

Collecting for the National Poo Museum *

Daniel Roberts [National Poo Museum, Isle of Wight]

I am one of the people who set up the National Poo Museum on the Isle of Wight. The museum was founded by members of Eccleston George, a collection of creative people working on the Isle of Wight. It was launched in 2016. We use the word poo for the material in question, although obviously there are many other names for it. Now, we heard today about the lady who has a museum of animal poo. She says that their museum does not contain human poo. Well, I am proud to say that we do have human poo alongside the other animals in our collection. It is important that we recognise ourselves as one of the animal species that produce poo.

The Museum exists to reveal the really wondrous world of poo – which is a subject that is rather taboo. It is dedicated to the collection, conservation and display of faeces. We operate out of an old public toilet [in the former Sandown barracks], and we have kept all the old cubicles. In each of them we cover different topics. For example, it might be sanitation, or history, or the micro-biome, or problems of dog fouling – all sorts of different questions. The faeces are displayed in resin spheres, where they can be both viewed and held. The process involves drying the poo, which can take up to two weeks, and it is then encapsulated and placed in a vacuum chamber, so that air bubbles are removed. The Museum is a very special place. There are things to sniff, handles to turn, buttons to press, and of course a huge collection of preserved poos to get up close to. We also have an expert team who are always ready to engage with visitors. We would love you to come and visit.

Now, I have come to this conference to tell you about a project that we are working on. We don't think that you can challenge the taboos around this whole subject by being over-polite and diplomatic in wrapping up our language, as people often do, in order not to offend others. So we favour straight-talking. But we also don't think you can really challenge the taboos around poo by exploiting it, as many artists have, in order to shock people. We felt that this just reinforces the taboo. Our presentation of poo is artistic, but our approach is to be quite straightforward, and we do whatever we can to make the subject approachable and interesting – and even beautiful!"

So, with most of our poos, we preserve them in specially made crystal balls. This particular one is mounted on a stick. It is going to be given to someone who has become our "Pooet Laureate" – Attila the Stockbroker. He is our new poet in residence at the Museum, and he has written poems on the subject. In the spirit of making poo beautiful and challenging the taboo around it, we are currently building a large "aquarium". This will be called The People's Poo Aquarium [*see back cover*]. It stands about two and a half metres tall; it is illuminated internally in different colours; it has bubbles rising up. And in it there will be circulating human poo, preserved in the same way that we do with all our other species, in floating crystal balls.

All of those poos have been, or are being, donated by different members of the community. From artists to poets to policemen to cancer survivors... people with stories connecting them to the subject of poo. We have a neurobiologist from Cambridge, an experimental artist from Leicestershire, the list goes on. However, the list is not as long as it could be! As you can imagine, it is not easy to get people to hand over their poos. We are hoping that some well-known people might be brave enough to take the step and

make a donation. Because the idea is that if people would be prepared to show their poo in public, and if we can present it beautifully, and especially if those people are well-known, then how can that continue to be a source of shame and embarrassment – and a source of embarrassment that, incidentally, costs thousands of people their lives every year through bowel diseases etc, through not wanting to go to the doctor about problems with their bowels. And also it is simply ridiculous that there should be a whole normal part of life which we can't talk about and communicate about. That is the reason for our project.

The idea is that this aquarium will be taken on a tour of libraries in Britain. First on the Isle of Wight and then other libraries around the country. Now, a day or so ago it occurred to me that, looking at this conference, perhaps nowhere in the world does there exist such a concentration of people with important messages to share about poo... (I should add, by the way, that every donor gets to donate both a poo and a personal message.)

That idea then brings me to the next stage... bringing it to the practical level. Statistically, in this room, during the next six hours somebody, and maybe even many of us, will be needing to have a poo. Now, this is up to you. I would invite you *to make a little donation*. I have come prepared. Perhaps you feel that you would like to do something rather special... Either you could pull the flush handle and your poo will be flushed to oblivion, as every other poo in your life has been... Or you might feel moved to do something unique with it. In that case, as I say, I have come prepared. [Laughter] If you wish to make a donation, just take one of these boxes and a little bag. It is very simple – you just do what you need to do, and put it in a bag, and give it to me, and we at the Museum will do all the rest. You can also write a little message, and also of course sign a consent form saying that you are happy for us to proceed with your donation.

So that is as much as I have to say. Thank you very much for listening. I look forward to your responses. [Applause]

[In reply to a question from the floor:] Does it have to be well-formed? No. Obviously some poos are prettier to deal with, but we can deal with what is known as a Number 7 on the Bristol Stool Scale. We are all-inclusive here. Diversity is our watchword. So whatever it looks like, it is welcome.

[Editor's note: At this point a professor from the US took up the challenge. Heading down the corridor to the ladies' toilet, she returned after the lunch break with her donation.]

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* This chapter is an edited audio transcription of the author's conference presentation.

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