

LABELLED

By Dail Behennah

The Idea

I have always been interested in the idea of the collector's cabinet which aimed to collect and preserve the whole of knowledge. The ordering and cataloguing of small objects led to the making of connections between them. Many of the collections made in the 18th and 19th centuries now reside in museums but are rarely seen due to their fragility. My proposed installation will draw attention to this largely untapped resource and its continuing importance today.

If we did not have Natural History collections in museums, with the information that is associated with them, we would not know which species are threatened, on the verge of extinction or already extinct.

Some, such as the dodo and passenger pigeon, may live on in folklore, but species of insignificant looking insects or fish can disappear without trace if they have not already been recorded, classified and labelled by collectors in the past, and preserved in museums today.

Scholars in the past concentrated on discovering what we had. Now in the 21st century we are more concerned with finding out what we have lost. We cannot do this without knowing what was there in the first place.

The Proposal

An object in a museum is accompanied by information on labels and in catalogues and a large part of the value of a museum is contained in its labelling and continued research.

I propose hanging a circle of labels in front of the central window on the landing. These will be inspired by, or taken directly from, labels in the museum's Natural History Collection, and will be made of enamelled copper. Enamel is a precious material and has been chosen to highlight the fact that an object is only as valuable as the information that goes with it.

I will make red labels to denote species that are already extinct or extinct in the wild - the colour referring to the IUCN Red List – and these will hover beyond the edge of the circle.

Those species that are critically endangered or endangered will hang at the edge of the circle and will also be distinguished by a different colour.

This will be beautiful – approximately 500 hovering labels in varying shades of white, cream and brown, punctuated by coloured ones, will allow the light to come through and cast shadows on the floor and surrounding walls. From the outside the labels will be white against the darkness of the museum's interior and will sparkle when the light hits them.

I hope in this way to engage in the debate about museums and their rôle and importance today, as well as the debates surrounding species diversity and conservation. These are important topics in schools and society at large, especially now that we are appearing to witness climate change and habitat movement and reduction.

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