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ARTICLE

Contemporary Collecting in the Era of Trump 2.0

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Abstract

This article presents a short selective history of contemporary collecting at the Smithsonian Institution. I explain what contemporary collecting is and show how contemporary collecting in the 1960s and 1970s produced histories of political reform movements and participatory democracy. I argue that many material records would not exist today if it had not been for a small group of committed curators who pioneered this practice in the absence of policy guardrails—and often despite a lack of institutional support. I present a brief overview of contemporary collecting methods and outcomes to argue that it is more important than ever for us to collect evidence of diverse political activity in our current moment—a moment in which cultural institutions, including the Smithsonian, are being attacked by executive orders issued by President Donald Trump, despite their long-standing reputation for maintaining truth and public trust in times of political change and contestation. The article concludes by suggesting how people can approach this work today.

Keywords: contemporary collecting; political activism; public history; Smithsonian Institution; Trump

President Donald Trump's inauguration this year was followed by a suite of executive actions that targeted the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and other agencies that distribute federal funding for cultural activities across the United States. Although the new administration's rationale for reshaping these agencies was ostensibly to shrink federal spending and remove diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, its real purpose was articulated in the "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" action of March 27. Focused on the Smithsonian Institution, this action aims to correct what it describes as a "corrosive ideology". It claims this ideology presents a "distorted" revisionism that undermines "the remarkable achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light."[1] In other words, the Smithsonian and other cultural organizations are being attacked for presenting history as a complex and contested experience and concept.

There are long-standing connections between the Smithsonian and the principles and practices that have shaped the political culture of the United States—including changing practices of participatory democracy, contested political ideologies, protest and reform

[1] "EO 14253: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" 2025.

movements, and varied and changing expressions of nationalism in a nation of diverse people and cultures.[2] The Smithsonian has a long history of collecting contemporary political action, a remit to represent the broad spectrum of political engagement, and an extended history of being weaponized by conservative actors within culture wars contexts.[3]

Although the executive actions have been met with resistance, the financial cuts and fears about what may yet come mean that institutions will have less capacity to document contemporary demonstrations and less leeway—or desire—to collect from socially progressive or anti-Trump movements.[4] However, it remains historically important for curators—be they institutionally affiliated or independent—to collect contemporary evidence of political action and response. Thus, this article provides some general recommendations on how to collect from contemporary life. I do not aim to argue that the Smithsonian should engage with political activism, but rather to demonstrate that the methods of contemporary collecting pioneered by their staff in previous eras have generated a significant historical archive that could not have otherwise been produced. The practices I describe offer models well suited for adaptation by collectors—whether based in institutions, working in community organizations, or collecting independently.[5]

1. Contemporary collecting at the Smithsonian

My own experience with contemporary collecting started at the Smithsonian Institution in the mid-2000s. I investigated how the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of the American Indian historically engaged with changing definitions of citizenship and political rights, contested political ideologies, and the place that protest and reform movements have in constructing national memory. The records I analyzed were largely unofficial and contained in a patchy shadow archive. Many of the items included in this archive were never formally accessioned but provided significant evidence to progress the case (made over decades) to establish the National Museum of African American History and Culture as well as the now conceptualized but not yet built Smithsonian American Women's History Museum.[6]

I followed up on this project, which prioritized the perspective of the Smithsonian as a national collecting institution, with research into how the noninstitutional and nongovernmental

[2] https://americanhistory.si.edu/about/departments/political-history#:~:text=The%20Division%20of%20Political%20and,democracy%20and%20the%20nation's%20military.

[3] Far from being the first time the Smithsonian has been singled out for political criticism, the institution has been popular media fodder over the last thirty years, including when *The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* exhibition (which showed in 1991 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum) was criticized for presenting "an entirely hostile ideological assault on the nation's founding and history." Soon afterward, their plans to exhibit the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945) at the National Air and Space Museum created controversy based on perceptions that it failed to celebrate the United States' wartime victory. Kimmelman 1991; Message 2014, 33–34, 154–57 (https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/exhibiting-enola-gay).

[4] Evidence that a groundswell of resistance is building momentum is most evident to date in the "Hands Off" National Day of Action that took place across American cities on April 5 (https://handsoff2025.com/). The order that will most impact the Smithsonian Institution is "EO 14253: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." Other orders that have targeted museum funding and operations include "EO 14238: Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy 2025," which identifies the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for potential elimination. The impact of cuts being overseen by the Department of Government Efficiency on the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is regularly updated at https://www.neh.gov/executive-orders.

[5] See also Miller 2022.

[6] Message 2014.

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movement of Occupy Wall Street developed ways to document their own experiences on their own terms throughout and after the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011.[7] In their case, contemporary collecting was an act of cultural resistance and resilience as much as it was an emergency action of information capture. In contrast to the Smithsonian's earlier approach to building collections, which demonstrated curatorial selection and interpretation of activism, the Occupy Wall Street collection prioritized the viewpoint and voices of activists themselves. The difference was emphasized by a lead member of the Occupy Wall Street archives and collecting group, Amy Roberts, who, in the early days of the 2011 encampment, wrote in her working notebook that the group's purpose was to "Go and document history as it happens. … We're also archiving ourselves as participants. No such thing as objective or unbiased archiving." This group's intention was clear. It was to "reflect the challenges of this movement and this society."[8]

2. A history of practice

Contemporary collecting refers to the acquisition of materials that document the contemporary world at any given moment. It typically falls into four categories: (1) cause-based collecting, which means collecting from protest and political reform movements (as is discussed in this article), (2) collecting from sites of trauma, terrorism, war, and natural disasters (a twenty-first-century phenomenon often associated with terrorist acts, such as 9/11, but which has a genealogy with practices of recording Holocaust memory), (3) collecting election campaigns and contemporary politics (the traditional work of museum-based political historians), and (4) collecting everyday and popular culture, including ephemera (a trend that emerged with the 1980s interest in recognizing history "from below" and had its own moment of popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic).[9] Contemporary collecting can focus on any material or information, tangible or intangible, and can be undertaken by anyone.

The practice of contemporary collecting developed in the United States and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s.[10] It was pioneered by Smithsonian Institution staff members Keith Melder in the late 1950s to 1960s, and Edith Mayo from the 1960s to 1980s. In 1965, Melder explained that the practice emerged out of basic need—they did not have enough historical artifacts for an exhibit they were developing about civil rights in 1959 and needed to supplement it with contemporary items. Both Melder and Mayo worked at the National Museum of American History (at that time called the Museum of History and Technology), which opened on the National Mall in 1964. They shared a commitment to building collections that reflected the civil rights demonstrations that were taking place both on their museum's front doorstep and sweeping across the country.

Based in the Smithsonian's Division of Political History, Melder and Mayo were part of a team of historians who understood that the repertoire of political action—and physical materials—employed by contemporary activists built on a genealogy of extra-governmental tactics rooted in the late eighteenth century, often in the United Kingdom. In contrast to earlier generations, however, in which the material culture of protest was rarely collected at the time it was produced and used (at least in state-sponsored institutions), they understood the value of collecting materials contemporaneously. Despite the lack of formal policies or guidelines

[7] Lubar 2015.

[8] Amy Roberts quoted in Message 2020, 9.

[9] Message 2014, 84; Fridman and Gensburger 2024.

[10] The Samdok organization in Sweden is often referenced as one of the earliest groups to formally commence contemporary collecting in the 1970s. Axelsson 2015.

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around the process, Mayo explained the benefits of contemporary collecting in an internal memo she wrote in 1983:

- Curators could be assured of having an object when it was needed.
- The object would be authentic. While records of production or provenance may be difficult to locate for an object produced in the 1890s, for instance, those for contemporary artifacts are accessible, easily located, and offer a potential for complete documentation of an item's creation and composition.
- Contemporary objects typically come at no or low cost.
- The contemporary object was seen as being able to legitimize an exhibition storyline or focus on the museum board or other authorities overseeing the exhibition (largely because of its authenticity).
- Contemporary collecting was understood to create links between and across other discrete collections.
- Familiar objects were identified as offering accessible entry points into an exhibition from which curators could direct audiences to more complex or challenging subject matter or perspectives.[11]

The practice of contemporary collecting was not universally supported within the museum. In 1969, its director, Daniel Boorstin, issued a warning about the dangers of confusing "journalistic 'topicality' with historical 'relevance'." He gave, as one example, what he called "the current American problem of race." There is, he said, "too much talk about racial problems, too much of the wrong kind of stress in the news media and elsewhere. ... and not enough talk about the common quest Americans still engage in."[12] Boorstin did not approve of representing minority or potentially subversive causes, believing instead that it was the museum's duty to present a progress-oriented narrative of Americans working together to build the nation.

On one occasion in 1975, Mayo was asked by Boorstin's successor, Brooke Hindle, to explain why a newly opened exhibition included objects that emphasized contemporary identity politics at the expense of historical materials and established national narratives. She responded to him in a letter, which said:

> Ten years from now, the objects in this "permanent" hall whose inclusion seems so "presentist" will be viewed as "historical artifacts from an era of major social reform." As such they will represent an invaluable collection to the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian administration should not allow itself to be "psyched" by charges of "radical chic" and "lobotomized" history into failing to deal seriously with these difficult subjects presented.[13]

While it is true that the Division of Political History's collections at this time tended to be shaped according to individual interests, curators sought to be balanced and representative in their collecting. This outlook resulted in the inclusion of politically difficult material

[11] Mayo quoted in Message 2014, 84–85.
[12] Boorstin internal memo (1972) quoted in Message 2014, 82.
[13] Mayo letter quoted in Message 2014, 83.

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(including Ku Klux Klan regalia that had no record of donation or provenance and seemed to disappear almost as soon as it had appeared), as well as objects and records associated with movements that curators did not personally support—such as a collection from Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative anti-women's rights and anti-Equal Rights Amendment Act activist. The paradoxical result of this attempt at balance meant that curators attracted criticism for being both too politically conservative and too liberal, depending on the object and the political views of the complainant.

In the absence of a formal policy on contemporary collecting, curators experimented through trial and error. They worked through personal knowledge of or connections to activist organizations as well as other cultural and collecting institutions and community groups to create relationships that might yield information and materials. In the 1980s, they established a cross-Smithsonian group called the 20th Century Group to develop processes. However, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the reality was that much contemporary collecting occurred informally or covertly, with senior managers simply unaware of the wealth of material that had been brought in "under the cover of darkness."[14] Objects might be preserved in curator's offices under desks and in drawers, or "hidden in storage." Acquiring but not accessioning material was a useful practice because it allowed curators to defer making an assessment about whether an item would have long-term significance or value. It was also a way in which very contentious or sensitive material could be brought in, perhaps under the guise of being an exhibit prop (as was reportedly the case with the temporarily held Ku Klux Klan regalia).[15]

Despite its benefits, and beyond internal institutional uncertainty and the potential for public outrage at the inclusion of a controversial object, challenges arising from contemporary collecting related to issues of trust, credibility, and legitimacy usually became evident as soon as exhibitions with these materials opened. In the early 1970s, the Social Human Rights Party from Michigan was invited to participate as subjects of a section of an exhibition called *The Right to Vote* (1972–74). They had been selected for inclusion because, despite being a minor party, they had attracted a vast number of votes soon after the passage of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowered the federal voting age from 21 to 18. They never replied to requests for participation or consented to being involved in the exhibition and subsequently accused the museum of getting information about them from the CIA as a strategy masterminded by the government to diminish or recuperate their activist politics.[16]

On another occasion, a protester attending a demonstration was photographed without their knowledge or consent, and the image was reproduced on a life-size mannequin—only to be identified by the subject's daughter on a visit to the museum. The complaint issued by the person photographed was not that the museum had not sought permission to use her image, but that they had replaced the protest sign that she had been carrying at the demonstration with another one that represented a different cause that she was not affiliated with.[17]

3. How to collect today

It is not my intention to prescribe what institutions or communities should collect. That decision will be informed by collecting strategies or other collectively agreed priorities.

[14] Mayo interview with Message (2010) quoted in Message 2014, 81.
[15] Mayo interview with Message (2010) quoted in Message 2014, 81.
[16] *Michigan News* article (1976) quoted in Message 2014, 78–79.
[17] Message 2014, 87–90.

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What I want to do instead is finish by discussing one item collected by the National Museum of American History, which offers a useful model for anyone considering collecting material today—whether political, cause-based, or otherwise.

The object is a T-shirt with a printed slogan in support of the "Stop Orme Dam" campaign prosecuted in 1976. It was collected because it was considered significant for environmental causes and Native American land rights claims. At the time of collecting the T-shirt, the curator overseeing the donation explained that it was valuable for the National Museum of American History because it was explicitly cause-based and narrowly focused in its messaging and addressed an issue that was both local and nationally recognized. They also noted that the item's donation had resulted from a personal relationship between a curator and community, which increased the likelihood that it was collected ethically and with the consent of the donor.[18]

Although this item was produced in the 1970s, the museum's justification for collecting it remains consistent with the guardrails recommended today for anyone wanting to collect from a contemporary event or political movement.[19] Good practice for collecting contemporary moments or events—especially those that are politically charged—adhere, in my view, to the following seven principles:

1. Understand your collection strategy and priorities fully to ensure that you only collect material that is valuable to your institution or organization. Would the item be more appropriately housed elsewhere? Does your collection duplicate another? If so, think twice about collecting.

2. Do not "swoop" in and out and take materials or photographs without consent, without full understanding of authorship, and without understanding and fully communicating the risks that may be associated with revealing activist identities on the public record.

3. Fully consider the potential harms that could arise from the collection. This could include police identification of protesters, physical risk to collectors attending a volatile demonstration, harm to handlers of materials produced using unsafe materials, and so forth.

4. Recognize what implications your extraction of materials will have—both for the movement and the materials. Movements often re-use protest signs, but if you have collected a number of these what will be used at the next demonstration? Understand that taking materials out of the immediate collection situation will change their meaning.

5. Represent the diversity of views that always exist about every event and that exist even within a single movement. Be vigilant about creating a fact-based archive. This means representing a full diversity of positions, including those in opposition to what is being demonstrated, and being open to including viewpoints you personally find intolerable.

6. Do not take everything. Make judicious decisions at the time of acquisition that are fully informed by community advice and justified by collecting priorities. Be mindful

[18] Message 2014, 119.

[19] For a discussion on good practice today, see Kavanagh et al. 2025.

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that new collections require conservation and storage resources that will have sustainability implications.

7. Even in a fast-paced environment, be patient. Talk to people and ensure you build a full record of the event that includes contextual information. Understand the significance of the material to the people who have produced or used it. Build trust-based relationships that extend beyond the single event. Keep communities of production or practice (such as demonstrators or activists) informed about how the material will be managed and used and what their access rights will be.[20]

4. Institutional obligations and public trust

Despite the challenges caused by escalating political polarization over recent decades, collecting institutions such as the Smithsonian continue to record high levels of public trust.[21]

While it is important that museums maintain their reputation for being able to assess the truth, authenticity, or reliability of a collected item, it is even more crucial for them to remain able to engage in a critical and informed manner with the social and political conditions that produced the materials collected. This task is less to distinguish fiction from fact than to track the production and consumption—what Carlo Ginzberg calls the "evidentiary paradigms"—of those "facts" themselves.[22] In the end, museums are part of a much broader truth-making process and have an explicit obligation to demonstrate how contemporary acts—especially politically charged ones—are part of a complex and multifaceted historical record.

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[20] Message 2020.

[21] American Alliance of Museums 2021. Another measure is provided by YouGov, which periodically tracks Americans' approval of the Smithsonian. It shows that the Smithsonian's approval has held steady at roughly 68% (with 2% disapproval) since 2020 (https://today.yougov.com/topics/travel/explore/tourist_attraction/Smithsonian_Institution).

[22] Ginzberg quoted in Stoler 2002, 91.

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