

### Collecting to preserve the memory of urban transport: a collective adventure

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# COLLECTING TO PRESERVE THE MEMORY OF URBAN TRANSPORT. A COLLECTIVE ADVENTURE

Anne Jarrigeon, Jacqueline Chervin und Dominique Lefrançois

Horse-drawn carriages, trams, buses, metro carriages and taxis, along with spare parts, fragments of rails (Fig. 1), network plans, instruction manuals, small-scale models (Fig. 3), mock-ups, uniforms, accessories, posters, tens of thousands of photographs (Fig. 2) and films, tickets from all periods, thematic books, trade journals, and more: these are the countless ›objects‹ that make up one of the largest urban transport collections. It was started in France in the late 1950's on the initiative of Jean Robert, an amateur intent on saving Parisian tramcars from systematic destruction after the dismantling of the network was decided and implemented during the 1930's. In 1957, together with a few other professionals and lay persons interested in the subject, he founded a non-profit association, AMTUIR (Association pour la création du Musée des Transports Urbains Interurbains et Ruraux)<sup>1</sup> for the purpose of setting up an urban, inter-urban and rural transport museum. The museum currently still has this role of preserving a national heritage.

AMTUIR was first set up in a former tram depot in Malakoff, before being moved in 1972 to a disused bus depot in Saint-Mandé. There the museum, run by volunteers, finally opened its collection to the public. A more ambitious project was subsequently drawn up, for a new museum to be created after the turn of the century. In the end, it was not set up in Colombes, as planned. A part of the collection was hosted by the town of Chelles but was closed to visitors, except for certain ad hoc occasions (museum night, national heritage day, etc.). Another project for a ›future urban transport museum‹ was drawn up in 2004, bringing together various stakeholders on the steering committee: non-profits, institutions, politicians and scientists, members of AMTUIR, the Marne and Charente greater urban community (the political sponsor of the project), a curator, and various experts and researchers in the fields of transport and museology.

As sociologists and anthropologists of mobility, we participated in the committee's work, contributing to the cultural and scientific programming of this much-awaited museum. In the process we developed an interest not only in the collection itself and in the way of accomplishing ›museum mediation‹<sup>2</sup>, but also in the people and social practices that had made it possible by giving it its current form and by bringing it to life. In his essay dedicated to the psycho-

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1 [www.amtuir.org](http://www.amtuir.org) (Date: 1.9.2014).

2 Jean Davallon: L'exposition à l'œuvre. Stratégies de communication et médiation symbolique. Paris 2000.

analysis, not of the collector, but of the »system of objects«<sup>3</sup>, by »collection«, Gérard Wacjman argues:

»In short, whether it is true or not in reality, any mention of a collection produces the necessary fiction that always lies behind someone, whom I will call the ›collector‹. A function, a fiction that governs a form. Let's say: There is no collection without a collector.«<sup>4</sup>

When it came to reconfiguring AMTUIR's collection for its future inclusion in national museum protocols, it seemed particularly important to take into account those individuals who may not have participated in its creation (almost all the founding members had since died) but who ran it on a daily basis: Former transport workers and enthusiasts passionate about the subject. They had valuable knowledge and know-how, especially of a technical nature, and we were entrusted to record these oral sources of memory in 2012 by the Marne and Chantereine greater urban community.

»Let it be clear: Contrary to what is generally said, the collector is an ›effect‹ of the collection, and not the other way round«, argues Gérard Wacjman<sup>5</sup>, thus urging us to think about the actual place and roles of collectors in the social phenomenon of collection. Countless people are keenly interested in old cars or railways, but how does one become an urban transport lover? What does that which is referred to as »THE collection« actually mean for the individuals devoted on a daily basis to preserving it and enhancing its value? From the perspective opened by Wacjman, how does it produce collectors? How does the current museum project and the prospect of a professional exhibition of »their« objects shed light on the specificities of their view of heritage, of their relationship with the transmission of a history, and, more fundamentally, of a memory of transport?

This paper draws on the sound and film archives that we started with members of AMTUIR in 2012 and 2013 for the »Future Urban Transport Museum«<sup>6</sup>. In particular, their testimonies reveal – and this is what we will focus on here – the specific characteristics of and the motivations underpinning the collection practices from which they compose the founding narrative and create the legend, in several ways. Our approach here is not museological. It is firmly rooted in an ethnological tradition that is attentive to representations, words and ways of doing things, with a view to understanding the meaning of the multiple concrete and symbolic acts of preservation of a certain state of objects and, more precisely, as we will see, of machines.

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3 Jean Baudrillard: *System of objects*. New York 2006.

4 Gérard Wacjman: *Collection*. Paris 2003, p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Anne Jarrigeon/Jacqueline Chervin/Dominique Lefrançois: *Toward the transmission of public transport memory 2012*. Research report based on our oral and audiovisual archive campaign with AMTUIR's members.



Fig. 1: Platform buses in the Association's venue. Photo by Anne Jarrigeon, Chelles, 2011.

Studying collections means studying »human behaviours«, Pomian reminded us when he sought to move beyond a psychological analysis of collectors' tastes to find an approach to collecting as an anthropological fact.<sup>7</sup> Our aim here is to analyse the motivations of this common interest (this ›passion‹?) for transport, and thus to gain insight into the way this eminently collective undertaking devoted to a highly contemporary aspect of our heritage functions.

*Collecting the collectors' accounts: archive campaign and visual anthropology*

With the goal to create an urban transport museum in Chelle, based on AMTUIR's impressive collection, it was decided to expand the field of related documentation so as to inform the mediation of this living memory. Until then, the testimonies of AMTUIR members had not been collected systematically. Today this has been done, or at least been started, with the creation of the first audio and film archives devoted to this association and to its historical involvement in safeguarding and maintaining a large technical heritage.

The oral memory campaign entrusted to us supported reflection on how empirical and technical knowledge and know-how is symbolically constructed as

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<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Pomian: *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris-Venise, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle.* Paris 1987, p. 47. Krzysztof Pomian: *Der Ursprung des Museums. Vom Sammeln,* Berlin 1988, pp. 49 f.

heritage by enthusiasts who are very often erudite and are very often presented as ›irreplaceable«<sup>8</sup>. In that sense, our research is part of an approach to the modalities of conservation, restoration and more generally to preserve a ›use value« to which the members of the association are attached. Enthusiasts like to point out that »a machine made to move must carry on moving«<sup>9</sup> as they work to maintain this ›moving equipment« in a state of repair so that it can be ›taken out« for public events and to make films. Some members of the association who have a license to drive public transport vehicles now regularly appear in films. In the many national and international feature films and TV films set in Paris in the 20th century, it is ›their« buses that drive around the city, sometimes transporting the characters, and of course it is they who drive them.

»The collector likes to create a world that is not only long gone but also better; a world where people have just as little of what they need as in the real world, but where things are freed from the servitude of being useful«, wrote Walter Benjamin.<sup>10</sup> One of the specific characteristics of this collection is that, contrary to what has generally been emphasised since Walter Benjamin, objects never really lose all their ›use value«; instead, their uses are redefined. The technical preservation of the ›moving« nature of vehicles is a particularly interesting aspect of these practices concerning a collection threatened by the immobilisation and inertia of its components. They are not simply the object of a ›misappropriation« of use but aimed at transforming objects into »semiophores« – to use the term coined by Pomian, who examined the way in which an object's signification for the person interested in it generally presides over its original instrumental function.<sup>11</sup>

Through its technical dimension, AMTUIR collection constitutes a particular type of human gathering in which professional and particularly mechanical skills relating to urban transport are highly valued. As we will see, the same is true of the constitution of the group of individuals interviewed for our archives. In fact, technical questions had already played an important part in the wording of the call for proposals to which we responded: We were asked, in a somewhat ambivalent way, to both collect individuals' accounts, that is, to »collect memories« as it was writing in the call for tender, and to objectify knowledge and know-how which could be used in the restoration protocols for the creation of the real national museum that was planned. As regards the technical dimension, we were able only to record the way in which the individuals represented it and imagined being able to transmit it to us, a research group consisting of three women researchers. This circumstance did a priori preclude any complicity on this subject. In the interviews carried out from a reflexive perspective, in the critical ethnology tradition, there was a *mise en abyme* of the object: The

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8 As this was emphasized in almost all conversations during our ethnographic work, we do not refer to one particular interview here. This will be the case each time we do not give specific references for quotations.

9 BK interviewed by A. Jarrigeon and J. Chervin on 12 april 2012.

10 Walter Benjamin: Louis-Philippe ou l'intérieur. In: Écrits français. Paris 1991, pp. 385–388.

11 Pomian, *Collectionneurs*, as fn. 7, p. 38.

interviews themselves were a form of transmission of the memory of transport that they were investigating. Even though they often denied it, allowing the collectors to talk prolonged one of their activities as enthusiasts: »Extrapolation, the pretext for narrative, [which] is one of the collector's pleasures«, as Gérard Wacjman<sup>12</sup> points out.

In our archives we see and hear accounts of the origins of the association, with descriptions of collectors' actual practices and of trades related to urban transport – that many of them practised at the RATP (the Paris urban transport company) – as well as, more fundamentally, the sources and modalities of their involvement in the construction and promotion of a heritage.

This research articulates critical ethnology, discourse analysis and visual anthropology. We decided to use a combination of recorded and filmed interviews to examine the way in which the meaning and forms of shared or more personal interest in transport were stabilised.<sup>13</sup> It appeared to us to be particularly rich and fruitful. The filmed interviews enabled us to match faces with words and to draw living portraits, so that our analysis could provide us with insights into the complexity of emotions, gestures and expressions as signs of the individuals' »engagement«<sup>14</sup> in their discourse, and thereby grasp all the nuances of these transport enthusiasts' passion. This focus on non-verbal communication enabled us to explain the work on memory. Our analysis of the videos we had taken allowed us to identify common points between sequences of accounts that seemed to be distant if considered only from the angle of their content, for underlying affinities between discursive texts are often defined through the expression of emotion. For example, the images evoked in those videos prompted us to compare memories of both childhood and contemporary events (like national heritage day).

The films were recorded on AMTUIR's premises: »In the offices« or »in the workshop« as everybody says in the association. The images were composed in collaboration with the enthusiasts, as they were invited to choose objects or backgrounds that they liked, were interested in or wished to highlight by having the camera focus on them. The interviewees also chose their physical position according to their habits. For instance, in the workshop some chose to be interviewed standing rather than sitting at a table. Their participation in constructing the image, along with their help in adjusting the lighting, for example, played an important role in setting up the scene and in nurturing the trust required for qualitative interviews. It made it easier for these overnight actors to talk in front of the camera.

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12 Wacjman, as fn. 4, p. 45.

13 We conducted interviews with 12 members of AMTUIR. Eight of them were filmed by Anne Jarrigeon and Jacqueline Chervin, and four were interviewed by Dominique le François. We met everybody twice. Our ethnographic work exceeded the interviews; informal exchange offered further insights and included other AMTUIR members, the museum project's curator, as well as members of the scientific committee.

14 Erving Goffman: *Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York 1963.

The openness of the methodology, in addition to the combination of writing enabled us to reach more people, including those who preferred not to be filmed and who could thus testify in a more discreet way.

Before going further, I wish to mention the way in which the interviewees were chosen in the collective of transport enthusiasts. The group thus constituted reflected the way in which the fans involved in the project represented AMTUIR collectors. A first list of individuals was drawn up in collaboration with the steering committee. The perception which the people we approached had of the museum project affected their participation; for instance, one of them preferred not to testify because of her disagreement with the project. We progressively adjusted our interview campaign, approaching other people indicated to us by the members that we had met, especially while filming. We thus interviewed individuals involved in the association at different levels and different times: ›Veterans‹ and individuals who had not had a career in urban transport but had developed an interest nevertheless. Several generations were represented, ranging from a mechanic who had worked for the RATP in the late forties, and conductors or drivers who had started after the war and spoke of those distant times, to a former wheelwright and a former manager who had arrived after 1968 and who described more recent technical, organisational and social changes.

Despite the apparently narrow framework – the urban transport enthusiasts' non-profit association – within which we ›recruited‹ our witnesses, we discovered an unexpected and wide variety of approaches and points of view behind the notions of collection, transport or museum. That was the advantage of examining the collection practices: We regarded the time span throughout which this collection was constituted and preserved, and we took its social dimension seriously. »One could say that the collection creates a collective. A collective that groups together and unifies around the object [...]. The collectors form societies of fantasy«, wrote Gérard Wacjman.<sup>15</sup> It is this fantasy, in a sense, and its singular and common dimensions, that we will now examine.

### *An individual and collective performance*

Not all the members of AMTUIR are strictly speaking ›collectors‹. There are those who describe themselves as »collectors of collections«, like the current chairman who likes to cite Lamartine: »Inanimate objects, do you have a soul?«<sup>16</sup> and who himself collects knives, arms and motorbikes. Most of the people we met felt they were simply the guardians of the collection, as they did not participate in its creation. Today AMTUIR collection is seen as a heritage, a valuable legacy, the scope and importance of which vary from one interviewee to the next. It is the centerpiece in the articulation of the transport lovers' diverse postures and practices.

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15 Wacjman, as fn. 4, p. 41.

16 Alphonse de Lamartine: Milly ou la terre natale. In: Harmonies poétiques et religieuses. Méditations poétiques. Nouvelles méditations poétiques. Paris 1981, pp. 270–273.

BK interviewed on April 12 2012.



The craze for old vehicles and their world is generally seen as a real ›passion‹ – one that is said to be at the origin of the collection and of the involvement of many AMTUIR members in its daily maintenance and display. We will now examine the significance of this passion.

### *The meaning of passion*

»Passion. It's all in one word, it's passion«<sup>17</sup>, commented one of the association's current leaders. In our interviews and conversations, some volunteers readily used excessive, quasi-religious terms, describing their enthusiasm as a sort of »ecstasy« or repeatedly mentioning their »fascination«<sup>18</sup>. One of them even said that passion was »AMTUIR's soul«<sup>19</sup>. Corporeal and medical metaphors abounded, the most common being »the virus« and »contamination«, indicating the uncontrolled and irresistible nature of the phenomenon. Another member spoke of a »railway vaccine«<sup>20</sup>.

All the interviewees mentioned that passionate enthusiasm related to an obvious pleasure: »It's really a thrill!« was a sentence we heard several times. Yet this pleasure seemed to be controlled and reproducible. Despite the repetition of its vocabulary, passion in this case was devoid of one of the complex components of romantic passion, the experience of which revives the etymological roots of the term: Passion is derived from the Latin ›passio‹ meaning passivity, indisposition, suffering and even a form of torture.

In some cases the members' passion was not so intensely emotional. One of them who did use the term downplayed the effect by limiting the definition. In the following excerpt he associates passion with the transmission of knowledge and learning:

»I think that to learn these things, one first has to be passionate, one has to really want to do it. So, we've seen people arrive here and say: ›Okay, so listen, I don't know anything, I can't do anything‹. And we said: ›Well, you can't do anything. You'll start by doing this, if you like. [...] But there have also been people who've left, who stayed for two or three days and then who said: ›No well actually... no, I'm not interested enough.‹ Once again, passion... there has to be passion. If you come here saying: ›I'm bored at home, I want to come here to see what I can do‹, that... that doesn't last very long. One has to have time, and also you have to want to.«<sup>21</sup>

The driver of passion, simply that »feeling like it« assumedly underlying the possibility of investing in an associative activity, can actually encompass forms of involvement that are relatively distant from enthusiasm. A volunteer mechanic explained: »I'll always need... well... to have something in my hands to be

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17 BK interviewed on April 12 2012.

18 PK interviewed on October 14, 2013.

19 BK interviewed on April 12, 2012.

20 JR interviewed on April 25, 2012.

21 BK interviewed on February 14, 2013.



comfortable«<sup>22</sup>. For him, spending three days a week working on restoring the mechanical parts of vehicles was simply »a good occupation« that enabled him to carry on working after his retirement.

#### *Various and ranked centres of interest*

The all-encompassing term ›urban transport‹ should not be misunderstood: The diversity of modes of involvement highlighted above echoes the plurality of objects of interest for the more active members of the association. Each of them positions her or his field of investment in relation to that of the others, sometimes mentioned with a certain dubitative or critical distance, or even amusement or mockery, albeit marked with kindness in front of the camera. The apparent consensus on the subject of what is so interesting about AMTUIR collection actually corresponds to a set of values that is both shared and taken from more personal hierarchical systems.

Several logics can be identified, with a focus ranging from particular objects to ›transport‹ as a full-blown urban system. Two common ideas consensuses clearly emerge from our analyses: One concerns the importance of vehicles, the other the importance of making them move, which strongly determines AMTUIR activities, as noted above.

#### *The vehicles in the foreground*

The strongest agreement concerns the attractiveness of the vehicles themselves. It is to them that the vague term ›collection‹ refers, even though it comprises countless other objects as well: Spare parts, technical instruments, accessories, clothes, various documents, and so on.

Although they are at the centre of all the discourses of our interviewees, the vehicles do not all have the same importance. The rareness or uniqueness of certain coaches causes them to have inestimable value in the eyes of informed members of the association. But above all, the value system reveals a highly structuring modal vision, witnessed in the application form for membership, where applicants have to indicate their interest by ticking boxes corresponding to different modes of transport: tram, bus, metro, etc.<sup>23</sup>

#### *A modal hierarchy*

This modal view, shared largely by experts in both the scientific and the professional world, and in what is exhibited to the general public, functions by way of a set of opposites and boundaries that in certain cases reactivate particularly clear-cut professional or historical oppositions (e. g. between rail and road transport): »It was the tram lovers who were there, not bus lovers! Buses were the enemy!«<sup>24</sup>, commented one of the ›veterans‹ of the association, who stressed: »[W]e were all railway lovers, but not... not buses, we didn't like buses!«

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22 GH interviewed on April 14, 2012.

23 [http://www.amtuir.org/02\\_amtuir/02\\_amtuir\\_soutenir\\_adherer.htm](http://www.amtuir.org/02_amtuir/02_amtuir_soutenir_adherer.htm) (Date: 1.9.2014)

24 JR interviewed on February 19, 2013.

Trams are still at the peak of a symbolic hierarchy today. Emblematic of AMTUIR, which at the time of their systematic dismantling was created to preserve this threatened heritage, they are the heart of the system that valorises them, and are probably the vehicles that receive most attention. Close on their heels is the famous Sprague Thomson, the mythical green and white Paris metro that ran for over sixty years in the capital and which certain members of AMTUIR drove or maintained at Paris' public transport system RATP.

The irony is that both these types of vehicle – the tram and the metro – can no longer be driven by members of the association because they require a specific infrastructure. AMTUIR's intense daily activity, therefore, revolves primarily around buses, which can leave the depots and travel on normal roads, and are regularly used in films. The most emblematic figure among them, which can be seen as an equivalent of the Sprague Thomson, is the famous TN, otherwise known to the public as the «platform bus».

### *Objects of fixation*

Apart from the modal and, therefore, generic structuring characterising it, the interest in the vehicles can take the form of a more specific focus on a particular vehicle. That is, for example, the case of Bus 85 which one of the volunteers said he was literally »in love with« and for which he wanted to be an AMTUIR »sponsor«.<sup>25</sup>

The attachment to vehicles can take several forms and has primarily collective or singular dimensions. Our interviews revealed a very precise modal hierarchy, usually grouping together a technical vision of the collection and, therefore, of transport. They also implicitly suggested the secondary role of the other objects, especially small ones, models and archive documents (photos, network maps, technical and legal documents, books, poster adverts), while the members we met at the association's offices were generally unstoppable once they started talking about a particular item.

### *The role of the urban system*

In parallel with the largely prevalent valorisation of these vehicles, another expression of interest was evidenced in the discourse and practices of the members of AMTUIR, which were underpinned by a cross-cutting logic that gave more open meaning to things in the world »of transport« as a whole. »I've always been interested in transport«, explained for example a volunteer, who considered that a familiar urban context is essential.<sup>26</sup> The assertion of a more general conception involved more or less explicit criticism of the adoration of vehicles, qualified as »fetishism« or »idolatry«.

This all-encompassing view gives rise to an analytical approach associated with »research«, as an interviewee put it.<sup>27</sup> Means of transport find their place in the

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25 PR interviewed on April 14, 2012.

26 BV interviewed on April 19, 2012.

27 PK interviewed on October 14, 2012.

articulation of the history of techniques and networks, of uses and customs, and in the understanding of a city. »Transport doesn't just amount to transport. It's part of a city [...]. One learns a lot about uses and populations«, a member pointed out.<sup>28</sup> Another one noted, in a similar vein, that only transport and what goes on behind the scenes can enable one to understand a city: »That was really something, I had to see the depot [...] to know the city«.

For some, who admit that an engine »doesn't mean much« to them, the context and understanding of the system is central to their displayed enthusiasm. Whether it concerns the »spectacle of Parisian life« or the pleasure of knowing and mastering a territory, the urban dimension of transport seems to play a key part.

### *The motivations*

While the members of AMTUIR demonstrate a diversity of centres of interest underlying their collective valorisation of their collection, what about the motivations for their commitment? How does one become a lover of urban transport? A psycho-analytical reading would be tempting. It is indeed difficult not to seek the truth of subjects behind their collection, as many have done.<sup>29</sup> Taking the interviewees' accounts seriously as regards the origin of their love for public transport enables us to shed light on the way in which they envisage the transmission of this common property and the memory associated with it.

»Old things, because that's it, they stir up one's childhood«, commented a transport enthusiast.<sup>30</sup> This is, in fact, one of the main drivers of the most passionate members' interest; they admit to having »been steeped in it« from a very young age. The social and family context probably played a decisive role. Even though they are not at the top of AMTUIR value scale, buses have a prime place in these accounts of origins, in which early sensations and experiences of mobility are prominent features. These city-dwellers relate that urban transport was part of their daily lives as children, when they admired the thundering power of the vehicles. Our analysis of interviews reveals the importance of low-angle views in their memories, and the monumental proportions of vehicles, of which even the massive steering wheels constituted objects of almost loving fixation. The fascination for buses can be likened to an aspiration for power and domination, over and above the attraction of the mechanics of movement. One of the members mentioned the »huge size of the steering wheel«:

»Ah, a matter of... of power in relation to... the vehicle. One feels that it's powerful. That it can carry 50 passengers without... without much effort, it's... despite the... the power, precisely, is necessary. But that's it... it's relative. Precisely, when I was small I saw this bus, I said to myself: ›Wow... what power it's got!‹ It's... um, ah!... mainly... to get up the... the streets

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28 DB interviewed on February 14, 2013.

29 Werner Muensterberger: *Collecting: An Unruly Passion. Psychological Perspectives*. Princeton 1995. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: *Why We Need Things*. In: Steven Lubar/David Kingery (Ed.): *History from Things. Essays on Material Culture*. Washington D.C. 1993, pp. 20–29.

30 PK interviewed on October 14, 2012.

of Montmartre [...] Whereas the driver, precisely, he was up there, he had his little cabin. He was dominating... it's mostly the charm, moreover, of driving it, because once you're up there, well, you dominate the situation, much more than down... down on the ground. That's it.<sup>31</sup>

The way the sound of the vehicles is always mentioned as a sign both of their life and of their power is revealing of this quest. »The sound. Ah, there was a very particular sound, that it still has. So, that's the advantage that it hasn't lost«, added the fan of the Bus 85.<sup>32</sup> »It's a bit like voices in human beings.« The sound is related to the life of the vehicle; mechanics readily use human or corporeal metaphors to describe the machines: »Organ«, »breath«, »behaviour« and »put life back into«.<sup>33</sup>

The testimonies have a very strong emotional charge that is particularly visible on the screen. It resembles the one which shows on the interviewees' faces in mentioning outings organised by the association, when some of them can drive these old buses through the city in present day. Remembering and »stirring up one's childhood« are essential aspects of the volunteers' commitment to AMTUIR. Moreover, the prefix »re« is recurrent in the interviews, because it is a way of effectively bringing up the past in the present: »It's true that there are images that are revived«, commented a member.

Over and above the nostalgia inherent in remembering the past in this type of context, two forms of »actualisation« in the linguistic sense of the term can be found in the time shifts affecting the interviewees' discourses, especially in the shift from past to present: The revival of fragments of the past in the present (reminiscence), and the realisation of a dream (action, acting out). One of the members of AMTUIR, who had never worked at the RATP, even though he would have liked to do so, saw this membership as a form of »symbolic compensation« – to use the term coined by Muensterberger<sup>34</sup> –, as was all the time he had spent throughout his life making models.

For those who formerly worked in the transport system, maintaining and enhancing the value of the vehicles seems to correspond more to the possibility of experiencing a form of control that they did not always have during their career. This is particularly striking among the mechanics, for whom the old vehicles correspond to »the baseline of mechanics« and to a golden age preceding the computer age which strongly affected their autonomy in their jobs. The pleasure that a former wheelwright or former metro driver derives is that of seeing something through to the end, of finishing a job. In a sense, the restoration of vehicles corresponds to a mode of »restoration« of the self that participates in a »narcissistic revalorization [sic!]<« found in collectors, as the ethnologist Frère-Michelat has described.<sup>35</sup>

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31 PR on April 14, 2012.

32 PR on April 14, 2012.

33 PR on April 14, 2012 et GH on April 14, 2012.

34 Ibid.

35 Claude Frère-Michelat Et bien j'aimerais mieux la voir mourrir! In: Jacques Hainard/Roland

Current engagement in the association is thus based on diverse centres of interest and is driven by various motivations, the strongest of which relate to childhood, to memories and to various activities that prolong or provide compensation for the members' working lives. This has a significant impact on the ways in which they collectively conceive of turning their collection into a museum.

*Preserving, restoring or transmitting: heritage logics*

»THE collection« is clearly what brings the members of AMTUIR together and gives meaning and value to their volunteer work. The urban transport museum project sponsored by the Marne and Chantierine greater urban community could affirm this activity. It will afford an opportunity to redefine the association's historical perspectives. The name itself attests to this: The Association for the Creation of the Museum of Urban, Interurban and Rural Transport, initially created »to endow France with a large urban transport museum«.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 2: The archives. Photo by Anne Jarrigeon, Chelles, 2011.

As a real heritage for the members of AMTUIR, the collection cannot be dissociated from the question of its »transmission«. The issue is precisely the definition, the modalities and the destination of that which must be transmitted. Cur-

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Kaehr (Ed.): Collections passion. Paris 1982, pp. 151-162.

36 [www.amtuir.org/02\\_amtuir/02\\_amtuir\\_histoire.htm](http://www.amtuir.org/02_amtuir/02_amtuir_histoire.htm) (Date: 8.10.2013).

rent debates – sometimes stormy – around the collection’s valorisation indicate the need to account for the vision of heritage that AMTUIR members convey. We propose here an interactionist-inspired rereading<sup>37</sup> of the meaning of the collection for the members who, in multiple ways, are involved in its »mediation«. To understand the value of the patrimonial work of AMTUIR people and the sense of the actual project, we needed to focus on relationships and interactions structured by the collection.

### *The collection as a heritage: having or being?*

Built up piece by piece by the founders who wanted to save from oblivion and destruction vehicles that had been excluded from contemporary networks, the AMTUIR collection is at the heart of interaction with various stakeholders and potential funders of France’s first urban transport museum. It is on this subject that fluctuating power struggles between highly active members and »the outside world«, as they put it, are played out. Preserving and not losing the collection is everyone’s concern, as one of the members suggested: »So if the museum is not created, we won’t be able to... we’ll lose everything.«<sup>38</sup>

»We must not sacrifice the heritage« commented another member.<sup>39</sup> The collection, a sort of bargaining chip in dealings with the stakeholders in the museum project, is described in ambivalent terms that cause it to waver between qualification and objectification. It corresponds to a form of possession, as in the case of the association’s chairman, who firmly pointed out that: »We’re not the owners [...] we won’t keep anything« while nevertheless stating that:

»What I saw as a technical collection... I now see that I... I have something far richer«. One of the members also commented that: »The others [documents] are at my place, yes. I had them photocopied, also, to keep them, what I had, myself, because I’ve had them for... 40 years. I, I’ve got... the first that I had, that must have been in... around 68 – 69, somewhere there«. The symbolic valorisation of this possession underpins the very social identity of the members, of which several, in the interviews or informal conversations we had with them during our research, said that: »We’re nothing without this collection.«<sup>40</sup>

Yet the act of collecting itself is often minimised in the discourse, including by those who assemble, collect and put aside in a systematic way. One of them, who had collected technical documentation, pictures of the Parisian networks, machines, roads and rails, specifically with the intent of building a scale-0 model of a metro station – which had presided over his dining room for the past ten years at least – exclaimed: »I can’t stand this word... collector. No, as I see it, it suggests a showcase and... it no longer moves.«<sup>41</sup> Another member who had a collection at home of souvenirs from his past at the RATP, mentioned:

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37 Howard Becker: *Outsiders: Studies in Sociology of Deviance*. New York 1963.

38 GH interviewed on April 14, 2012.

39 PK interviewed on April October 14, 2012.

40 BK interviewed on February 14, 2013.

41 PR interviewed on April 9, 2013.

»I don't collect. I don't do... second-hand markets to look for pieces of the metro. No, I don't take it that far [...]. I'm not a fetishist by saying: »It's mine, I'm keeping it.«<sup>42</sup>

In fact, the most active members today are not real collectors. They use their time and energy to maintain, restore and valorise this heritage which, in a sense, is frozen in time.

For many of them, the prospect of presenting the collection in a museum seems to imply that it will be redefined. They worry that the entire collection may not be kept. Some, like the current chairman of AMTUIR, nevertheless display a certain »rational« distance in the management of this heritage, which has led them to let go of some items. Convinced that »people have to have their two feet on the ground« he orchestrated a vast »streamlining« operation that was supported by some of the members we met but strongly criticised by others.<sup>43</sup> In all cases, it aroused intense emotion.

The museum project triggers fears of dissolution, especially since it would affect not only the possession of objects but also the association as an entity with a very real collective identity, which is deeply rooted in singular aspirations and in the fact of doing things together daily. In view of the symbolic sharing with new stakeholders – institutions, politicians, and potential visitors – transmission can be analysed as an alternative to possession, as a process at the heart of the valorisation of the heritage.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Transmission called into question*

»Transmission« is not seen in the same way by all members of the association: whereas for some it is a problem, for others it is one of the most important forms of valorisation of their voluntary work.

At AMTUIR, knowledge on transport is closely articulated with technical and mechanical knowledge which the members see as fundamental if the vehicles are to be restored. They all said that it was particularly difficult to pass on technical knowledge without taking the know-how dimension seriously and, therefore, without being involved in a taking part which cannot be reduced to verbal explanations alone.

Although they could talk for hours on the various subjects connected to their collection and its exploitation, several members said they preferred not to participate in presenting the collection to visitors. On a day-to-day basis, the activity of transmitting could even clash with the »work« that they associated with their voluntary activity.

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42 BV interviewed on March 9, 2013.

43 BK interviewed on October 14, 2013.

44 Jean Davallon: *Le don du patrimoine: Une approche*. Paris 2006.





Fig. 3: Pierre Ravenel's Urban Transport Museum at 0 scale. Photo by Anne Jarrigeon, Chelles, 2011.

»Our survey revealed that collectors are not simply ›living libraries‹ whose knowledge and know-how could merely be recorded; the ›secret‹ of their practices also lies in the ability to investigate and mediate the history that they have embodied«

wrote Da Lage.<sup>45</sup> The conditions and course of our own work of collecting testimonies constitute relevant material for the analysis of this dimension. The goodwill, often tinted with enthusiasm, of those individuals who agreed to participate in the oral and audiovisual archive campaign, revealed the importance granted to narratives, which they saw as the only way of making up for the fact that, for the uninitiated, the interest of the collection was invisible. A priori reluctant to produce official discourse on each of their »most beautiful« pieces, the members were actually inexhaustible when it came to talking about them, and were convinced that only a real lover of these objects could pass on their passion and thus »contaminate«<sup>46</sup> their public. Despite their concerns, related primarily to the sound and film recording devices and to the fact that the inter-

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45 Emilie Da Lage/Agnieszka Smolczewska Tona: Le secret dans les pratiques de collection et de médiation d'objets des deux guerres mondiales: Les leçons de l'enquête partagée. In: *Journal for Communication Studies* 6/2 (2013), pp. 223–235, here p. 232.

46 BK interviewed on October 14, 2013.

views were not anonymous<sup>47</sup>, they played the game, so to speak, seriously: They granted us time and helped us carry our equipment and set up the décor and lighting in their offices. Between the two interviews they often thought about what they wanted to add to the first interview, thus showing their awareness of the importance of their testimony.

During the interviews everyone expressed their opinions on what was worthy of being communicated, what was meaningful, and listed what they thought characterised speaking well. Conciseness was mentioned by some members, which contrasted with the many requests that we received during our oral memory campaign. In fact it was often the potential for anecdotes represented by a particular person, which determined the choice to introduce us to them.

### *Meeting the public(s)*

Questions of heritage cross those of a present time lived at AMTUIR, both in the daily routines and in more exceptional events (»outings«, »open days«). The pleasure that makes engagement in AMTUIR activities possible actually seems to stem, more fundamentally, from emotional sharing rather than a transmission of knowledge and know-how.

This emotional motivation produces an expression of very particular relations with the ›public‹. The implicit questions that our interviewees raised when they sought to explain to us the value of what they liked and the meaning of what they did were: How does one transmit [knowledge and know-how]? And, above all, to whom? The very word »public« came up repeatedly, associated with »opening«. »Public« was used alternately with »people« or »visitors« depending on whether the person was talking about the museum or the events organised by AMTUIR. The »youth« occupied a distinct place in the discourse, precisely because they were more difficult to associate with this sharing of nostalgic emotions. One of the members commented: »This museum suits me because these are my memories. But I think of my son who'd say: But where are the SC10? For him, the SC10 is a bit like my TN«. <sup>48</sup>

### *Project for a »living museum«*

This »sharing of the sensitive«, as Jacques Rancière<sup>49</sup> put it, is at the heart of the conception of a »living museum« put forward by everyone at AMTUIR. A veritable leitmotif of the association, the expression reflects the desire to build a museum that would enable visitors to relive the past in the present. That is inseparable from the idea of enabling the vehicles to move, enabling the public to relive (or discover, for the younger visitors) the sensorial experience of the past, with its sounds and its smells that were so characteristic.

Mention of the »museum« was ambiguous in the discourse. In the past tense, it generally referred to the period when AMTUIR could effectively receive the pu-

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47 The production of archives and especially of audiovisual archives departs from the tradition of protecting individuals' identity which generally prevails in the social sciences.

48 BK interviewed on October 14, 2013.

49 Jacques Rancière: *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*. Paris 2000.

blic, that is, at the Saint-Mandé museum. In the present tense, it corresponded to the description of associative activities which extended that period: Museum was then synonymous with »AMTUIR« or even »Chelles«. The term thus described the association as much as it did the association's premises. In the future tense, it concerned the current project for the future urban transport museum, sponsored by the Marne and Chantereine greater urban community.

The interviewees' personal experience of museums obviously influenced their conceptions of this museum. Although they were familiar with quite a few museums, the volunteers interviewed did not present themselves as real museum lovers. In fact they readily criticised certain museums. Among those mentioned, the Mulhouse railway museum, the »Cité du Train«, stood out sharply, serving as a counter model: Because »the locomotives«, although »magnificent and gleaming« are »inert« there; »it's dead«, one of them commented, »a locomotive that doesn't spit, that doesn't puff, that doesn't ooze oil, is not a locomotive«. <sup>50</sup> In contrast, the tramway museum in Brussels generated quasi-unanimous enthusiasm because the tramcars from the past can be taken out to travel on contemporary rails whose sizes have not changed since the urban network was first created.

The cessation of movement is referred to with a set of funeral metaphors which can be seen as the opposite of everything that literally animates AMTUIR volunteers.

### *Conclusion*

Our oral archive campaign was aimed partially at the sources and the forms of this interest in transport, grasped through the strong implications for the valorisation of a collection constituted in a different age. Our interviews enabled us to nuance a uniform view of »the collectors' passion« and to inform reflection of the fundamentally social nature of collection practices. We sought to understand the collective of enthusiasts that brought back to life a vast collection of vehicles and objects related to urban transport shortly before it was to be presented in a museum.

At AMTUIR, questions of heritage cross those of a present experienced as daily time and in relation to the events that the association can organise for various audiences. The pleasure derived from engagement in AMTUIR's activities appears to stem, more fundamentally, from an emotional sharing rather than a transmission of the technical knowledge and know-how that everyone seems to value. One of the »specific characteristics of the work of narrating collectors' mediation is to make visible their »amateur work«<sup>51</sup>, as indicated in their inquiry. The work of AMTUIR members corresponds to laymen's practices of restoring a technical heritage destined to maintain a certain use value which, according to them, cannot be separated from a conception of a »living museum«. In the final analysis, the future urban transport museum seems to be dreaded as much as it is eagerly awaited. Dreaded for the destabilisation that it represents,

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50 BV interviewed on March 0, 2013.

51 Da Lage/Smolczewska Tona, as fn. 23, p. 230.

of the association's life and its ways of symbolically constructing a heritage, but eagerly awaited because it will consecrate this volunteer activity by guaranteeing it an opening to the public and, more generally, publicity that it currently lacks.



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