AAD 199: Portable Life Museum
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Term Project: Your Portable Life “Museum”/Cabinet of Curiosity

What you’ll need:

a. A receptacle of sorts for display: find a receptacle to display your work. This could be a knapsack, rolled up tent, miniature cabinet, a wooden or cardboard box divided into sections, a board upon which to mount your items, a few large mason jars or drinking glasses, or any other means of combined portable storage and presentation you can devise -- whatever might offer visual interest for you and others and that offers ease of portability, that you could take almost anywhere, anytime, no matter the circumstances. Anything that offers transparency or other visibility of seeing/encountering objects that you selected will work. You can find something you already have or visit MECCA (http://www.materials-exchange.org/) or BRING (http://www.bringrecycling.org/) or thrift stores to find an inexpensive, recycled item(s) to use. Alternatively, instead of a fully physical, object-centric collection, you could develop a more ephemeral collection housed in your videolog or audiolog, etc. as well that fully encompasses the same concepts of “receptacle” and “display”. But what happens if electrical, wi-fi, or other sources run out in your travels?

b. Selections & Collections. Items that represent your own portable life. Consider, for example, what objects are necessary for your current life experience and expectations of your position as a student? employee? family member? What other objects come to mind about your own life and situation that help you be successful? Or maybe objects that hamper your success? What would you need to take with you know matter where/when you might travel that would support and sustain you vitally for basic needs (shelter, food, clothing) and those that would support and sustain your heart, emotions, mental life? How heavy or light are these items? What memories, wanted and unwanted, arise for you? How heavy or light are these memories? How are those memories represented by specific objects? What does the future hold and what “things” do you need to carry with you? Consider different objects, icons or sacred figures, and the like; found objects of all kinds; characteristics and traits; skills and abilities; attitudes and perspectives; or whatever else represents your experience of “portable life” and things of value, import, or need or desire in this present moment to carry over to the future and connect to the past. Remember to consider size of objects that can fit within your display receptacle(s) and ease of transportation.

c. An area for display for final project: The primary area for exhibiting your “cabinet/museum” will be our classroom space. However, also think about how you will display your specific “cabinet of curiosity/portable life museum” within this space. Do you want to have it displayed on a type of shelf that you bring, in a window frame, etc.? How is this type of display different than how you might regularly transport or use the item(s) for travel?
How to make your cabinet of curiosities/portable life museum:

1. Start selecting/collecting! Spend time in and out of doors, and you’ll be sure to find definitely representative items. What would you need to sustain your body, heart, and mind if you had to suddenly leave your current circumstances due to a crisis, whether environmental, pandemic/epidemic, economic, genocidal, natural disaster, etc. What would you want to take with you? Need? How could you best represent these in a “portable life museum” or “cabinet of curiosity” for yourself? Sometimes, searching for very specific items is helpful and keeps you on track. Other times, if you set out not looking for anything in particular, you’ll likely stumble on to something great. Also, it is important that you aren’t afraid to get your hands dirty. Sometimes the most interesting items are half-buried in the dirt. Going to thrift stores, material exchange centers, and flea markets is also a good idea. People sell all sorts of weird things. Collecting takes time and patience. You will have more time than many of the characters in Station Eleven.

2. Care for your findings. Wash any items possible as part of caring for them over the length of the term. Any organic things may be too delicate to be washed (i.e., don’t try to wash a butterfly wing or a locust leg). If you are able to do it, metal, wooden, ceramic and glass things should be washed in a heavily-diluted solution of organic soap and water. If you want a more steampunk look, don’t bother washing anything. Patina (age and wear on items) adds character. If you are collecting photographs as part of your findings, how will you keep them in order and track them as needed?

3. “House” your wares. Create a holder that could also work as a display that captures your life in a “museum/curiosity cabinet”. What does that portable gallery of yourself in this moment look like? Why are these items important for you to be able to take with you at any moment’s notice? Arrange the items according to your tastes. If you have multiple jars and glasses, select one for each sort of item. One for hair ties, one for pencils, one for paper, one for ribbons, one for fake pearls, etc. If you have a divided cabinet/box, you can use one shelf for every variety, or you could mix and match. The top shelf could have feathers and doll parts, the bottom shelf could have jars filled with other specific items. You could fill small glasses (shot glasses, absinthe glasses, small jars) or miniature cardboard boxes and place these within the case. But, how will you make certain these items travel and remain safely in place as you travel? If you are using a glass box, you can add a piece of fabric such as red velveteen to line the bottom. Then, lay the items out as you wish. If you are using jars for inorganics, and you don’t have lids, large silk flowers, small pieces of fabrics, or other such items work very well. Just stick it over the opening, it looks really cool.

4. Share your collection through a formal exhibit. We will have a formal showing of your cabinets/portable museums during the last week of class. Please invite friends to visit our class and look at your completed cabinet/museum. We will also be inviting faculty and staff from Folklore, Arts & Administration, Special Collections, and First-Year
Programs to join us to see your displays. We’ll invite them to ask about and discuss each item. You will have an opportunity to tell stories about how you found each thing and what it means to your current portable life, memories, and needs.

5. Prepare a 2-3 minute talk that can be shared during the formal exhibit display (see #4 above) that discusses how your portable life cabinet/museum “preserves” or “showcases” or “exhibits” you and what you would most want to take with you if you had to leave in this present time. If the crisis of *Station Eleven* happened to you, what would your cabinet/museum look like? Consider in your talk:

   a. How will this presentation prompt you and others to grow academically and personally in new ways while understanding where you have come from previously as well as exist now?

   b. How does the development of your portable life relate to your Art & Gender course? to the Introduction to Folklore course? to the experience encapsulated in *Station Eleven*? What specific course readings connect here?

   c. How does your portable life relate to things outside of class that you observed in your creative journals? Your observations of the world, family, friends, socially networked learning, or current news?

   d. How does your portable life relate to that of others you have met through this FIG, your fall term courses, in residence life, social groups on campus, and the like?

   e. What is your primary takeaway about yourself this term? How will you navigate that takeaway in the coming term? academic year? calendar year? How can you boil this down to one (1) “portable” phrase?

   f. What would this portable life museum do for you during a natural, physical, environmental, or social crisis?

Note: Peer and self-evaluation will be part of the presentation process.

6. Never stop collecting. The key to an interesting cabinet is to always add new things to it. Every time you find something new, add it! As your life changes or when you run out of room, swap things out. If you store things in Tupperware, you can put them in your closet and switch them out seasonally. This will also keep things fresh. Share your collection with friends & family. Ask them for ideas to add to/change it.