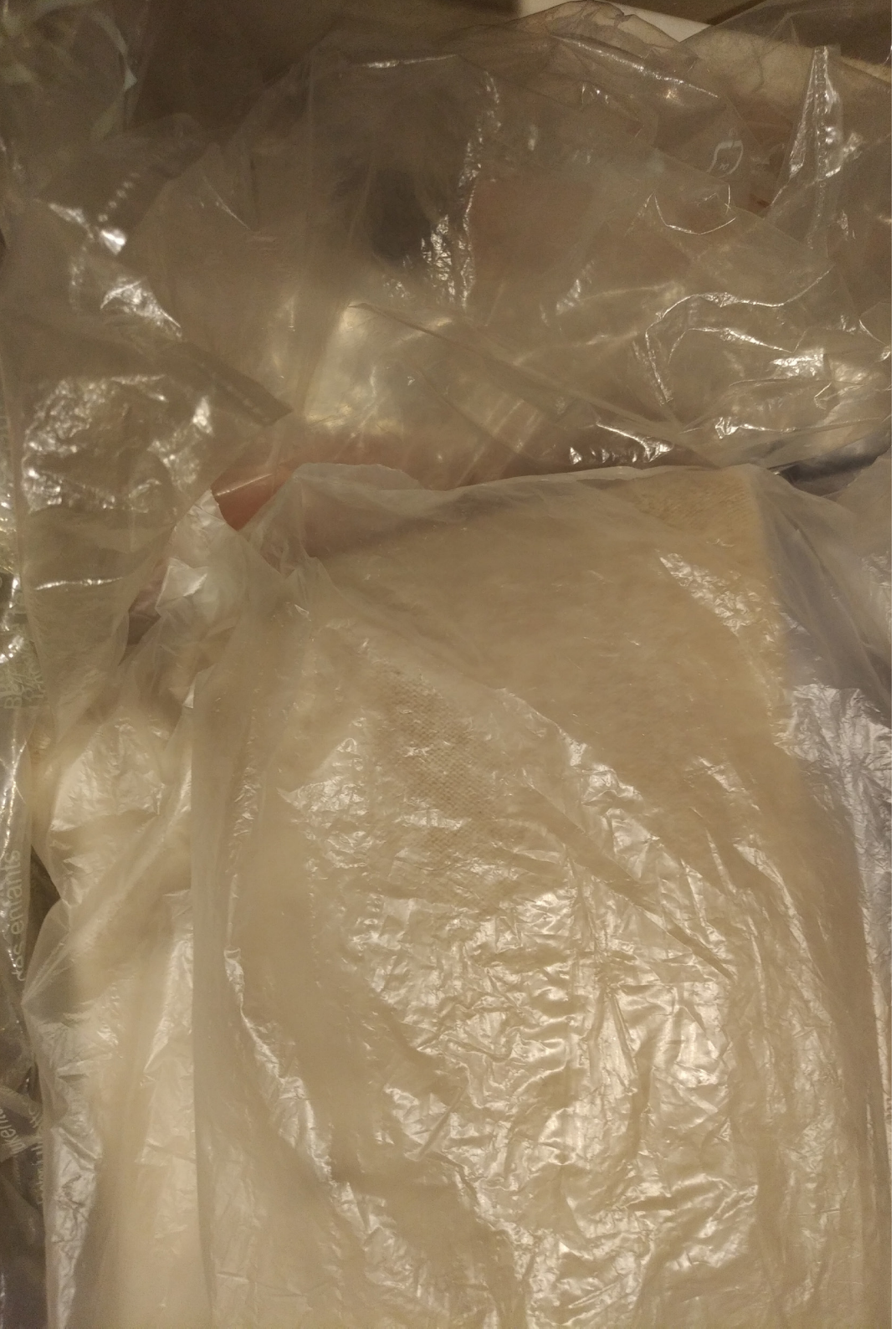

Analia's cabinet, 2017

My mother, Analia keeps each item of clothing individually wrapped in her cabinet. Some are in old dry-cleaning bags, others in the bags the clothes came in, or re-used plastic bags. When you compliment her outfit, she does not say "thank you," she says "oh, it's old" then tells you where she bought it, thirty years ago in Argentina with her mother, before immigrating to England, while her mother was still alive, at a time when she was surrounded by family.

She is generally a very clean and organised person. She has been told on numerous occasions that her house is like a museum – everything is looked after and impeccable. Even the objects that are not kept in plastic bags are regularly dusted and polished. Each object is placed on a surface – a table or a wall, deliberately, as if being allowed the space to breathe. She has been collecting small boxes for as long as I have known her. Her favourites are empty, laid out on one particular fingerprint-less glass top table.[1]

She is actively exhibiting, caring not only for each object but also how visitors experience her home. Of course her home is private, those who enter have been invited in.

Analia's garden is similar to the interior of her house. The colours of each plant are chosen and arranged in specific locations, trimmed regularly, with weeds consistently removed from the root. In England there is a tradition dating back to 1959 called the National Garden Scheme where people chose to open up their private home gardens to the public once a year.[2]

1 "Whether a child collects model dinosaurs or dolls, sooner or later she or he will be encouraged to keep the possessions on a shelf or in a special box or to set up a doll house. Personal treasures will be made public." James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 219.

2 "Who We Are," National Garden Scheme, accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.ngs.org.uk/who-we-are/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/.

Similarly, within public museums there are occasional ‘open days’ and guided tours to selected private and restricted areas such as the archive collections and storage spaces not readily available to the public.[3] Otherwise, access to a particular part of the museum, or to view a specific object, often involves a long and arduous process with multiple forms and delays.

Within most museum archives, objects are stored under specific conservation regulations. In the Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia in Saõ Paulo, the artefacts are wrapped in plastic bags and kept in temperature-controlled environments for conservation purposes.

Conservation seems to be a human necessity – a need to preserve a culture or a memory, verbally or through objects. Although conservation as a practice within museums began during the nineteenth century, humans have been conserving art since prehistory.[4]

3 In the 1980s the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) created a space visible to the public referred to as “the goldfish bowl” where scientists were conserving large fossil marine reptiles. In 2016 the museum opened a similar space when restoring the blue whale skeleton which now lives in Hintze Hall. The space was created for public outreach and the museum consequently was awarded the Keck Award for Public Understanding of Science. The space was also created because of overcrowding in the conservation lab. In both occasions the public encounters the scientists work through a glass wall, similar to vitrines which keep the exhibited taxidermy, creating a spectacle of labour. Lorraine Cornish (Head of Conservation at NHM), email correspondence with author, 29 January, 2018

4 Traditional story-teller of the Nugal-warra clan, Willie Gordon, when talking about the preservation of Indigenous rock art said: “If you go to different parts of Australia they’ve [tribes] already recoated or repainted art. They’ve painted it because it’s in our culture to keep it alive and well.” Sam Davis, “Preserving Indigenous Rock Art,” last modified 27 October, 2009, http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2009/10/27/2725103.htm.

Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia archive, 2017

When I was a child, Analia took me to the Zoológico de Buenos Aires. The zoo was conceived in 1875 by Argentine president, Domingo Sarmiento. The first director of the zoo, Eduardo Holmberg structured the environment so that the animals would be housed in buildings that reflected their countries of origin. For example, a replica of a Hindu temple was built for Asian elephants, housing the first one ever to be born in a zoo. These replicas were built as an attempt to conserve the *imagined* original home of the elephants. The idea of a lived human architecture being built for an elephant so that she can feel more at home is beautifully absurd. They are a scenography that allows the public to imagine a fiction of animals living in human built environments from their home countries, but paradoxically the real power of these replicas is that they highlight the fact that the animals were plucked from varying countries for exhibition.[5]

5 In 2014, a Buenos Aires Court ruled that Sandra, a 29-year-old Sumatran orang-utan living in the Zoológico de Buenos Aires, had enough cognitive functions that she should not be treated as an object. She was granted non-human animal rights allowing her to be liberated from the enclosure. In 2016, the zoo was shut down with the promise that the animals would be transferred to alternative sanctuaries and reserves. After three years, on November 2019 Sandra was transferred to a sanctuary, Center for Great Apes in Wauchula, Florida. "La orangutana "Sandra," una vez más sujeto de derecho no humano" iJudicial, last modified 28 December 2016, http://www.ijudicial.gob.ar/2016/la-orangutana-sandra-una-vez-mas-sujeto-de-derecho-no-humano/.

Family Photograph at Zoológico de Buenos Aires,1997

Jarina Seed donated to NHM from author. Photograph by Thierry Bal, 2019

Tom works as a technician building displays at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London. In the staff canteen, he had overheard a colleague of his, Nigel Bamforth, discussing a cabinet filled with ivory in the furniture conservation lab. Nigel had previously worked in the fashion industry, with a subsequent twenty-two years and four months heading the furniture conservation department at the V&A.

I visited Nigel in April of 2016 where he generously showed me the cabinet filled with ivory, which he explained was used for furniture and artefact conservation, primarily to replace broken parts. He said that the material had been donated by customs.

I was curious whether the use of confiscated ivory in artefact conservation and restoration occurred in other national museums. While staff at the British Museum mentioned that they also held ivory for similar use, the official response I received from Dr. Anna Bülow, then Head of Conservation at the British Museum was that "no Western trained conservator would use plant or animal material [unprocessed organic material such as ivory] for object conservation, as it is neither ethical nor useful to do."[6]

I visited Nigel again in March 2017 and asked him why alternative materials were not used instead. He answered "we have the material [ivory] available to us so it would be rather pointless." Alternatives that exist for ivory include celluloid, and the Jarina seed (also known as 'vegetable ivory,') a dried endosperm of the seed of *Phytelephas* from the Amazon.[7]

6 Dr. Anna Bülow, email to author, 8 March, 2017

7 Yinghao Chu, Marc A. Mayers, et al, "A Sustainable Substitute for Ivory: The Jarina Seed from the Amazon," Scientific Reports 5, Article number: 14387 (24 September 2015).