

Perceptions and experiences of selected participants engaging with a digitally curated environmental Outsider Art collection.



Sarah Schäfer
SCHSAR010

Supervisor: Richard Higgs

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Library and Information Studies Centre
Faculty of the Humanities
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ABSTRACT

This study uses the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda as an exemplar for interrogating the possibilities of digital curation in South Africa. It draws on a conceptual framework encompassing the digital humanities, museology, Baudrillard's notion of simulation, as well as contemporary research and similar studies. Digital curation of a Visionary Environment, which falls into the ambit of Outsider Art, is a largely unprecedented practice, especially in the context of South Africa.

This qualitative study is situated in a social constructivist paradigm and uses elements of a phenomenological approach. As an instance of qualitative research, at the heart of this study is an emphasis on understanding how people construct their realities and interpret their experiences.

Interpreting and viewing digital artefacts outside of a museum are not the same as viewing them in real life. This inevitably changes the way that someone experiences and interprets a collection. The challenge of digitising a museum is thus to understand what this transformation process (physical to digital) does to the integrity of the original collection.

Digitisation within museums offers so many possibilities, especially in the context of site-specific museums that are largely inaccessible like the Owl House. A digitally curated collection of high quality digital media can allow for a museum like the Owl House to be visited digitally, and moreover, that visitors can interpret a museum experience that is rich and layered. The data for this study was collected from interviews with participants who engaged with a digitised sub-collection of the Owl House – The Long Bedroom Collection, and after an initial presentation and analysis of the data, emerging themes were discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation explores an aspect of digital curation in the context of museums, using the Owl House – an environmental Outsider Art collection known as a Visionary Environment – in Nieu Bethesda in South Africa, as the site of research. This study is qualitative in nature and uses a small case study methodology framed by elements of phenomenology to gather and analyse data. Through interviews with a selected group of participants, data was collected and emerging themes were identified and interpreted. This chapter provides a brief backdrop to the study, states the research problem, then articulates the research goals and questions. It also briefly describes the research methodology and ends with a succinct outline of the dissertation.

1.2 Background

The realm of the digital is not just made up of seemingly infinite arrays of intangible ones and zeros. The ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive, because digital objects can hold valuable information and have meaning. The digital revolution has opened up a plethora of possibilities for museums – collections can not only be digitally preserved, but also digitally experienced. Digital collections have accessibility that was previously unimaginable for physical museums. That an immersive digital museum experience is not only a possibility, but also a valuable encounter is the crux of this study.

A digitised and digitally curated collection can be viewed and interpreted on different platforms, and viewers can see and interact with artefacts and collections at their own pace, in their own space, and delve as deep as their own curiosity demands. The digital transformation of a museum collection, however, is a complex process which involves knowledge of the collection, sensitivity, collaboration and research. The Owl House in Nieu Bethesda in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa was created by Helen Martins, an Outsider Artist, over the course of several decades, and was the site of research for this study.

The following conceptual framework is key in situating this study, and will be briefly introduced: contextual background on Helen Martins and the Owl House, Outsider Art, digital curation, museology and simulation.

After the deaths of her parents, Helen Martins, living once again in the house in which she grew up, began transforming her home to reflect a magical, mythical place that existed in her imagination. Over two decades she transformed it entirely, creating the Owl House and its accompanying Camel Yard. “During the time that she lived at the Owl House, it was an artwork and a home, a space that breathed and altered with the changing moment”, explains Emslie (now Graaff) (1997:ix).

Martins is recognised today as an Outsider Artist, and Outsider Art (also known as *art brut*) is a term coined by art theorist Roger Cardinal, who described it as “a mode of original artistic expression which thrives on its independence, shunning the public sphere and the art market” (Cardinal, 2009:1459). It is “original work produced by untutored creators of talent whose expressions convey a strong sense of individuality” (Cardinal, 2009:1459).

Terms for this kind of Outsider Art collection vary, and the Owl House is regarded as a Visionary Environment – what Beardsley (1995:7) described as a

handmade environment that express[es] a...vision, typically fabricated of found materials by people who aren't necessarily identified by themselves or by others as artists. These environments are made to surround and even engulf the home; they often have an obsessive character and are the result of many years of work.

Maizels (1996:211) suggested that Visionary Environments come to life from the universal “desire to create an environment of vision and personal meaning”. The idiosyncratic space that is the Owl House embodies what Cardinal describes as a “coherent, albeit strange, private world” (2009:1459). In attempting to classify a taxonomy of an elusive field, Visionary Environments could be said to be typical of a particular kind of Outsider Art.

Needless to say, a Visionary Environment requires a visit to the site itself – the art simply cannot be separated from the place, they are inextricably intertwined. The Owl House personifies this innate experientialism very well – visiting it is, in my view, an immersive experience. Visitors come from around the world to pay homage to Martins and look into her world. In a traditional museum, artworks are often disconnected from their site of original intent. At the Owl House, there is no separation: the house is a part of the collection and vice-versa.

Today, over forty years after the death of Martins, the Owl House exists as she left it, but in a state of deterioration. When a museum collection, such as the Owl House, is inextricable from its site, digitising it and digitally curating it holds new problems, challenges and possibilities. Museum collections can be digitised for many reasons – posterity, preservation and access are common motivations. The context of the collections and the extent of the information, however, varies. Digitising and digitally curating Visionary Environments however, is a largely unprecedented practice, especially in South Africa. Chapter 2 illustrates this further with details of similar studies and digital projects.

When a museum collection is digitised and digitally curated, it can be preserved for an extended and extensive period of time. Moreover, the digital platform allows for access on a previously unattainable scale for the following reasons:

- because it is no longer situated in a physical place, a digital collection allows for a much bigger audience – hundreds of thousands of viewers can access it at the same time;
- viewers that are physically unable to view the real collection (for economic, physical or other reasons) are able to access it;
- digitally accessing files does not have the same implications for deterioration that visiting a physical space does;
- viewers can spend as much or as little time as they like, in privacy, with whichever artefacts they please;
- the collection can easily grow and become connected to other networks and similar collections.

The site-specific nature of the Owl House and the fact that it constitutes “no more than the complete abandonment of one’s living space to artistic creation...at times spilling out into the surrounding environment” (Rhodes, 2000:175) is key to the research, as it is this aspect that makes the experience so immersive. Jagodzinski’s theory on ‘un(becoming)’ and his notion that Outsider Art, by its very definition, remains perpetually outside established art (Jagodzinski, 2005) is a necessary foil to a discussion of whether the museum needs to be digitised at all. Jagodzinski provides a critical perspective by tackling these perplexities. He speaks of a “kernel of irrationality” (Jagodzinski, 2005:245) in art “where often there is no rhyme nor reason as to what passes as art” (Jagodzinski, 2005:245).

This study also orientates itself with other contemporary research, digital museum projects and similar studies. These include Petrelli et al.’s contemporary literature on creating immersive museum and cultural experiences with technology (Petrelli et al., 2016; Risseeuw et al., 2016), the Freer Gallery and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s digital transformation, as well as other large-scale projects like the Google Cultural Institute.

However, to balance the pro-technology voices, Postman’s warning that “the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity” (Postman, 1993) is acknowledged. Berger’s theory that the way we see things depends on our beliefs and knowledge (Berger, 1972) is fundamental to this research: a reproduction of an image, for example “becomes itself the reference point for other images. The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it” (Berger, 1972:29). He compels us to consider what it means to create replicas (images or other types of media) of artworks *ad infinitum* in the digital realm: as artefacts, single items from the Long Bedroom of the Owl House hold little artistic meaning; it is only when they are interpreted as a collection that they have meaning.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) offer useful insight into museum-goers, their outlook and the ultimate comprehension of a collection. Their observation that “the feeling of confusion when confronted with works of art decreases as soon as perception is equipped with a certain amount of pertinent knowledge, no matter how vague” (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991:55) is a

valuable one that holds true in the digital realm, and in a world of lived realities. Without context, a museum visit loses meaning.

The theoretical and philosophical underpinning of this dissertation is the concept of simulacra, Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* and the notion that consequences arise when reality disappears (Baudrillard, 1994). In creating a digitised version of the Owl House, it will be nothing more than a 'hyperreality' – a simulation that replaces the relationship between reality and representation (Baudrillard, 1994:11). On another level, however, perhaps the Owl House is also just a simulacrum of the third order, which "masks the absence of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, 1994:6).

1.3 Research Problem

The experiences of interpreting and viewing digital artefacts outside of a museum are not the same as viewing them in real life. This inevitably changes the way that someone experiences and interprets a collection. The challenge of digitising a museum is thus to understand what this transformation process (physical to digital) does to the integrity of the original collection. This dematerialisation can specifically impact the experience of a Visionary Environment, which is by its very nature rooted to its site. In digitising a collection however, different digital media can be used to create a complex and layered museum experience that may mitigate misrepresentation of the original collection.

1.4 Research Goal

The goal of this study is to interrogate the possibilities of digitising a Visionary Environment using the Owl House as a site, and interviews with participants as a case study. The research aims to interpret data about how a digitised Visionary Environment can be meaningfully viewed and understood by digitising and digitally curating a museum collection and analysing the perceptions and experiences of six selected participants engaging with it.

This goal informed other objectives:

- to provide a comment on the possibilities and opportunities for engaging with digitised Visionary Environments;

- to trial the process of digitising an art collection and creating a digital platform to interact with;
- to identify the needs of viewers who engage with a digital collection;
- to potentially act as an exemplar for cultural heritage institutions, especially in South Africa, that are looking ahead in the hopes of enabling the translation of a museum experience into a wider-reaching and accessible educational resource.

1.5 Research Questions

This study was guided by one main research question:

What are some of the possible methods and challenges of digitising and digitally curating Visionary Environments and offering valuable digital museum experiences to visitors whilst allowing them to retain their unique characteristics?

Sub-questions:

- How do people respond to a digitised collection?
- What are the practical implications of digitising a sub-collection of the Owl House?
 - What are people's responses to a digital simulation of a museum?
 - Do people's experiences with a real-life museum have an impact on their digital experience of that same museum?
 - What information is lost in a digital museum experience?
- What are the philosophical implications of digitising an Outsider Art collection?

1.6 Significance of the Study

A study of this kind is, to my knowledge and reading, largely unprecedented. There are no official guidelines for the digitisation or digital curation of Outsider Art, immersive art collections or Visionary Environments, and there is little existing literature or policy on digital curation in museums in South Africa. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on digital curation within cultural heritage institutions and museums like the Owl House. A country like South Africa, with its wealth of cultural heritage, vulnerability to poor policy, long distances

and economic disempowerment, holds significant potential for the development of a coherent digital curation strategy that would benefit small and isolated museums.

The Owl House offers a very suitable case study to act as a small exemplar for this kind of research. Although this study was small in scale, it was comprehensively researched, and the methodology and structure was carefully chosen in order to present itself as relevant research that presents academic rigour. Conceptual frameworks that reinforce this study were researched, an appropriate research design was implemented, and examples of other contemporary and similar studies have been consulted.

The field of digital curatorship and facilitating digital visitors' experience is an exciting one. Petrelli, et al. (2016:1) observe that there are numerous initiatives in current museum theory globally towards "rethinking not only the technology for heritage, but also the process." This research speaks to this 'rethinking' with specific reference to environmental Outsider art collections.

1.7 Research Methodology

This research study consists of two parts. Part one is the process of digitising a sub-collection of the Owl House, and the second is an empirical process of collecting data within the context of a small case study.

A sub-collection of twenty selected objects found in the Long Bedroom of the Owl House was digitised and digitally curated for this study. I made the decision to focus on one room for two reasons: firstly, due to time constraints, and secondly due to the complexities that arise around authorship when discussing other aspects of the Owl House, and the Camel Yard in particular. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

The digitised collection was curated on an online platform, referred to in this study as The Long Bedroom Collection, and shown to a selected group of participants who were interviewed about their experience engaging with it. The data collected from the interviews was analysed for this research. The case for this study is thus The Long Bedroom Collection,

and the unit of analysis is the perceptions and experiences of a group of six participants as they engaged with the digitised collection. Stake (2006:2) emphasised that the “first objective of a case study is to understand the case”, therefore, as described above, although this case was small, it was carefully and deeply examined. The analysis of the data for this qualitative case study was deductive.

The research design of this study was informed by Creswell’s (2007) framework and incorporated Moustakas’ (1994) elements of phenomenological research methods. The philosophical assumptions of this qualitative research are ontological, and I use quotes from participants to provide evidence of different perspectives, embracing the idea of multiple realities (Creswell, 2007:18). By using “multiple quotes based on the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives from individuals” (Creswell, 2007:18), this research reports on how experiences are viewed differently.

Because the nature of the research places importance on understanding “several individuals’ common or shared experiences” (Creswell, 2007:60), this study was conducted phenomenologically in the sense that up to a point, I let their voices and utterances speak for themselves. Therefore, rather than defining a rigid interpretive framework at the outset, I identified themes that emerged from the data analysis.

The six participants were selected using purposive sampling, chosen for their varied and contrasting views and experience with the Owl House. This method is complemented by my own ontological assumptions that embrace multiple realities. None of them had interacted with The Long Bedroom Collection prior to the interviews. Each volunteer had sufficient time to critically engage with The Long Bedroom Collection; they were willing and prepared to provide me with rich responses; and they were all experienced in humanities discourse and had previous experiences with visiting museums.

The overarching paradigm in which the research was conducted was social constructivism (Creswell, 2007:20). I recognise that my own background and my interactions with others shape my interpretations and assimilation of knowledge and experiences. I thus acknowledge that my own personal, cultural and historical experiences shape my meaning-making process

and how I may interpret what other people say (Creswell, 2007). As “[t]he researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense (or interpret) the meaning others have about the world” (Creswell, 2007:21), my specific intent is to make sense of how my six participants experience The Long Bedroom Collection.

There are two aspects to the gathered data that were analysed:

1. Each participant engaging with the online platform, interacting with the media, and navigating through it. This process was recorded through a screencast.
2. I then interviewed each participant about their experiences and perceptions of the collection.

As my six participants engaged with the digital collection, I observed each of them in real time and recorded their activity with a screencast. The purpose of this was to gather evidence of how the participants navigated through the collection on the computer. The interviews were transcribed and analysed for interesting themes which then formed the framework for my narrative.

1.8 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study was restricted by certain limitations, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. These limitations were largely influenced by the small scale of the research, time and budget constraints.

1.9 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in five chapters, and includes appendices.

Chapter 1: A brief introduction to the research and motivation behind it. This chapter introduces the reader to the study, briefly problematises the research and provides justification for it. It familiarises the reader with pertinent themes surrounding the research, and situates it more broadly by explaining its significance in a wider context. It also covers the research goals and questions.

Chapter 2: A literature review, covering concepts and issues pertinent to the research. By reviewing relevant literature, my scope of understanding was broadened, and I was able to understand underlying concepts on a deeper level.

Chapter 3: A presentation of the research design and methodology. The design of the research is unpacked and substantiated. The methods of data collection and analysis are also discussed here.

Chapter 4: Presentation of findings from the data. The data (collected from interviews with participants) is presented in this chapter. Interview analyses are presented as a linear narrative and as a cross-sectional interpretation of emerging themes.

Chapter 5: The final chapter offers a discussion on the findings presented in Chapter 4. Finally, I suggest some recommendations and summarise the research.

Appendices: These include the initial request for voluntary participants, the participant consent form, the interview schedule, the ethical clearance certificate, interview recordings, transcriptions of the interviews and video screencasts.

1.10 Summary

This chapter introduced and contextualised the research. The research questions that guided the study, the objectives of the study, the limitations of the study and the research design were outlined, and concepts relevant to the study were presented. The following chapter discusses the theory that informed this study and, interrogates the surrounding research and reviews literature on the subject.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In order to contextualise this study within historical and contemporary studies, this chapter presents pertinent concepts and research. First, it looks at the digital humanities and the evolution of digital curation especially within museums. Further, it offers some background on cultural heritage and museums in the digital age as well as an introduction to Outsider Art, Helen Martins, and her Owl House. Although issues around copyright, authorship and intellectual property rights are relevant to this project and the field of cultural heritage and museum studies, they are beyond the scope of this study.

2.2 Digital Humanities

The digital humanities, broadly described, is the relationship between and the overlap of digital technologies (computing) and the humanities. It is now recognised as a discipline in its own right, but in previous years served as the underling for the real academic work of humanities scholars (Berry, 2012:2). Tensions in the discourse are not uncommon: in contrast to a predominant optimism from the advocates of technological progress, there is also distrust from those who imagine “the future deserted by the past and tradition and loss of cultural unity. Both emanate from tensions inherent in modernity” (Dalbello, 2011:497).

The digital humanities are changing the way that knowledge is produced and reproduced, especially in the context of memory and learning institutions – “digital technologies are transforming our ability to use and understand information outside of these traditional knowledge structures” (Berry, 2012:6). Moreover, the implications of the digital humanities in cultural institutions like museums are potentially radical (Berry, 2012:91).

2.3 Digital Curation

Stated very simply, the principles of digital curation are “preserving, maintaining and adding value to...data throughout its lifecycle” (Digital Curation Centre [DCC], n.d.). Although digital curation initially began as a field of practice within the sciences and library and information studies, it has evolved and grown significantly, and is now a *bone fide* and far-reaching field of practice and study, with notable adaptations within museum studies.

2.3.1 The Evolution of Digital Curation

The term ‘digital curation’ was born in 2001 when it was introduced at a meeting in London billed as ‘Digital Curation: digital archives, libraries and e-science seminar’, which aimed to “begin a conversation between library and information management specialists and managers of scientific data on approaches to the management of research data for future reuse” (Ray, 2017:32). At that early stage, although the concept itself implies a very natural step towards museum thinking, museums as such were not represented.

Subsequently, organisations like the Digital Curation Centre (DCC) have facilitated the evolution of digital curation by providing resources and generating and publishing research. Today, it is recognised that digital curation impacts on many sectors, including memory institutions (libraries, archives and museums); research data management (including biological sciences); digitisation and eResearch.

In 2006, Beagrie speculated on how the term digital curation implies not only preservation and maintenance, but also “some degree of added value and knowledge” (Beagrie, 2006). In 2015, the National Research Council published a technical paper which sought to establish the parameters and scope of digital curation, which includes all types of digital information. It defines digital curation as the “active management and enhancement of digital information assets for current and future use” (National Research Council [NRC], 2015:1).

Traditionally, curation has taken place in organisational contexts – libraries, archives, museums and collections of all kinds. Digital curation is in many ways a continuation of this

tradition. Whether a collection is physical or digital, a curator's role includes appraisal (for value and relevance); determining its preservation and storage needs; documentation of provenance and authenticity; describing and cataloguing (metadata); and making it accessible and useable (NRC, 2015:10).

2.3.2 Digital Curation and Museums

Memory institutions and digital curation involve a crucial aspect that is not immediately obvious in the broader definitions of digital curation described above. As a model, maintaining and adding value to bodies of digital information does not necessarily accommodate the presentation of digital information. Johns Hopkins University (JHU), currently a world leader in digital curation in a museum context, released the following amended definition for digital curation in 2016: "the planning and management of digital assets over their full lifetime, from conceptualization through active use and presentation to long-term preservation in a repository for future re-use" (Johns Hopkins University [JHU], 2017). It is this definition that informs the process of digital curation for this study.

2.4 Museums

Museums are widely known to have originated from the sixteenth-century curiosity cabinets or 'wunderkammer' (room of wonders) (Sparacino, 2004:72), which were privately owned and available to a very small aristocracy. Museums, as we know them today only emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, and this development made them far more accessible to the public (Kidd, 2014:6). Historically, museums have had instrumental value as places of learning – they were "conceived to be, first and foremost, educational institutions" (Rub, 2016:238). The traditional functions of museums were to acquire, conserve and interpret material culture, and thus the collections had symbolic and cultural value (Burton & Scott, 2003:56).

Humanity assigns meaning to objects by placing them in museums. Without the inherent hierarchy that is culturally understood by being displayed in a museum, objects would not necessarily have the same symbolic value. National museums like the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the South African National Gallery all contain treasures that

are nationally and culturally important, and the objects that they display are therefore significant. Museums thus have cultural and symbolic power in that they are responsible for the way in which different objects are given meaning within their space (Kidd, 2014:4), and the story that they are curated to tell can potentially be dishonestly motivated. Shields (2010:34) offers a caustic interpretation of this autocracy: “If my forgeries are hung long enough in the museum, they become real”.

A less malignant version of this dilemma is author Orhan Pamuk’s Museum of Innocence in Istanbul – a museum collection that exhibits the ‘real’ objects of a work of fiction by the same name (Pamuk, 2012:15). Both the novel and the museum “are products of [Pamuk’s] imagination, dreamed up word by word, object by object, and picture by picture over a long period of time” (Pamuk, 2012:18). One can visit the museum in Istanbul, and view the objects that were collected, selected and curated by Pamuk.

This study makes a case that national museums that house innumerable valuable artefacts are no more important than, say the Museum of Innocence, or a small museum in the Karoo. Pamuk’s museum and the Owl house are not disingenuous – they tell a story and allow for the viewer’s interpretation. Museums, at their heart, should all hold the same kind of cultural value, and “the aim of big, state-sponsored museums...is to represent the state. This is neither a good nor an innocent objective” (Pamuk, 2012:54).

Pamuk offers ‘A Modest Manifest for Museums’, which is critical of state institutions “being used as blueprints for future museums” (Pamuk, 2012:54). He suggests that museums “can also speak for individuals... [and] should explore and uncover the universe and humanity of the new and modern man emerging from increasingly wealthy non-Western nations” (Pamuk, 2012:54). Museums thus need to be sensitive about the agenda that they portray and guard against being propagandist or towing a particular political line.

2.4.1 Museums and Technology

It can safely be asserted that people today are more visually and technologically literate than ever before. Our worlds seem awash with images and different media, and people can

consume hundreds of media outputs every day. The introduction of digital technologies is challenging museums to reconsider their place and role in society, and realise the potential of this technology in their curation processes. An impact of this digital convergence is “the revamping of interpretative discourses and debates over the changing ontology and epistemologies of digital images, their technologically redefined nature and renegotiated cultural values and social functions” (Lapenta, 2011:1). For one institution, it might mean that photographic slides and negatives that are decaying are preserved; for another it could mean that a remote physical collection can be accessed online; and for yet another it could provide the means to engage new audiences through online experiences. The potential is limitless, and just as each institution and collection is unique, so are the digital options and opportunities.

When digitisation within museums became a reality, general pessimism surrounded the very concept. People speculated about the possibility of the original museum experience being superseded and compromised by the distribution of high-quality digital media, resulting in the redundancy of the public museum. As Rub (2016:241) explains, the actual result has been quite the opposite: “it has in an odd sense amplified the power of the original and underscored the value of the context in which it can be seen and appreciated”. As digitisation becomes more pervasive and museums adopt and support digital curation practices, they can reach and engage more users than ever before (Ray, 2017:32). Today, digital curation within cultural heritage institutions and museums can reach many more people and incorporate innovative technologies that provide viewers with a multitude of multimedia experiences.

The digital “holds great promise for enhancing the experience of the museum, both in the galleries and online, and for engaging younger audiences who are becoming accustomed to learning in this way” (Rub, 2016: 242). The Art Newspaper’s report on museum visitors around the world in 2015 highlights this: millions of visitors flock to museums around the world every year (The Art Newspaper, 2016:III), even as those museums launch virtual online tours and free mobile phone apps.

The role of museums has changed to the extent that they are “in many respects like other contemporary media...They translate the otherwise unfamiliar and inaccessible into the

familiar and accessible” (Silverstone, 1994:162). As museums undergo digital transformations, their roles also change. According to Burton and Scott (2003:58), “[if] the traditional role of the museum is to acquire and preserve objects, the collapse of physical space in this information-based paradigm may require museums to re-assess their relationship with objects and collections”.

It is fairly well recognised, albeit not always enthusiastically, that museums should “make a sustained commitment to the conversion from analog [sic] to digital” and embrace “an entirely new range of possibilities” including accessibility (Rub, 2016: 241). The digitising of artefacts is no more than a prerequisite for the digital transformation process; what is crucial in creating valuable digital museum experiences that are as rich and engaging as on-site museum experiences is the question of how this digital transformation will occur.

A valuable museum experience and a valuable *digital* museum experience by their very nature are two different things, and should complement instead of mimic each other. Good digital archives can be much more than mere static collections of digital surrogates existing in silos, or what Beagrie (2006:5) refers to as “data mortuaries”. They have the potential to be dynamic instead of static.

As museums and cultural heritage institutions become beacons of using innovative technology across the world, and digital literacy becomes an inescapable currency in today’s museum (Kidd, 2014:21), it is clear that dismissing their digital future is futile. Rub (2016:245) argues that museums have “a living purpose”, because although they have a didactic function, their work is not antiquarian. Instead, their aim is to help us learn about the past by presenting what is culturally and historically important. Rub (2016: 245) describes museums as

places where the past can be brought into a rich conversation with the present. At their best, they can also help to guide us into the future, to imagine what might be, to inspire and fill us with that sense of possibility that is essential to what it means to be fully alive.

Moreover, “the democratizing effect of technology to provide access to primary materials” (Dalbello, 2011:496) is a notion that is especially pertinent to museums in South Africa, and is discussed further in the following section.

2.4.2 Museums in South Africa

The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) was established under the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 and is a statutory organisation and national administrative body that is responsible for the protection of South Africa's cultural heritage (South African Heritage Resources Agency [SAHRA], n.d.). According to South Africa's *National Heritage Resources Act* of 1999, civil society should be empowered "to nurture and conserve their heritage resources so that they may be bequeathed for future generations" (*National Heritage Resources Act, No. 25 of 1999*, 1999:preamble).

Digitisation and good digital collections management are tools that can empower civil society by nurturing and conserving resources in a way that is forward-looking and sustainable. In digitising cultural heritage, resources are being dematerialised, which allows for access and preservation on a new level. Neil Grindley of Jisc, and previously on the board of the Digital Preservation Coalition, speaking from a non-South African perspective, says that "we need to preserve with a purpose, and that purpose is to give society...opportunities in the future that they wouldn't otherwise have" (DigCurV: 2013).

For its vast wealth of cultural heritage, the digital status of South African cultural heritage institutions is sadly inadequate and needs much attention. In my reading, there is no South African museums policy for digital collections management nor for digitisation, mostly because there is no government agency that regulates this aspect of preserving our cultural heritage. Most museums have their own internal policies, and generally follow the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (2017:2) recommendations which state:

Museums are responsible for the tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage. Governing bodies and those concerned with the strategic direction and oversight of museums have a primary responsibility to protect and promote this heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for that purpose.

Inherent in a museum's responsibility, according to ICOM, is the notion of safeguarding and stewardship "that includes rightful ownership, permanence, documentation, accessibility and

responsible disposal” (ICOM, 2004:8). Museums in South Africa are only slowly becoming aware of their digital potential. Some are initiating digital strategies, but at an individual and local level. There is thus an urgent need for the development of a digitising policy at a national level.

Moreover, in alignment with the concept of digitisation as democratisation as described in section 2.4.1, Bourdieu’s enquiry of social theory and cultural practice offers another aspect to the meaning of museums in South Africa. He stated that “[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu: 1984:2). In a later text, he (along with Darbel and Schnapper) articulated “the natural inequality of ‘cultural needs’” (1991:37), or the idea that cultural needs are taught through school systems and society. Although their research is a little dated and perhaps geographically irrelevant, the implication is that those without economic means do not have the same kind of access to cultural goods. Put simply, “[c]onsidered as symbolic goods, works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them” (Bourdieu et al., 1991:39). Burton and Scott (2003) came to a similar conclusion – the majority of museum visitors “are well-educated, affluent and versed in deciphering the museum code” (2003:57).

In South Africa, with its many educational, economic and social challenges and inequalities, the preservation and curation of cultural heritage is, in my experience, not seen as a top priority by many of its people, policy-makers and politicians. In addition, traditional museums currently have symbolic value in what they teach and portray, but have not transformed into institutions to which everyone has access. They tend to portray a particular kind of knowledge and value system. This makes them, and their content, culturally inaccessible.

Aligning with Bourdieu’s position currently, and in the context of the digital humanities, it is perhaps reasonably optimistic to hope that the democratisation of museums, through their digitisation, could change the landscape of cultural inequality in South Africa.

2.5 Cultural Heritage and Outsider Art

Outsider Art, as defined in Chapter 1, does not fall neatly into the traditional art canon – it is “work produced outside the mainstream of modern western art by self-taught, untrained visionaries...beyond the imposed margins of society and the art market” (Rhodes, 2004:outside back cover). Because the ambit of Outsider Art is not easily delineated, it is a complex area of art history and curation. It tests the “conventional language of art” (Beardsley, 1995:7) with its “expressive intentionality” (Cardinal, 2009:1459). To further obfuscate an already elusive definition, Outsider Art “becomes art only in the act of naming, though this in no way alters its intrinsic qualities” (Rhodes, 2004:22).

Jagodzinski (2005: 226) elaborates on Outsider Artists and refers to them as them having an “*acultural*” relationship regarding their place within an established social order”. This aculturality sets these artists apart from those who create work that is different yet still fits into the normative establishments of the artistic institution. By hailing a movement ‘acultural’, or anything else for that matter, we are implying a consciously adopted ideology, which is not always the case with Outsider Art. What characterises Outsider Artists is their alienation, their estranged, isolated and solitary existence (Jagodzinski, 2005:226). Outsider Art possesses what Jagodzinski refers to as “an uncanny, unnameable kernel that *perpetually remains outside established art by its very definition*” (2005:227).

The contradiction of canonising Outsider Art does not go unnoticed. By calling it ‘art’, we are un-defining it as Outsider Art, which makes for complex semiotic territory. Some Outsider Art has been canonised by the art world. For example, Jean Debuffet’s work has been exhibited at the Tate Modern in London, England, and the Collection d’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland is dedicated to Outsider Art.

It can be argued that the established art world is an imperfect one, and one that is still largely dictated by hegemonic capital; it is not an intersectional, diverse or dynamic realm, as much as it may purport to be. As curator Bonaventure Ndikung (2017) puts it:

Every society develops its canon. And it is fair to say that no canon is superior to another and none can or should supersede another, as canons are formed

in the wake of particular historical and social givens or myths. But it is also fair to acknowledge that canons, just like History with a capital H, are epistemic, cultural, political, and social power tools, whose mechanisms have to be scrutinized and critically questioned.

Berger's critique of Western cultural aesthetics offered a similar idea (1972:32)

The visual arts have always existed within a certain preserve; originally this preserve was magical or sacred...Later the preserve of art became a social one...During all this history the authority of art was inseparable from the particular authority of the preserve.

Although Berger's *Ways of Seeing* came long before the concept of digital curation was born, his discussion on the representation of image accessibility is still relevant and resonates within this study. Digitisation of art is the natural progression of what he called "modern means of production" (Berger, 1972:32), which destroy the authority of institutionalised art and allow them to "enter the mainstream of life over which they no longer, in themselves, have power" (Berger, 1972:32).

2.5.1 Helen Martins as an Outsider Artist

Although Outsider Art does not fit neatly into a genre of art, it is helpful to classify it. Thus, Helen Martins falls into Rhodes' category of a 'self-taught visionary', who gave herself "entirely to the creative urge, irrespective of any likely audience for their production" (Rhodes, 2000:140) and the result was her Owl House, which is recognised as a Visionary Environment – a 'category' of Outsider Art. Fugard (1985:10) refers to Helen Martins' work as that of "obsessive dedication", and her biographers tell of her total fixation on her Owl House.

Helen Martins embodied much of Jagodzinski's 'aculturalism'. She was unconventional in every sense of the word – she disobeyed social, cultural and artistic conventions. As Ross (1997:23) contemplated,

she eventually flouted virtually all the social, moral, and religious norms of the community in which she was raised, spent most of her life, and eventually died. Her creation of the Owl House...was the physical manifestation of her rejection of most of the teaching of her background and upbringing, and the social and moral conventions of her time.

The Owl House is inextricably connected to its milieu: Nieu Bethesda, the Karoo and South Africa. Helen Martins was a product of her environment – a woman in a conservative, patriarchal, and parochial society, living in a tiny, isolated, arid town – and the Owl House is her attempt to create a world that overcomes the tedious obstacles of everyday life. As David Byrne explains, from an aptly non-academic perspective, Outsider Artists “focus intensely on what they feel might be a better world...They are dreamers – as are we all” (Byrne, 2018).

2.6 The Owl House

The Owl House has been referred to as “a wonderful cult of the kitsch. Inside, even the most mundane objects become part of a wonderful kitschy world” (Interview with Peggy Delport in Ross, 1997:62). Ross (1997:62) continues:

The house is filled with a profusion of trivial objects and clutter. These range from baskets of plastic fruit, to fluffy animals, wind chimes, dusty old collections of carved soap, face-powder boxes, perfume bottles, cheap mass-produced trinkets, bangles and necklaces, shells, small plaster of Paris models, and so on.

The Owl House is recognised as what is termed a Visionary Environment, and “was constructed, under Martins’ directions, by three hired men – its interiors are covered with ground glass and mirrors to play with light” (Rhodes, 2000:179).

2.6.1 The Long Bedroom

The sub-collection of artefacts selected for this study are all located in the Long Bedroom. According to biographers, the Long Bedroom was Helen Martins' favourite room to sleep in (she would sleep in different rooms, carrying a sleeping mat from one room to another depending on her mood) (Graaff, 1991:54). It is a long, narrow room (2,8 metres wide and 9,47 metres long) and the north wall, which extends down the length of the room, brings in an abundance of light. It is one of several rooms in the house, as shown in Figure 2.1 below.

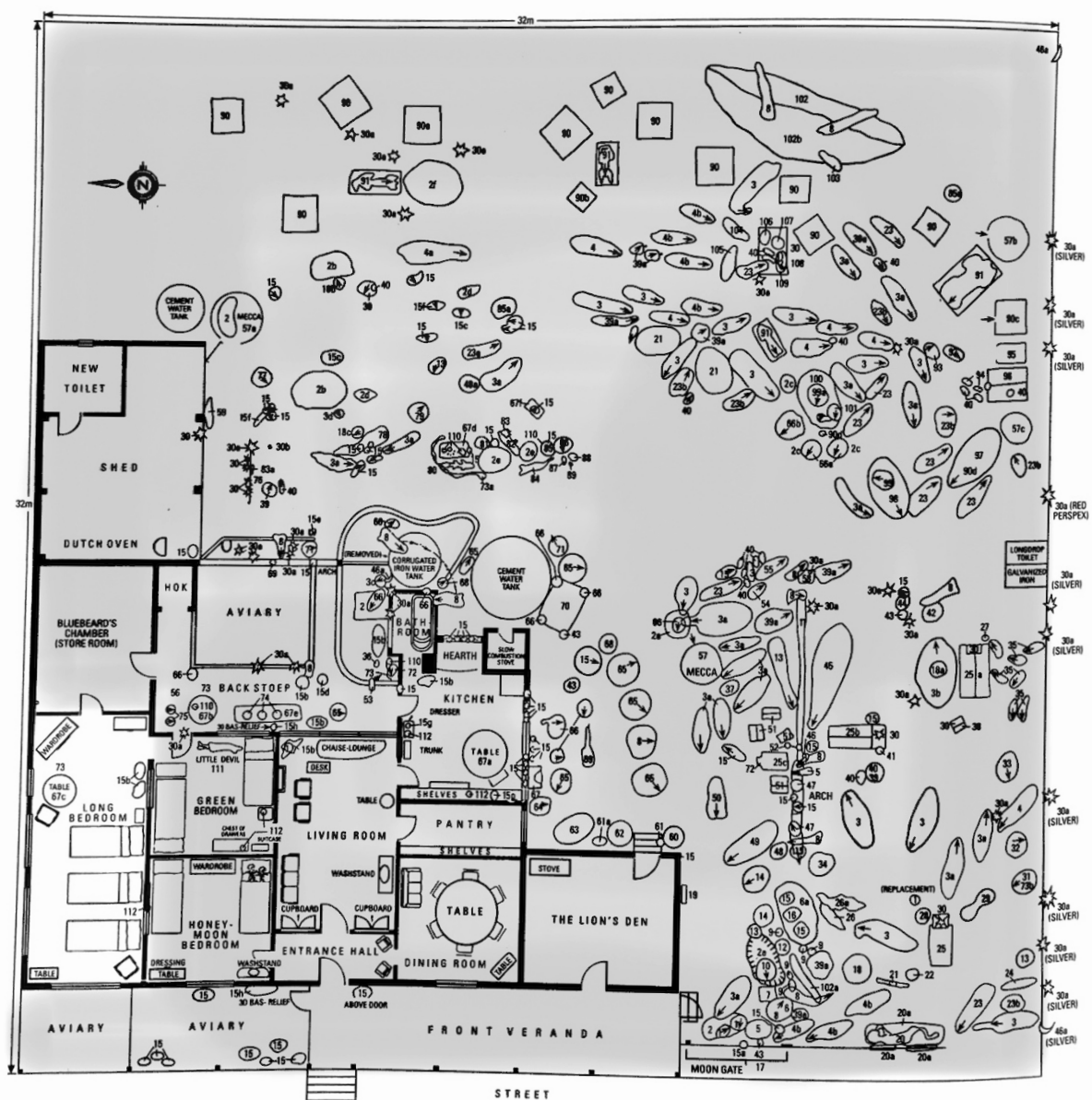


Figure 2.1: A plan of the Owl House, showing the Long Bedroom in relation to the rest of the house (Ross, 1997:260).

Importantly, no parts of the existing Owl House, including the Long Bedroom, exist now exactly as Helen Martins created them. The events following her death and the matter of her estate were not straightforward, and many of the original objects no longer exist. Sadly, no inventory was taken, and no record of the arrangements of her artefacts for each room was made. It is a palimpsest of sorts.

2.6.2 The Owl House as Cultural Heritage

Whether or not it was Helen Martins' intention, the Owl House has been canonised in the realm of the art world, in South Africa and internationally. Many people refer to their visits to the Owl House as a 'pilgrimage'; perhaps echoing Helen's own portrayals of Mecca, and in turn, Athol Fugard's titular *Road to Mecca*. Nieu Bethesda is an isolated town in the Eastern Cape, a significant distance from any major city, and a detour past any thoroughfare. One needs a reason to go there, and for many people, the Owl House is that reason. However, the Owl House's existence is precarious. It faces the ravages not only of nature and of time, but also of a lack of funding within a mediocre and outdated national heritage and resources plan. It is largely this that has inspired this study.

The Owl House tells the story of Helen Martins, and it also tells of her world. As a museum, it is, as Pamuk describes, "much better suited to displaying the depths of our humanity" (Pamuk, 2012:55) than a large national institution.

2.7 Baudrillard, Simulation and Digital Curation

The museum as a concept is also well-disposed for a postmodern discourse on simulation and reality, and Baudrillard (1994) provided a metaphysical conjecture that can be repurposed in the context of the digital humanities and digital curation. Baudrillard maintained that we experience reality through signs and symbols, and because of this, our experience in life is nothing but a simulation of reality. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), he provides a theory (which also serves as a caustic social and cultural critique) about how we construct and simulate reality. We live in what he calls "the desert of the real" (Baudrillard, 1994:3), where our media are, at times more real than our own physical world. Today, perhaps, this is even

more relevant, as our digital media and virtual realities are becoming steadily more advanced and allegedly realistic.

Baudrillard reasoned that complete understanding is impossible, but people are seduced into thinking otherwise as they become drawn into a simulated reality, which he calls hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994:4). We live our lives in the realm of hyperreality, connecting more and more deeply to things that merely simulate reality. In introducing his thesis, Baudrillard recounted the story of Borges' map - "most beautiful allegory of simulation" (1994: 3), in which a map gradually becomes more than what the real land is. Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* also described how contemporary culture is awash with re-creations where the "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake" (1986:21).

The Owl House in New Bethesda in the Eastern Cape, its corresponding Camel Yard (see section 3.3.2.1) and Helen Martins herself, on deeper inspection, all contain elements of these notions of simulacra and simulation. In fact, his conceptualisation of simulation can be extended to museums in general (Kidd, 2014:6), which consist of little more than "an entanglement of significations that have little to do with any external reality" (Kidd, 2014:6). In the context of this study, the concepts of simulation and simulacra exist on many levels: The Owl House is Helen Martins' own perfect world, that she has simulated from her imagination and images in her mind; the Camel Yard is a simulation made up of many simulacra (most of her sculptures are clear copies of items in the house) and The Long Bedroom Collection is a simulation of the Long Bedroom.

Ross (1997:62) explains how Martins used objects repeatedly, both inside the Owl House and in the Camel Yard. Many of her statues are derived from objects, products and pictures that can be found in the house. In other words, Helen Martins herself was a master of the simulacrum. She copied things and borrowed aesthetic ideas. For this study, I as a researcher reproduced her works digitally and recreated her reality as a digital hyperreality. In Baudrillard's terms, Helen Martins created a simulation, and I in turn created a digital hyperreality.

Although this study only focuses on digitally curating the Long Bedroom in the Owl House, it aimed to do more than just show what the Long Bedroom looks like. I provide additional interesting information and multimedia artefacts. On one hand, I wish for the visitor to have a real experience of the Long Bedroom, and on the other, I do not purport to trick the viewer into believing it is anything but a simulation.

2.8 Current Research within Digital Curation and Museums

As indicated above, the digitising of museums and cultural heritage artefacts is not new, and today the use of digital resources within cultural heritage institutions is ubiquitous. “Digital projects that lead to participation, immersion, experience and sociality have become currency in a cultural-professional landscape” (Kidd, 2014:2). However, the extent of the use of digital resources and the technology that is employed varies from one institution to another, and from one country to another. This, of course is influenced by available resources and by policy.

The creation of valuable, accessible and interactive digital exhibitions that are carefully digitally curated, however, is not as ubiquitous, particularly in South Africa. Although digital cultural heritage exists in petabytes around the world, and is available in a plethora of repositories and digital archives, these archives and repositories are “accessed only in a limited way and utilised through rather static modes of delivery” (Material EncounterS with digital Cultural Heritage [meSch], 2013). There is huge potential to harness the digital medium to create immersive museum experiences.

Dr Daniela Petrelli from meSch is a leader in this field, and has headed projects that integrate digital technology and personal memory. Although the curators, designers and technologists at meSch focus on interactive visitor experiences and make more use of technology and material than The Long Bedroom Collection, the philosophy remains the same – to engage users through tangible interaction to “bridge the gap between the physical and the digital” (Petrelli et al., 2016) and to create evocative and immersive experiences that “offer visitors multiple and contrasting voices to foster personal meaning making” (Petrelli et al., 2016:2).

The notion that technology can not only convey a sense of time and place, but also complement heritage (Petrelli et al., 2016) is a fundamental one: “[b]espoke design can bring places and stories from the past into the present and create immersive experiences where technology complements heritage (as opposed to competing with it for the visitors’ attention)” (Petrelli et al., 2016:2).

In order to give viewers something evocative and experiential, a digital collection like The Long Bedroom Collection needs to be layered; it needs to give people the opportunity to interpret differently. That people create meaning according to their personal histories and beliefs and are capable of weaving more than one narrative thread throughout a collection, means that museums can tell stories and impart knowledge. Taking advantage of this is the difference between a static exhibition and a dynamic experience. Content cannot be didactic, but needs to be something that is open to different personal interpretations for “active meaning making” (Petrelli et al., 2016) to be possible. In order for interpretation to be possible for visitors, they must be offered “multiple and contrasting voices to foster personal meaning making (as opposed to offering a single interpretation of facts)” (Petrelli et al., 2016).

In the realm of three-dimensional virtual reality that we have access to today, it is possible that content can be lost in technology. In any digital curation project, those involved need to be aware that technology and content are not set against each other; they have the potential to empower each other. Digital technology and the internet allow for museum experiences to be accessed and experienced profoundly and in unique ways and moreover, it allows curators to be more adventurous with their content, navigation and media.

As illustrated in section 2.4, a museum imbues objects with meaning – it “animates objects as the sources of knowledge, and simultaneously as aesthetic, auratic things” (Henning, 2006:18). “It sounds banal to say that a core feature of any digital artifact [sic] is lack of materiality, but when dealing with traditional cultural heritage this becomes a serious issue as materiality, authenticity, or ‘aura’, cannot be transferred to the digital” (Petrelli et al., 2013:1).

Thus, when objects are dematerialised, they are easily construed as having lost their meaning.

Henning (2006:71) disputes this:

The word 'virtual' is often used to describe the representations produced in these [digital] media as a world separate from, and substituting for, concrete reality...[I]t is worth remembering that media representations are also tangible physical things, that it is not simply a question of opposition between the 'virtual' and the 'real' worlds.

This concept resonates strongly in the context of this study. As described in section 2.6.2, the Owl House is significant as cultural heritage, and a large part of what makes it significant is its context. The objects within the Owl House cannot simply be removed from their location, displayed in a venue, and then hold the same meaning or communicate the same subjective emotional reaction as when situated within the Owl House itself. An attempt to digitally replicate the Owl House and its emotiveness, is impossible. "Emotion, affect and sensation are essential parts of the experience of heritage" (Petrelli et al., 2013). There are, however, different means to communicate information, sensations and emotions, and I argue that in the digital medium there is sufficient freedom and versatility to create a valuable and layered experience for the viewer, albeit not the same experience as visiting a museum or collection *in situ*.

The tenets of digital curation and physical curation should be the same: to create an experience of a collection that allows a visitor to interpret and discover at her own speed, which allows for the creation of layers of meaning. Sotirova et al. (2012:24) assert that "there is no change in the principle of curation between institutional environment and its digital alternative". They explain how a digital collection can in fact make for a richer and more valuable experience than its physical counterpart, and argue that a digital collection "makes contextualizing richer and easier, adding a new layer to it - the layer of the user" (Sotirova et al., 2012:24). This, of course, has a bearing on the quality of "the three building blocks of digital heritage" (Sotirova et al., 2012:26) - digitisation, access and preservation, which are "vital for creating, using and sustainment [sic] of digital heritage" (2012:26).

2.9 Similar Studies

Within contemporary museums that have a digital strategy that were researched for this study, one aspect is ubiquitous – that digital curation within cultural heritage institutions and museums needs to be both collaborative and iterative. In a webinar organised by The Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC, 2017), Carolyn Royston, Director of Digital and Information Services at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, emphasises how the digital process is a collaborative effort. She explains how museum curators and digital experts need to work together in order to create a valuable digital museum experience, whether it is on a mobile app, a website or an archive.

On a global level, the most large-scale digital transformation project is the Google Cultural Institute and Google Arts and Culture (previously known as Google Art Project), which is currently providing impetus for the digital transformation of collections across the world. It was launched in 2011, and aims to home digitised cultural heritage in a single unified experience where visitors can easily access, search and browse artworks, heritage sites, landmarks and exhibitions (Google [1], 2018).

The Google Cultural Institute builds free “tools and technologies for cultural organizations to showcase and share their cultural treasures and stories with a global audience online” (Google [1], 2018). Currently, (Google [1], 2018)

supports over 1,400 cultural institutions in 70 countries, more than 200,000 high-resolution digital images of original artworks, 7 million archival artifacts, over 1,800 Street View museum captures, and more than 3,000 online exhibitions curated by experts.

Designated team members (museum curators, private collaborators or contractors) from the different collections are given access to the free tools, and are then able to generate interactive digital exhibits.

The possibilities for collections are endless, and the more information that exists, the more the potential for a complex collection. The Venice Time Machine Project, for example, incorporates more than a thousand years of history, spanning eighty kilometres of archives (Kaplan, 2010).

2.9.1 Similar Outsider Art Collections

By their very nature, Visionary Environments are often isolated (geographically and culturally), and moreover, Outsider Artists often do not create for posterity, and use materials that are not intended for art-making. They do not create for the 'art world', and this often translates into their collections deteriorating quickly. This, in conjunction with diminishing arts budgets, the precarious position of Outsider Art in the realm of western art, minimum policy and insufficient artist's strategy for the future, means that the digitisation of many of these collections could be their only reasonable long-term plan.

Although Helen Martins is arguably the best known, South Africa has been home to several Visionary Environments created by Outsider Artists. These include Nukain Mabuza (c.1915-1981), who created a painted stone garden at Revolver Creek in Mpumalanga; Jackson Xidonkani Hlungwani, who "created his 'New Jerusalem' from rock and earth on top of a hill which overlooks the surrounding countryside" (Ross, 1997:220) near the village of Mbokhoto; and Sibusiso Mbhele, who created a Visionary Environment inspired by aeroplanes and helicopters.

Aside from a few mentions in publications and the odd photograph, there is scarcely any information available about these artists. After Martins, Mabuza's work is most widely recognised, and his Painted Stone Garden is recognised as an important Visionary Environment. Mabuza "did not initially intend his painted stones to have a commercial value. He appeared to order and enhance his immediate environment for his own pleasure" (Clarke, 2013:13). Mabuza painted the stones and boulders of his surrounding countryside at Revolver Creek in the Lowveld of Mpumalanga, softening the harsh landscape with "stripes, dots and pictograms representing birds and animals" (Maizels, 1996:214). John Clarke explains (n.d.):

Mabuza's home was a visually striking landmark reflecting the artist's strong yet sophisticated sense of colour and pattern, and his ingenious use of available materials...For the past thirty years the Stone Garden has remained abandoned to the elements - apart from one attempt to repaint the stones - and little remains of it in its original state.

Although he only discovered the Painted Stone Garden after the death of Mabuza, Clarke has documented the site extensively, and spent the past three decades gathering information, documents and photographs for his Mabuza archive (Clarke, 2013:6), which is currently the most comprehensive archive of the Painted Stone Garden. The archive has been partially digitised, and is currently stored in a filing cabinet at Clarke's own residence (Clarke, personal communication 2018, January 24). Although he would be happy to do it, Clarke has never been approached by a cultural heritage organisation, governmental or otherwise, to hand over the archive (Clarke, personal communication 2018, January 24).

Internationally, and especially in Europe and North America, the situation is marginally better.

Nek Chand (1924-2015) created a vast Visionary Environment in Chandigarh in northern India, and from its conception in the late 1950s until its discovery in 1972, consisted of over 2000 sculptures on a site several acres in size. He had worked on his creation every night in secrecy while working as a civil servant during the day. When his project (built on government land) was discovered, although there was outrage, authorities eventually supported his artistic vision and provided him with a salary, staff and materials to continue his work, which now spans over 25 acres (Maizels, 1996:215-225). An aspect of Chand's Rock Garden has been digitised and is available digitally online (Interactive Panoramas, n.d.) in the format of images and 360-degree panoramas. They were created by photographer Jean-Noël Montagné, who was commissioned by the Nek Chand foundation, and created them under a free licence (Montagné, personal communication 2018, January 29).

Another Visionary Environment that bears a striking resemblance to the Owl House is SP Dinsmoor's (1843-1932) Garden of Eden in Kansas, which was built at his home and contains over 200 concrete sculptures. Although each artist is unique, there are similarities between the Garden of Eden and the Owl House. Remarkably, Martins never had any knowledge of Dinsmoor, located in Lucas, Kansas - a community of less than 500 people. Funded by the Kohler Foundation, the Garden of Eden underwent conservation treatment as part of a preservation project to "repair and bring the Garden of Eden back to the condition SP Dinsmoor intended" (Kohler Foundation Inc., 2018).

According to Erika Nelson (personal communication, 2018. February 3), artist and board member of Friends of SP Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden, the foundation has started

an unofficial digital archive, with anything and everything we come across scanned and saved to an online bank of images, newspaper scans, transcripts, and theses...To date, most of the Garden of Eden info has been secreted away in various owners' basements, folders in area scholars' dens, or languishing on the shelves of libraries...It only scratched the surface of the resources I know to be out there.

As far as this research has led me to learn, other Visionary Environments around the world do not have a set digitisation strategy.

2.9.2 Other Collections

Two relevant collections that have seen profound digital transformation are the Peacock Room at the Freer Gallery and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Both projects are analogous to the Owl House, for different reasons. The Peacock Room is, like The Long Bedroom Collection, physically contained within one room, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, although encompassing several rooms, is an immersive museum experience.

Lee Glazer, Curator of American Art at the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution led the initiative to digitise the Peacock Room at the Freer Gallery in Washington DC after overseeing its re-installation in 2011. The project involved creating a content-rich interactive website and an app for in-gallery use.

The Peacock Room is a single room at the gallery, and is American artist Whistler's renowned decorative interior, created in 1908, where it served as an "aesthetic laboratory" (AAMC, 2017). Glazer describes it as being one of the most treasured collections at the Freer Gallery, but also one of the most challenging, because it is incongruous with the rest of the museum (which focuses on Asian art), and because it has "multiple chapters, reflecting its dynamic, cosmopolitan history" (AAMC, 2017). Glazer recognised that delving into technology could help them tell these different stories from different perspectives, and also increase access to the room and an understanding of its history. Thus, after working intensively with digital librarians and immersive learning specialists, a website was launched. It is an excellent

example of how hyperreality of the representation of digital objects “can be combined to aid reconstruction of the authenticity of an object across its whole history” (Dalbello, 2011:497).

The site is not intended for in-gallery use, for several reasons: there are no computer kiosks in the museum, and Glazer did not want the virtual to be a distraction from the immersive experience of being in the room itself. The site was developed to appeal to a fairly diverse audience, from enthusiasts to regular first-time museum visitors, and access to primary source materials means that it also functions as a resource for students, teachers or scholars (AAMC, 2017).

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston is a unique museum that was created as a philanthropic act by Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1903. There is a courtyard at its centre, encircled by several galleries containing about 15 000 objects in total. These include noted artworks, rare books and archival objects that Gardner collected to “give beauty and art to America” (AAMC, 2017). Carolyn Royston and Christina Nielsen collaborated on the digital transformation of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Royston from a digital technology background and Nielsen from a curatorial and collections management background.

Like the Owl House, the Isabella Stewart Garden museum is not a collecting museum, and the collection stays fixed as Gardner set it, with her intentions for it to be emotional, immersive and not solely intellectual. In order to respect the experience that Gardner created, the museum does not employ didactic panels or labels, which makes it very open to interpretation by visitors. As Nielsen explains, there is “no filter between you and the art” (AAMC, 2017: 35:51). However, many visitors need scaffolding during a museum experience, and this is where digital transformation plays an important role. Incorporating digital into the museum experience, the curators are able to tell stories and link digitised objects easily.

Glazer emphasises that the digital transformation of a museum is dramatic, both internally (the administration of the institution) and externally (audiences and visitor experience), and it is not something that can happen quickly or easily, and not without cooperation from all sides.

2.10 Summary

This chapter has attempted to give a concise background on the conceptual framework on which this research is built. Overarching themes like the digital humanities and digital curation were explored and linked to museums. The evolution of museums was discussed, which included the impact of the current digital revolution in South Africa and beyond. Outsider Art, Helen Martins and the Owl House were explained. This chapter also discussed the philosophical implications of simulations and hyperreality in relation to digital museums. Finally, it explored some contemporary research and similar studies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to interrogate the experiences and perceptions of participants who interacted with a digitally curated online platform of the Long Bedroom of the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda, referred to in this study as The Long Bedroom Collection. This qualitative study is situated in a social constructivist paradigm and uses elements of a phenomenological approach. As an instance of qualitative research, at the heart of this study is an emphasis on understanding “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 1998:5).

3.2 Research Design

The research design of this study was informed by Creswell’s (2007) framework, and followed two phases: phase one was the process of digitising a sub-collection of the Owl House in the Long Bedroom, and the second was an empirical process of collecting data from interviews with selected participants within the context of a small case study. These two phases followed four steps:

- Selection and digitisation of a sub-collection within the Owl House (phase 1).
- Creation of an online platform for the digitised collection (phase 1).
- Selection of participants who interacted with the platform (phase 2).
- Data collection and analysis: interviews with the participants and examination and exploration of their responses (phase 2).

This study is built on the interface between cultural heritage and digitisation. As described in previous chapters, visitors to museums experience and interpret artefacts in particular ways, and simply digitising museum collections and exposing visitors to a purely digital version does not translate into the same museum experience through a different medium. The integrity of the original collection inevitably changes through its digitisation and dematerialisation, and

this could result in misrepresentation of the original collection. This is not to say, however, that it is impossible for a digital museum experience to be as complex, layered, or meaningful.

3.2.1 Philosophical Assumptions

The ontological assumption of this research is that reality is not objective; it is created by interactions with the real world. The foundation of my ontological orientation in this study is that as the researcher, I make certain assumptions about the nature of reality. Reality, in my worldview, is not simply something that exists and is objective and discoverable – it is created by interacting with the real world. In this context, the meaning of the Owl House is created by peoples' experiences and perceptions of it. The Long Bedroom Collection, as a museum experience, invites people to make their own meanings. In the context of this research, the nature of a specific reality (experiences of The Long Bedroom Collection) are constructed by the actors that live it (Creswell, 2007:248).

Supporting these ontological beliefs, the epistemological assumption of this research is that knowledge is subjective. To make this assumption, however, “imposes on researchers an involvement with their subjects” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:7). This rejection of the methods of natural science for this research project means that this research supports subjectivism or anti-positivism (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:7). In other words, this research called for a methodology that was anti-reductionist and anti-mechanistic, moving away from measurable terms and toward “inner experience...notions of choice, freedom, individuality, and moral responsibility, regarding the universe as a living organism” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:17).

With these philosophical assumptions in mind, it follows that as a researcher, I favour an approach that is more post-positivist in nature, where I “view the social world as being of a much softer, personal and humanly created kind” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:8). Therefore, my methodology was selected from a comparable range of qualitative techniques - “accounts, participant observation and personal constructs, for example” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:8).

3.2.2 Qualitative Research

Moustakas (1994:21) lists several “common bonds” that distinguish qualitative research models from quantitative ones. These include the recognition that human experiences are not “approachable through quantitative approaches” (1994:21); the ability to focus on “the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts” (1994:21) and to find “meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (1994:21). As a caveat, I recognise that a positivist approach can be qualitative, and by no means advocate the polarisation of methods. However, for the sake of this research, as well as my own worldview and recognition that human experience does not always have to be measured, it was apparent that a qualitative approach would be more suitable for this study than a quantitative one.

3.2.3 Social Constructivist Paradigm

The paradigm in which the research was conducted is social constructivism (Creswell, 2007:20). I recognise that my own background and my interactions with others shape my interpretations and assimilation of knowledge and experiences, and I thus acknowledge that my own personal, cultural and historical experiences shape how I may interpret what other people say (Creswell, 2007:20). This paradigm aligns with my ontological orientation and the supposition that the nature of a specific reality is constructed by the actors that live it. As “[t]he researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense (or interpret) the meaning others have about the world” (Creswell, 2007:21), my specific intent was to collect data about how my participants experienced the Long Bedroom Collection. Moreover, the research relied on the varied views of the participants.

Because the nature of the research places importance on understanding several individuals’ common or shared experiences, the study was, to a large extent, conducted phenomenologically. Therefore, rather than defining an interpretive framework at the outset, I identified themes as they emerged from the data analysis. Rather than starting the research with a theory and deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research, my process was

inductive - I gathered data to “build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field” (Merriam, 1998:15).

3.2.4 Phenomenological Research

Put simply, “[p]henomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith, 2016). Smith (2016) continues: Phenomenology is

the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.

According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007:22),

phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that advocated the study of direct experience taken at face value; and one which sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality.

This research used aspects of phenomenology, in particular the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, and Moustakas’ (1994) expansion of the concept into phenomenological research design. A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their ***lived experiences*** of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007:57). As Merriam (1998:16) states, “the product of a qualitative inquiry is ***richly descriptive***. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about the phenomenon.” This research made use of data in the form of interviews as well as descriptions and contextualisation. The use of direct quotes from participants provides evidence of different perspectives, which further reinforces my ontological assumptions and the idea of multiple realities (Creswell, 2007:17). By presenting and compiling these different perspectives, the study shows “how individuals participating in the study view their experiences differently” (Creswell, 2007:18).

3.2.4.1 Phenomenological Research Procedure

The roots of phenomenological research stem from Husserl, and most importantly his notion of *epoché* and the methodological constraints that this imposes (Beyer, 2016). Research methodologists Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) differentiate between phenomenological research procedures, specifically hermeneutical phenomenology and empirical, transcendental or psychological phenomenology.

This study lent itself to a transcendental or psychological approach, as it called for “descriptions of experiences of participants”, rather than the hermeneutical approach which is oriented toward lived experiences (Creswell, 2007:59). In conducting phenomenological research, however, a researcher may well realise that her own experiences with the phenomenon affects her analysis, and thus her experiences need to be bracketed out (as much as possible) (Creswell, 2007:61). This aspect is also relevant to the social constructivist paradigm in which the research is bound: “researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2007:21).

The transcendental nature of this methodology comes from the notion of *epoché*, from Greek, “meaning to refrain from judgement, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994:33). When embracing this concept, researchers are able to set aside everyday understandings and judgements, “and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wider open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (Moustakas, 1994:34). In other words, in order for a researcher to achieve the ability to focus less on her own interpretations and more on the descriptions of others’ experiences, she needs to remove herself as much as possible from the phenomenon.

As Creswell and Moustakas point out, “this state is seldom perfectly achieved” (Creswell, 2007:60). LeVasseur (2003, in Creswell, 2007:62) offers a solution: “Perhaps we need a new definition of epoche [sic] or bracketing, such as suspending our understanding in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity”. In doing so, the researcher can decide how “her personal

understandings will be introduced into the study” (Creswell, 2007:62). It is for this reason that I proposed using elements of phenomenology in this study. Although my participants’ experiences were at the heart of my analysis, the themes that emerged were bracketed relative to my own worldviews and lived experiences. In other words, I recognise that this study is not an entirely true representation of a phenomenology, but rather that it used aspects of phenomenology. In a true phenomenology, the phenomenon would speak entirely for itself, but in this study, the data (interviews) were interpreted and analysed.

Creswell (2007:60) provides a brief synthesis of the transcendental phenomenological methodology:

The procedures...consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher then analyses the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes.

Once descriptions have been developed, the researcher will be able to “convey an overall **essence** of the experience” (Creswell, 2007:60).

A journal was kept during the course of the on-site research at the Owl House, which attempted, if not to mitigate personal interpretations obstructing the research, at least to offer insight into my personal interpretations. This journal did not, however, form part of my data set, but was rather kept as a personal diary.

3.2.5 Case Study

Consistent with my phenomenological orientation, this research is also consistent with a case study approach. In a traditional quantitative case study, the research requires a “bounded system” (Merriam, 1998:40) and a unit of analysis. In this study, the bounded unit is the six participants, and the unit of analysis is their responses. Importantly, the unit of analysis in a case study does not need to be quantifiable - “[q]ualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding” (Merriam, 1998:39).

Although elements of a case study were extant in this study, on assessment of the central purpose of this research, I prefer to classify it as a phenomenological case study.

3.2.6 Appropriateness of the Research Design Choices

As a genre, Outsider Art is an introspective form of creation - it relies on the experience of the creator (the Outsider Artist) being manifested in the real world. Moreover, it is an aspect of a lived experience of an individual. Therefore, I believe that a phenomenological approach supports this study's ontological assumptions of a subjective reality, and it also aligns with the spirit of Outsider Art.

Phenomenology is best suited to a problem that requires understanding of multiple individual experiences and "common experiences in order to develop practices of policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007:60). An aim of this study is to use this research as an exemplar for future practices or policy, and to develop a sound understanding not only about the features of a digital collection like this one, but also how people interact with it, what meaning they take from it, and what meaning they make. This meaning-making aspect is where the phenomenological methodology becomes fundamentally important.

As stated previously, this research also incorporated aspects of a case study. This aspect of research design aligns well with the ultimate aim of the research, which is to examine experiences and perceptions of The Long Bedroom Collection of selected participants.

3.3 Description of the Research Method

This study consisted of two phases: digitising a sub-collection and collecting data through interviews with selected participants.

3.3.1 Digitising the sub-collection

A sub-collection from the Long Bedroom was digitised and digitally curated for this study. A selection of twenty objects in the Long Bedroom were chosen. I made the decision to focus on one room only for various reasons: firstly, I felt that it was necessary to choose a defined area to work within; secondly, there were time constraints; and thirdly, because the room and the artefacts resonate with me. The room represents Martins' life and childhood and I believe is an intimate reflection of her lifestyle and her history. The Long Bedroom was the bedroom that Martins and her sisters slept in as children, and it continued to serve as a bedroom as Martins grew older. In other words, it was less of a space of display than other rooms in the house, which makes it an interesting composite of public and private space.

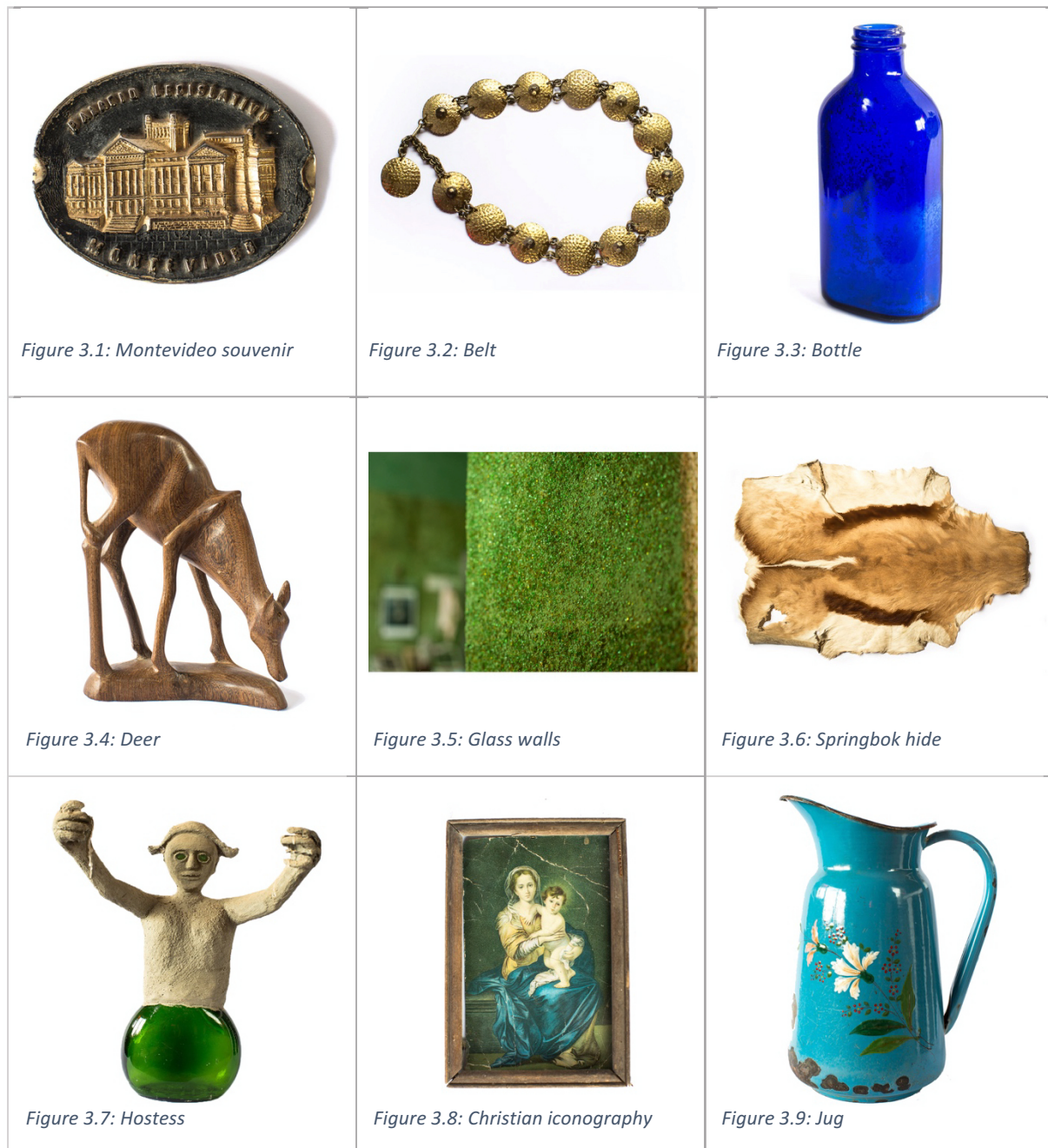
3.3.1.1 The sub-collection

The chosen objects from the Long Bedroom include sculptures, trinkets, ornaments, found objects that have been re-purposed, clothing, textiles, organic objects, furniture, pictures and parts of the building itself. They have been selected for their diversity in purpose and appearance.

3.3.2 The artefacts

Each artefact was digitised in various ways according to its suitability. Firstly, each artefact was photographed in its original location in the Long Bedroom. Where it was possible, and in the instances where artefacts were dynamic, objects were videoed or recorded. Figure 3.19, for example, was videoed as it moved. Secondly, all objects were removed from the Long Bedroom to be carefully measured and photographed with a high-resolution camera against a white background. This was done with the permission and supervision of the Owl House Foundation, and objects were handled carefully and replaced in their original location. The potential philosophical implications here were examined, and I concluded that although I 'tampered' with the Long Bedroom, its lived reality has already been altered by museum workers and curators over the years. Finally, each artefact was thoroughly researched, through existing literature and personal communications with experts.

Thus, each artefact has at least two digitised versions, in a variety of media and formats. This digitised collection was subsequently curated on an online platform – <http://www.thelongbedroomcollection.xyz/>* – with the expertise of a web developer. Figures 3.1 to 3.20 constitute the artefacts in The Long Bedroom Collection (figures marked with an asterisk are also in video format).



* Password to access is misshelen



Figure 3.10: Mermaid



Figure 3.11: Mug

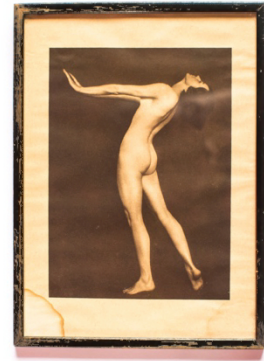


Figure 3.12: Nude



Figure 3.13: Oil lamp



Figure 3.14: Red lamp



Figure 3.15: Shell



Figure 3.16: Shirt



Figure 3.17: Shoes



Figure 3.18: Tin



Figure 3.19: Wind chime *



Figure 3.20: Windmill *

3.3.2.1 An aside on the Camel Yard

During preliminary research for this study I interrogated the different options for digitising the Owl House, and the Camel Yard was an enticing option. Figure 3.2 illustrates the iconic Camel Yard. However, the complexities surrounding the Camel Yard are manifold, and on closer exploration, I chose not to encompass this area of Martins' work. Instead, I chose to only work within the realm of the Owl House itself.



Figure 3.2: A detail from the Camel Yard. Photo: Sarah Schäfer 2011.

In brief, Martins hired local men to help with the physical labour-intensive work of building cement statues, crushing glass and painting, and their help increased as she aged. It was “an unusual symbiotic relationship between Miss Helen and the men who physically made the work” (Ross, 1997: 15). Most of the statues and scenes outside in the adjoining Camel Yard are derived from, or at least inspired by, objects in the Owl House.

Ross (1997:16) explains how much of the Owl House and the Camel Yard

would not exist without the combination of Helen and these helpers: Helen to inspire, commission, supervise, and purchase the necessary materials: cement, glue, glass bottles, and whatever else was needed – and her helpers to make the necessary practical construction decision and to physically execute her vision.

Intellectual property has thus become a contentious point in discourse around the Camel Yard, and although it is a valid discussion point, it is not relevant for the sake of this small study. If this research had a wider scope and were to mature, then the Camel Yard would be a fascinating aspect of the project.

3.3.3 Creation of the Online Platform

Web developer Andrew Paterson collaborated with me to create the online platform - <http://www.thelongbedroomcollection.xyz>. He had no previous knowledge of or experience of the Owl House, and worked solely with the content that I provided. This served as a layer of bracketing of the external party, which has an implication for the phenomenological truth. Paterson is a full stack developer, with a design background. He specialises in front-end web development, which translated into him being able to realise my vision for the online platform using the Ember.js JavaScript framework.

During our first consultation, I specified that users would have different needs, and these would need to be provided for in corresponding ways. For example, navigation patterns could vary, and one user might prefer getting a broad overview of the site before interrogating each artefact; and vice-versa. Moreover, I wanted to accommodate people who knew nothing about the Owl House and would enjoy exploring the collection in a way more approximate to actually being there. The process involved three stages:

1 – What I envisioned for The Long Bedroom Collection:

- The opening page needs two layers – an overview of the room, as well as each artefact separately;
- each artefact has its own set of data;
- each artefact has a separate page;
- metadata is easy for visitors to access and easy for me to edit;

- simplified user interface and a non-didactic navigation structure.

2 – After consideration, Paterson conveyed the following thoughts to me:

- The opening image (the wide angle of the room) needed to be a high-quality, jpeg image, with each relevant artefact clearly visible. Each artefact would need to be clearly demarcated to prompt the user to hover the mouse. This would bring up a box which would act as an entry point for the user to access more detailed content about the artefact. Each artefact could also be accessed separately from the home page from a horizontal panel below the main image and from the main site drop-down menu.
- Given that there were only 20 artefacts, creating a full stack web application with a database, API and frontend would be unnecessarily complex, particularly from a hosting point of view. Thus, the entire application would be built in the Ember.js frontend framework. Instead of using a database, the raw data would be put into a JSON file in exactly the format that an API would generate when fetching data from a database.
- For user experience, each separate artefact page includes a 'Next' and/or 'Previous' link where relevant, to accommodate users wishing to read about all of the artefacts without needing to constantly go back to the Home page. This offers different pathways for user engagement.

3 – Final details:

- Because The Long Bedroom Collection was created for research purposes, and not for the Owl House as a legal entity, I wanted to take measures to protect the site. Paterson therefore designed the website so that no content would be initially visible before a password was provided. Due to the fact that this is not a database-driven site, the method used was not fool-proof, but for these purposes, it suffices, as it would require extensive technical knowledge to gain access without the qualifying password.

The collaborative process of creating the online platform was incremental and iterative, and involved communication between the web developer and me.

3.4 Data Collection

A museum experience has value for visitors who have the opportunity to interact with artefacts and objects of cultural and historical significance that have been curated as a collection. It was therefore imperative for this study to use data collected from interviews with individuals who had engaged with The Long Bedroom Collection.

As described previously, the data collection stage of the study is the case study. Merriam (1998:2) states that

Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited to this task, especially because interviewing, observing and analyzing [sic] are activities central to qualitative research.

Empirical data collection for this study occurred through engagement with six participants. The participants agreed to attend an interview scheduled for approximately 60-90 minutes. For the first 20-30 minutes they engaged with The Long Bedroom Collection, and their computer interaction was both observed by me and recorded through a screencast. Subsequently, they were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences with The Long Bedroom Collection.

Data analysis is richer if information is collected on several levels, therefore, three kinds of data were collected: a screencast (see 3.4.3) of each participant navigating through and engaging with the Long Bedroom Collection; an interview (see 3.4.2) and critical reflection with each participant about their experiences and perceptions of the collection; and my own observations and interpretations.

3.4.1 Selection Criteria for Participants

For this qualitative research, a small number of participants sufficed, and six people were chosen to be interviewed. They were selected using non-random, purposive sampling, “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to...gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998:77). In other words, participants were chosen for their varied and contrasting views, in order to provide rich data. I used an

approach of maximum variation, which consists of determining in advance some differentiating attributes, and then selecting participants accordingly. Importantly, this purposeful sampling was also convenient for me as the researcher, as well as for the participants.

The main criteria for selecting the participants were that some have never visited the Owl House and that some have. Furthermore, all participants needed to share:

- an arts, humanities or social sciences background;
- arts literacy and an ability to be articulate in arts discourse;
- computer literacy and an ability to navigate an online platform intuitively.

Although the particular demographics of the participants were not of direct relevance for this study, the participants varied in age, race and ethnicity. For the sake of convenience and limited resources, all participants were located in Cape Town, where I am based.

3.4.2 Interviews

“To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection” (Merriam, 1998:25). In accordance with the social constructivist worldview in which this research is located, the interview questions were “broad and general” (Creswell, 2007:21), which allowed for the participants to “construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell, 2007:21). The style of interviews was a mixture of semi-structured and unstructured (Merriam, 1998:89).

While following a set of broad questions (Appendix C), the tone was conversational and the questions were open-ended. I gave prompts to guide the process, and the conversation was flexible and exploratory. “The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting” (Creswell, 2007:21). The aim of the interviews was to gain knowledge about the perceptions and experience of the participants, and obeying a set of standardised questions would not have lent itself to providing the types of data that were needed for this study.

Because this study was based on phenomenological data, and in order to get candid responses and for the conversation to evolve organically, it was important for me to be

present for the interviews. People were selected based on the criteria described above and invited to participate in the study. All participation was voluntary. Each individual was given time to peruse the Long Bedroom Collection, and their online engagement was recorded in a video screencast. Although the times that they each spent with the Long Bedroom Collection varied (see following section), it was imperative that they “all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, [could] forge a common understanding” (Creswell, 2007:62) and that there was relevant data reflecting this.

Interviews were scheduled with participants for November 2017 at times that suited their availability and convenience. The setting for the interviews was a comfortable, confidential and non-distracting environment. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and to ensure accuracy, participants were offered electronic copies of their transcribed interviews.

3.4.3 Screencasts

A screencast is a digital recording of a computer screen output, or a video of a computer screen changing over time as a user interacts with it. By screencasting while the participants each interacted with The Long Bedroom Collection, another layer of data (in addition to the interview data) was collected that could be analysed concurrently with the interviews. In this way, statements made by interviewees could be corroborated or contradicted by the screencast. The addition of these screencasts to the interview data allows for triangulation of the data. The screencasts varied from 19:41 minutes to 34:27 minutes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Two aspects of the data were analysed:

- An interview with each participant about their experiences and perceptions of the collection. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.
- The process of each participant engaging with the online platform and interacting with the media. This was recorded through a video screen capture or screencast.

As the six participants engaged with the digital collection I observed them and also recorded their digital movements using a screencast. As stated previously, the purpose of the screencast was to gather evidence about how the participants navigated through the collection. This made it possible to examine details such as how much time was spent with each object, how often an object was revisited and under what circumstances, and which objects had multiple visits.

After each participant had interacted with the Long Bedroom Collection, I conducted an interview. Data from my observations (recorded in the screencast) informed some of the direction of the interview, and enabled the participants to reflect critically on their perceptions and experiences as they navigated through the Long Bedroom Collection. The interviews were transcribed and analysed for interesting themes which then formed the framework for my narrative.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was completed in accordance with the University of Cape Town's ethics requirements. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Library and Information Studies Centre in the Faculty of Humanities before proceeding with the process of seeking voluntary participants.

Before the creation of the digital platform began, permission was successfully sought from the Friends of the Owl House, and cooperation with Shawn Graaff, collections manager of the Owl House. This meant that I had extensive access to the Owl House and as well as the expertise and knowledge of those working with it. As intimated earlier in this chapter, I was aware of the ethical dilemma of tampering with the collection.

Full ethical consideration was also given to the human subjects that were involved in the study, and was considered prior to the selection process. Their involvement was voluntary, and they gave consent with full knowledge of the aims of the study. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

In securing participants that were relevant, I sent investigative emails prior to selecting them. I outlined the study, what I expected from them, and how much time they would be expected to give. Once selected, they signed a consent form outlining their rights as participants. All interviews were audio recorded, and all online interaction with the Long Bedroom Collection was recorded as a screencast. These digital recordings were offered to the participants for the sake of transparency, and are digitally stored in a repository (see Appendix E).

Three appendices (Appendix A - initial appeal for voluntary participants; Appendix B – participants’ consent form; Appendix C – interview questions) were attached to the application of ethical clearance together with a summary of the study. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the Library and Information Studies Centre on behalf of the Humanities Faculty of the University of Cape Town on October 15, 2017.

3.7 Summary

This study was qualitative in methodology, and employed a social constructivist paradigm within a phenomenological orientation. The research was framed by elements of a phenomenological method and justified by an interview process. The methods chosen were intended to reflect the intricacies of digital curation within museums and cultural heritage institutions, and the effects of digital curation on Outsider Art collections, using the Owl House as an exemplar.

This chapter demonstrated the reasoning behind the research design and describes the methodology through which data was collected, managed and analysed. It described how each aspect of the research was determined, and the intention behind it. The philosophical underpinnings of the research and my own belief that meaning is developed through context was clarified.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the six interviews and presents findings drawn from the data. Merriam's (1998) viewpoint that qualitative data analysis is emergent (Merriam, 1998:169), inductive and comparative (Merriam, 1998:175) forms the epistemological foundation of this chapter.

The objective of this study was to explore six participants' perceptions and experiences of The Long Bedroom Collection, and I gathered qualitative data through one-on-one interviews with each participant. The interviews were conversational and a broad array of responses was captured. As described in Chapter 3, I selected a group of six participants using purposive sampling. Their experiences with and knowledge of the Owl House was varied, and the collected data reflected this diversity. Guided by Merriam's qualitative research framework, the data was analysed as it was being collected as separate units, and as a collection upon completion of the interviews (Merriam, 1998:169). The interviews took place in November 2017, and each interview was recorded and transcribed (Appendix E).

4.2 Approach to Analysis

According to Merriam (1998:169), "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research", and "the process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic". Before interviews began, I had a broad set of interview questions outlined (Appendix C), which I used for the first interview. Once complete, and upon inspection of the transcription, my reflections and ideas informed the second interview. Upon comparison and reflection of the second transcription, my questions for the third interview were informed, and so on. In other words, the interviews evolved.

At its most simple, Creswell (2007:148) describes data analysis in qualitative research as consisting of "preparing and organizing the data...for analysis, then reducing the data into

themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion". These core elements of data analysis were extant in this study, and most notably through the close inspection of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed and formatted (Appendix E) so that each line was numbered, and then thoroughly scrutinised for salient themes or patterns. I played back each interview, and read and re-read the transcripts thoroughly, in order to immerse myself in the details of each, "trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts" (Agar, in Creswell, 2007:150).

As I systematically went through the interviews and their transcriptions, I began the process of what Merriam (1998:178) terms 'open coding' – taking note of bits of data that are potentially relevant for answering the research question, while attempting to bracket out my subjectivity and remaining open to possibilities. I classified and categorised various themes that emerged from the data by assigning designated colours to different themes in the transcripts and highlighting the sections of the text on a digital copy. In other words, I began "taking the text or qualitative information apart, and looking for categories, themes or dimensions of information" (Creswell, 2007:153). Categories or themes that were 'prefigured' (Creswell, 2007:152) did arise from the data analysis, as anticipated. For example, the extra layer of immersion that the video format holds was a predictable theme. However, there were also emergent (Creswell, 2007:152) categories that surfaced, like the notion of the Owl House being site-specific. These themes that inductively emerged from the data are discussed in 4.5.

While some themes were anticipated, the methodological implications of framing this study phenomenologically mean that the data collected needs to speak for itself. Therefore, as the researcher, I needed to bracket myself out of this process as much as possible, let the data speak for itself, and not allow tight pre-determined themes to obstruct the themes that emerged and were extrapolated from the data. In order to be a reliable researcher and retain a phenomenological methodology, I needed to ensure that the data (the transcripts) kept their voices, and that I needed to keep my own subjectivity at bay, or at least be aware of the need to bracket myself out.

4.3 Presentation of the Analysis

The analysis of the data is presented linearly and as a cross-section. The vertical (linear) analysis discusses each participant individually and forms a narrative of each of their experiences with The Long Bedroom Collection, in the context of their own personal history. The horizontal (cross-sectional) analysis looks at the collection of interviews together, and forms a cohesive narrative of similarities, differences and idiosyncrasies that emerged from the interviews across the participants.

The fundamental purpose of making meaning out of the data was to attempt to answer the research questions set out in Chapter 1:

- What are some of the practical implications of digitising a sub-collection of the Owl House collection?
- How does the digitisation and digital curation process affect the original integrity of the collection?
- What are the perceptions and experiences of 6 selected participants when engaging with the digitised collection?

4.4 Vertical Analysis

4.4.1 Participant A

Participant A is a 27-year-old Anthropology PhD scholar, currently working in the field of education while doing research into South Africans' identity. She is Irish, and has lived in several countries, including China, England and latterly South Africa, where she has been based since 2015. Participant A described herself as not "*somebody who goes out of my way to view galleries*" (Participant A [A]:291), but she does visit museums regularly. She attributes this to her background and academic pursuits in anthropology. She is interested in cultural influences on individuals' personal stories (A:294-296), and mentioned how, as a non-South African, she would be "*curious as to what [the Owl House] means to South Africa*" (A:235-236).

Participant A is particularly interested in social dynamics within the context of South African identity, and was intrigued by the Owl House when she visited it two years ago. She knew little about Helen Martins or the Owl House, and initially, she was “*a little bit unnerved*” (A:15) by the Owl House and by its isolation (A:15). “[*It*] was not like anything I’d ever experienced before” (A:27).

From the following statements made by Participant A, it can be inferred that her understanding of the Owl House was more profound after her interaction with The Long Bedroom Collection. For example, during her visit to the Owl House, she was quite shocked by the glass-covered walls (Figure 3.5) – “*whoa...why would you want shards of glass on your walls?*” (A:81), but she is now aware of the effect that Martins achieved using the glass – “*actually, the walls are quite dusty now, and so...they don’t glimmer like they would have...it would have been lovely if it was clean and...there were lights shining*” (A:79-83).

Participant A carefully observed and read through all information given about each artefact in The Long Bedroom Collection, and found the attention to detail “*fascinating*” (A:43). She repeatedly referred to Nieu Bethesda, and the important role that she feels the town plays in the Owl House: “*it’s a really amazing response to quite an isolating life, and potentially quite a lonely life, to kind of create something that would attract people to come to this like remote town*” (A:115-117).

Overall, after her engagement with The Long Bedroom Collection, Participant A’s initial conception of Martins was challenged, and her views were adjusted. She views her experiences of the Owl House and The Long Bedroom Collection as two completely different yet inseparable things because she “*probably engaged with it very differently since I’d already been there, and...I don’t necessarily see the two as being separable*” (A:274-276). If she returns to the Owl House, she would want to revisit The Long Bedroom Collection “*in preparation for enhancing the experience*” (A:158).

4.4.2 Participant B

From the USA originally, Participant B has been living in South Africa since 2009. She is 34 years old, and is an accredited heritage practitioner and an archives and museums consultant. She knows the Owl House extensively and intimately, both in personal and professional capacities. She first visited Nieu Bethesda in 2015, when she was invited as part of a visionary team put together by Participant E “*which was set up in order to re-envision the Owl House and how it’s managed and [shows] best practices for museums and archives*” (Participant B [B]:9-10).

When Participant B first visited the Owl House, she immediately became aware that, in terms of policy and the future of the museum, “*a lot of dust shaking*” (B:29) was needed to revitalise this environment. She has begun implementing a preservation plan, and “*we’ve made a lot of progress, but there’s still a long way to go*” (B:34). Participant B is quick to emphasise how the Owl House is “*an evolving exhibit*” (B:16-17) which changes with the years, the seasons and the visitor. Participant B probably knows every object in the Owl House; she has catalogued them for inventory and archiving purposes, and when she is working on-site she sees them daily. Her first impression of The Long Bedroom Collection was that it “*is very object intensive, which is really cool*” (B:77), because it offers a “*fresh*” (B:80) take on the traditional Owl House museum photography.

She appreciated the different digital formats of this study (B:130-131), and admired the style of photography that I employed, which she felt “*pays tribute and homage to [Martins’] style, which speaks to the language of the Owl House, which...enhances the experience*” (B:163-164). Incorporating different photographic styles “*adds to the nuance*” (B:172), which is so central to the Owl House.

Participant B’s views about digitising vary according to the different roles that she plays vis-à-vis the Owl house in her professional and personal capacities. Overall, she recognises the power of good digital media, commenting on how “*a digital curation [strategy] is the best chance of capturing spaces like this*” (B:461-462).

For the past two years, Participant B has been focusing her energies at the Owl House on policy, and putting in place a solid archival plan for the museum. It is a difficult topic considering the nature of the Owl House: *“who are we to make that decision, because there’s not...a game-plan that she [Martins] left”* (B:328-329). This uncertainty also speaks to some philosophical concerns around the integrity of a collection, which are alluded to in Section 5.2.7.

4.4.3 Participant C

Participant C is a 31-year-old landscape architect from Cape Town. She has been to the Owl House once, in 2008. Her general impression of the Owl House is that *“it was a very cool and very weird place”* (Participant C [C]:14), which she found *“fascinating”* (C:18). She was taken aback at *“the number of things that she’d made and the amount of...creativity contained in that house and garden”* (C:18-19).

At several moments during the interview, Participant C referred to the *“overwhelming-ness”* (C:102) of the Owl House, and the fact that the proliferation of glass casts an eerie light on everything. Her memory of the Owl House is very much about the experience as a whole, and the feelings that it conjured up in her. She has a vivid memory of the glass-covered walls (Figure 3.5) inside the Owl House (C:19-21):

I remember the glass walls...really standing out for me, in terms of wanting to touch them, but not wanting to touch them. And that feeling of, it’s so sparkly, but it’s so spiky. It must be such a strange thing to want on your walls.

Participant C pointed out how The Long Bedroom Collection reminded her *“of what it felt like to be in the house...it invoked a lot of the feeling of being in the house”* (C:35-36). Although Participant C’s understanding of the Owl House is tied to its immersive nature, she appreciated The Long Bedroom Collection, and noted that *“the digital versions of the artefacts allowed for interrogation and investigation of each artefact”* (C:109-116).

For Participant C, that the digital collection is *“not tactile”* (C:77) is its most prominent shortcoming. However, she did point out how The Long Bedroom Collection *“does a very good*

job of showing things from many different angles” (C:95-96), which adds an element of dimensionality. She refers to it as (C:98-101):

a both sides thing, because the photos and the digital [medium] capture light in a way that really shows it. But you can't be in it...I think that the digital can actually show what the light's doing, in a way that you wouldn't necessarily experience if you were actually there, which...enhances it completely.

For Participant C, The Long Bedroom Collection provides a *“much more detailed glance”* (C:130-131) of the space than a real-life visit to the room, which she felt was *“almost more immersive in terms of interacting with all the elements, or a lot more of the elements in the space”* (C:135-136).

In comparing the Long Bedroom Collection to the actual Owl House, she describes it (C:195-8) as

a different kind of satisfaction button. Because if I were actually there, I don't think I would have the patience to look at everything as closely as I was looking at the digital. I would definitely be glancing, and experiencing the overall sense, more...I think the digital collection...hones in on various things, which is...cool. It's nice to be shown.

In summing up her experiences of The Long Bedroom Collection, Participant C acknowledged that The Long Bedroom Collection inspires her to go back to the Owl House (C:189).

4.4.4 Participant D

Participant D is an English lecturer at Stellenbosch University. Prior to his engagement with The Long Bedroom Collection, he had no experience nor knowledge of the Owl House. He is, however, well-versed in literary and artistic themes, and was enchanted by The Long Bedroom Collection. He immediately noted how Martins *“loved to clutter things up”* (Participant D [D]:4), and how he was drawn to the *“magic and enchantment”* (D:158) of the space.

Participant D was positive about the digital format of The Long Bedroom Collection, and the way that the selected artefacts were chosen and represented: as a browsing experience, he found it *“very, very satisfactory”* (D:373) and he liked the layout too: *“I think it's friendly, I*

think it's non-intrusive and very, very helpful" (D:384-5). He is appreciative of how The Long Bedroom Collection allows for freedom of movement throughout the collection - *"I begin to find what I look for in a museum, through the digital process here. It just leads my eye, but when I pull back I can also see more things"* (D:171-172).

Participant D's reaction to the digital media was very favourable, not only in terms of the experience of the collection as a viewer but also because a digital collection is accessible to people who might not have the means to get there (D:223-225). He describes a hypothetical student from an impoverished background *"who actually wants to be in the world of art, has this [digital collection] accessible to them"* (D:221-3).

Participant D spent time with each artefact in The Long Bedroom Collection, and spoke about most of them in detail. The intimacy of the bedroom was a theme that Participant D mentioned several times during the interview, and he was instantly drawn to the hostess (Figure 3.7) (D:28-35):

I think it characterised the room...it speaks to a feminine welcoming of...a feminine space. And there's something welcoming and warm about it. The kooky colours...And it's an extraordinary gesture, in that, as a visitor from afar, I already feel welcomed in the space.

He also recognised this welcoming femininity in the Madonna and Child postcard (Figure 3.8).

Participant D's own research into the culture of kitsch, ornamentation and pageantry in South Africa is echoed in his response to The Long Bedroom Collection, and what he calls Martins' *"kitschy rebelliousness"* (D:60). His understanding of Martins is that she wanted magic, so *"she [grew] a paradise garden, but on the inside"* (D:112).

Participant D was, overall, very excited at the prospect of visiting the Owl House in the future because of what he had seen and experienced in The Long Bedroom Collection. His enthusiasm was evident: *"I'm in love with the room"* (D:148).

4.4.5 Participant E

Participant E is an author, artist and poet, and the author of a seminal book on the Owl House. She has been returning to the Owl House since her first visit there in 1976, and has been a key player in the Owl House as a museum and an institution. She is currently the honorary director of the Owl House Foundation. She describes her first experience of the Owl House when she was a young student and happened to be passing through Nieu Bethesda a few months after the death of Martins. *“I was just amazed”* (Participant E [E]:260), she says. She describes the experience (E:272-274):

“Geez! Who would make a place like this? This is interesting! You know. And it just seemed so ecstatic in a way, I liked the ecstasy element. A lot of the work is...this...even in this Long Bedroom, is...has an ecstasy element, you know, the...staining the light, all that is all part of an ecstasy language, you know”.

Participant E was very positive about the digital simulation of a space that she knows so well, and she recognises the power that digital as a medium can have: *“I think it’s cool, you know, it’s interactive. And... it’s like a library...it’s just like a picture that comes alive”* (E:82-83).

Furthermore, Participant E believes the The Long Bedroom Collection was able to capture some of what she refers to as the Owl House’s *“psychedelia”* (E:80).

Participant E mentions that she did not ever expect the Owl House to persevere for as long as it has, and she recognises that, as it decays more rapidly, presenting it digitally is potentially the best possible option for preserving it. She explains (353-7):

[A]t this stage, it’s a very deteriorated environment...So what do you do with a deteriorated environment, do you faithfully sort of conserve it and stop the clock? No, it makes no sense. So, the other approach is to really attempt to understand the meaning of the place, and to do everything with that in mind. And in a way, that’s appropriate to the meaning.

4.4.6 Participant F

Participant F is an architect from Zimbabwe who has lived and worked in South Africa for eight years. Prior to the interview, he had no knowledge of the Owl House. He enjoys visiting museums because he acquires an insight into how *“people lived in the past, and the contrast*

from now and then. It's so intriguing to see" (Participant F [F]:11). Despite having no experience or knowledge of the Owl House, Participant F was very enthusiastic about his experiences with The Long Bedroom Collection, and thought that *"the platform is brilliant"* (F:162).

His perception of Martins was that *"she needed an outlet of sorts"* (F:22) and that the Owl House is *"inspiring"* (F:34). He felt that the digital version of the Long Bedroom made him *"more curious"* (F:80), and that *"now that I've seen the detail, it makes me want to go there and actually experience it for myself"* (F:82-83). Another aspect that Participant F mentioned about the digital platform is that it is convenient for accessibility (F:127).

As an architect, he spoke about the intangibility of The Long Bedroom Collection, and how, in order to really experience the all-encompassing nature of the Owl House, one would need to visit it (F:40-44). However, he sees digitising as a necessary aspect of the future of museums (F:99-102):

everything has a lifespan. At some point, this [the Long Bedroom] will never exist. And right now, the only source of posterity is actually capturing what was, just in a digital format. And, I think it also attracts people. If I was to send a link to somebody else and they will see it and probably someone else would appreciate it, they're more inclined to visit, rather than reading about it.

Participant F was particularly drawn to the Montevideo souvenir (Figure 3.1), because there was something familiar in its trinket nature – *"it's just one of those things, maybe your grandmother would have, but you don't know how she got it until she tells you the story"* (F:59-60). He was also fascinated by the extent of glass and glasswork that is visible in the room. *"[S]he's actually taken common household things we take for granted, and she's just tweaked them, and given them an expression"* (F:131-132).

Overall, Participant F would have liked to see more artefacts, but he appreciated the construction of the platform, especially the wide-angle photograph on the landing page with the animated blocks, because it *"actually gives like an extra sense of feel, like a sense of like being there"* (F:125).

4.5 Cross-Sectional Analysis

This cross-sectional analysis of themes that emerged from the six interviews is separated into four main themes: tangibility, subjective experience, access and preservation, and descriptions and metadata. While being aware that I needed to allow the voices to speak for themselves and for the themes to emerge organically, I organised the cross-sectional analysis in four themes and here I present them accordingly.

Within each broader theme, separate sub-themes emerged:

- Tangibility
 - Site specificity
 - Sensory overload of the Owl House
- Subjective experience
 - Interpretations of Miss Helen
- Access and preservation
 - Accessibility
 - Decay and deterioration
 - Preservation and temporality
- Descriptions and metadata
 - Interpretations of the artefacts
 - Digital formats

4.5.1 Tangibility

Tangibility is what the digital medium lacks. Simply put, the digital is *“not tactile”* (C:77). Objects that have weight and three-dimensionality, when reduced to digital surrogates that simply stand alone, are meaningless. In digitising an immersive space like the Owl House, this tangibility and intangibility needs to be continuously considered. As Participant E says, *“there’s no substitute for the real thing...but it’s a good second best”* (E:496-7), especially when ‘the real thing’ isn’t an option for many. She discusses her views on the divide between reality and simulated reality (E:495-98):

“Sometimes simulated reality is...more glamorous. But it...has much less information, because, well, the real thing always has more information. Objects have vibrational qualities that some people pick up. They have auras that some people pick up”.

This tangibility is captured by Participant C, who remembers going to the Owl House and being captivated by the glass walls (Figure 3.5) – she was both drawn to touch them, and repulsed by them at the same time (C: 19-21). It is this physical reaction to something that cannot be replicated digitally. However, Participant C also pointed out how The Long Bedroom Collection *“invoked [sic] a lot of the feeling of being in the house”* (C:35-36).

4.5.1.1 The Site-specific Nature of the Owl House

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the site-specific nature of the Owl House. It is so tied to the town of Nieu Bethesda, a remote village in the heart of the arid Karoo, and to dismiss its locale would be disingenuous. Participants B, D, and E all pointed out that it is impossible to extract it from its location. Helen Martins did not exist in a vacuum, and the Owl House was as much a product of her own personality as it was of this environment.

Participant B describes getting to Nieu Bethesda and visiting the Owl House as *“a tactile experience...your vehicle is reverberating...nothing is working anymore, it’s like you’re going to space, basically.”* (B:281-3). A digitisation of the Owl House needs to include more contextual information about the real place that it occupies in the world. As Participant A states, *“if the Owl House was in the centre of Cape Town, I would have a very different understanding of what it is”* (A:111-12). Participant D, although he has never visited Nieu Bethesda, also noticed the contrast between the geographical locations of Cape Town and Nieu Bethesda, noting that the Owl House probably could not have been born in the Western Cape (D:269). As a Capetonian, he says (D273-5)

we’re too busy being performative. Look at Cape Town...it’s beautiful to look at, but everyone gets caught up in the hype of its performance, and that has been Cape Town’s illness since the 19th Century.

Moreover, if artefacts from the Owl House were removed and placed in a different setting, much of their meaning would dissolve. *“I’m reminded so much of the way Olive Schreiner felt, trapped in the Karoo and the way she also had a sense of adventure”* (D:128-130).

Nieu Bethesda is a unique village in a picturesque setting, but the reality is that...like many other towns across the country, it represents a microcosm of South Africa's very unequal society. Participant A describes herself as being "*perturbed by the whole Nieu Bethesda setup. I think...being quite new to South Africa, it was quite strange to me, to have...a town that was so white with such a huge township¹ outside*" (A:22-24). She suggested that a platform like The Long Bedroom Collection could benefit from more contextual information (A:198-200):

I would have been interested for it to go much deeper. I think I would have enjoyed much more information about her as a person, much more contextual information about what Nieu Bethesda was like at that time.

Getting to Nieu Bethesda is a pilgrimage of sorts, and the town is palpably isolated, even now that there are well-maintained highways and internet connections. It is a long distance from any major hub, and the roads leading to the town are long and arduous. Figure 4.1 illustrates the vast expanse of the Karoo. Part of the experience of the Owl House is the journey to Nieu Bethesda. Participant B (272-279) explains:

once you get on that turn-off, your phone don't [sic] work no more...Hello, welcome to being out in the middle of nowhere. When you take that turn and you see these...big rock structure formations, and you've got the toer [mountain] in there, and the farm land...it just like hits you. You probably arrive in the afternoon, it's this...really powerful, hello, welcome, like spectacular...it's like a cruise-ship dance line, like 'Hello! Welcome!' Like the Rockettes kicking their legs...you are here, you are driving and then your car hits that dirt road, and it's rattling you and it's this dust storm. It's...whatever you thought you were coming to, is not what is about to happen.

¹ Colloquial South African term for the segregated areas, often on the periphery of towns, that were traditionally reserved for people of colour, and have remained largely under-developed.



Figure 4.1: The Karoo landscape on the road to Nieu Bethesda, with the Sneeuberg mountain range and the majestic Compassberg cutting into the skyline. Photo: Sarah Schäfer 2017.

The Long Bedroom Collection did not contextualise the Owl House by providing extensive information about Nieu Bethesda or the Karoo, and aside from a mention in *Read More*, visitors to the platform are left quite unaware of its environment. Participants who know the Owl House well, spoke of it in relation to Nieu Bethesda, and participants who know little about the Owl House expressed interest in finding out more about Nieu Bethesda.

4.5.1.2 Sensory Overload in the Owl House

The Owl House and the Long Bedroom is filled with objects, resulting in an environment that verges on being over-stimulating. In the Long Bedroom, there are an estimated 400-500 objects. The Long Bedroom Collection included only 20 objects for the purpose of this research project. It must be pointed out that in the Owl House, objects, although tangible, are not interactive – as in many museums, visitors are strictly prohibited from touching the artefacts. This creates an interesting ambiguity in the concept of tangibility, because although the digital objects in The Long Bedroom Collection are not three-dimensional, viewers have

more freedom to interact with them than they do in the actual Owl House. The objects that were video recorded were meant to give this sense of multi-dimensionality to the object. The viewer could view the object from the front and the back, for example.

Sensory overload is part of the experience of the Owl House – there is a *“heady sensuality...all the colours and the glitter and the...everything, the theatricality of it”* (E:218-219). Participant C (27-28) remembers the overwhelming nature of the Owl House: *“everywhere you looked there was [sic] twenty things to see”*.

Participants responded differently to this aspect of the space. Participant E refers to it as *“the living stage set, both alluring and dangerous”* (E:222), that she understands as the heart Martins’ work. She refers to it as a *“psychedelia story...to confuse the senses, to confuse the reality”* (E:195-197).

Participant F found himself wanting to look at everything, including the objects that had not been digitised (F:111). He enjoyed the *“cluttery”* (F:114) nature of the space, and how Martins made use of everything. Participant D enjoyed being guided through the collection, moving from one artefact to the next. *“I love being guided through these frames, because I can pick up patterns”* (D:8). He compared it to a museum: *“I feel guided in a museum, but also lost at the same time...[but] that doesn’t mean that museums have to be prescriptive, it means it’s a guide for somebody who could use it, and the rest can do [it] their own way”* (D:161-168).

4.5.2 Subjective Experience

Meaningful experience is subjective, and meaning-making occurs through a process of gathering and interpreting information and adding it to an individual’s own gamut of life experiences and beliefs. A valuable museum experience, whether physical or digital, needs to be thoroughly researched and carefully curated.

4.5.2.1 The Interpretation of Miss Helen

The Owl House is a very personal expression of a very sensual person – Helen Martins. For Martins, the Owl House was more than an artistic outlet, it was also her home. Any experience of the Owl House, therefore, will instigate a reaction to the person that created it.

Participant E and Participant B, neither of whom knew Martins personally, are both very familiar with her because of their time at the Owl House, but all other participants drew their own conclusions about ‘Miss Helen’ from their engagement with The Long Bedroom Collection.

Interestingly, the four participants with little or no prior experience of the Owl House came to similar conclusions about Martins. Participant F noted how she was a non-conformist, both in her personal history and also as an artist – she “*didn’t fit into a particular genre*” (F:142). Participant D remarked on her “*girlish rebellion*” (D:65), and Participant A recognised that although she was “*an oddity*” (A:57), she had an artistic vision (A:89). Participant C remarked on “*the amount of creativity contained*” (C:19) in the Owl House.

4.5.3 Access and Preservation

4.5.3.1 Accessibility

A straightforward motivation to digitise museums is the notion that the digital format is intangible and therefore remotely accessible. Especially in the context of South Africa, where humanities funding is scarce and poverty is extensive, few people who are attracted to the idea of visiting the Owl House actually have the means to get there.

Participants D and F both mentioned how museums like the Owl House can be made more accessible through digital versions. Participant D appreciates how The Long Bedroom Collection “*makes the Owl House more accessible*” (D:219-220), especially to, for example, a student with little budget who has an interest in art. He is careful to point out how, in South Africa especially, there is a conflation of art and privilege (D:223-225), and he feels strongly

that making collections digitally available would be a means to potentially narrow the gap. He explains (258-61):

I still have the means to just jump in a car and go to the Owl House without having seen [The Long Bedroom Collection]. But I think...of this hypothetical student who is getting supported to...do art, but still doesn't know where the nodal points are, what to look at. This is a great guide and I think it then does expand to other forms of art.

4.5.3.2 Decay and Deterioration - the Owl House Standing Still

The Owl House, during Martins' lifetime, was an ever-changing environment, and Martins altered it daily. It was a living, breathing space, with her at its very heart. It was not a static space, yet in its current state, it does stand still.

The Owl House had temporality, but since 1976, with the decision to preserve it, it has been made immortal. However, philosophically, its standing-stillness is anathema to the very meaning of the Owl House. As a place of public interest, and an art environment, the board of the Owl House Foundation made the decision to preserve it, "*because what's more important is to keep the spirit of the place...and the atmosphere of the place right*" (E:347-349).

The Owl House was a living environment - "*it changed daily...she was in the process of changing it when she died...She had plans for it, you know... for moving it forward in a certain direction*" (E:350-352) but it is no longer a living environment. By digitising the Owl House and attempt is made to keep the spirit of the Owl House alive. There are, however, ethical and philosophical implications of digitising the Owl House, and these were highlighted by Participant B especially, as the following section discusses.

4.5.3.4 Preservation and Temporality

Many objects in the Owl House and the Owl House itself is deteriorating, and as Participant F says, "[a]t some point, this [the Long Bedroom] *will never exist. And right now, the only source of posterity is actually capturing what was, just in a digital format*" (99-100).

On a professional level, as an archives and museum specialist, Participant B firmly believes that the Owl House should be digitised as a preservation measure. She explains (B:203-209):

for preservation and for operational purposes, the rate of decay and deterioration for many of these objects is so high, and we are hitting a critical tipping point where the number of visitors are going to directly negatively affect the stability and the continuity of the objects within the Owl House. If we keep having the same number of people in every year...these things are going to fall apart...The Owl House itself is not secure...people are touching, people are moving...it's very difficult, you can't control the space. And unless the museum is going to make changes in order for that to be more secure, then they have to digitise.

However, although Participant B believes that a digital strategy is a necessary part of the future of the Owl House, she does not envision it belonging on an accessible digital platform only. If it does, it should be carefully selected *“to stimulate the desire to go to the original, not make it so detailed to the point where you don't have to go”* (B:218-291). She understands the Owl House as a part of its environment and its community, which is Nieu Bethesda and the Karoo. *“you have to frame the Owl House in the context of Nieu Bethesda”* (B:261-262). Simply put, *“you just don't get it, unless you go there”* (B:413).

Participant E believes that one should not faithfully conserve such a deteriorating environment, attempting to *“stop the clock”* (E:355), but rather to conserve it through truly understanding it and allowing it to evolve as organically as possible.

Participant B also has a more existential understanding of the Owl House and its temporality – *“what's the point of digitising it if it's not going to be there, and it's going to fall apart* (B:227-228). The Owl House is an ephemeral space – it was not created for posterity, and yet we attempt to preserve it. She references Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, too: *“we're making this simulacra of the original, but if the object deteriorates and it's no longer part of the exhibition, which is the Owl House, then why are we digitising something that's no longer?”* (B:232-234). Martins did not choose objects because she planned for the museumification of the Owl House, and most objects have a natural life cycle.

She resolves the dilemma with a compromise of sorts (B:234-239) –

It needs to be very carefully determined what the purpose of it is, because you're bridging in from an experiential museum, to a historical museum. And...you've got to make a clear defining mark. And I think with something like a digital collection, and making objects digitised to the point where...you don't necessarily need to display them anymore, is fantastic from a preservation point of view, but when you do that, you're changing the ethos of the purpose of your museum professionals.

On a personal level, Participant B believes very differently, and does not think that the Owl House should be preserved. *"I fundamentally think that if we can preserve space as an experience, that's the purpose. That's what it was intended for...I believe that, as a person that's into what Helen did"* (B:312-216). In other words, Participant B believes that if she were true to what she believes was Martins' true vision for the Owl House, she would not attempt to preserve it. She continues, implying that Martins would most likely be horrified at the state of deterioration: *"I think we should put new things in. We should take out the old rotty stuff. She did not live a life of rot and decay"* (B:318-319).

4.5.4 Descriptions and Metadata

Although there are hundreds of artefacts to choose from in the Long Bedroom, I settled on a selection of 20 objects in total for the purpose of this research project. They were chosen for their diversity. The collection included trinkets, artworks, sculptures, decoration, re-appropriated objects and clothes. Once the artefacts for The Long Bedroom Collection were chosen, each artefact was digitised and then researched for metadata. The artefacts do stand alone, but importantly, they are a part of the bigger collection, which in turn, is a part of the Owl House itself.

Each artefact was researched as thoroughly as possible in order to allow viewers an in-depth reading of them. Some objects were more biographically and historically interesting than others – for example, Figure 3.1 (Montevideo souvenir) was more difficult to research than 3.17 (the pair of shoes). Martins kept no inventory of her own, and guessing the importance of any particular object was sometimes just that: guesswork. The metadata that was sourced included provenance information, materials and measurements. I consulted the available

literature and asked relevant experts about the specific objects. Each artefact in The Long Bedroom Collection is accompanied by its particular metadata.

On the home page, there was an option to 'Read More'. *"I liked the way the 'read more' was there...It wasn't forced on me...sure, my eye was guided, but...I felt I had choice, I felt I had the time to do it"* (D:375-378). Participant D liked the layout of The Long Bedroom Collection – *"I think it's friendly, I think it's non-intrusive and very, very helpful"* (D:384-385).

4.5.4.1 Interpretations of the Artefacts

Each participant was asked whether a particular object stood out for them, and the responses were varied. In the Owl House, rooms are brimming with objects of all sorts, and it is very difficult to learn all the details about them, which can be overwhelming. The Long Bedroom Collection, on the other hand, shows the objects both in and out of context, and offers different layers of information about them. Each participant gleaned information and insight into the artefacts and the Long Bedroom in their own ways. Participant A (173-80) acknowledges that

I think things don't make that much sense to me unless I have some kind of information behind them...I went and I was like, this is room full of junk. But actually, reading what I know now...I understand a little bit more about why this is special.

Participant A recalls how, during her visit to the Owl House, she did not pay particular attention to most of the objects, and *"brushed them away as...junk that had kind of been left"* (A:44-45). Later, she noted, *"the more you know about these kinds of objects, the richer the experience feels"* (A:96-97). Participant A was particularly drawn to the shoes (Figure 3.17), which she puts down to the biographical details that were included about an accidental toe amputation.

The same artefact also made an impression on Participant C (C:164-165) for similar reasons – she found the detail quite bizarre and that made it stand out for her. Participant C was fascinated by the glass-covered walls (Figure 3.5), and this was mostly because she remembered her visceral reaction to them when she visited the Owl House. She enjoyed the

video and sound of the wind chimes (Figure 3.19), and appreciated how each item was given several digital forms, which tell a story and offers context (C:166-171). Participant C felt that The Long Bedroom Collection provides a *“much more detailed glance”* (C:130-131) of the space than a real-life visit to the room. *“[It’s] not immersive [in terms of involving] all the senses, but it’s almost more immersive in terms of interacting with all the elements, or a lot more of the elements in the space”* (C:135-136).

Participant D, on the other hand, spoke about how the hostess (or *die meisie*) (Figure 3.7) was noticeably interesting to him because of metaphorical and literary connotations that he drew from it. To him, it *“characterised the room”* (D:28). He went on: *“there’s an innocent femininity to it, it makes the room friendly, it does reference the handmaiden or the figure of the handmaiden, but that in itself, speaks to a kind of intimacy”* (D:28-30). He brought up an interesting detail pertaining to the bottles and how he recognised some of his own history in them – *“[the] fact that they were milk of magnesia bottles [is] very evocative if you were a child [in South Africa], you’d know what that tasted and felt like...I love the transaction of that”* (D:130-132).

On the other hand, Participant E and Participant B, who both know the collection well already, did not gain new knowledge from the collection, but they appreciated how information was gathered together on one platform.

4.5.4.2 Digital Formats

Most artefacts in the Long Bedroom are passive objects, but artefacts that have dynamic potential (e.g. Figs. 3.19 and 3.20) were also video recorded, and in general, the feedback from participants about the digital video format was positive. *“I liked the wind chimes [Figure 3.19], in terms of the fact that you [could] also hear them. I think that was...it was fun”* (C:166-167). Participant B thought that *“the video and the sound is very cool. And that’s really catching and pulling in, and drawing”* (B:130-131). Participant E particularly enjoyed the artefacts that were in a video format for their *“lovely animation touch”* (E:112), which she found *“charming”* (E:166). The Owl House is a very sensory space, and a digital experience need not rely solely on visible material. Different kinds of media were used in order for the

participants to experience the collection in a way that might be similar to visiting the actual collection.

The decision to begin video (and its accompanying audio) playback automatically was made with the web developer, with the intention of capturing some of the ambience of the room itself, and Participant B appreciated this detail, noting that it “*adds to an immersive experience of the space*” (B:133).

Participant C appreciated the detail that was captured (C:109-116):

[In] digital...you can highlight things that you wouldn't necessarily notice [in real life]...I would never have seen those items up close. And I wouldn't have found out about what they all meant...I think that that is a big enhancement from the digital. It's...being able to interrogate and interact with all these different little bits and pieces...I kept wanting to...be able to walk around.

The Long Bedroom Collection is photograph-rich. As explained in Chapter 4, each artefact was photographed several times, in different settings. All participants appreciated the quality and the detail of the photography, for different reasons. Participant B felt that the photographic quality “*adds to the nuance*” (B:172) and “*totally enhances*” (B: 144) the Owl House. She continues (144-151):

the Owl House suffers from a lack of high quality imagery and high quality replication...And part of that is...is charming and it does add to the quaintness of the Owl House [because]...it's a time capsule, and that adds to...the curiosity and the sort of weird, locked-in-time mysticism of it. But, it...it takes away from what we're used to, so it makes it more foreign. So, this quality of photography makes the objects more accessible.

Participant E particularly appreciated the photography of several of the artefacts in their context (in the Long Bedroom), particularly the blue Milk of Magnesia bottles, and pointed out the fact that this was Martins’ “*own kind of version of a rose window*” (E:187) was particularly evident when photographed in this manner.

As a browsing experience, Participant A “*found it very satisfactory. I particularly liked the long shot of the room where...you could click on the objects. I really enjoyed that, I felt that was*

really cool" (A:272-4). Participant F was also drawn to the opening photograph because of how *"the way the picture was taken, the angle of it, it's quite expressive. It's beautiful"* (F:150-151).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter analysed the data from the interviews using both linear and cross-sectional approaches. In the linear analysis, a synopsis of each interview was given, which drew attention to pertinent themes that emerged from each participant. The interviews were discussed as a narrative, which also briefly biographically contextualised each participant. In the cross-sectional analysis, general themes that emerged from all of the interviews were discussed. At each step of this process, as the researcher, I tried to bracket myself out of the analysis as much as possible.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter very briefly summarises the findings presented in chapter 4, and mainly discusses what meaning can be derived from the data. In this final chapter I will also make recommendations that pertain to digital transformation of museums in general and the Owl House in particular.

The fundamental purpose of making meaning from the data was to attempt to answer the research questions that were set out in Chapter 1:

- What are some of the practical implications of digitising a sub-collection of the Owl House collection?
- How does the digitisation and digital curation process affect the original integrity of the collection?
- What are the perceptions and experiences of 6 selected participants when engaging with the digitised collection?

The aim of this study was to firstly digitise and digitally curate a sub-collection of the Owl House, and secondly to gather data from interviews with participants who had engaged with it. When analysed in Chapter 4, this data informed the themes that emerged relating to the selected participants' perceptions and experiences. Each of the six interviews was explored by providing linear and cross-sectional analyses, and themes that emerged in the course of the interviews were identified. This chapter discusses these main findings in the context of the relevant literature and the theory that informed my research.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings relates to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, and attempts to synthesise the literature and similar studies discussed in Chapter 2, the theory and methodology described in Chapter 3, and the data that was presented and analysed in Chapter 4.

5.2.1 A Digital Collection Needs Context

As discussed in the previous chapter, a digital collection like The Long Bedroom Collection needs to be contextualised. The Owl House is connected to its own greater environs: Nieu Bethesda, the Karoo and South Africa. As described in section 2.5.1, it is no coincidence that the Owl House is where it is. Consequently, information about the Owl House and Martins needs to be framed by the surroundings: Nieu Bethesda, the Karoo, South Africa and Outsider Artists in general. This information, offered to viewers, can make for a richer interpretive experience.

Participant B feels that The Long Bedroom Collection needs to be framed by Nieu Bethesda, but cautions against using disingenuous generic symbols, and would rather use something more authentic and realistic. Half-joking, she recommends that the site crash to give it “*some Bethesda flavour*” (B:426).

When visiting a digital collection, the digital curator does not know anything about the viewers, and once they have accessed the collection, cannot steer them - they can explore it as they please. Therefore, enough surrounding information to inform a person who has no context whatsoever should be available.

Put simply, one can make meaning from things when we are given information about them and are then able to interpret further and draw our own conclusions. Participant A simplified this further: “*things don’t make that much sense to me unless I have some kind of information behind them*” (A:173). She goes to on to explain how the meaning of certain objects was actually enhanced for her when she made discoveries about them, for example, “*the amazing thing about the nude [Figure 3.12], is that they’re potentially her sister. Otherwise, they’re just*

nudes" (A:176-7). Without this contextualising information, the room was little more than *"full of junk"* (A:179).

If isolated from the Owl House, single objects contained in it would hold little meaning. I argue that separating objects in the Owl House from the house itself would not even allow a viewer a fragmentary glimpse of the artist's intention; it would shatter the meaning completely. "While her vision was extraordinary, her sources of inspiration were often mundane or trivial", explained Ross (1997:17). It is contextual information, conveyed through metadata or through the digital files themselves, that is the scaffolding that so many museum visitors need. With well-researched, relevant information surrounding a collection it would be possible for visitors to say *"okay cool, I understand a little bit more about why this is special"* (A:179-80).

Museums are spaces for learning, and on one hand while they should not be didactic, on the other, neither should they leave viewers in the dark. In an immersive museum space, like a Visionary Environment, noticeable signposting and labelling draws attention away from the collection itself, and this makes it difficult for curators to supply relevant information to viewers. Digitally, this is no longer the case.

5.2.2 A Digital Museum and a Real Museum do not Stand in for Each Other

The Owl House, as it is, is an experience. The Long Bedroom Collection is in equal measure an experience that is fully comprehensible standing alone. The two do not need each other to be experienced on their own. Participant A conveyed this notion when she said *"I just see them as two completely different things"* (A:272) yet *"I don't necessarily see the two as being separable"* (A:276). Participant E doesn't believe that the real thing can be substituted, but she is willing to concede that The Long Bedroom Collection is a good alternative (E:496-7).

However, The Long Bedroom Collection is a simulation of the Long Bedroom in the Owl House, and although it does not intend to replace the real thing, it in itself is still valuable. Participant E brought up how *"the real thing always has more information"* (E:496), and she refers to vibrational qualities and auras (E:497-8), which, whether scientifically verifiable or not, are

subjective aspects of a real experience that people place value on. Shaw and Wagelie's research on 'auratic qualities' reflects this too: they found that amongst their participants, being in the presence of an original artwork allowed for the viewer to access something that they deemed valuable or special (2016:65). Whether museums can even hope to bridge what Kidd terms "the auratic gap" (Kidd, 2014:4) that occurs when objects are digitised, is a question whose answer will most likely vary.

Despite these complexities, there are also aspects to digitisation that can encapsulate tangible instances better than real life can. An example is the Peacock Room at the Freer Gallery, which was discussed in Chapter 2. The room itself is steeped in history, and there is not just a single narrative of the room – there are "multiple chapters, reflecting its dynamic, cosmopolitan history" (Glazer, AAMC, 2017). Having different iterations of the room is physically impossible, but digitally this is quite easily achievable. The Long Bedroom, when realised digitally, can tell different stories about the room and the objects that it holds. This, in turn, can increase intellectual access to the room and an understanding of its history.

5.2.3 A Critique of Digitising – the Limitations of Digital

Despite the possibilities of having a meaningful digital museum experience, participants pointed out that there are limitations to the digital medium: The digital does not mimic the real; it is just a simulacrum.

When digitally curating a collection, decisions about the artefacts need to be made carefully, because the information that is available to viewers is all of the information that they have. If, for example, a digital curator makes a decision to only digitise a few selected artefacts, this needs to be reasoned. An amount of autonomy is taken away from the viewer. As Participant C pointed out - "*it does feel like you're being shown the specific things, whereas I might not have looked at those specific things in that space*" (C: 199-200).

A digital version of an immersive space like the Owl House cannot be truly simulated digitally, and this should arguably not be the goal of the digital curator. Participant F noted that "*to*

really experience the all-encompassing nature of the Owl House, one would need to visit it (F:40-44).

5.2.4 The Advantages of Digitisation

The Owl House is an immersive museum and would, in my view, not benefit from didactic signposts and labels. These would clutter not only the space, but also interpretation of the space. Visitors, especially first-time visitors, however, do require scaffolding, and this is where a digital platform can prove a huge advantage. Whether this is through a website (accessed before or after a visit), or a mobile app that can be used on-site, digital information that guides each visitor could be an answer.

Participant A noted that she would visit digital collections like The Long Bedroom Collection “in preparation for enhancing the experience” (A:158) of visiting the museum. Participant D was, overall, very excited at the prospect of visiting the Owl House in the future because of what he had seen and experienced in The Long Bedroom Collection. “I’m in love with the room” (D:148). He continued (181-85):

If I could be enchanted through the screening of it, through your computer screen, and the carefully chosen focus points, then I actually want to breathe in the space, I want to stand in the space. And it’s different to the standing in the museum, where I might be overwhelmed. Now I’m prepared for this space. And the sense of preparation gives me an eagerness and a confidence as well, because I’ll approach the room like a detective, it would be like a hen hunt.

Participant C appreciated the detail that was captured (C:109-116):

[I]n digital...you can highlight things that you wouldn’t necessarily notice [in real life] ...I would never have seen those items up close. And I wouldn’t have found out about what they all meant...I think that that is a big enhancement from the digital. It’s...being able to interrogate and interact with all these different little bits and pieces...I kept wanting to...be able to walk around.

The limitations to the visitor of the traditional museum include limited hours, need to travel and the cost of admission. Provided one has access to a digital device, these become irrelevant in the digital world. For example, since its launch in 2012, the digital experience of

the Peacock Room has had over 5 million visits from users around the world (AAMC, 2017). A formidable advantage that a digital approach to curating holds, is the power to re-script the demographic of the user (Kidd, 2014:1).

5.2.5 Collaboration

A digital curator may not have all of the background knowledge necessary to create a valuable and informative digital museum experience. On the other hand, a museum curator or cultural heritage expert may not have the technological expertise and experience needed to create a valuable digital experience. The relationship between the two needs to be symbiotic.

If the Owl House were to be completely digitised and digitally curated, all stakeholders would need to be consulted and involved in the key decision-making processes along the way. In creating The Long Bedroom Collection, I collaborated with an advisory committee member and collections manager Shawn Graaff on the selection of the artefacts, as well as the web developer, Andrew Paterson. Had all of the decisions been made by me, The Long Bedroom Collection would have been a different digital platform, not nearly as well-informed as it stands.

If the digital transformation of a museum was in the hands of only one digital curator, that person would be responsible for a myriad of decisions in many fields, many of which she may not be an expert in. The curatorial decisions, for example, may be best supervised by a heritage expert; the digitisation decisions by a digitisation expert; and the building of a platform by a web developer. This is not to say, however, that there is no space for a digital curator; rather, the opposite. The digital transformation of a museum needs to include a person who can visualise the project and delegate the necessary experts. It is this active management and enhancement process that distinguishes digital curation from simply digitising, collecting and storing digital information (NRC, 2015:10).

Digital transformation should be approached holistically – it should not be something that occurs in a silo, but rather something that is fully integrated into the museum as an institution and also into the visitor experience.

5.2.6 Digital Transformation is Iterative

Museums, by their very nature are not static – they are continuously changing and growing. The Owl House, although the collection *per se* is not changing, is still “*an evolving exhibit*” (B:16-17), because museums are living entities. So, museums themselves are iterative, and this should be no different with digital museums. Curators at museums can create many valuable experiences from a single collection, and that collection can continuously be researched. In this way it is a living, breathing entity. A digital collection should be no different.

At several points during the development of The Long Bedroom Collection, the web developer and I made changes to the content and the site structure. Although the Owl House contains many objects, the collection is finite, and, in comparison to other larger museums, it is small. This means that it can be nimble in its transformation and as a digital collection, it can be truly iterative.

5.2.7 Considering the Long-term Intention of the Artist

As digital curators, I believe that we preserve for posterity and that the preservation of a collection is achieved not for the artist, but for future generations. However, there are philosophical implications for this conviction. For example, there is a possibility that the integrity of the collection will be compromised by digitising it.

A cultural heritage expert or art curator, on the other hand, may feel differently. Participant B in particular raised some interesting issues and dilemmas, particularly her concerns regarding Martins’ goals for the Owl House: “*who are we to make that decision [of digital preservation], because there’s not...a game-plan that she left*” (B:328-329).

Not all digital curators and not all heritage experts have the same beliefs, and this discussion is one that will need to be drawn out as different projects present themselves. As discussed

in section 5.2.5, digital transformation should be a collaborative effort, not only in practical terms, but also in philosophical and epistemological terms.

5.3 Limitations

As is the nature of any investigation with a deadline, several limitations presented themselves in the course of this research. Time and capital were restricted - the study was completed within thirteen months on no budget. Nieu Bethesda is more than 700 kilometres away from Cape Town, and the Owl House collection in its entirety is vast. The size and scope of the final chosen sub-collection was therefore restricted. With regard to the participants, it was necessary that the interviews were conducted in-person, which meant that all participants needed to be in Cape Town at the time of the interview. There were also limitations in terms of policies and best practice for digitising Outsider Art collections and a lack of policy on digitisation within cultural heritage in South Africa. Similarly, there is little literature on Helen Martins, the Owl House and other Outsider Artists and their Visionary Environments from South Africa.

5.3.1 Larger Scope of Research

This study was informed by a small data set, and was implemented by one researcher. It would be useful to conduct further studies on digitally curated museum collections in order to gather more data. Ideally, these would include collections from a variety of museums, including large collections of artefacts and interviews with a larger set of participants.

If the digitisation of the Owl House were to be implemented on a larger scale, a similar study could potentially incorporate more artefacts and a museum-wide digital preservation plan, which would then cover an important policy mandate of stewardship and conservation.

5.3.2 More Participants

The nature of case studies is that they are limited to a number of participants, but that in itself is a limitation because the story of the case can therefore not be generalised across

other contexts. This study therefore cannot be generalised to other contexts because it pertains only to this one.

5.4 Validity

If research is invalid it is worthless, thus validity is a requirement for any research. Qualitative and quantitative research need different tools for measuring validity, and in this study, it was addressed through “the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved” (Cohen et al., 2013:133) and my effort, as researcher, to remain as objective as possible. True validity, however, is a difficult feat – it is the “optimism of perfection” (Cohen et al., 2013:133).

5.5 Recommendations

The following are recommendations that pertain to this study:

- **More participants:** a larger data set would provide more information to analyse. If I were to re-do this study, I would include more participants, and I would vary their ages and their technical proficiencies.
- **Wider physical scope:** replicating the study in another room at the Owl House, and, ideally, the Camel Yard.
- **More artefacts:** scaling the study up – have more artefacts in the Owl House (more in the room, and more rooms in the house).
- **A comparative study:** If similar studies of other Visionary Environments were completed, the data could provide for a potentially insightful comparative study.

5.5.1 Policy

In the context of South Africa, museums are national institutions and therefore governed by national policy. As described in Chapter 2, there is little policy on digitisation within these cultural institutions, and what does exist is rather outdated. As digital technology evolves with unprecedented speed, many institutions could face being left behind and ultimately suffering because of this lack of sound policy in place at a national level. If policy were updated, then a more comprehensive strategy for conservation and the stewardship of digital artefacts could inform the digital transformation of museums.

5.6 Summary, Conclusion and Reflections

This chapter has discussed the findings presented in Chapter 4, and these discussion points illustrate the importance of a digitisation strategy in museums in South Africa, in order to facilitate access but also to create valuable experiences for viewers.

People will look as they want to look. One cannot control the thoughts or the direction that different viewers of a digital collection will take, therefore it is prudent to provide well-researched and objective information that shows many sides to the subject, thus allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions.

I do not believe that The Long Bedroom Collection is the perfect example of what a digitally curated Owl House could potentially be, but for the sake of this research it sufficed, and can hopefully be the basis for future discourse around the digital transformation of similar collections.

In the undertaking of the research, I executed a digital curation project, and the experience of working in the field has been invaluable. However, this research journey study has not been a solely academic one – it has strengthened my convictions in the potential of digital transformation. Digital curation, and the interface between art and technology, is a realm that excites me, it involves far more than a cursory understanding of digital media and cultural heritage – it needs someone who appreciates both the theoretical and practical aspects.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Appeal for voluntary participation

Appendix B: Participant consent form

Appendix C: Interview questions

Appendix D: Ethical Clearance

Appendix E: Interview Recordings, Transcriptions and Screencasts

Appendix A: Appeal for voluntary participation

Dear [Name of Participant]

REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN DIGITAL CURATION RESEARCH

My name is Sarah Schäfer, and I'm a postgraduate student in Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I'm currently doing research for a minor dissertation for my MPhil in the Library and Information Studies Centre (LISC). My field of research is in digital curation and digital cultural heritage. I wish to invite you to take part in my research which seeks to explore perceptions and experiences of a digitally curated collection. You have been intentionally selected using purposeful sampling.

The title of my dissertation is Perceptions and experiences of participants engaging with a digitally curated environmental Outsider art collection from the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda.

A brief summary of the research: This study uses the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda as an exemplar for interrogating the possibilities of digitising cultural heritage in South Africa. It focuses on digitisation and digital curation in the context of museums, cultural heritage and Outsider Art. Digitisation within museums offers so many possibilities, especially in the context of site-specific museums that are largely inaccessible. A curated collection of high quality digital media can allow for a museum like the Owl House to be visited digitally, and moreover, that visitors can interpret a museum experience that is rich and layered. The data for this study will be from interviews with participants who have engaged with a digitised sub-collection from the Owl House.

Involvement: If you agree to take part in this research project, your involvement would consist of:

30 minutes of interaction on a digital platform, where you will navigate through the digital collection (this will be recorded through a screencast);

30-60 minutes interview with me (the audio will be recorded with your permission);

voluntary checking of your transcripts (delivered 1-2 weeks after the interview).

There are no risks involved, no remuneration and no cost (aside from your valuable time). As a participant, your information will be confidential and all information will be anonymised in reporting the results of the research. You will have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The interview and online engagement will need to take place within the next 3 weeks, in a controlled environment, which will be in my office in Gardens, Cape Town. I will make myself available at your convenience.

Please contact me should you require any more information. Richard Higgs is supervising this research, and his contact details can be found below, along with my own.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Sarah Schäfer

Contact Details:

Sarah Schäfer:	schsar010@myuct.ac.za		073 307 0637
Richard Higgs:	richard.higgs@uct.ac.za		021 650 1852

Appendix B: Participant consent form



University of Cape Town Faculty of Humanities – Library and Information Studies Centre (LISC) Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Perceptions and experiences of participants engaging with a digitally curated environmental Outsider art collection from the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda.

Principal Researcher: Sarah Schäfer
schsar010@myuct.ac.za
073 307 0637

Degree: MPhil specialising in Digital Curation

Supervisor: Richard Higgs
richard.higgs@uct.ac.za
0216501852

Department: Department of Library and Information Studies
Level 6, The Chancellor Oppenheimer Library
University of Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0)21 650 4546
Email: lisc@uct.ac.za

Name of Participant:

Nature of the Research: Involvement consists of:

- 30 minutes of interaction on a digital platform, where you will navigate through the digital collection (this will be recorded through a screencast);

- 30-60 minute interview with researcher (audio will be recorded);
- voluntary checking of your transcripts (delivered 1-2 weeks after the interview).

There are no risks involved, no remuneration and no cost (aside from the participant's time). Information will be confidential, and the candidate has the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The interview and online engagement will take place within the next 2 weeks, in a controlled environment, which will be in the researcher's office in Gardens, Cape Town.

1. I agree to participate in this research project.
2. I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions.
3. I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition my privacy is respected, subject to the following: I understand that my personal details (first name, age and occupation) may be included in the research.
4. I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
5. I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.
6. I understand that this research might be published in a research journal or book.
7. In the case of dissertation research, the document will be available to readers on an Open Access electronic platform.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant

Name of person who sought consent:

Sarah Schäfer

Signature of person who sought consent

Name of principal researcher:

Sarah Schäfer

Signature of principal researcher:

Date:

Appendix C: Interview questions

I will be conducting open-ended interviews, but the following is a list of guiding questions.

Pre-exposure to The Long Bedroom Collection

1. To date, have you had any prior experience Owl House? Explain and describe.
2. What are your perceptions of the Owl House?
3. *If participant has not visited the Owl House*

Would you visit the Owl House? Why?

Post-exposure to The Long Bedroom Collection

1. What are your perceptions of the Owl House/Long Bedroom after your engagement with the digital collection?
2. If the opportunity presents itself, will you visit the Owl House? Why?
3. You are asked to explain and describe the Long Bedroom to someone who knows nothing about it – what do you say?
4. Are you inspired to learn more about Outsider Art, Helen Martins or the Owl House?
5. If this collection was publicly available, would you recommend it to others?
6. If the opportunity to browse inaccessible collections like the Owl House was a digital possibility, would you visit them online?
 - If so, how much time would you be willing to spend on a platform like this one?
7. How do you feel that these digital artefacts detract from their tangible counterparts or how do you feel that these digital artefacts enhance their tangible counterparts?
8. Should collections like this be digitised?

9. How would you improve this digital platform?

- Do you feel that there are any glaring omissions?

10. How do you feel that the digital formats added or detracted to the artefacts?

11. Was there an artefact in particular that interested you? Why?

12. *If participant has visited the Owl House*

How satisfactory was this browsing experience, as opposed to a real-life experience of the Owl House?

Appendix D: Ethical Clearance



Library and Information Studies Centre

University of Cape Town
Upper Campus

Private Bag X1, RONDEBOSCH, 7701 South Africa
Level 6 Hlanganani, The Chancellor Oppenheimer Library
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 4546
E-mail: lisc@uct.ac.za
Internet: www.lisc.uct.ac.za

UCTLIS201710-16

15 October 2017

Ms Sarah Schäfer
Library and Information Studies Centre
University of Cape Town

Dear Ms Sarah Schäfer

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the Library and Information Studies Centre on behalf of the Humanities Faculty of the University of Cape Town for your Master's study entitled: *Perceptions and experiences of participants engaging with a digitally curated environmental Outsider Art collection from the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda*.

I wish you the very best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

Signed by candidate

A/Prof. J. Raju
Chair, Department (LISC) Research Ethics Committee

Appendix E: Interview Recordings, Transcriptions and Screencasts

Three sets of six datasets are digitally stored, and can be accessed online.

Interviews with 6 participants about the experience of visiting a digital museum -
<https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.5882467.v1>

Transcripts of interviews with 6 participants about the experience of visiting a digital museum
- <https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.5883175.v1>

Screencasts of 6 participants navigating and exploring a digital museum -
<https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.5883187.v1>