Contemporary museum practices:

the case of the Victoria and Albert's Rapid Response Collection

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In 2014, the Victoria and Albert Museum decided to form a new collection, named the Rapid Response Collection. According to the museum's website, the collection 'represents a unique strand of the V&A's collecting activity, with each new acquisition raising different questions about economic, political and social change, globalisation, technology and the law.' (www.vam.ac.uk) it is this quotation, which is central to the Research Question of this thesis: to what extent has this collection been able to fill its initial aim of addressing these concerns? In the introduction to this thesis, I will briefly address the history of the V&A in order to provide context for the collection, before looking into what the Rapid Response Collection actually is and the way in which it fits into the overall the institution overall. I will then address the research questions, explain the methodology used and finally detail the overall structure of this thesis.

Figure 1: Panorama of the Rapid Response Exhibition Space (www.vam.ac.uk)

1.2 History of the Victoria and Albert Museum

On May 17th, 1899 Queen Victoria (1819-1901) laid the founding stone for the 'Victoria and Albert Museum and Science Museum', her final public appearance before her death some 2 years later (Physick 1982, 252). The intention of the museum by her husband, Prince Albert (1819-1861), can be seen in the quotation

inscribed above the entrance which reads 'The excellence of every art must consist in the complete accomplishment of its purpose' (www.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 2)and was hoped to educate the masses who had not been able to access such a wealth of resources before. Referred to by its first curator, Henry Cole (1808-1882) as a ‘a refuge for destitute collections’ (www.artfund.org) the V&A now houses 2.3 million objects, from just over 5000 years of history and all across the globe (www.vam.ac.uk). Its own history from the Industrial Revolution and the Great Exhibition to the letters of Captain Owen, a prominent naval officer and opponent of the V&A, and the subsequent building of the ‘Brompton Boilers’ contributed towards the creation of the first, and, by their own admission, best, museum of art and design in the world. This museum, described as ‘an extremely capacious handbag’ (www.vam.ac.uk) by the prominent art historian, Sir Roy Strong, will be examined in this thesis.

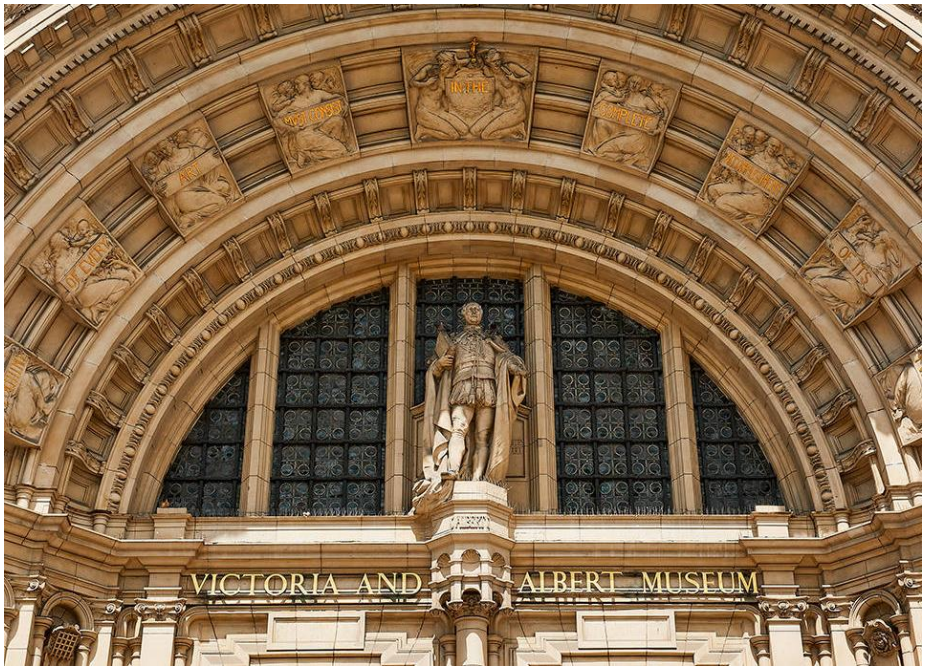


Figure 2: Entrance Inscription (www.vam.ac.uk)

The reign of Queen Victoria was heavily influenced by the Industrial Revolution. The movement of people into the towns in hope of employment had resulted in increased poverty and the contrast between the living conditions of the working class and the elite was clearer than ever before. Tension was rife between the classes, heightened by the French Revolution in 1848 (Marx 1850, 75-76) as part of the wave of revolutions in Europe at the time, and resulting in the overthrow of

King Louis Phillipe. Prince Albert responded to this revolution by accelerating his pre-existing programme to modernise the British Monarchy. Albert was a passionate believer in the educational value of museums, which could be used as a tonic for all classes of the British hierarchy. Coupled with the increased use of railways and the subsequent adoption of the 'British Weekend' in which members of the Middle Class would venture from industrial capitals to the countryside or places of further learning, the museum became a fundamental institution for the education and improvement of all, regardless of class.

In response to the French Revolution, Albert acted swiftly. On the 30th June 1849, he proposed four categories for the greatest Great Exhibition yet: Raw materials, Machinery, Manufactures and Sculpture (www.thegazette.co.uk). The promotion of applied arts had been encouraged since the sixteenth century; however, the Great Exhibition was intended to act as festival of emancipation for the working classes. In 1851 the Crystal Palace, the 'glorified greenhouse' where the exhibition was to be held housed 100,000 objects from across the globe (www.crystalpalacefoundation.org.uk). In just six months, 6 million visitors entered the Exhibition, with attendance influenced by the royal patronage, resulting in a profit of £180,000 (Memorial to the Exhibition, Royal Institute of British Architects). Whilst the Great Exhibition was a resounding success, one thing was clear – the applied arts of the UK had fallen behind. Something had to be done.

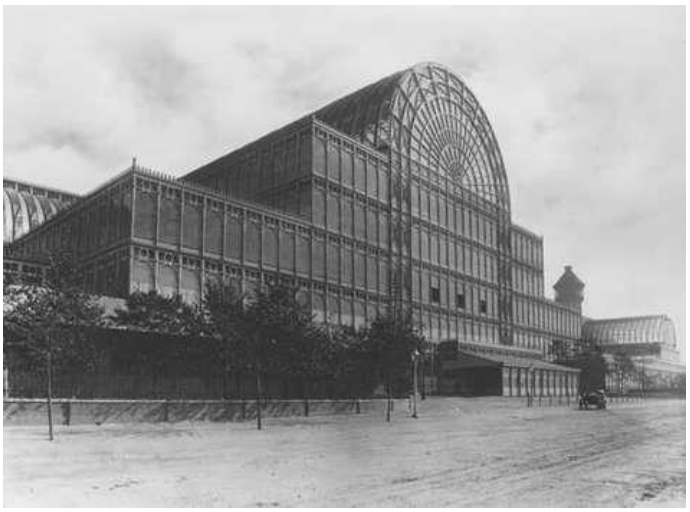


Figure 3: The Crystal Palace (www.britannica.com)

Albert stepped up to the plate once again. Well informed by the German concept of a 'cultural centre', which predated the Great Exhibition by some hundred years, the Prince had visited a number of museums in his European 'Grand Tour' prior to his marriage to Victoria. Heavily influenced by the Vienna Museum, Albert suggested that the profits earned by the Great Exhibition ought to be used to buy 35 hectares of land south of Hyde Park, now known as Exhibition Road (www.google.com/maps). It was here that the V&A and other contemporary museums would be built. The Museum opened in 1852 and was originally based at Marlborough House on the Mall, before being moved to South Kensington in 1857 (Hobhouse 2002, 109). Albert's desire for social reform, coupled with the success of the Great Exhibition demonstrated the existing appetite for a greater number of museums available to a wider audience. This idea was fondly known by the general public as 'Albertopolis' (www.royalalberthall.com), in lieu of the number of establishments he had planned on introducing to the area as was his vision. Albert believed that museums ought to be the vehicle for the state education of the people and did all possible to see the project through. Dying at 42, he would never see the full fruits of his labour.

The V&A was not a universally popular idea, and met with strong opposition from Captain Owen, lifelong opponent to the establishment, who composed a detailed letter of complaint in 1854 after the first incarnation of the V&A had been opened some 2 years. This Museum of Manufacture, as it was then known, wanted to extend its reach and combine artefacts from the National Gallery, British Museum, Economic Geology Museum, Botanic Collection at Kew and the Marlborough House Ornamental Manufacture. Owen did not want 'particular view of industry taken by those to recommend the acquisition of such articles' (Hobhouse 2002, 111). The specific intentions of the V&A were to provide a reference collection for the best examples of art and design found across the world to inspire future craft workers, in the hope that this may help improve Britain's own craft industries. Owen suggested that it should instead be 'based upon a classified census of population' (Hobhouse 2002, 111). Owen was not the only source of criticism, with John Burns, a radical member of the House of Commons referring to the museum as a 'nest of nepotism, a jungle of jobbery' (Hobhouse 2002, 253) in 1896, attacking the internal bureaucracy of the museum instead. In

1854 it seemed that opposition to further development of the V&A divided the upper classes.

Despite this division, building went ahead as planned, and in 1857 Prince Albert and Queen Victoria opened the South Kensington Museum, as it was then known (Hobhouse 2002, 109). The building was nicknamed the ‘Brompton Boilers’ due to its metal mainframe and was the first purpose-built building for the V&A, which has developed and expanded in the 150 years since (Hobhouse 2002, 111). Its central aim was to provide ‘the greatest central educational point in science and art’ (Hobhouse 2002, 109), and was the first museum born of an International Exhibition, though many followed suit in later years. The museum was intended to be for the people and had all manner of modern conveniences such as toilets, cloakrooms and gas lighting to allow for later opening hours, allowing people to visit after the working day had finished. It also housed the first tearoom inside a museum, meaning the hours could be whiled away without having to leave the premises. Most importantly, the museum had ‘free days’ every Monday, Tuesday and Saturday in which people would not be expected to pay entrance, allowing for a greater sphere of access. Student days were also common, where those studying were admitted free of charge. The Museum also had a Lecture Theatre, where for a small fee people could hear the great and the good of the day.

Figure 4: The Brompton Boilers (collections.vam.ac.uk)

Tony Bennett, the prominent sociologist, criticises the early museum, by saying that whilst it was intended to be for the people, it was not of the people. He furthers this, by suggesting that there was 'nothing which might make you feel at home and relax in there' (Bennett 1995, x). Bennett considers the use of museums in the Victorian era to be linked with a desire to educate the poor and contribute towards social control, linking to Prince Albert's desire to found the museum after the collapse of the July Monarchy in France in 1848. In keeping with this the V&A was designed to educate and illuminate, not to act as a second home (though the new V&A in Dundee marks a change in this attitude with its motto of acting as 'a living room for the city' (www.vam.ac.uk)). The early museum was also criticised as being rife with curatorial inconsistency, however, Julius Bryant attributes this to the lack of founding document (Bryant 2011).

Figure 5: Mosaic to Henry Cole, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Author's Photograph)

Seven years after Owen's letter, in 1861, Prince Albert died, and the future of the V&A was uncertain. Henry Cole stepped to the fore (Figure 5). Cole had been heavily involved in the Great Exhibition and had worked closely alongside Prince Albert. It was he who had acquired a number of artefacts from the Great Exhibition to be used as learning aids for the V&A. He was tasked with the promoting a more refined artistic sense in his peers, no small feat, and was able to maintain Queen Victoria's interest through citing the Museum as Albert's legacy.

Cole was a key figure in the signing of the 'Convention for promoting Universally Reproduction of Work of Art for the Benefits of Museums of All Countries', (www.vanda-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/) which allowed for works to be replicated and displayed alongside one another in the cast galleries of the museum, introduced in 1878. These aided the central aim of the museum – to encourage the artistic industries of the UK, and to influence the stylistic quality of such works.

The work of Cole led to the opening of 'The Victoria and Albert and Science Museum' by Queen Victoria in 1899 (Physick 1982, 252). The Queen had requested that the museum be known only as the 'Albert Museum', however, the governing body of the museum decreed it should honour both the Queen and her late husband. In 1874 the museum was reviewed by its board, and it was advised to build up a collection of physical and mechanical instruments to develop its position as a museum with expertise in both the arts and the sciences. The institution's name was shortened to the 'Victoria and Albert Museum' in 1909 in the understanding that the museum could not excel in both spheres. Albert's desire to make the museum an exceptional space for both art and design had been fulfilled, with the museum housing diverse collections from around the world to expand the knowledge and to encourage learning.

The V&A has never been a museum to shy away from controversy. The 1901 exhibition of Art Nouveau furniture was described by the Times as 'An exceedingly vulgar show' and met with general disdain (www.vam.ac.uk). This furniture was a gift from Sir George Donaldson, a man well known for his excellent taste, who was, in this particular instance, sorely mistaken. The initial positioning of the tables and chairs in the Tapestry Court met with widespread scorn and led to complaint letters made by the V&A's Committee of Advice for Art. In a bizarre turn of fate, which museums are often subject to, the pieces reached such heights of notoriety that museums across the UK clamoured to display the pieces. The V&A were, unsurprisingly, happy to oblige. The entire event encouraged a redraft of the museum's constitution, explicitly stipulating that all gifts to the museum had to be subject to scrutiny by those with good taste before they were accepted. Donaldson may not have left quite the legacy on the

V&A that he had intended, however, he did succeed in reforming its collection policy.

Figure 6: The 'exceedingly vulgar show' (www.vam.ac.uk)

In 2019 the V&A stands in the same space where Prince Albert intended it to. It now has some 3 million visitors a year and won the Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2016 (www.artfund.org). It the past decade it has had displays ranging from the history of Underwear (www.vam.ac.uk) to the Life of David Bowie (www.vam.ac.uk). Their current mission statement is 'to enrich people's lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world to the widest possible audience' (www.vam.ac.uk). The V&A has inspired some of the world's greatest thinkers in art and design and has helped to improve the practical art industry of the UK, achieving exactly what Prince Albert had dreamt it would.

Prince Albert's desire for a 'schoolroom for everyone' was supplemented by the museum. Through the legacy of the Industrial Revolution and the Great Exhibition, it was possible to form a museum that could act as a reference collection for designers and artists alike. Through exhibiting artefacts thematically, it became possible to contextualize them in a wider global concern and to aid further development of the practical arts. The museum was also subject to controversy in the form of the Owens letters and the Donaldson collection, however, was able to thrive in spite of these. The V&A now stands as the global leader for art and design museums and continues to grow and strengthen itself.

1.3 What is the Rapid Response Collection?

The Rapid Response Collection comprises of some 30 objects all acquired after the collection was established in 2014. The full list of the artefacts is included in the appendices of this thesis (see Appendix B). The oldest piece dates to 2004, and the most recent to 2018. The collection is housed on the 3rd floor of the museum and comprises of between 10 and 12 artefacts on display at any one time. All acquisition decisions are made by the chief curator Corinna Gardener, who I was fortunate enough to interview for this thesis.

Figure 7: Rapid Response Collection (www.vam.ac.uk)

The V&A website, somewhat more eloquently describes the collection as ‘ranging from Christian Louboutin shoes in five shades of 'nude', a 3D-printed titanium handlebar used by Bradley Wiggins to set cycling's Hour Record, to a knitted Pussy Hat worn at the 2017 Women's March in Washington DC, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration; each new acquisition raises a different question about economic, political and social change, globalisation, technology and the law.’ (www.vam.ac.uk).

The collection has been the subject of extensive media discussion from its foundation in 2014 to the present day, though it is clear that the discussion of the collection has trickled off somewhat. The collection makes headlines when the V&A acquires unusual items, such as the Flappy Bird App, or the Xbox controller, but other than this it is only discussed with regards to newly founded Rapid Response type collections in other museums.

The V&A looks outwards: its Rapid Response Collecting gallery is unveiled

Opening installation includes 3D-printed handgun, Primark trousers, and an Ikea toy – notes of much bigger global stories

▲ Objects in the gallery, like this 3D printed handgun, are collected in response to major moments in history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. Photograph: Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 8: The Guardian piece on the collection (www.theguardian.com)

1.4 Where does the Rapid Response Collection fit?

The establishment of the Rapid Response Collection has been lauded as the first exhibition of contemporary culture as and when it happens and has a strong legacy to support, of collections of a contemporary ethnographic variety.

The Rapid Response Collection was intended to collect pieces from across the world with regards to significant contributions to art and design. Indeed, the collection has influenced other establishments such as the National Museum of Ireland (www.museum.ie) and the Jewish Museum in Berlin (www.jmberlin.de) to also form similar contemporary curated collections. These collections will be discussed in the Forth Chapter of this thesis as part of my interview with Corinna Gardner, the curator of the Rapid Response Collection since its conception in 2014.

Figure 9 & 10: Rapid Response Collection from the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Museum of Ireland respectively (jmberlin.de)(nytimes.com)

1.5 Research Questions

The Research Questions for the thesis will focus around the extent to which the Rapid Response Collection have succeeded in fulfilling their central objectives set out in the mission statements on the website (see page 7). I will structure these through looking to the groups the museum involves – the audience, the museum professionals, and the audience. I will structure these through looking to the three theoretical spheres I intend upon analysing, looking to the role of the *Contact Zone*, that of the *Social Life of Things*, and then move on to an analysis of the concept of the underrepresented. As such, my central question for this thesis will be – to what extent did the Victoria and Albert Museum's Rapid Response Collection fulfil their founding aims?

1.6 Methodology

The methodology of this thesis will be spilt into three central spheres. The first will be an examination of the theory surrounding the topic of new museology, examining Pratt's concept of the *Contact Zone*, Appadurai's *Social Life of Things*,

and finally Sandell's conception of Social Justice in museums, considered with regards to the museum audience.

I will then turn to an analysis of my interview with Corinna Gardner, looking to the various questions I asked her, in order to gauge the way in which the curator of the exhibition herself considers the collection.

Finally, I will consider the way in which the most important group in the museum consider the collection through looking to the Social Media response to the collection, examining the #rapidresponsecollecting on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I will consider both the quantity of responses on Facebook and Instagram and will consider their content on Twitter.

Due to the fact this thesis centres around a very recent collection, a large proportion of my sources are digital ones.

1.7 Structure

In this thesis, the structure will be as follows:

The following chapter of this thesis will be a discussion of the *Contact Zone*, Mary Louise Pratt's concept (Pratt 1991, 33) applied by Clifford in a museological context, which revolved around the unequal power dynamic which is central to museums. I will look to the way in which the Rapid Response Collection can be considered as a *Contact Zone*, first with regards to the collection itself, followed by the way in which individual objects can be considered as *Contact Zones*. I will conclude with the way in which the V&A uses online resources in order to engage with various communities. This chapter will focus on the work of James Clifford (Clifford 1997, 89), Chris Gosden (Gosden 1999, 169) and Charlie Gere (Gere 1997, 59) respectively, alongside the work of other authors.

The third chapter of this thesis will revolve around Arjun Appadurai's *Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986, 3) looking to individual objects and the ways in which they have their own Social Lives independent of human biographies. This chapter will focus on Appadurai's model, before addressing the way in which Igor

Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1986, 64) considers the construct from a far more economic perspective. Further to this, I will consider the work of Sam Alberti in his work on *Objects and the Museum* (Alberti 2005, 559) before concluding with Hoskins' work on the Social Life of individual objects (Hoskins 1998, 152).

The fourth chapter of this thesis will examine the role of the museum curator, beginning with an analysis as to the way in which the position has changed over the past 50 years, from the bastion of knowledge, to a celebrity status, before moving back into almost obscurity. I will then focus on my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection (see Appendix A for the full transcript). Gardner's discussion will revolve around the past, present and future of the collection, and will also feature my own analysis of the answers given.

The fifth chapter of this thesis will look to the underrepresented of museums and consider the way in which the V&A Rapid Response Collection makes an effort to engage with this group who are either consciously or unconsciously excluded. This will be done both from the way in which the narrative is told, and the way in which the collection is displayed. In this chapter, I will address the demographics who have been included in the display who are often excluded, through the discussion of specific objects, ranging from the Refugee Flag to the Pussy Hat among other items of note.

The final chapter of my thesis will centre around the various comments made by visitors to the V&A online, using Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. This will allow for an understanding as to the way in which people have reacted to the collection, both within the museum and out with it when they have had more time to reflect upon the experience.

Through using the various theoretical understandings of museums, alongside the interview with Gardner and the comments of visitors it will be possible to gain the most rounded perspective of the collection, and the role it is able to play in the museum overall.

Overall this thesis will serve as the first analysis of the V&A's Rapid Response Collection currently written, bringing together a variety of different pieces in order to bring a fully developed critique and analysis of the collection. Ideally this

thesis will serve as a model for the way in which the museum can further develop the collection, in addition to the collections of other ‘Rapid Response-esque’ establishments such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin (www.jmberlin.de) and the National Museum of Ireland (www.museum.ie).

Chapter Two: Contact Zones

2.1 Introduction

In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt gave the keynote address to Modern Language Association, introducing a new term she referred to as the *Contact Zone* (Pratt 1991, 34). She defined this term 'to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (Pratt 1991, 34). Whilst Pratt conceived of this concept to apply to literature, specifically that of the autoethnographic variety, it was soon appropriated by academics such as Clifford to the discipline of museology (Clifford 1997, 192). In this chapter of my thesis I will consider the *Contact Zone* in three distinct ways. First and foremost, I will look at the term through its original understanding as appropriated by James Clifford, considering the Rapid Response Collection as a *Contact Zone* (Clifford 1997, 192). Secondly, I will consider specific objects from the collection as *Contact Zones* in and of themselves, looking at the work of Chris Gosden who suggests that pieces can mark the sites of intersecting histories (Gosden 1999, 5). Finally, I will cite the work of Charlie Gere, among others, in interpreting the use of the Internet as a *Contact Zone* (Gere 1997, 62) and the way in which the V&A has used such an invaluable resource to engage with a variety of communities.

2.2 The Conventional *Contact Zone*

Six years after Pratt spoke on *Contact Zones*, Clifford published an essay on the subject in which he acknowledged the historical power imbalance in which museums are both created and curated. Whilst Clifford's work centred around an exhibition on *Continuity and Change in the New Guinea Highlands* (Clifford 1997, 188), this by no means suggests his model cannot be applied to the V&A's Rapid Response Collection.

On their website, the V&A writes that the objects selected for the Rapid Response Collection are 'collected in response to major moments in history that touch the

world of design and manufacturing. This new strategy helps the V&A to engage in a timely way with important events that shape, or are shaped by design, architecture and technology.' (www.vam.ac.uk). It is this statement which is integral to reaching an understanding as to how the V&A chose to direct this particular collection and as already referenced in the introduction will focus on the central research question of this thesis.

One would think that the Rapid Response Collection would be a prime space with which to actively engage with source communities. After all, it a modern curation project deigned to respond to social design phenomena as and when they happen. Yet the collection seemingly does not deliver on the idea of community engagement in any form. This can be seen in several ways.

First and foremost, the very geographical location of the display. On the 3rd floor of the museum, in a 'temporary space' (www.vam.ac.uk) according to the online map, sits the exhibition space for the Rapid Response Collection. Barely half the size of the Gift Shop on the ground floor (www.vam.ac.uk), one can hardly help but think that the exhibition is something of an afterthought, as opposed to the provocative and revolutionary display we were promised in 2014, especially considering the abundant thought pieces in the media surrounding the new exhibition (www.museum-id.com). The very fact that the space the collection is housed in is room 74a further emphasises the position of the collection as something of an afterthought.

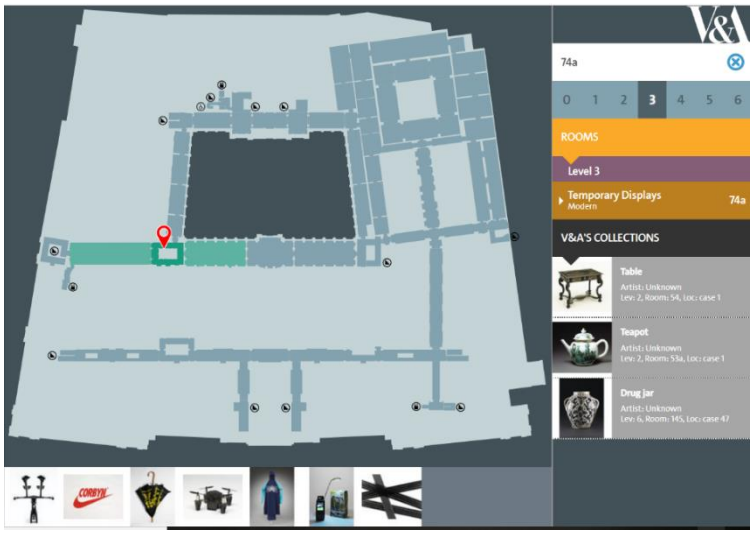


Figure 11: Digital Map with Exhibition Space highlighted (www.vam.ac.uk)

Indeed, the media attention surrounding the exhibition has reached something of a standstill in the past years. In spite of the 'hype' regarding the collection in 2014, with the new collection featuring in the Guardian (www.theguardian.com), Telegraph (www.telegraph.co.uk) and a number of other papers and websites, the little media attention surrounding the collection now comes from other museums creating a similar kind of exhibition (www.nytimes.com). Whilst the acquisition of certain pieces, such as the Pussy Hat receive attention at the time of their acquisition, overall, media engagement surrounding the collection has reached something of a standstill.

Figure 12: BBC News reports on acquisition of the Pussy Hat (www.bbc.com)

The geographical origins of the collection's pieces are also something of a disappointment. 13 of the collection's pieces come from Europe, with none whatsoever from South America or Africa (www.vam.ac.uk)(Appendix B). It seems lax to consider a museum intended to display the art and design of the world to have neglected entire continents. After all, there can be no *Contact Zone*, if there is nothing with which to be in contact. This can be seen in Appendix B of this thesis.

With these issues in mind, it becomes clear that overall, the Rapid Response Collection ought not to be considered as successful a *Contact Zone* as it has the potential to be.

2.3 The object as a *Contact Zone*

With this critique of the conventional *Contact Zone* in mind, it is possible to put the spotlight on specific objects and consider them as *Contact Zones* in and of themselves. I will use the examples of the Primark Trousers and the Burqini to substantiate my case.

In order to appropriately consider this level of analysis, it is worth first understanding Gosden and Marshall's work on the 'Cultural Biography of Objects' published in 1999 (Gosden 1999, 172). Gosden seeks to understand the relationship between people and things, writing that objects are themselves integral to society. Whilst Gosden accredits Kopytoff in defining the value of an object through its biography (this will be discussed in the following chapter), Gosden encourages us to look closely at the creation of value between people and things. Indeed, Gosden's words on the 'the ways meanings and values are accumulated and transformed' (Gosden 1999, 172) can be no more appropriately applied than in the following examples.

i. Primark Trousers

One of the founding objects acquired by the Rapid Response Collection are, upon first glance, a pair of fairly innocuous trousers - grey cargo pants to be precise. With a waist size 34 and leg 32 there is apparently little that is exceptional about this piece. They retailed for somewhere in the region of £10, sold from the retail giant, Primark. Yet upon further examination, the trousers take on a far more sinister meaning.

Figure 13: Primark Trousers (collections.vam.ac.uk)

On the V&A website the trousers are explained in more detail, 'On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1133 workers and injuring thousands more. Pairs of cargo trousers like these were manufactured there for British retailer Primark' (collections.vam.ac.uk). The brief explanation continues, writing of a reformed approach to 'fast fashion' examining how the very concept emerged from the work of companies such as Walmart. Whilst this alleged change in approaches to fashion is perhaps a touch optimistic (although it is currently estimated that by the year 2020 the average wardrobe will consist of 40% second-hand clothing (www.forbes.com)) this reflection is a wise one.

Our material lives are as important as our social ones, for one cannot exist without the other. Gosden's acknowledgement that artefacts have a range of biographies is particularly relevant when we apply this model to the concept of the *contact zone*. The context within which a piece is viewed varies its meaning. To a child these may be school trousers, to an employee of the Rana Plaza building these may have represented another day of brutal work, to a clerk of Primark another piece to be scanned. This radical change in meaning for the artefact lends itself to the idea that there is a radical difference in the piece as a *Contact Zone*.

These trousers can be considered as a *Contact Zone* between so many different groups. Between the West and those, we readily exploit, between producer and

consumer, between the wealthy and the impoverished. As such, they are a perfect example of the way in which the V&A has excelled in using seemingly everyday objects to create a dialogue regarding the way in which unequal power dynamics exist in seemingly everyday relationships. After all, one group makes them, but it is we who most certainly wear the trousers in this relationship. In the choice of this piece, the curators have excelled. The idea of objects having individual Social Lives will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter of this thesis, centring on the work of Appadurai and the *Social Life of Things*.

ii. Burqini

The oldest piece currently part of the Rapid Response Collection, the Ahiida Modest-Fit Navy/Turqoise-ButterFly Ice/Silver Burqini (www.vam.ac.uk) can be considered as yet another piece which represents a site of transecting histories. The piece was created in Australia and was intended to be used as a way in which to allow women to maintain modesty whilst also being able to swim. Little is written about the piece on the V&A's digital catalogue; however, it marks another *Contact Zone*. The piece is an item specifically designed for a woman with certain religious affiliations, to provide both greater freedom of movement and activity. The diversity of responses, which the garment has prompted, suggests a way in which a *Contact Zone* can be a subject of extensive debate.

Figure 14: Burqini (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The Burqini can be considered in two particularly interesting ways. First and foremost, it marks a site of discussion. The way in which we talk about the piece can illuminate others as to our conceptions of gender, faith and sport. The piece was acquired in 2016 in response to the banning of religious wear in public spaces in France. On the V&A's Website, they state

'The French government initially defended these bans because they were considered to be in keeping with the strict secularism enshrined in law and designed to keep religion out of public life. It's a law that led to the banning of conspicuous religious dress in state schools (headscarves, but also crucifixes and the kippah), and to the niqab being banned in all public places in 2010. Arguing that women should be forced to bear more of their body against their wishes is problematic and France's highest court, the Conseil d'Etat, ruled against a nationwide ban on 26 August 2016, even though individual town mayors still sought to enforce it.' (www.vam.ac.uk).

The collection of the Burqini by the V&A suggests that the museum recognises its position as a place of recording the connection between design and politics, also seen in the acquisition of the pro-Brexit leaflet, and the Umbrella used in protests of the same name in Hong Kong. In this particular piece, successfully crystallises the way in which an individual piece can be considered as a *Contact Zone*.

Figure 15: Burqini on display (Author's Own)

However, arguably more importantly, the piece was designed to be worn. It was not created with the intention of making news, nor was it created to be displayed in a museum. Instead, it was intended to allow for women to be able to participate in sport, in a way that was understood to be sufficiently modest according to their beliefs. Upon their blog, the V&A writes thus 'Zanetti was inspired to design the garment after seeing her niece struggle to play school netball wearing a hijab and a long-sleeved, high-necked top. The burqini is made up of a knee-length, loose-fitting top, with long sleeves and an attached close-fitting hood and trousers with ribbons to attach to the inside of the top. A wide and dense graphic transfer is printed across the chest area to stop the garment clinging and preventing a feeling of exposure' (www.vam.ac.uk). This was a piece for wearing, nothing else. The fact that this piece made the news ought to be considered as far removed from its primary purpose.

As a piece which marks a significant moment in art and designs history, and one which the V&A has done well to record.

2.4 The Digital *Contact Zone*

In 1963, the Smithsonian was the first museological institution to use digital technology for their collection. Their creation of a virtual database heralded in a new 'digital age' for museums, which may arguably be said to have transformed public access to museum collections. From 1967, UK museums were widely embracing this new era too, in the hope of being able to expand the reach of their influence. In the past 50 years there has been a noticeable change in the use of technology to allow developed engagement and broader access to museum collections, and this was considered as a *Contact Zone* by Gere in his 1997 work '*Museums, Contact Zones and the Internet'* (Gere 1997). In this section, I will consider the way in which the V&A utilises the Rapid Response Collection in order to create a digital *Contact Zone*. I will do so by introducing the work of Gere before turning to the work of other authors and then look to the acquisition of the Flappy Bird app to substantiate my case.

i. Gere's Theory

After Clifford's appropriation of Pratt's model, Gere applied the *Contact Zone* to the sphere of museum technology citing the way in which the digital age transformed public access to museum collections (Gere 1997, 64). He suggests that through the use of the internet by museums, an unparalleled model of communicability is offered. Whilst many curators initially perceived the internet as a threat to their institutions, 'none of this would seem to threaten the museum's fundamental purpose or way of doing things' (Gere 1997, 59). Chapter Four will focus on the role of the curator, and as such provide context for this claim.

Indeed, Gere goes so far as to refer to the use of the internet by museums as an 'emancipatory reciprocal mass medium' (Gere 1997, 62), which ought to serve to expand access to museums. This suggests his view of the *Contact Zone* as a sphere in which there can be almost entirely equal contact, rather contrasting Pratt's concept of an unequal power dynamic. Yet Gere recognises this fundamental aspect of the use of virtual museums – increasing access to collections. The museum ceases to be an establishment which is open 9-5 and on the occasional bank holiday. It is now possible to see a collection at the click of a button, and in the comfort of one's own home, something which the Rapid Response Collection could capitalise upon far more than they do at present.

Whilst Gere's work is all well and good in theory, the practical applications of the methods are far more interesting with regards to the Rapid Response Collection. As a collection which demarcates a change in overall museum policy, it is surprising that the collection has a near identical online profile to any other collection in the museum. They have one page for the collection, and pages which shoot off this. For a collection that was intended to show the present, it is odd that the style of online representation is the very same as the past.

Figure 16: Rapid Response Webpage, V&A Website (www.vam.ac.uk)

ii. Li's Corpus

Indeed, the virtual museum experience is reliant on the user, arguably more so than the institution, as recognised in the work of Yu-Chang Li, communication technology expert. The digital age, if engaged with appropriately, can be used in a museological context to adapt to each individual user, creating an as before unseen museum-made experience for each person. This is seen in the creation of apps tailored to each individual museum visitor, though at the time of publication the V&A Rapid Response Collection, and the museum itself are without an app.

Tailoring an app or digital experience to an individual allows for the overall experience to be far less stressful for the online visitor. As the online learner is freed from the formal learning contexts on which the museum is so reliant, they can actively engage with the museum in a different manner to the physical museum. The online learner is also a producer and their previous knowledge can be used to tailor their own experience far more than the physical museum allows for. This is further identified by Li who suggests that 'the digital museum is not to replace the traditional museum; conversely, the digital information should complement the physical museum' (Li 2012, 647) with a key strength being the adaptive nature of technology.

In a world where the average time spent at any exhibit is under two minutes (Sandifer 1997, 689), the museum must work harder than ever to engage with their audience. This can be done with ease through creating a narrative according

to the preferences of each individual. As such, it is fair to argue that the digital age has been greatly transformative with public access to the museum, if the technology is utilised to provide a personally tailored experience for each individual. The focus of the digital museum there for ought to be transformed from the collection, to the relationship between the visitor and the collection, argues Li (Li 2012, 647), a matter the Rapid Response Collection could do well to consider.

iii. Marty's Method

Paul Marty's discussion of the museum website and museum visitors can be seen to support the fact that the digital age has been transformative to public access of museums (Marty 2008, 82). He writes of an increasing number of individuals visiting the online museum, citing a pool of 9 museums and 1200 visitors (Marty 2008, 88). Marty's results are helpful in our understanding of the extent to which public access to the museum has been transformed due to the digital age. Of his respondents, 45% of people were likely to visit the online museum, with 40.4% using this visit as a replacement for the actual museum (Marty 2008, 89). Arguably, the most enlightening aspect of the survey, was the 83.9% of individuals who felt their needs were different when they visited the actual museum, in comparison to the online resource. Whilst the V&A was not used for this profile, it is still clear that the internet has provided an ease of access to information, which the museum would be wise to capitalise.

iv. Problems with Technology

On the other hand, this apparent transformation has been somewhat idealised. The place of consumption, in this instance, the internet, has been recognised by Gere as still attracting a certain kind of spectator, playing into Pratt's idea of an unequal access to information, on which all further work on the *Contact Zone* is based. It is unfair, and also inaccurate to suggest that the internet is not mediated or controlled in any way, with the apparent choice is 'open only to those rich enough or connected enough to have access' (Gere 1997, 65). Instead, the online

museum, whilst arguably allowing for freer negotiation of collections, cannot be said to have created an absolutely free negotiation. It is not a medium which will resolve all problems for the Rapid Response Collection, however, it will improve overall access to it.

If the Rapid Response Collection were to be truly successful, it would allow for the inclusion of the non-visitors, those who have been previously excluded from these institutions and will be discussed in greater depth in the fifth chapter of this thesis. Yet as Ross Parry somewhat unwittingly identifies, the digital age has permitted 'greater accessibility of fundamental resource materials of specimens and related data to students at all levels, as well as senior scholars' (Parry 2007, 26). These groups of people already visit the physical museums. Whilst it is a tremendous resource for example to be able to look at a Hepworth online (hepworthwakefield.org), the audience doing so already come from a background of intellectual privilege. These are not the demographic who ought to be targeted.

The use of technology in exhibitions is similarly problematic as it is easy to be seduced by it, without fully understanding its purpose. It is all too easy to be distracted by 'technology infatuation' (Olesen 2016, 285) identified by Anne Olesen, which is used by countless institutions to sell a product. This is identified by the disparate understanding as to what is actually required in a museum versus what may actually be achieved through the technology. Olesen suggests that technology in museums is oft used as a virtual golden ticket, but with little thought going into what the outcome may in fact be. This would be worth consideration if the Rapid Response Collection elected to do anything revolutionary with their online profile.

v. Flappy Bird

In spite of their online profile, the Rapid Response Collection does not shy away from representing technology in its collection. This can be seen in the museum's choice to acquire the game of Flappy Bird, the museum's first acquisition of an app. The story of the apps rise to fame is as unusual as the V&A's choice to acquire it. The app was created by Dong Nguyen, a Vietnamese artist and programmer, and was first published on the app store in 2012. It reached the

height of its fame in 2013 and was both critiqued and praised for its high level of difficulty. On February 10th, 2014 the app was removed from both the Google and Apple store, with its creator citing "Flappy Bird was designed to play in a few minutes when you are relaxed…(b)ut it happened to become an addictive product. I think it has become a problem. To solve that problem, it's best to take down Flappy Bird. It's gone forever.' (www.forbes.com).

Figure 17: Flappy bird app (www.vam.ac.uk)

The case gets more interesting and bizarre in that phones with the game preinstalled were put up for sale for after the app was pulled, with one iPad air put up for auction at 80,000 USD receiving multiple bids (www.fool.com). Whilst these purchases were all rendered null and void due to a violation of Ebay's policy that phones must be restored to factory settings before being sold, the marked interest in this app indicates how items with no tangibility can still be given a monetary value.

This piece marks a virtual *Contact Zone* in multiple ways. It joins consumer and producer in an interesting way, with the latter citing, a desire to clear his conscience as the reason the app was removed. It also creates an idea as to how different users can be put against one another in terms of a virtual leader board (most received a high score of around 10). Yet within the V&A the app also developed an understanding of hierarchy, with Corinna Gardener informing an audience at Stanford that in an attempt to get the highest possible score on display, all curators were encouraged to play until a trainee electrician played and managed to score a respectable 6 points (www.youtube.com).

Of its acquisition, the V&A writes ‘In 2013 both the Apple App Store and Google Play (the Android store) celebrated 50 billion apps downloaded each since 2008. It is in this context that the V&A is collecting its first app, closely followed by the Museum of Modern Art in New York who announced their first acquisition of a mobile phone app on 11 June 2014.’ (collections.vam.ac.uk). For a museum which is so ahead of the curve, it seems surprising the lack of engagement online for this particular collection.

The Rapid Response Collection’s choice of acquiring such a controversial app is indicative of the recognition that technology can also contribute towards an understanding of art and design, in addition to acting as a contemporary *Contact Zone*. This is indicative of the V&As desire to keep up with the times, seen in their 160-year history.

On the other hand, one is forced to consider the way in which the V&A uses digital resources for their Rapid Response Collection. In spite the acquisition of other digital design pieces, such as an X-Box controller specifically designed for those with various disabilities (www.vam.ac.uk), the collection has limited digital engagement. The website page for the collection is similar to most other museums, with photographs of piece included which can be clicked on for the reader to receive more information (www.vam.ac.uk). Tweets pertaining to the collection are featured below this, and they too can be clicked on and enlarged (www.vam.ac.uk). Other than this, the collection features on the digital map of the collection, with various pieces being used as objects of interest for the collection. For such a modern collection, and one, which is intended to break ground, it is more than a little disappointing how unambitious the digital engagement seems to be. The digital profile of the museum’s collection begins when one enters the venue, whilst it could be used to aid overall engagement with the collection from afar.

2.5 Conclusion

The idea of a *Contact Zone* is interpreted in this chapter in three central ways. First and foremost, the conventional concept of the *Contact Zone,* as written of by Pratt and appropriated by Clifford has been discussed, focusing on the museum as

a space of an unequal power dynamic. Further to this, the concept has been used to analyse regarding the geographical location of the collection within the museum, and the floor space the display is given, before turning to the recent lack of media discussion for the collection and finally the exclusion of entire continents in the 30-artefact strong collection. Whilst it is all well and good to extensively critique the nature of the Rapid Response Collection, the conclusion of this thesis will include suggestions as to how the collection can improve, both with regards to public engagement with regards to inclusivity.

The analysis of the individual objects acting as *Contact Zones* focused on the Primark Cargo Trousers, one of the first pieces of the collection, before further examining the way in which the burqini may also be considered to act as a *Contact Zone*. Through looking to this piece through a more Appadurai-esque lens, it is possible to gain a little more insight into the curatorial policy of the collection, and the way in which specific objects can be designated as *Contact Zones* in themselves. These trousers and burqini are an excellent way in which it is possible to assess more of the curatorial policy held by the curators of this collection.

Finally, through using the work of Gere I have considered the way in which the V&A's online resources have not been fully capitalised to allow them to act as a *Contact Zone*. I have considered how technology can be used to personalise the museum experience for visitors; however, the Rapid Response Collection's online profile cannot be consolidated with these ideas as yet. Through examining the way in which collections can use digital resources in order to engage with various groups, suggests how the V&A might consider employing such methods to achieve just that. Instead, the current lacklustre policy seems to be out of line with the overall progressive nature of the museum. Again, the conclusion chapter of this thesis will be used in order to develop an idea of some of the policies the V&A could adopt in order to engage more with those who do and those who do not visit the museum.

Chapter Three: Social Life of Things

3.1 Introduction

The discussion of on object's *Social Life* has peeked anthropological interest over the past 40 years, with authors like Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1986) and Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1986) playing significant roles in its development. In order to address whether it is fair to consider objects to have *Social Lives* it is essential to define the two key parameters of the question, what does one consider to be an object, and further to this, what does one consider as *Social Lives*. Appadurai suggests that the types of objects with *Social Lives* are commodities, endowed with social, political and economic value (Appadurai 1986, 6). This can be considered in accordance with the Rapid Response Collection and their acquisitions. When turning to the definition of *Social Lives* it is important to recognise that objects have both an impact on our own human *Social Lives* and have *Social Lives* of their own. Simply because an object is not able to verbally convey its history, does not mean it is without one. If anything, the physical impact of a *Social Life* on an object can be more useful to us with regards to our overall understanding. In this chapter I will begin with an examination of Appadurai's *Social Life of Things*, applying it to the Rapid Response Collection's acquisition of shoes from the Louboutin' s Nude Collection, before looking to Kopytoff's conception of an object's *Social Life* looking to the Corbyn T-Shirt, a tile from Grayson Perry's Essex House, and once again the 3-D printed gun. I will then consider Alberti's analysis of the interaction of objects and the museum, with particular attention given to the anti-homelessness spikes, before concluding with a look to Hoskin's Hypothesis, considering the role of object intentionality.

3.2 Appadurai's Model

The work of Arjun Appadurai has been integral to the understanding of an object's *Social Life*. (Appadurai 1986, 3). Through editing the volume on the *Social Life of Things*, and writing the introduction to it, it is possible to see how his work is integral to the debate. Appadurai begins his discussion of the *Social*

Life of Things through discussing their economic value (Appadurai 1986, 3). He suggests that as economic exchange creates value, this value becomes embedded in these exchanged commodities. This concept is contested to an extent in the Rapid Response Collection's assortment of artefacts with no real monetary value, for example the pro-Brexit leaflet acquired in 2016 (collections.vam.ac.uk), acquired not due its pecuniary value, but instead due to social value in influencing people through art and design (Figure 18). The leaflet in question was deliberately designed in order to mimic the leaflets produced by the National Health Service, seeking to mimic their credibility (www.theguardian.com). Through this creation of social value, it is possible to understand how an object may in turn be given a *Social Life*.

Appadurai's version of the *Social Life* of an object is anthropocentric, and as such focuses on the way in which human beings interact and use objects, as opposed to the biography of an object from the perspective of the item. Appadurai's focus on the exchange of objects allows for us to understand how people endow an object with value, and as such how it becomes part of our own *Social Life*.

Figure 18: Brexit Leaflet (advisor.museumsandheritage.com)

In an extension of how we imbue objects with value Appadurai argues that objects which resist our desire to possess them are the ones we consider to be most valuable, however, he acknowledges that there is little standard of universal value.

The localised demand for an object endows it with value, and it is this which allows for what Karl Marx (1818-1883) refers to as the 'fetishization of commodities' (Marx 1990, 16). Luxury goods must be responsive to the ever-changing taste of what is in vogue for a particular group at a particular time, or even when the idea of being in vogue is contested by social justice, for example Rapid Response Collections' acquisition of the Louboutin's nude collection (collections.vam.ac.uk). These shoes mark an acknowledgement of the reality of who the consumers of such products are, with five pairs made for a range of skin tones (Figure 19). Appadurai considers the economic status of objects through placing emphasis on the fact that the circulation of goods creates a social aspect, and it is this which may be considered to give objects a *Social Life* (Appadurai 1986, 4). Through extending this, Appadurai suggests that an object cannot be given any kind of social value if it never moves. This is a particularly controversial point for the Rapid Response Collection, in which certain items (such as the 3-D printed gun (collections.vam.ac.uk)) have a developed sense of value without being exchanged. The dynamics of exchange create thoroughly socialized objects, both with regards to fostering human relationships, and through endowing the objects with further social value, according to Appadurai.

Figure 19: Louboutin's Nude Collection (www.vam.ac.uk)

Appadurai identifies that objects can be made into commodities in three central ways – through destination, through metamorphosis and through diversion (Appadurai 1986, 6). As such, despite not being explicitly discussed by Appadurai, all objects have a life history and their own personal biography. As

such Appadurai is able to frame the discussion of the *Social Lives* of objects through identifying exactly how an object may be given some form of social value (Appadurai 1986, 3). It is this model, which will be used to interpret the role of the *Social Life of Things* in the Rapid Response Collection.

3.3 Kopytoff's Conundrum

Igor Kopytoff is further able to discuss the production of commodities as a cultural process; however, he resists the idea that all things may be considered a commodity (Kopytoff 1986, 68), a matter considered by Appadurai, though not explicitly mentioned in his work. This can be seen in the collection of the pieces from the Rapid Response Collection such as the tile from Grayson Perry's Essex house (collections.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 21), or the Corbyn t-shirt (collections.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 20). Biography, as Kopytoff understands it, is shaped by perspective, and as such it is difficult to create a completely accurate biography of any particular object. Kopytoff suggests that we ought to look to each object independently, and then to establish its overall role in the system, citing three particular case examples.

The first example that Kopytoff cites is that of the Lincoln memorial, which he addresses as a monument which encapsulates human power. This replica of Abraham Lincoln reminds us not only of Lincoln's prestige in life, but also his unfading power in death (Kopytoff 1986, 77). As such, this monument brings attention to the fact that it is not always possible, nor is it useful to separate people from things. This is reflected in the Rapid Response Collection's acquisition of the Corbyn t-shirt (collections.vam.ac.uk), which came to be significant in the 2017 British Election. The importance of this object is also seen in the fact that it indicates the position of the cult of personality in politics, in conjunction with an appropriation of design – in this case the Nike Swoosh.

Figure 20: Corbyn t-shirt (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The second example Kopytoff cites is that of the Rocky statue in Philadelphia (Kopytoff 1986, 81). The statue came fresh from the set of the film and was originally intended to be placed outside the Philadelphia art gallery. However, the statue was deemed by the artistic elite to be inconsistent with the tastes represented inside the art gallery and it was greatly debated as to where the monument should be placed. Those in favour of positioning it outside the art gallery, felt those against the concept were prejudiced and considered it to be to a certain extent, a slight on their honour and a statement against the Philadelphian pride. The case of the Rocky statue exemplifies the fact that there is no such thing as a standardised taste, even with regards to such a relatively small group of people. Again, this is seen in the tile from Grayson Perry's Essex house (collections.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 21) an example which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter. It also demonstrates how the biography of an object may not always be able to take into account certain parts of its life history if they do not leave a physical impact on the object.

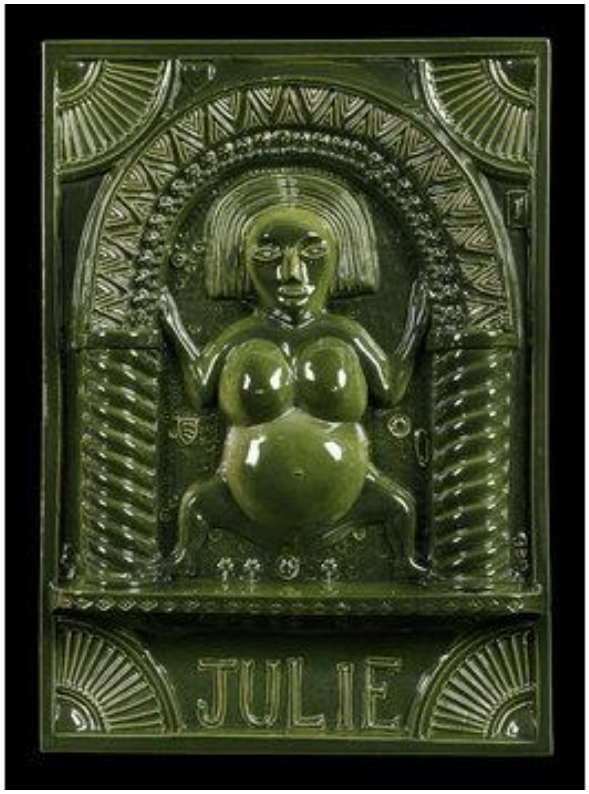


Figure 21: Tile from Grayson Perry's Essex House (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The final example Kopytoff uses is that of a work by Picasso. Picasso's work is valued in the upper thousands, with part of this value being the irreplaceability and uniqueness of the item. Yet discussing the work in terms of money is oft considered vulgar and tasteless (Kopytoff 1986, 82). The Rapid Response has similarly 'value-less' items, though they are perhaps without value in a way which is different to the Picasso, for example the 3-D printed gun, a unique piece of design, though perhaps not of art (collections.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 22). It offends our sensibilities to discuss a work that may be considered to have changed the artistic world, as equivalent to piles of coins. The *Social Lives* of objects may be considered with regards to bestowing a good with social value as opposed to a monetary one.

Figure 22: The Liberator – the first 3-D printed gun (www.vam.ac.uk)

3.4 Alberti's Angle

The specific discussion of an object's *Social Life* and the museum is done elegantly by Alberti in his 2005 paper on 'Objects and the Museum' (Alberti 2005, 559) which introduces the discussion through representing the history of museums as told by their objects – leading to the question as to whether the Rapid Response Collection is indicative of change within the Victoria and Albert Museum itself. Given the fact the museum has exhibited more traditional acquisition styles in the past it is possible to suggest that this new collection marks a break from traditional collecting (www.vam.ac.uk).

Alberti looks to the way in which museums have been used to construct Empire, as well as the converse. Whilst the Rapid Response Collection is theoretically out with the parameters of Empire, the colonial legacy can still be seen in a more general curatorial style (most noteworthy in recent news, the British Museum coming under fire with the #returnyourstolenartefacts campaign (www.theguardian.com)), however, at its most basic level Alberti's argument can be reduced to the way in which museums are used to construct knowledge. The Rapid Response Collection is an excellent example of a museum constructing knowledge, particularly given the fact that the we are living at the same time as the knowledge being constructed is exhibited. For example, the anti-homeless spike was part of a far wider discussion, which stretched from austerity measures

to our conceptualisation of wealth and privilege (collections.vam.ac.uk). The piece has a *Social Life*, and it is for this reason that it has been brought into these hallowed halls to be exhibited. These negotiations lend themselves to perceiving the position of a museum and its place in the creation and maintenance of power.

Yet Alberti keeps the discussion of museums and the construction of power relatively brief, instead electing to focus on the significant moments of an object's career. By looking at an object with regards to its life history, one is able to bestow it with almost human characteristics. It is born, has a life, and perhaps even a death (deposition, or placed in a museum collection dependent on perspective). The very idea of an object's biography can be understood either in tangent with human interaction, or out with it, as examined under Appadurai. In the words of Chantal Knowles 'I seek to answer how human relations were realised …. by producing, exchanging and using objects' (Gosden and Knowles 2001, xxi). This understands objects entirely through their human interaction, with them being acted upon by individuals, as opposed to living lives independently.

Indeed, Alberti contests this, looking to the life of an object in the museum in three ways – firstly its manufacture. An example of this is the Anti-homeless spikes, acquired by the Rapid Response Collection in 2014, were part of an increasing trend in public spaces towards hostile architecture (Figure 23). In the V&A collection they are said to have been

'Manufactured by Kent Stainless, Ltd., an Ireland-based designer and fabricator of steel products, are made from cast, electropolished steel. Each spike is designed to sit partly above and partly below a surface. The exposed part takes the shape of a cone with a blunt tip, designed to be uncomfortable to rest on but not cause serious physical harm. The part that lies below the surface is a 2.8 cm cylinder protruding from the middle of the cone's base, with three grooves around its circumference to create purchase with the material it is to be placed in. This might be a substance such as tarmac or cement, which sets around the cylinder; when used in a solid surface such as marble, a hole is drilled and a chemical mortar added to hold the spike in place. Usually several are grouped together to cover a wider open space.' (collections.vam.ac.uk).

This somewhat abstract and almost sterile explanation as to what these spikes are almost detracts from their entire purpose – to consciously exclude individuals from occupying space.

Figure 23: Anti-Homeless Spikes (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The second aspect of the *Social Life* of an object in the museum according to Alberti is the artefact joining the collection. Alberti's article centres around this, asking what exactly the motivation for collecting is (Alberti 2005, 562). Indeed, Alberti remarks that an object has undetachable links with its donor, a further part of its life history. The concept behind this will be further examined in the following chapter, with an analysis of my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection. The life history of an object as part of a whole collection furthers this very idea. The object gains status with regards to the museum it finds itself in. After all, the very fact that the anti-homelessness spikes found their way to the V&A and not Aberdeen Maritime Museum speaks volumes as to the way it is considered as a significant commentary upon society. This furthers the idea of the importance of context.

Yet Alberti recognises that the meanings of objects are not frozen. The understanding of an artefact changes given its context and given the very person who is viewing it. The majority of objects in the museum, are, after all, never actually displayed. This is another way in which the Rapid Response Collection is quite exceptional – each and every artefact from it has been displayed at some point, regardless of for how long. This is one aspect in which the Rapid Response

Collection can be considered to have fulfilled its expectation. The pieces were brought to the museum with express intention of being put on display. This lends itself further to the various intellectual movements within and without the museum.

The final sphere in which Alberti engages is the way in which objects relate to the visitors of a museum. This is arguably the most significant part of an objects museological life, for it is here that the object fulfils its central role – creating a new narrative surrounding power and knowledge. More attention will be given to the status of museum visitors in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis. Yet again, Alberti seeks to emphasize the fact that the object varies dependent upon who is viewing it (Alberti 2005, 561). The very fact that objects are afforded different meanings is related to the way in which people live their daily lives. Taste is something which visitors do not simply leave at the museum door; however, it is something which can be altered in the museum if curation is done well. This is also considered by Kopytoff, as previously examined. As I will do in later chapters, it is helpful to look to the various comments individuals leave as this allows us to reach a more developed understanding as to what people think - in our digital era this is easier than ever before.

3.5 Hoskins' Hypothesis

The work of Janet Hoskins can be used with regards to develop our understanding of *Agency, Biography and Objects* (Hoskins 1998, 152). Hoskins identifies the fact that people have been drawing lines between people and things since the time of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), recognising the fact that these lines between people and things are variable (Hoskins 1998, 191). Hoskins goes further than this, reminding the reader that objects can share many characteristics with people, having both a name, gender, age and ritual purpose. Hoskins' central thematic concern is that of exploring the link between agency and objects, phrased by Laura Ahearn as the 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001, 112). It is worth noting that this is simply a more complex way of referring to an object as being created and developed with regards to its context.

Whilst I have already explored the works of Appadurai and Kopytoff, Hoskins also explores the work of Alfred Gell who suggests that things operate as part of instrumental action (Gell 1994, 43). Gell suggests that instead of a passive creation of biography, in which objects are acted upon instead of themselves being able to act, objects are capable of being able to actively engage, a more nuanced perspective than Ahearn. Gell even emphasizes this by looking to the ways in which objects are able to actively exert an influence on people, looking to the way in which people become enchanted with objects. This can be seen in the works of Grayson Perry's Essex house, a tile of which is displayed in the Rapid Response Collection (collections.vam.ac.uk). The tile from the Essex House has on it a figure labelled as 'Julie' claimed by Perry to represent a mythical Essex woman. The tile is a perfect example of people's infatuation with the work of art, an enchantment with an object. Gell also recognises a crucial point – that people's infatuation with objects is able to change dramatically over a very short space of time. Relations are themselves as fluid as the very nature of biography.

Indeed, Hoskins elegantly follows the move from *Agency to Biography* in anthropology. From Gell who refers to biography as 'an index of agency of an explicitly temporary nature' (Gell 1998, 225), to Susanne Kuchler who suggests that biography is far more a part of 'the extraordinary theatre of memory that we have enshrined in our museums in the result of a laborious and systematic work of displacement of objects by images' (Kuchler 2002, 190). Kuchler's issue is an entirely separate one which deserves a master's thesis to itself – the decreasing number of objects in museums, in comparison to the increasing number of photographs. Yet the very idea of what an object brings to the museum is essential to extending our understanding as to why specific pieces find themselves in a museum whilst others do not. None of the pieces from the Rapid Response Collection have been created especially for the purpose of being displayed. The anti-homeless spikes were created to contribute to the worrying trend of hostile architecture (collections.vam.ac.uk). The Brexit Leaflet was created in the hope that it would encourage people to vote a certain way (collections.vam.ac.uk). The Pussy Hat was to unite a political movement (collections.vam.ac.uk).

Again, the idea of objects as subjects permeates Hoskins' work, suggesting the comparison between provenance and provenience, terms, which actively oppose

one another. The former means the location an object was found, whilst the latter refers to its life history through various owners. This is brought into real theoretical understanding when one looks to the opposition between archaeologists who begin with ethnographic research, as opposed to art historians who focus more upon the ethnographic objects themselves. Marijane Ferne allies with this view, suggesting that objects can act as the 'material bearers of collective memory' (Ferme 2001, 9) as well as acting as the markers of identity for people. For example, the aforementioned Pussy Hat (collections.vam.ac.uk) is made from the very same pattern that all wearers printed out and knitted. It indicates the idea that one item can be used to unite the biographies of its wearers.

Figure 24: Pussy Hat (www.vam.ac.uk)

Yet this in turn lends itself to further questions for the Rapid Response Collection. A number of artefacts, such as the Louboutin shoes (collections.vam.ac.uk) are without a specific previous owner. Much of the Rapid Response collection is out with the normal museum realm in this regard – it does not come with a previous owner, simply a prior producer. As they are previously unused, their value comes from what they symbolise overall – in this instance the first ever collection of shoes which understand nude to not exclusively mean white. On the V&A website, the collection is understood thus,

'The colour nude is often used in fashion to describe a light peachy-beige tone representing the colour of Caucasian skin. In autumn 2013 the French fashion house Christian Louboutin launched The Nudes Collection, a range of shoes in five skin tones. This was the first time that a major fashion house had adjusted its

definition of nude to include skin colours other than white.' (collections.vam.ac.uk).

The importance of these shoes, is therefore, not necessarily who their previous owners were, but instead, what they symbolise. The shoes from this case lend themselves to the idea of the V&A as a museum which collects and curates contemporary design. Whilst the majority of the objects have been used, there are a clear demographic which enter the museum collection, never having 'lived' in terms of a biography. It is thus possible to question the idea of the collection, fitting into the idea that what the pieces represent as far more important than the various ways in which they may have been used. The shoes may fit, but they have never had a chance to be worn.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the progression of the concept of the *Social Life of Things*, conceived of by Appadurai in 1986, in his work of the same name. I have considered how Appadurai's understanding of a *Social Life* directly linking to the economic status of objects is appropriate for specific examples of artefacts in the Rapid Response Collection, but less so in others.

I have then turned to Kopytoff's understanding of the concept, linking it to the way in which the biography of an object is heavily dependent upon the perspective one considers it from. I extended Kopytoff's own examples, using three parallels from the Rapid Response Collection.

Further to this, I considered how Alberti's work on the museum and objects link to the construction of knowledge. In this I considered how the acquisition of pieces in the time of their use and conception alters the way in which we conceive of the museum, both in terms of the knowledge they construct, and the way in which they are considered as an institution.

Finally, I turned to the work of Hoskins on the biography of objects and used this to link the idea that objects acquired may also be considered as subjects – further developing the way in which we understand the pieces acquired and exhibited in museums.

One would think, however, that given the importance of the pieces exhibited in the Rapid Response Collection exhibit importance with regards to their *Social Lives* (after all, this is the very reason the pieces have specifically been chosen) this would be acknowledged a little more in their labelling and website. This will be developed more in later chapters of my thesis.

Chapter Four: The Role of the Curator

4.1 Introduction

When considering those who have a stake in the museum, there are three central groups – the object donors, the museum audience, and finally the museum professionals. These groups have differing, though often overlapping, objectives when considering the way in which objects are both obtained and exhibited. In this chapter, I intend to examine the role of the final group – the museum professional – in order to determine the way in which they impact the exhibition of objects, and by extension the way in which knowledge is conveyed. In order to do so I will first look briefly to the way in which the role of the curator has changed since the 1960s, using the work of Paul O'Neill on the subject (O'Neill 2012) before looking to the way in which the role of the contemporary curator can be understood. I will conclude with an analysis of my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the V&A's Rapid Response Collection since its conception, and Head Curator for Design and Digital at the V&A. The full copy of the transcription can be found in the appendices of this thesis (Appendix A). The position of the other stakeholders, namely the museum audience will be examined in the following two chapters.

4.2 The History of the Curator

In order to develop a specific understanding of issues in the management and display of the Rapid Response Collection in the 21st century, it is fundamental to understand how a museum may be considered to exert power through interpreting the role of the curator. In the 21st century, the museum curator is understood to be far more than simply a custodian of artefacts, though as previously mentioned the role has changed dramatically in the past 60 years, with the importance of marketing and museum education reaching an all-time high noted in the publication of works such as Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* in 2010 (Simon 2010). Indeed, the position of the curator has transcended from invisible

in the 1960s, to being put in the public spotlight in the 1990s, and again being shrouded in mystery in our contemporary museums.

If one wishes to understand the development of museums overall, it would be wise to turn to the Wunderkammers of the 1600s, and to look to the trajectory of museological establishments from this time onwards (Figure 25). However, as this chapter intends upon looking to the work of curators, it seems wise to begin in the 1960s, in keeping with the work of O'Neill in his article *The Emergence of Curatorial Discourse from the late 1960s to the present* (O'Neill 2012).

Figure 25: Example of Wunderkammer (researchgate.net)

O'Neill begins his discussion through looking to the way in which the curator in the 1960s was positioned perfectly as the Independent Exhibition Maker (O'Neill 2012, 9). At a time of increasing social freedom, the relationship between curator and audience was also changing – marked by what O'Neill refers to as the crisis of audience relations. As such, the 1960s was the ideal time for curation to remove itself from the hallowed halls of older establishments, and to court controversy, seen in pieces such as Duchamp's Mile of String, or Kieler's Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques (Figure 26), in which the meaning was created at the point of reception far more so than had been done prior (O'Neill 2012, 12). In the 1960s, in spite of these novel and innovative approaches to curation, the intellectual power was still held very much by the curator, in spite of their relative anonymity.

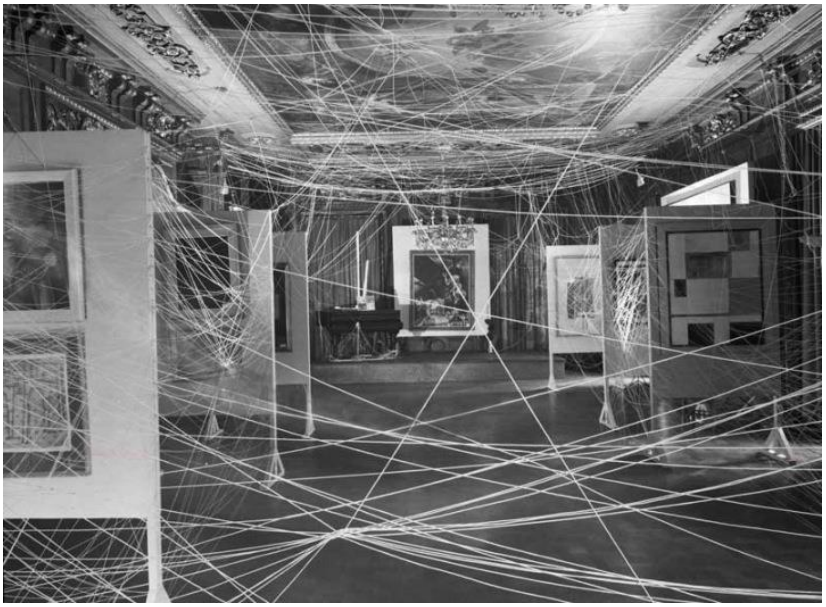


Figure 26: Duchamp's Mile of String (tate.org.uk)

After the catalyst of social change in the 1960s, curators fell into two distinct schools – those who favoured the museum as a space for radical art, contrasted by those who felt it ought to be used for more conventional display (O'Neill 2012, 13). These schools mediated the way in which exhibitions were curated overall. This duality can be further seen in the way in which art was conceived of – with it being seen either as a material practice or as an object (seen in previous discussion as the opposition between provenance and provenience). As such, the 1970s was a time of curatorial turmoil and discussion, which resulted in the beginning of the demystification of the role of the curator, and the extension of curatorial transparency, the legacy of which can be seen in the Rapid Response Collection today.

The fall out of the 1970s division of curation can be seen in the altered understanding of the role of the curator – namely that they were considered to be a mediator between audience and culture. From the curator being positioned as an experience provider, the 1970s heralded in a period in which the curator was considered as a knowledge mediator, conveying the elite and erudite in a way easily interpretable to their audience (O'Neill 2012, 22). This is by no means a suggestion that the two schools of thought regarding the curator's role were reconciled, quite the contrary, with the opposition now centring round the importance of representing the residual as opposed to the dominant culture. At

this point, the curator's responsibility in appropriately conveying knowledge came to the fore.

This is crystallised in the position of the curator in the 1980s, with the role now positioning the museum professional as the author of the exhibition. This also created a sense of re-mystification in the role of the curator, with an aura surrounding them (O'Neill 2012, 27). This altered role of the curator was further conveyed by the way in which their role was considered to be one more of deconstructing culture, in order to make it more comprehendible overall.

The 1990s, arguably the beginning of the cult of celebrity, saw the hyper-visibility of the curator. Whilst the majority of the work in museums which occurs is invisible, this period marked the 'curator's moment' (O'Neill 2012, 33). This is seen in the emergence of curator's names featuring alongside their exhibitions, and the increase in the publication of companion texts for the museum. At this point the role of the curator was shrouded in a kind of myth, with their position extending to the constructor of culture and sociality, both past and present.

O'Neill's analysis of the role of curator leaves us with two distinct thoughts. The first is that of the 'strong amnesia' we have towards exhibitions held in the 1920s-50s (O'Neill 2012, 7). Whilst O'Neill does not offer a specific reason for this lack of memory, he cites the problems which arise from this – namely, the way in which we repeat the curation's past in the present. The second, and arguably more relevant to this thesis, is the extent to which the outside world impacts the internal curation of museums. O'Neill divides this into three aspects (O'Neill 2012, 42). First, he writes of the way in which there is still an element of almost residual demystification with regards to the status of curation, and that this extends to the way in which we understand museums in the present day. The Rapid Response Collection endeavours to contest this, though making their collection as transparent as possible, with each piece acquired subsequently exhibited. The second factor O'Neill identifies, is the way in which the shift of an exhibition as being 'curated by' a specific individual influences the way in which we understand and interpret knowledge conveyed in a museum space. Finally, O'Neill writes of the Nomadic Global curator, a juxtaposition in terms, in which the curator is confined to one place, but is charged with the representation of

numerous others. These three concerns will be elaborated upon in the following section of this chapter.

4.3 The Current Curator

With a brief detail as to the way in which the role of the curator has changed over the past 60 or so years, it is now time to consider the way in which this change has impacted present day curation. This will be done through the three issues with which O'Neill concludes his discussion on the change in the role of the curator since the 1960s.

The first, that of the residual mystery surrounding the curator, and the way in which this impacts the overall capacity of the museum to create and convey knowledge. Modern curators are able to exert dominance over objects and space, all based upon the way in which they construct a display, from the selection of objects to the way in which lighting is arranged. This will be further examined in my following chapter, citing Professor Stephanie Moser's work. As an individual, it is not possible to be politically neutral in one's actions, and as such, it is not logical to expect a curator to be able to act in a neutral way. The idea of museum neutrality is not only farcical, but also dangerous, as seen in the artstuffmatters blog entitled 'Changing the Things I Cannot Accept: Museums Are Not Neutral' (artstuffmatters.wordpress.com). This piece went viral amongst museum professionals and heralded in an age in which it was appropriate to acknowledge the personal opinions held by museum professionals and, in turn, their audiences.

Indeed, this ability to create and maintain knowledge is also seen when looking to where museums have emerged from. The colonialist desire to acquire, obtain and keep parts of the world, couples an understanding of the way in which imperial powers saw the world, with an indication as to how the legacy of such behaviour would play out (Gosden and Knowles 2001, xxi). We see this in all aspects of museums most clearly seen in the way in which the institutions are structured, with a mere 30% of US museums employing female curators (www.nytimes.com). This structural inequality can be considered as a contribution towards the way in which the supposed 'neutral museum' model plays out. With the curation in museums primarily done by white, elite men it

seems understandable that there are groups who are excluded from the narrative, either consciously or unconsciously.

O'Neill's development of the paradigm shift of the 'curated by' element ought to be considered as marking a change in the way in which curators are considered to have overall responsibility in the exhibitions and establishments they curate. Indeed, if we buy into the idea that museums are bastions of knowledge, the modern curator is still responsible for the way in which this knowledge is conceived of and understood. Whilst it is clear that individuals visit museums with entirely their own background knowledge, they are nonetheless held at the whim of the curator as to whether they are able to see a Vermeer or a Van Gogh in that particular gallery.

Indeed, this command over knowledge is a fundamental component of curatorship. Sarah Longair writes that 'We rely on museums to get the past right for us' (Longair 2015, 2) This is a particularly interesting comment with regards to the V&A's Rapid Response Collection, which may be considered responsible for getting the present right for us, as we live within it. It is this, which is worth further analysis – if museums can get the past 'right for us' how do they cope with a representation of both the present and the future?

The curator is no longer exclusively responsible for the way in which we view the past in these institutions. They are now positioned, particularly in the Rapid Response Collection, to tell us of the present and the future too. This allows for a reinterpretation of O'Neill's concern as to the curator as a Global Nomad, especially in times of increasing global connectivity. This is tied to the change in curation rendered as a more transparent occupation. Indeed, this is seen in the way that modern museums are moving towards a tendency of *Openness* within curatorial practice that underlies the philosophy and practice of these new museums and new collections (Longair 2015, 7) The curator may still be seen to represent intellectual authority; however, it is time for a change in how this is done. There is a fear by some, such as Longair, that 'audiences could lose interest if that authority is called into question' (Longair 2015, 3) however, it seems insubstantial to suggest that this is the case. Human beings are flawed, and it is this which is part of their wonder. To suggest they are unable to understand the

world in a museum when presented with honesty and integrity suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be human. Kenji Yoshida writes that the 'The museum can change the world' (Yoshida 2004, 110), it is up to the curator how it does so, both in terms of topic and extent.

Indeed, the power of the curator is never more clear than in collections such as the Rapid Response Collection, which intends to represent the contemporary through art and design. It is unclear the extent to which they have been successful in these noble aims. In fact, they have neglected to include entire continents in their narrative, suggesting that the only future they represent is a highly exclusive one (Appendix B). This is magnified by the way in which pieces are moved around the exhibition space, with the Refugee Flag (www.vam.ac.uk) moved from its existing space in the Rapid Response Gallery, to the ticketed 'The Future Starts Here' display (www.vam.ac.uk). Movement of objects such as these, to an undeniably smaller audience, indicates the priority of museums in funding than in integrity. Decisions such as these suggest that curatorial power is often overshadowed by the need for money.

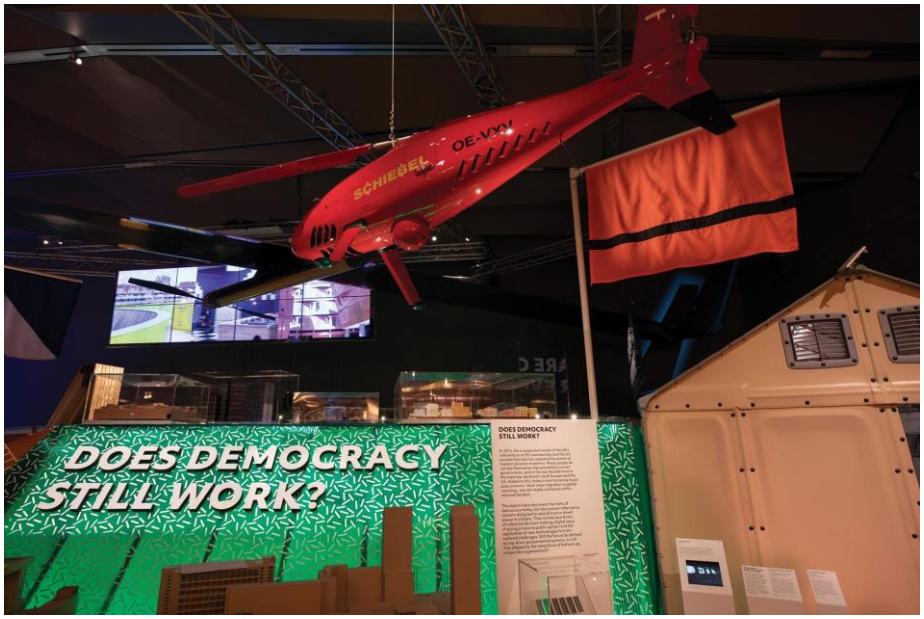


Figure 27: The Refugee Flag in the Future Starts Here Exhibition (chemistryworld.com)

The position of the curator is one, which has such an extensive capacity to effect meaningful and longstanding change, yet also precariously positioned on a need

for funding. It is this cross section which impacts the way in which an exhibition can occur, and the impact it can have.

4.4 Interview with Corinna Gardner

On March 25th, 2019, I interviewed Corinna Gardner, Head Curator of Design and Digital at the V&A, and under whose jurisdiction the Rapid Response Collection falls. The interview took place in the Rapid Response Gallery on the third floor of the museum, and as already clarified, the full transcription can be seen in the appendices of this thesis (Appendix A). All the information in this section of the chapter comes from my interview with Gardner, and all quotations are from the very same.

I elected to ask Gardner 10 questions which I felt would best develop my own understanding of the collection. An additional question was added during the interview. The original ten questions were as follows:

1. Can you talk me through how the Rapid Response Collection came about?
2. How do you go about acquiring a piece for the collection?
3. How do you see the Rapid Response Collection in relation to the rest of the museum collections?
4. How might the V&A's overall curation policy shape what you can and cannot do with the collection?
5. Do you think it's fair to refer to the collection as a 'contemporary ethnographic' one?
6. As it currently stands, the Rapid Response Collection does not include any pieces from South America. Is this something you consider when acquiring new pieces?
7. Will there be an R.R. collection in the Dundee branch of the museum?
8. What relationship does this collection have to other R.R. collections, for example those in Ireland or Berlin?
9. In what ways would you say the R.R. collection broadens representation in the museum?

10. What do you think Queen Victoria and Prince Albert would have thought of the R.R. collection?

As already specified, these questions were intended to aid the way in which I understood the collection prior and were hoped to indicate the possible direction of the collection in the future.

4.5 Interpretation of the Interview

i. On its Foundation

Gardner's role as the curator for the Rapid Response Collection was established in 2013 after a meeting of a group of curators - Gardner states that her role was informed by a desire to 'consider how the practice of design has changed and how we feel we want to represent that within the institution' (Appendix A, 136), reflecting a desire on behalf of both the curator and the institution to modernise their overall curatorial policy. This offers a novel approach to the museum, and its existing policy. 2013 was an interesting time for the United Kingdom overall, with the Olympic Games the year prior, and the discussion of Brexit only just rearing its ugly head. This is seen in Gardner's suggestion that 'our past enables us to understand our present and think forward into our futures and Rapid Response sits within that nexus and finds purpose from that' (Appendix A, 138). The V&A, after all, is a museum with a rich history, and it would not be helpful for them to reject their past in lieu of their future. Instead, Gardner sees the collection as one which fits well into the development of the V&A overall. This collection heralds progress in its conception as much as the artefacts it exhibits.

2013 was a time of hope, and a time of a future better than the past before it. It is thus, Gardner's words summarize the ethos of this new collection 'how can we look beyond the walls of the museum to find out what designed things are resonating in public? And so it was as much to say what are the design things that enable us within the institution to ask the pertinent or urgent questions of the day? So the aim was to bring in the modest, the popular, and things which are designed by those beyond the professional sphere, which is also reaching beyond an

expanded definition of what design is' (Appendix A, 136). If one is to be cynical, it is possible to consider this as representing a clever marketing policy of the museum – enticing viewers due to its use of the collection to claim relevance. Yet, the effort and desire for change is indeed reflected in the collection, with each piece painstakingly selected to demonstrate the way in which the roles of design and the discussions of the day come together in order to develop our own understanding of what design is. An advantage of the mission statement being so seemingly vague is the room to grow which it allows for.

Gardner consistently emphasized the concept of design being at the forefront of the selection of pieces for the collection, stating 'it's very much the design of the object which has to be at the centre of the questions being asked' (Appendix A, 137). The objects acquired for the collection may be considered as *Contact Zones*, as developed in the second chapter of this thesis, with pieces being both significant in terms of design and social status.

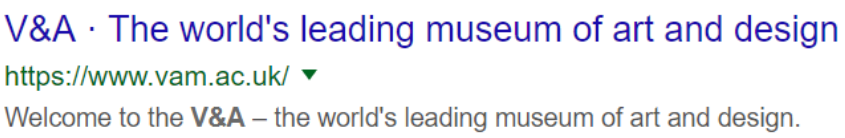


Figure 28: First Search Result for V&A (google.com)

The Victoria and Albert museum is, first and foremost, one of design and as Gardner states 'We have to be able to justify the acquisition of a Rapid Response Object in absolutely the same manner as any other acquisition, so it needs to have both a design narrative at the time of acquisition for Rapid Response, but then also a comfortable place within the frameworks of the collections, but also, if very contemporary, towards a purpose of this broader definition of design' (Appendix A, 137). The Rapid Response Collection is created to develop our own understanding of art and design, but this must be done within the Museum's overall structure of acquisition. The curator acts within an overall power structure, and this need not be forgotten. At the end of the day, this is a collection entering a museum with a long history and does not have complete freedom in how to behave.

ii. On its Overall Fit in the Museum

I asked Gardner how she felt the collection fit into the overall museum, and she specified the way in which the collection focuses on individual objects 'Every object is that of design, some of them are very modest, some of them less so, some of them are objects that without the museum acquiring them would be very hard to see them in public, the others are extremely public, by bringing them into the museum you see them differently'(Appendix A, 137). The collection is particularly unique in the fact that each piece acquired is done so with the intention of being exhibited. Gardner's focus on the contextualization (or even the recontextualization of pieces) is a matter of integral importance to the way in which the museum operates overall. Again, this fits neatly into my second chapter which discusses the *Social Life of Things*, in which it becomes clear that Gardner's acquisition policy is informed by the objects design *and* by their *Social Life*. These two factors come together, in the form of a *Contact Zone* in order to influence the acquisition policy of the Rapid Response Collection.

iii. On Risk

Arguably, the most illuminating part of my interview with Gardner was her view that the collection is one which represents an appetite for risk. In the interview she said 'if I reflect on the reactions and collaborations with my museum colleagues as peers I think they are often surprised at the latitude I'm given within this work and the appetite for risk or indeed a sense of, what is it to fail when I'm making acquisitions?' (Appendix A, 138) especially as Gardner notes the fact that 'The current climate within museums is one of constraint and reducing resource and the idea of acquiring something which may not hold its value has a particular sense of risk' (Appendix A, 138). The collection is one in which is able to fit into a very precarious position expertly, and as such fulfil a role as the change bringer for the overall institution. However, if we consider the current museum situation, it would seem logical that it is more important than ever for museums to prove themselves relevant through provocative collections such as these.

iv. On the Nature of the Collection

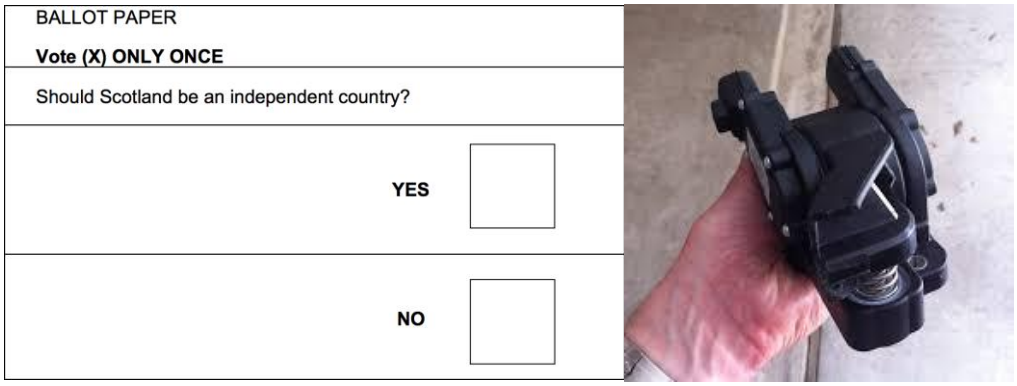
With regards to the nature of the collection, I elected to ask Corinna about whether she felt the collection could fairly be considered a 'contemporary ethnographic' one. When asked about the ethnographic tendencies of the collection, Gardner replied that she considered the collection to have 'an ethnographic inflection towards it, but I don't think the Rapid Response is operating in a vacuum' (Appendix A, 138) – indeed this became a very interesting point of discussion, with specific reference to the idea of context being important in the museological world. Once again, the museum professional cannot escape context, as noted earlier in this chapter. This response offers as much a reflection of the nature of an ethnographic collection, in addition to a reflection of the Rapid Response Collection. The idea of the collection not operating in a vacuum allows for it to sit neatly into the theory of *Contact Zones* as discussed earlier, the pieces from the Rapid Response Collection offer a place between the museum and contemporary society, making them invaluable pieces in bridging a longstanding museological gap.

Gardner went on to extend what she meant, clarifying that she viewed her work as no different from that of a modern artist, relaying the idea that 'if you look beyond Rapid Response into broader museum practice across both the V&A and sector there is a greater interest and investment in context narrative and individual, and I think that is very much one which you can see in contemporary art. Many contemporary artists, their medium is context and so it's of our time but also I think you live in a world rich with digital media which also work on the basis of personal narrative and timeline which I think shapes a collective view on the world and museums and curators don't operate in a vacuum'(Appendix A, 139). Through extending the role of the personal narrative within this collection it is possible to understand the way in which the collection has been established in order to inspire a more personalised approach to objects of art and design. This fits well with the previously examined notion of the *Social Life of Things*, in which it was established that objects are bestowed with *Social Lives* both with and out with the lives of their respective owners. This investment in individuals allows for a more expansive and developed notion of both what, and who belongs in a museum, which will be examined in greater depth in the following chapter. This

priority of museum context is one which fits elegantly into the discussion of *Contact Zones*, as previously addressed. The medium is as much the pieces as the context.

v. On the Ones that got away

Inspired by Gardner's lecture in Stanford in 2016, I chose to ask her about the objects which perhaps did not make it to the collection, but nonetheless would have been invaluable to it. This question was not part of my initial ten but fit well at this point in our discussion. Gardner replied that 'There are lessons learnt, objects that got away, and indeed a sharpening of understanding that is the design of the object that has to come first' (Appendix A, 139). This notion of the design of the object coming first was a topic Gardner reiterated throughout our interview, cementing the idea that the V&A, in spite of a fairly recent acquisition policy, is focused upon the design of objects before it examines their social, political, or economic significance. Gardner continued by detailing objects oft suggested as additions to the collection, but not entirely within the remit of the collection or the museum. The first and foremost is that of Malala Yousafzai's school uniform, which Gardner mentions is 'is evidence of an occurrence, its making or its design or its form does not enable us to ask bigger questions' (Appendix A, 139). Similarly, a brick from the compound where Osama bin Laden was assassinated, which in spite of offering an interesting object, was not one which made it to the collection. Instead, pieces such as the ballot paper for the Scottish Independence Referendum (Figure 29), or the Aston Martin accelerator pedal made from fake plastic (Figure 30), were those which would have been interesting additions to the collection, but for a variety of reasons, were unable to be added to the collection. This emphasizes once again, the extent to which the collection is responsible to the rest of the museum.



Figures 29 & 30: Scottish Independence Ballot Paper and Aston Martin Accelerator Pedal respectively (nytimes.com)(aston-martin.com)

vi. On Geography

Inspired by the fact the Rapid Response Collection has strong geographical ties to Europe, I enquired as to whether or not the geographical origin of pieces was considered when pieces were acquired, and received the response that 'I'd like to be more global in the work that we do. We're an institution which claims to be, and asserts to be, the leading museum of its kind in the world. If we have that global ambition, we need to demonstrate it in our acquisition, is my view' (Appendix A, 140). As the current Rapid Response Collection excludes South America, and Africa, it appears the geographical limitation of the collection is one which is on the mind of this curator (Appendix B).

Yet, an arguably more interesting aspect of this, was the fact that this question led to the fact that the 'Rapid Response has a particular character in the sense that it puts at question the idea that the design museum is solely there for the laudatory or contemporary design acquisition' (Appendix A, 140). The idea of social design is one of great importance to Gardner, and the V&A has a legacy of encouraging and promoting design from all backgrounds. Indeed, the museum should be a place open to the mistakes as much as the successes, seen in pieces such as the Zano Drone, currently on display in the Rapid Response Collection (Figure 31). This aspect is one which the Rapid Response Collection could do well to develop further in the coming years.

Figure 31: Zano Drone (collections.vam.ac.uk)

vii. On Other Museums

One of the concluding questions for this particular interview centred around institutions out with the London branch of the V&A, and the way in which they will interact further. With regards to the V&A Dundee, there are no current plans for the Rapid Response Collection to be exhibited there, as Gardner mentions that her 'colleagues across the departments here suggest objects for acquisition with Rapid Response – it goes beyond my team and department, but it's not yet one which has been franchised' (Appendix A, 140).

This too is seen in the Relationship between the Rapid Response and similar collections in Ireland and Berlin, with Gardner noting that she 'consistently been in conversation of exchange between colleagues, nationally and internationally, about Rapid Response and it's about thinking about design today, but also as much about the museum in contemporary society' (Appendix A, 141) – the collection is one which ought to be considered as belonging to a wider group of collections of the same nature, which do not share pieces among themselves. This aspect of the collection policy is a further aspect of the collecting, which is

entirely unique and like most siblings, they do not share well if at all. This is in part due to the fact there is no real need for them to do so, as Gardner remarked in her interview 'I often say my collections are like duty free shops, you see the same collection of objects in museums across the world' (Appendix A, 141). If we are convinced by this, there is little need to share collections if most, if not all, comprise of the same objects. But further to this, there is little need for the Rapid Response Collection to take in pieces from out with their own acquisition. Indeed, these almost entirely goes against the collection's intention, to display their own understanding of the very best art and design of the present day.

viii. On Access

In the concluding question I asked Gardner as to whether she felt the collection served to broaden access. She replied that the V&A 'has so far been constrained to that particular authorship' (Appendix A, 141) and that she would like to see pieces added which broaden our own understanding of art and design –'Rapid Response is striving toward a much broader or expanded understanding of what design is and how it shapes a role of how you and I live together' (Appendix A, 141). This development of these collection in recent years certainly indicates that it is leaning towards a far greater understanding as to what design entails, and the social responsibility it fills.

There is no better place for this than the V&A's Rapid Response Collection. The consideration of museum access will be developed further in the following chapters, considering the concept of the 'underrepresented' and the strives the Rapid Response Collection have made to include them in the narrative.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavoured to analyse the role of the curator. I have done so, first and foremost by providing a brief introduction into how the role of the curator has changed over the past decades, using the work of O'Neill to do so, considering the curator less as a purveyor of intellectual authority and more as a communicator of information to the largest possible audience.

I then turned to an examination as to the present conception of the museum curator, structuring this with O'Neill's three central concluding points of his article in order to allow for a consideration as to the way in which the contemporary curator can be seen in the Rapid Response Collection.

I have then concluded through analysing my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection, through using my previous critiques of the collection, and referencing the theory from the two previous chapters. Further to this, I have endeavoured to consider the way in which constraints of funding and museum authority might impact the overall structure of such a collection.

With regards to an understanding of the nature of the collection, my interview with Gardner further clarified the extent to which the Rapid Response Collection is first and foremost one of design. It is this which is the central aspect used to inform curatorial choices, with the social legacy of the piece coming second. I am pleased to have been privy to this information as it altered the way in which I considered the collection considerably.

This theme extends to the way in which the collection is seen within the broader sphere of the overall museum, with it being considered by curators out with the Design and Digital department as having a great deal of creative remit. The fact the collection is considered by those in the museum as the risk-taker of the establishment speaks volumes as to the overall operation.

The context of the collection is something which can be greater understood when reading through Gardner's interview. Indeed, after considering the design of the object, the social legacy is the second most important and informing aspect, and this can be seen in Gardner's recognition as to how important the context is. This furthers the idea as to how the exhibition ought to be curated and displayed.

The relationship between the Rapid Response Collection and external museums, leads us to believe that the collection is considered as something of a museological island, with regards to the fact that it operates entirely on its own in terms of objects. This is an aspect which offers interesting room for analysis, but also allows us to understand the nature of the collection in greater depth.

Overall, the Rapid Response Collection is an excellent example of a collection which can be understood with a consideration of the role of the curator, and in my following chapters I will turn to an a further museum stakeholder – the audience, both with regards to the way in which they are included in the exhibition, and their opinions on the collection.

Chapter Five: The Audience

5.1 Introduction

Having considered the role of the curator in the previous chapter it is now time to consider arguably the most important people in the museum - the audience. Without them, we have no museum – simply a room filled with objects. Indeed, the audience offer us a space with which to reflect upon the role of curators, and in turn, the way in which information is conveyed. This mutually beneficial relationship is one which must not be forgotten in modern curation, in order to make the most coherent and interesting exhibition possible.

In this chapter I will consider those most often excluded from the museological dialogue, examining both the position of the underrepresented, and that of the disaudience, both of which will be defined in their later discussion.

I will continue by considering the lengths the V&A's Rapid Response Collection have gone to in order to include groups from a broad range of backgrounds, examining the objects of the Refugee Flag, the Xbox Controller and the Pussy Hat, alongside the Tom of Finland Stamps, each of which have allowed for the inclusion of those who are often excluded from such a narrative.

I will then use the following chapter to consider the way in which those who have visited the collection have engaged with it online. In my interview with Corinna Gardner, she noted 'given that we only have 12 objects on display at any one time the practice and profile of Rapid Response punches well above its weight' (Appendix A, 141) and I will utilise the Social Media engagement with the collection, looking to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in order to determine the extent to which this is a valid statement. I will elaborate upon my methodology in the following chapter.

5.2 The Underrepresented

Having examined the power held by the curator in the previous chapter it is now important to turn to the most important group in the museum – the audience.

A recently recognised, though still (ironically) underrepresented group in academic discourse, is the 'non-visitor'/'disaudience/underrepresented' (Simon 2010). These are the individuals who, for whatever reason, be it conscious or unconscious, are excluded from the museum.

This term can take two different forms. The first is those who elect for whatever reason, not to visit the museum. Whilst it is estimated that some 52% of British Adults visited at least one museum last year, there are still some 48% who did not (www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk). If we consider a museum as a fundamentally important and significant social institution, missing out almost half of the adult population is something, which is lacking. In the first understanding of the term, the disaudience which is comprised of those who for whatever reason do not attend museums. It is the responsibility of the modern museum to create an approachable and unhostile environment that all feel able to become involved in. Whilst the attendance of the so-called disaudience is an essential topic for discussion, deserving of thesis in its own right, it will not be the definition used in this thesis.

The second understanding is that of the 'underrepresented' (my preferred term and the one which will be used in this thesis) is the people who are excluded from the narrative in terms of representation in museum exhibitions. This may be due to gender, sexuality, or disability or a number of other reasons. These are individuals who have been excluded from the record as they contest what those in power deem significant. Women, children, LGTBQ+ groups and ethnic minorities are oft excluded from museum displays and by extension historical narratives

This feeds into the way archetypal curator, the straight, white male constructs knowledge – from their own perspective, driven by their own personal biographies (www.nytimes.com). The way in which we conceive of, and act upon our own knowledge systems is brought about by our own life experiences. This has been developed in the previous chapter, looking to the reformed perception of the museum as an unneutral space. As such, it would be illogical to believe that a curator from an elite background can fully understand the experiences of someone from a different societal position. This is no excuse for a failure to represent varying demographics in a museum. When an institution intended to act as a

bastion of knowledge fails one person, they fail all people by being unable to sufficiently educate. There must, therefore, be a place for museums to accurately and respectfully represent groups from numerous spheres, in a way that can affect longstanding and meaningful social change. It is the obligation of museums to represent the whole truth. It is this understanding of the term underrepresented which will be used in this chapter.

It is also a responsibility for museums to include varying demographics in a way that does not fall into the 'token woman' category, as seen in the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam (www.stedelijk.nl). The museum attempts to represent, but instead using a group as an afterthought, with their singular room on the art of women off the numerous galleries of work by male artists, at most an eighth of the size. Inclusion of groups in this manner makes one feel that it was done through a feeling of obligation and not for the benefit of the narrative overall. Works and artefacts by groups often excluded from the narrative ought to be commonplace and not done due to some attempt to tick the box of inclusivity. Representation is a right, not a privilege.

5.3 Social Justice in Museums

In the past two decades equality, diversity, social justice and human rights have become a core concern of museums (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). There has been considerable consensus in better engagement, shown by events which are targeted at those who have previously been excluded from the museological record (again the work of Nina Simon emphasizes this (Simon 2010)). However, the way in which knowledge is conveyed, for example museum publications, are still restricted to experts. There must be an attempt on behalf of museums to make knowledge more publicly available and accessible. Below, four objects from the Rapid Response Collection will be examined in order to reach an understanding as to how the collection has endeavoured to represent those who are often excluded. The extent to which Social Justice is a viable category in museums will be considered from the vantage point of the following objects.

i. The Refugee Flag

The museum is now making moves to accurately represent communities who have previously been left out of the museological record. Ghislaine Lawrence suggests that there is currently no investigative capacity to museums (Lawrence 1990), and that this is supported by Hoskins, whose work has been analysed in the third chapter of this thesis, who feels that the biography of objects are manipulated by museums to fit into our existing understanding of society (Hoskins 1998). It is possible that the V&A Rapid Response Collection is a culprit of this, with pieces primarily coming from wealthy countries, and often commenting upon circumstances fuelled by wealth. Yet the inclusion of pieces such as the Refugee flag serves to identify a global crisis, the impact of which will be realised in the generations to come (www.vam.ac.uk).

Figure 32: Refugee Flag (therefugeenation.com)

In their catalogue, the V&A describes the piece thus

'The striking orange flag is cut horizontally by a black line representing the ambiguous situation of refugees today: at once crossing over borders and negotiating life within strict geographical limits. The flag was conceived by artist Yara Said and its design refers to the lifejackets worn by many fleeing conflict. Said is herself a refugee who studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus before being forced to leave her country to find asylum in The Netherlands. "The lifejacket is a symbol of solidarity for all those who crossed the

sea in search of a new country," says Said: "I myself wore one, which is why I so identify with these colours.'(www.vam.ac.uk).

The flag seems part of an effort on behalf of the museum to include demographics which are essential to the museum, but often ignored. The inclusion of the piece ought to be understood as part of the museum's engagement with politically controversial times and objects, and ought to be applauded.

Yet there are events which are missed almost entirely in Western Journalism, for example the destruction of the Bahimyan Buddhas, and these are also excluded from the museological narrative (www.bbc.com). Collections such as the V&A's Rapid Response Collection have an obligation, as curatorial provocateurs, to include these stories and objects in the collection. Through the inclusion of pieces such as the Refugee Flag, they succeed in nailing their own curatorial flag to the mast.

The telling of stories in museums is formative to the understanding of the history of objects, and museums can offer a safe medium in which to curate and convey reality. However, the way in which this is done can create issues for the display and management of collections. Lawrence suggests that the labelling of objects can serve to remove them from their original context, whilst writes of a curator who states that 'Without a label giving all sorts of information' an object 'might just as well not be on display' (Lawrence 1990, 114). Once again, the importance of context, as discussed in my interview with Gardner comes to the fore. It is a new issue facing museums of the 21st century to put the people back in, and to understand the power which comes alongside their own capacity to convey knowledge. This can be considered from the perspective of including pieces such as the Refugee Flag, hung in the atrium of gallery 74a, allowing for a more anthropocentric narrative.

ii. The Pussy Hat

The work of Richard Sandell can be considered a significant turning point in the understanding of the representation of excluded groups in the museological record (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). The understanding that the past two decades have

marked a significant social change in the role of individuals in museums, is indicative of overall social change. Sandell recognises the fact that equality is the elimination of discrimination, however, does not address the fact that in a society where basic inequalities exist, ranging from the wage gap, to police brutality against certain demographics, to what extent can a museum ever attempt to be equal, especially when the society they are part of is not? The 2010 Equality Act has made leaps and bound with regards to improving representation in museums in the United Kingdom, yet there are still ways to go (www.legislation.gov.uk).

Figure 33: Case with Pussy Hat (museum-id.com)

With regards to the representation of women, the Rapid Response Collection makes an attempt, having acquired one of the Pussy Hats worn in the march protesting Donald Trump's presidency of the United States of America. Their website reads

'A KNITTING PATTERN THAT DEFIED A PRESIDENT

In January 2017, over 500,000 people took part in the Women's March on Washington to protest the inauguration of US President Donald Trump. Before the event, participants were encouraged to download a basic open-source knitting pattern to create their own pink pussyhat to wear at the event. The pussyhat, a

response to Trump's boast of grabbing women 'by the pussy', became an internationally recognised symbol of female solidarity against the President's administration. '(collections.vam.ac.uk).

The pussy hat is undeniably a mark of protest against a president notorious for sexist comments, most prominently his perceived freedom to grab women 'by the pussy'. Yet the position of women in museums has always been, at best, a precarious one. The Guerrilla Girls, a collective who protest against the lack of representation of women in museums adopted the tagline 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?' (www.tate.org.uk) looking to the percentages of women who were in the art in comparison to those who were creating it. Overall, they were less than satisfied. Their work offers a pressing example as to the inequality, which is still rife in museums. The work of women can be used to challenge the long-term discrimination, yet far more needs to be done to examine the museum's relation to inequality and to injustice. If a museum is seen as offering a reflection of wider societal values, it is time to note a change in said values.

It is possible that museum displays are culpable of presenting us with limited perspectives of the world, with the world represented in a way in which it was not. However, what distinguishes the Rapid Response collection, from the V&A's other exhibitions is the fact that it is intended to display the world as and when it happens and is successful in its choice to exhibit the Pussy Hat.

iii. The Xbox Controller

The Rapid Response Collection endeavours to include the underrepresented. For example, their most recent piece, an Xbox controller specifically designed with the disabled participant in mind (www.vam.ac.uk) makes an attempt to include those who are traditionally not represented in the narrative. On their website, they say of the piece,

'The X-box Adaptive Controller was designed with access in mind, allowing users with a range of abilities to play videogames. Players can custom programme the two large buttons and plug in additional buttons, switches and pads. Users can

make the controller fit their body in order to play with their feet or chin, for example, and use more than one device.' (www.vam.ac.uk).

The fact that this piece was commissioned with a disabled user in mind is indicative of the fact that there is a recognised change occurring in the way in which people perceive conventionally minority groups in the museum space and beyond. The inclusion of this piece, one hopes, marks a change in the way in which disabled individuals are seen in society, and the way in which they are provided being represented in the narrative. Continued progress such as the inclusion of this piece ought to be praised, and the Rapid Response Collection has done well to recognise the importance of inclusion in this manner.

Figure 34: Case with Xbox Controller (Author's Own)

However, there is a more ironic thread to this piece. If a viewer in a wheelchair endeavoured to see the piece as it is currently exhibited, they would find themselves with a view of the base of the case, but not of the actual object. Inclusion at present, it seems, only goes so far.

iv. The Tom of Finland Stamps

The representation of the LGBTQ+ community in museums is a particularly interesting one. As a group they offer a pressing example of who has been excluded from representation in and out of the museum. Richard Parkinson identifies that love is always difficult to pin down in the archaeological record, and that gender is similarly difficult to identify as much 'like desire is diverse and has been shaped and constructed in many different ways' (Parkinson 2013, 12). The importance of presenting this community is similar to the presentation of any community which has found itself suppressed in the past. The representation of a community that is 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Parkinson 2013, 25), can help to indicate that despite power dynamics at play human variety exists in a more material form.

Figure 35: Tom of Finland Stamps (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The existence of these so called 'sub-cultures' has always been difficult to trace, but this is by not to say it is impossible, nor to suggest that it is unimportant. One of the most important elements of museology is its power to represent those from all classes, races, creeds or sexualities. The way history is told may be determined by the governing culture, but the great unrecorded history of groups which do not fit with what we privilege as normal will remain harder to access until it is represented in museums. As such, the museum of the 21st century has an obligation to honestly and accurately represent those who have been excluded from this record previously.

Inclusion of the LGBTQ Community can be seen in the Rapid Response Collection through the Tom of Finland stamps, of which the website details:

'When used for their intended purpose, these stamps openly disseminate homosexual imagery. While this type of representation was once seen only clandestinely, these stamps reflect the majority of Europe's changing attitudes towards sexuality in the twenty-first century and aspirations to spread these ideals globally. There are still 79 countries around the world where being gay is illegal, with at least five punishing same-sex relationships with the death penalty. The publication of the set of stamps was not without controversy. In Finland, an online petition called for their cancellation, insisting that "traditionally stamps have shown themes that are aesthetically beautiful and culturally valuable. Strong homoerotic themes in stamps are not either". The chain department store Halpa-Halli, which consists of 39 stores across Finland, managed by Christian owners, refused to stock them' (collections.vam.ac.uk).

These stamps were intended to provoke and detail an interesting aspect of art and design which may otherwise have been forgotten. They offer an example as to the way in which items traditionally used on a regular basis can be appropriated in order to send a very specific message. Through collecting something which seems so innocuous, the collection demonstrates the way in which design permeates all spheres of our lives. The Rapid Response Collection's choice of this particular piece indicates the extent to which they are willing to detail the more provocative and interesting aspects of art and design.

The world is diverse, and museums owe a representation of this. However, museums are still culprits of offering sanitised perspectives. It is still infinitely harder to find displays representing the LGBTQ+ community and these are placed where children will not visit. There is much to achieve still.

5.4 Conclusion

The museum is in a privileged position to challenge the ideas which are held by society, which it has inherited from its history as a bastion of knowledge, elaborated upon in my previous chapter which considered the role of the curator.

Through understanding the intellectual power inherent in museums, and the way in which artefacts can play a fundamental role in this it is possible to understand precisely why the burden of responsibility is so great in museums.

In this chapter I have examined the way in which the Rapid Response Collection has created a way in which the underrepresented have been shown to be important and significant in the narrative. I began by considering the way in which the underrepresented have been excluded from the more traditional museum narrative and have cited examples in which inclusion has been done poorly.

I have then looked to four specific examples from the Rapid Response Collection, beginning with the acquisition of the Refugee Flag, and considering the way in which the piece has its own narrative involving a community who are traditionally not included in the narrative. I looked to the representation of gender through the Pussy Hat, used in the march against Trump. I then turned to the Xbox controller, specifically created in order to consider the way in which less able-bodied gamers might still engage with gaming devices, and the most recent acquisition of the collection at the time of this Thesis. Finally, I looked to the Tom of Finland stamps as a way to include the LQBTQ+ community in the display.

By identifying the groups which have been excluded from the record previously, such as women and the LGBTQ+ the power of the museum to change our understanding of the world may be understood. The Rapid Response Collection has done well to include these groups in a manner, which is neither patronising not tokenistic. None of the pieces, which I have examined in this chapter, feel forced into the collection, instead each and every one feels a natural fit for the establishment. This can be seen in my previous chapter with Gardner's reference to the fact that each piece acquired for the Rapid Response Collection has to be justified in much the same way as their partner collections.

Overall, the museum now stands on the brink of something incredible – it is able to aid and effect change. Material culture and its display can change the world. It is understandable that problems would come alongside this, particularly in the instance of the Rapid Response Collection. As cultural provocateurs, the Rapid Response Collection has done well to include pieces from such a wide variety of groups. However, only future acquisitions will be able to fully indicate the

direction of the collection, and whether these pieces have been done in the guise of inclusion, or whether the museum is fully committed to the idea.

Chapter Six: Visitor Perspective

6.1 Introduction

Since the foundation of the Rapid Response Collection in 2014, the collection has received a great deal of media attention. The collection's initial media presence saw it featured in the Guardian (www.theguardian.com) and New York Times (www.nytimes.com) among other media outlets. As previously mentioned, this media attention has plateaued in the past year or so. However, this chapter will be utilised to consider exactly who the museum has been designed and curated for.

As identified in the work of Stephanie Moser, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Southampton, the museum is integral to the way in which we construct and consume knowledge (Moser 2010). Yet, as examined in the fourth chapter of this thesis, the museum as an institution is becoming increasingly aware as to the importance of communicating ideas as part of their role. Indeed, this ethos is imbued in the V&A, especially when one considers its founding intention as a place intended to inspire British craftsmen to create a more developed sense of art and design. Moser's recognition as to the fact that there is an atmosphere which aids the display, is one which can be well realised by the curators of the Rapid Response Collection.

In order to interpret the visitor experience for those who visit the Rapid Response Collection this chapter will focus on four central parts. The first will be an analysis of Moser's article, 'The Devil is in the Detail', (Moser 2010) looking to the way in which Visitor Experience can be structured with regards to specific aspects of the museum. Following this I will turn to visitor comments in their own right, allowing for those who have engaged in the museum to have their own voice and commentary upon the Rapid Response Collection. In this I will use the three 'central' social media sources – Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to consider the way in which the collection has been engaged with out with the academic discourse.

There are a number of reasons as to why I have elected to use Social Media, as opposed to another method, for example the more traditional visitor interview. First and foremost, social media is so pervasive in our society that it allows for a far wider scope than two days of interviewing, for example, would. Secondly, it is

worth acknowledging the fact that individuals in interviews are far more likely to be swayed by interview questions, and less inclined to detail their true feelings upon the exhibition itself. Finally, time constraints precluded me from interviewing visitors, and as such, social media seems the natural way in which to gather the required information for my thesis. It is worth noting that the use of social media demonstrates a distinctive bias towards younger users, however, older members of society still make use of the resource and as such this is not considered a substantial enough reason to reject the source of information.

6.2 The Devil is in the Detail

Prior to discussing Social Media Engagement with the Rapid Response Collection, it is helpful to examine to academic framework within which I hope to consider the comments made by visitors. Moser's article centres around the way in which museums are able to create knowledge and features an enlightening discussion as to the way in which establishments such as the V&A are able to influence the visitor experience, both consciously and unconsciously.

The first area Moser focuses on is the architecture of the museum (Moser 2010, 3). Whilst Moser focuses upon the fact that museums influence the viewer from the very first moment they step into the establishment, it is also fair to extend this model to the space in which the exhibition is held. In the case of the Rapid Response Collection, the space is somewhat liminal, as briefly touched upon in my second chapter. It is situated between two other galleries and is viewed as far more of a corridor, than a gallery within its own right. The very fact that the space is labelled on the website as room 74a (www.vam.ac.uk) further suggests the idea that the collection finds itself as something of an afterthought, forced to vie for space with the other, older collections.

Figure 36: Rapid Response Collection Exhibition Space (Author's Own)

Indeed, the position of the gallery as an afterthought is only furthered by the limited case space they are given – 5 exhibition cases overall, with only 12 objects on display at one time, a matter Moser considers to be significant in her article. The space itself is slightly odd, with the majority of floor space being taken up by a skylight for the floor below. Ease of access is a further issue which feels poorly considered as it is dubious the ease with which a visitor in a wheelchair would be able to view all the pieces on display. In future incarnations of the collection, one hopes the issue of access is given greater consideration, as considered in my previous chapter.

The design, colour and light of the museum space are another category, which Moser identifies as significant with regards to the overall visitor experience (Moser 2010, 4). The look of the exhibition has a huge impact in the way in which the visitor feels about the collection overall. Corinna Gardener, curator of the Rapid Response Collection mentioned in a lecture given at Stanford in 2016 the limitation of the museum's budget for the Rapid Response Collection, emphasising it has enough money to be able to cover the cases insides with metal, and to print out magnetic labels to stick on. The overall appearance of the cases links very closely to the idea of the collection being representative of some kind of 'present future' with the metal adding to the idea that we truly are present in

some kind of futuristic age, and we have mere moments before the robots take over. Through using exhibition techniques such as this, the collection furthers its position as exhibiting technological and design advances of society, and to an extent removes it from our present-day experiences.

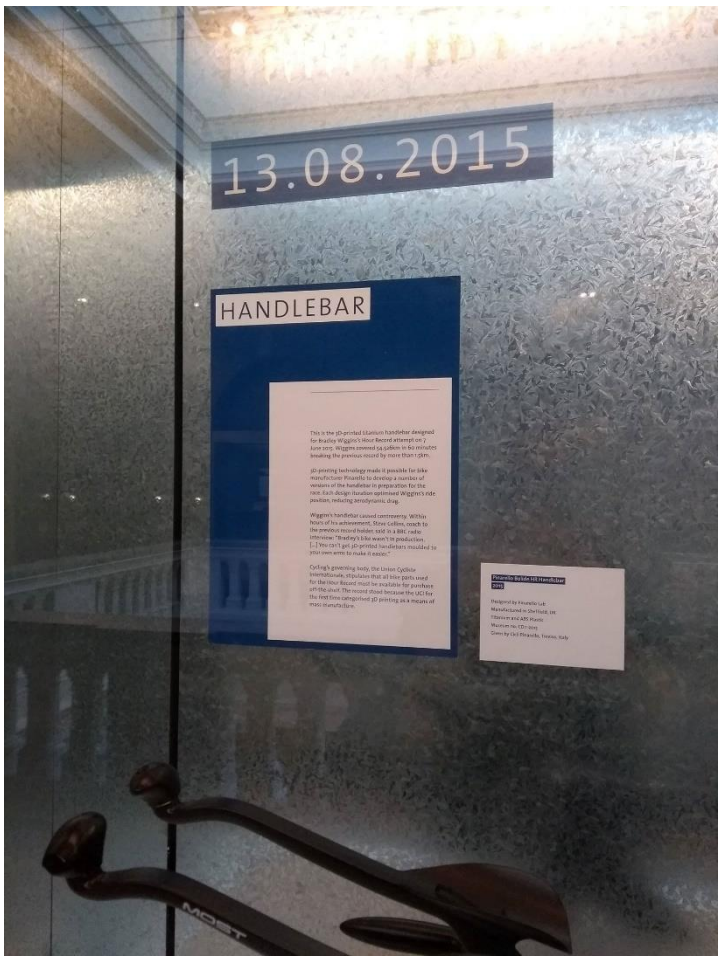


Figure 37: Example of case inside (Author's Own)

The subject of the exhibition has already been analysed in previous chapters, and as such merits little discussion here, in spite of Moser's recognition as to the importance of the category (Moser 2010, 5). The Rapid Response Collection is far more thematic than it is chronological; however, the pieces are known to all have come from post 2014 in terms of when they became politically or socially significant. Again, this object led narrative answers Moser's question of the exhibition style found in the collection. The exhibition fits well with the idea of the V&A's overall chronological narrative, with it succeeding in marking the transition point between two more contemporary design galleries.

The layout of the space is one, which is further important to the visitor experience, and Moser makes this a distinct category from the space of the exhibition (Moser 2010, 4). It is surprising that for such a revolutionary collection, the objects are exhibited in such a standard style, employing the typical glass fronted case approach, as done throughout the rest of the museum. This would not come as such an insult, except for the brilliance of the temporary exhibition 'The Future Starts Here' in which viewers were encouraged to interact with the collection in a far more active manner, including riding a bike to create power, or an opportunity to sit inside a new self-drive car. The least passive aspect of the Rapid Response Collection was the temporary positioning of the Refugee Flag outwith the case and hung from the skylight instead. This does little to promote any kind of active engagement with the collection overall and fails to distinguish the collection from any other one in the museum itself.

Moser concludes her article by asking how the visitor experience is overall, and it is thus I turn to the Social Media discourse surrounding the collection to develop an understanding of the matter.

6.3 Social Media

The presence of the Rapid Response Collection in the Media has fluctuated over the 5 years of the collection's existence. One member of Twitter, Andrew Lewis cleverly acknowledges the position of the collection in Social Media by saying:

Figure 38: Tweet of Andrew Lewis (twitter.com)

Lewis considers the Rapid Response Collection to represent a versatile social media opportunity, being used for both Twitter and Instagram, and as such offers an ideal introductory statement to this section of Chapter Six.

In the following section of this chapter, I will look to the way in which the collection has been engaged with on social media, with specific attention on the collection and Twitter, as it is here I have been able to gather the bulk of my information.

6.4 Facebook

Whilst Facebook is becoming an increasingly infrequently used resource, particularly in younger generations with 15 million fewer users now than in 2017 (www.theverge.com) and a preference towards Instagram becoming clear, the fact that the site is free and easy to use lends itself perfectly to the use of the museum and by extension the Rapid Response Collection.

Indeed, the trend in recent years has seen people comment less and less on the site, resulting in far fewer 'statuses' overall. This meant there was far less information to be able to garner from this resource than anticipated, and as such, little work worthy of analysis.

As such, what can be perhaps garnered from this is the fact that the collection is not considered by the majority of Facebook users to be sufficiently noteworthy to merit discussion. Instead, it was insufficiently significant to reach more than a couple of mentions on the platform, both indicative of Facebook's overall decrease in popularity, as much as the same holding true for the collection.

6.5 Instagram

Instagram is the image equivalent of Twitter and allows for users to post photographs of their lives to be 'liked' by others at their own discretion. Photos may also be saved to a specific collection, though it is not possible to gauge which ones have been saved, or by whom so this has not be considered in this particular analysis. At the time of publication, there are over 1 billion users of Instagram,

with 300 million private accounts, the ones which are not made up the pool used for this thesis examination (medium.com)

The majority of uses of the hashtag affiliated with the collection (#rapidresponsecollecting) were to the newly acquired Pussy Hat, the acquisition of which was examined in my previous chapter. It is possible that the collection is most prominent in the media when the pieces which are acquired are of particularly controversial or media-worthy. Overall photographs of the collection are the second highest, with four accounts posting them, and this is followed by pictures of the Louboutins, one of the first acquisitions of the new collection. There are only one reference to the Umbrella protest, the Tom of Finland Stamps and the Lufsig stuffed toy.

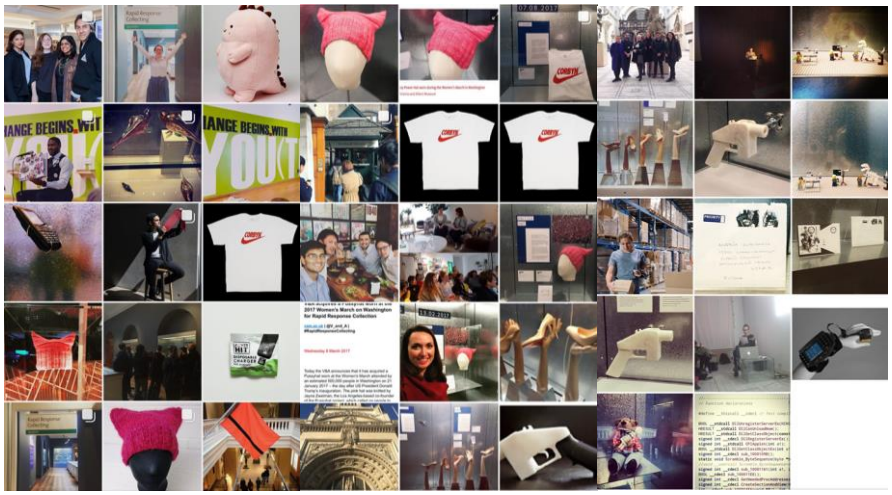


Figure 39: All posts on Instagram marked #rapidresponsecollecting (Instagram.com)

Again, the use of the resource in order for the museum to actively engage was poor at best, with a mere 44 posts marked with #rapidresponsecollecting (one of which is my own), a shockingly low 8.8 references to the project per year (for context #diordesignerofdreams, in reference to the temporary Dior Exhibition at the V&A has at present 12.2 thousand posts on Instagram) . For a collection which intends upon focusing on the advances of the world, with particular focus paid to technological improvements, it seems bizarre that so little has been done to encourage social media engagement, particularly through a site such as Instagram which could include traffic to the museum overall.

6.6 Twitter

The use of Twitter is intended to be brief – with the cited limit of 140 characters allowing for the presentation of ideas in a more concise manner than conventional discourse would allow. It is this which will serve for the central sphere for analysis for the Rapid Response Collection. In order to do so I looked for all posts marked with the #rapidresponsecollecting, and discounted any written by Corinna Gardener, the curator of the exhibition. I have also discounted those which come from institutional accounts, for example other museums, as I feel this represents the view point of an establishment and not that of an individual. The collection was founded in late 2014, so the majority of the tweets date from this year.

i. On Uniqueness

One theme of Twitter based discussion, was looking to how 'unique' the collection was as it focused on pieces which were perhaps a little more novel than visitors expected to find in such a conventional establishment. By placing pieces such as Katy Perry eyelashes, alongside the more longstanding valuable artefacts such as Tipoo's tiger, the former is given the kind of credibility which money simply cannot buy.

Figure 40: Tweet of Eeva Kemppainen (twitter.com)

The eyelashes are written about astutely on the V&A website, as:

'These eyelashes are available in any high street pharmacy, part of an industry worth £110 million per year in the UK. They are also a key part of the aesthetic of

the pop star Katy Perry, whose image as a bright-eyed girl-next-door has led to endorsements for many beauty products.

The lashes are made by hand-sewing individual hairs on to a piece of string. The job requires considerable skill and excellent eyesight. They are then sent to a factory to be cut into a range of styles.

In 2013, an article in the Sun on Sunday revealed that women in Asia were being paid between 1p and 8p per pair for making lashes that cost around £6 on the British high street. The lashes are a part of street fashion today, but also show how globalised manufacturing can connect one of the most famous women in the world with women living on the poverty line in South-East Asia.

As an artefact of global consumer culture, the false eyelashes are compelling, and Eylure's history also tells the story of how globalisation has changed manufacturing. The brand was originally a British company and the first manufacturer of false eyelashes in the world. The company was started by the makeup artist brothers Eric and David Aylott in the 1940s, and began using pieceworkers and a small manufacturing facility in Welwyn Garden City.' (collections.vam.ac.uk)(Figure 41).

Figure 41: Katy Perry Eyelashes (collections.vam.ac.uk)

The response of the public to the acquisition of pieces such as these indicates a recognition as to the way in which conventional museology is changing.

ii. On #rapidresponsecollecting

The creation of the hashtag (#rapidresponsecollecting) specific to the collection was intended to aid future curation, asking the audience to suggest pieces they felt would fit well into the new collection. This is a very intelligent move on behalf of the collection as it encourages members of the public to consider themselves as museological stakeholders – through creating their own idea of what ought to be in place, and with the museum acting upon it the visitor becomes someone who has an active involvement in the collection.

Such an idea is seen in the tweets below:

Figure 42: Tweet of Zachary Schrag (twitter.com)

Figure 43: Tweet of Chuck the Magpie (twitter.com)

Figure 44: Tweet of M. René Bradshaw (twitter.com)

Figure 45: Tweet of Lauren Henry (twitter.com)

Figure 46: Tweet of Filippo Lorenzin, 1 of 2 (twitter.com)

Figure 47: Tweet of Filippo Lorenzin, 2 of 2 (twitter.com)

Figure 48: Tweet of Suze Leitao, 1 of 2 (twitter.com)

Figure 49: Tweet of Suze Leitao, 2 of 2 (twitter.com)

Figure 50: Tweet of Marine Tanguy (twitter.com)

Figure 51: Tweet of Grace Bremner (twitter.com)

Figure 52: Tweet of Janet Gunter (twitter.com)

Figure 53: Tweet of Kateryna_Kruk, 1 of 2 (twitter.com)

Figure 54: Tweet of Kateryna_Kruk, 2 of 2 (twitter.com)

The diversity of suggestions as part of this collection indicates the extent to which the collection has managed by and large to capture the public psyche. Indeed, this is one aspect of the collection, which ought to be praised and developed further where possible.

The method of asking the public was adopted by the V&A's outpost in Dundee, in which, prior to the opening of the new Scottish Design Gallery, members of the public were asked over various forms of social media exactly what they felt would make the best addition to the new gallery. This was far more of a successful campaign, with numerous responses, putting the 50 or so from the Rapid Response in a new light.

However, when asking the public for their opinion, an aspect, which is often forgotten, is following through. Actually acting upon the suggestions is far more difficult than simply soliciting them. This was not done for the V&A Dundee, nor was it done for the Rapid Response Collection. Through asking for a suggestion and failing to deliver, the museum puts themselves in a far more dangerous position than if they had not asked in the very first place. They seem to ignore the opinions which people have willingly and freely presented them.

The only one which seems to have been considered is the suggestion by Zachary Sagg (Figure 42), with the acquisition of the Bollide HR Handlebar (Figure 55), referred to on the website as

'This is the 3D-printed titanium handlebar used by cyclist Bradley Wiggins for his Hour Record on 7 June 2015. Wiggins covered 54.526km in 60 minutes breaking the previous record by more than 1.5km.

3D printing technology made it possible for bike manufacturer Pinarello to develop a number of versions of the handlebar in preparation for the race. Each design iteration optimised Wiggins' ride position, reducing aerodynamic drag.

Wiggins' handlebar caused controversy. Within hours of his achievement, Steve Collins, coach to the previous record holder, said: "Bradley's bike wasn't in

production. [...] You can't get 3D-printed handlebars moulded to your own arms to make it easier" in a BBC radio interview.

Cycling's governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale, stipulates that all bike parts used for the Hour Record must be available for purchase off-the-shelf. The record stood because the UCI for the first-time categorised 3D printing as a means of mass manufacture.' (collections.vam.ac.uk)

Figure 55: Bollide HR Handlebar (collections.vam.ac.uk)

Indeed, the countless other suggestions made by members of the public seem to have at best, been ignored, and at worse discounted. It is all well and good to pretend the museum gives room for the view of its visitors, but it is a poor show not to act upon it in any meaningful way.

iii. On the Profile of Specific Objects

The most tweeted about addition to the gallery is the burqini, written about in the Tweets below.

Figure 56: Tweet of Félicie Kertudo (twitter.com)

Figure 57: Tweet of Alice Power (twitter.com)

Figure 58: Tweet of Dr Pip Gardner (twitter.com)

Figure 59: Tweet of Catherine Sargent (twitter.com)

This is followed closely by the acquisition of the LegoAcademics:

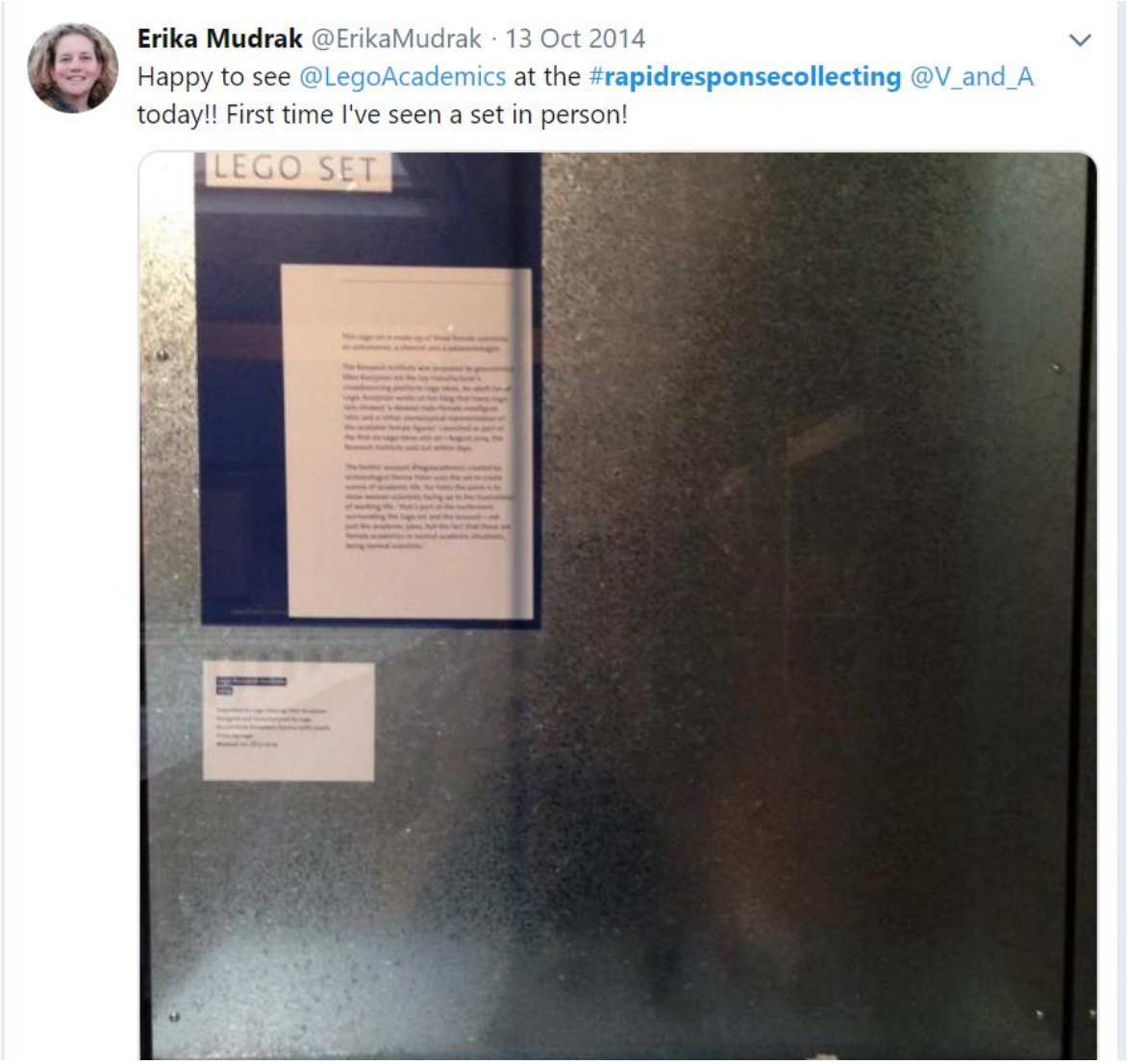


Figure 60: Tweet of Erika Murdak (twitter.com)

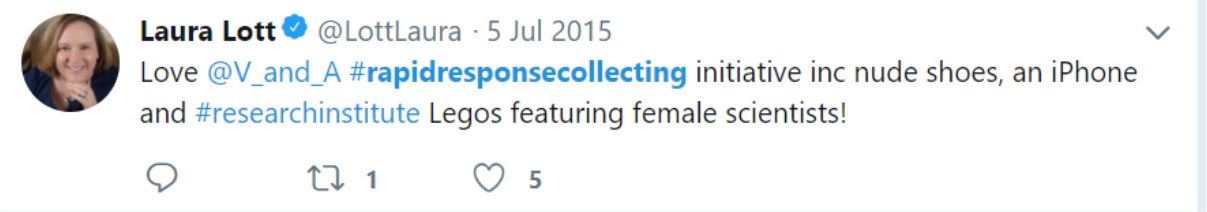


Figure 61: Tweet of Laura Lott (twitter.com)

Attention was also given to the acquisition of the Tom of Finland stamps:

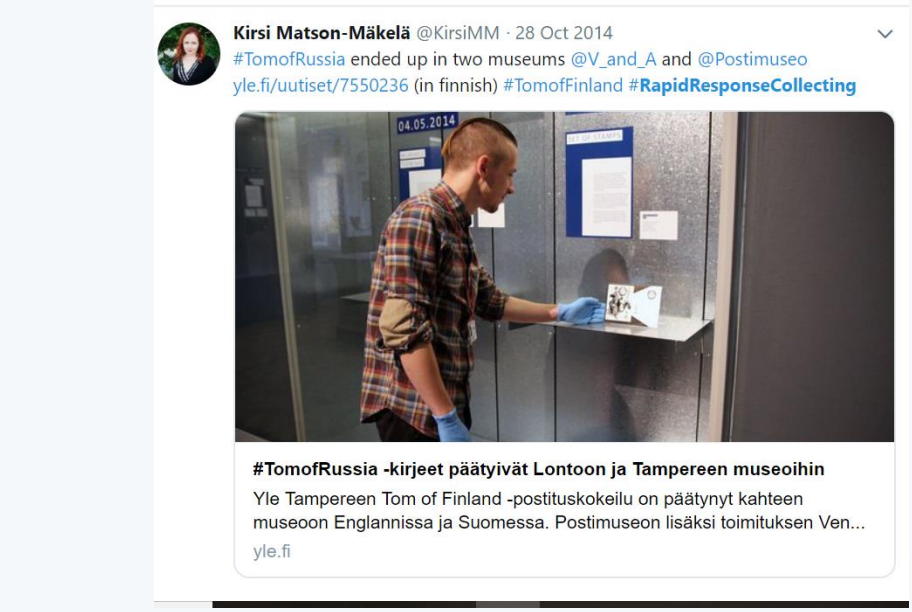


Figure 62: Tweet of Kirsi Matson-Mäkelä (twitter.com)

Figure 63: Tweet of Alice Power (twitter.com)

Figure 64: Tweet of Kristain Volsing (twitter.com)

In addition to the Corbyn t -shirt

Figure 65: Tweet of Priya (twitter.com)

Figure 66: Tweet of Christopher Turner (twitter.com)

It is unclear why these objects reached particular media attention, while the other objects were not given quite so much focus. I believe that the pieces which are given the most attention, both on Twitter and Instagram are those which are the most controversial acquisitions, for example the Burqini, the Pussy Hat and the Tom of Finland Stamps, all of which have been the focus of great media attention at one point or another throughout the history of the Rapid Response Collection.

iv. On the Nature of the Collection

The final aspect of the collection which was addressed on Twitter is the countless positive reviews the collection was given. These are listed thus:

Figure 67: Tweet of Andy Aldridge (twitter.com)

Figure 68: Tweet of followthethings.com (twitter.com)

Figure 69: Tweet of Hanna Kapanen (twitter.com)

Figure 70: Tweet of kat[redacted]braybrooke[redacted] (twitter.com)

Figure 71: Tweet of Laura Blair (twitter.com)

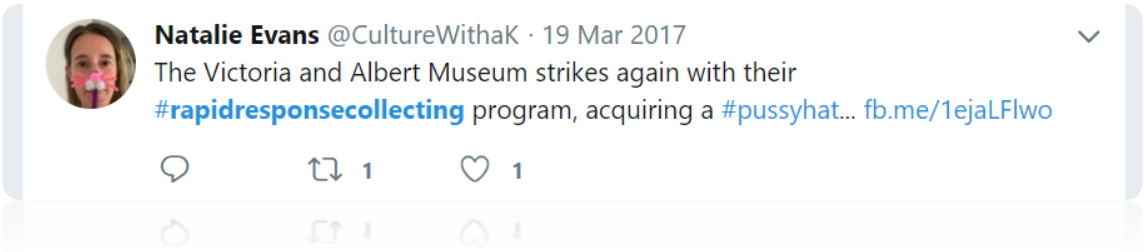


Figure 72: Tweet of Natalie Evans (twitter.com)

Figure 73: Tweet of Claire Wintle (twitter.com)

Figure 74: Tweet of Alexandra Kim (twitter.com)

Figure 75: Tweet of Laura Davey (twitter.com)

Figure 76: Tweet of Alice Power (twitter.com)

Figure 77: Tweet of Samantha Chang (twitter.com)

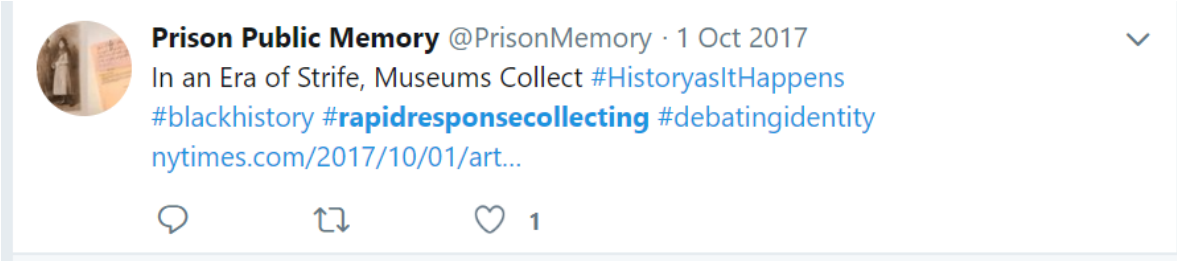


Figure 78: Tweet of Prison Public Memory (twitter.com)

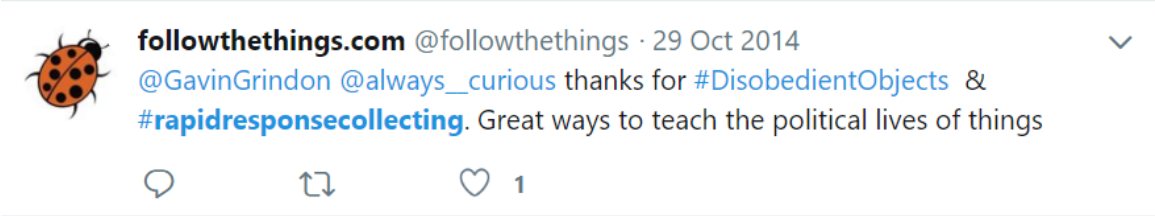


Figure 79: Tweet of followthethings.com (twitter.com)

Figure 80: Tweet of Andrew Lewis (twitter.com)

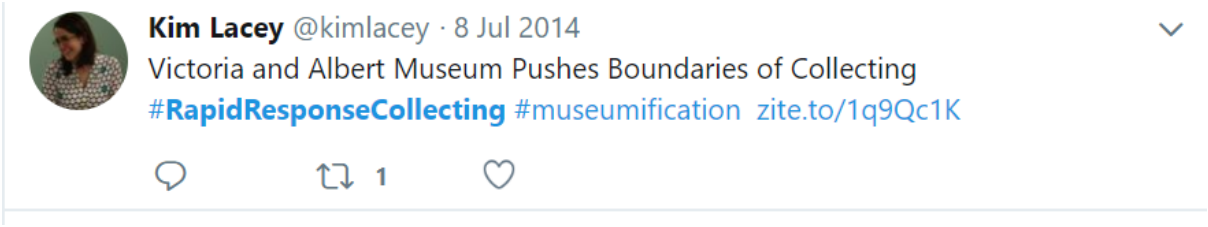


Figure 81: Tweet of Kim Lacey (twitter.com)

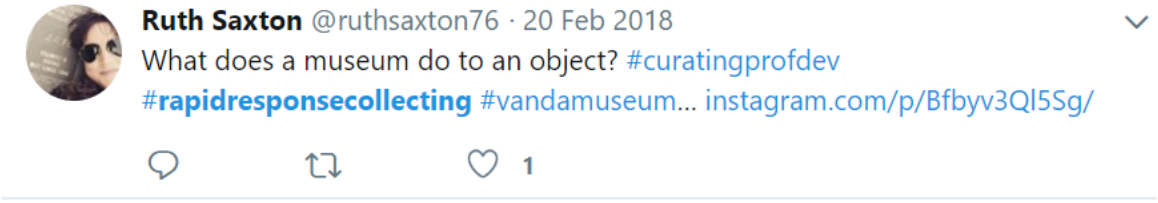


Figure 82: Tweet of Ruth Saxton (twitter.com)

This overall praise of the collection suggests that in spite of the extensive critiques of the collection which I have listed throughout this thesis, the collection ought to be recognised as far more of a success than previously considered. Indeed, the reference both to specific pieces and to the collection as a whole have been overwhelmingly positive and have acted as a way in which members of the public have been able to voice their opinion on the collection.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have used this chapter to address the ways in which the Rapid Response Collection has been engaged with by those who have been able to visit it. I began with an analysis of the visitor experience in museums using the work of

Stephanie Moser, and her discussion as to how the visitor experience in the museum is characterised by a multitude of features.

I then turned to the position of the Rapid Response Collection in Social Media which varies heavily dependent upon the platform used. Indeed, the profile of the collection is lacklustre when looking to Facebook, with adequate success in the realm of Instagram.

The real Social Media success story for the collection is seen in the sphere of Twitter, with Tweets both engaging with the collection and positively praising it. This is something which it seems the collection ought to strive to continue upon, for it is here that they excel. Overall the collection is not discussed on Social Media to the extent one might hope, but the lack of criticism received on Twitter certainly counts in their favour.

Through examining the collection in these regards, it becomes clear that overall it is a success story in these aspects.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 The Beginning of the End

In 2014 the Victoria and Albert Museum launched their most recent museum exhibition at the time of this thesis' publication - the Rapid Response Collection. Aimed at collecting and curating elements of contemporary art and design, the collection was considered to be of appropriate significance to merit inclusion in such an establishment. Over the past five years some 30 acquisitions have been made for the collection, each and every one of which have been exhibited at some point in gallery 74a of the museum. In this thesis, I have analysed the extent to which the museum has been successful in its initial aims of creating a collection which was able to reflect upon the modern world of art and design, and also the transparency of the curation.

In order to offer appropriate analysis, I first engaged with two spheres of theory – firstly that of the *Contact Zone*, the concept conceived of by Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt 1991), before turning to its application in the museological setting by James Clifford (Clifford 1997). I then turned to Appadurai's *Social Life of Things* examining the way in which individual objects in the collection were selected as their associated stories were significant to the modern world (Appadurai 1986). I then considered the way in which the role of the curator impacts museum exhibitions, using the work of O'Neill (O'Neill 2012), before turning to an analysis of my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection since its conception in 2014. I then concluded my examination of theory by looking to the representation of the *underrepresented*, a term which I elected to define in my fifth chapter influenced heavily by the work of Sandell, and his work on Social Justice in museums, which elaborates upon how institutions can include or exclude groups through curatorship (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). Finally, I elected to examine the overall Social Media profile of the collection, examining its position on Facebook, Instagram, and most importantly on Twitter, each of which allowed for a differing perspective as to the importance of the collection. Overall, these chapters have served to examine the

effectiveness of the collection in meeting its primary aim – curating the modern world of art and design as and when it happens.

7.2 Conclusion Structure

In this conclusion I will summarise the central arguments of my thesis chapter by chapter, alongside suggesting potential directions for the collection's future. It seems remiss to begin this thesis with an examination of the past, and not have some idea of what exactly the future might hold for it. I will then conclude the extent to which the collection has offered a successful understanding of contemporary art and design.

i. The *Contact Zone*

In the very first theoretical chapter of this thesis I applied Pratt's concept of the *Contact Zone* to the Rapid Response Collection. In order to do so I offered a brief introduction to the concept, detailing its initial use by Pratt and then its application by Clifford to the museum world (I considered this as if Pratt were an artist and Clifford the individual who decides the fit is far better in another setting, electing to rehang it elsewhere) (Pratt 1991) (Clifford 1997).

After this I wrote of the more conventional *Contact Zone*, as considered by Clifford in 1997, looking to the Rapid Response Collection in this regard. I referenced the media attention the collection garnered after it emerged in 2014. I then turned to the consideration of the object itself as some kind of *Contact Zone*, applying Gosden and Marshall's understanding of the model (Gosden and Marshall 1999). I cited the example of the Primark pair of cargo trousers, which are important in both their physical manifestation in addition to their story of origin. I also cited the example of the Burqini, a piece of particular societal importance, as well as acting as a significant piece of art and design. This piece summarises the intention of the *Contact Zone* superbly – acting as a point in which so many theoretical and personal beliefs are able to transect and diverge.

I then turned to an examination of the digital *Contact Zone* as written of by Gere (Gere 1999). Through utilising this model, I was able to examine the extent to which the collection digitally engages, citing the example of the collection page on the V&A website. I used the chapter as a way to critique the way in which the collection is not sufficiently ambitious in its online profile, failing to utilise less orthodox techniques in order to pull in additional viewers. I extend upon this in my sixth chapter, which discusses a more successful use of the collection's online profile on Social Media.

However, I did give appropriate credit for the collection's acquisition of the first app for the museum in the form of Flappy Bird, which demonstrates an overall development in the museum's curation policy. This indicates the position of the collection as a space with an 'appetite for risk' (Appendix A, 138) as stated by Corinna Gardner in my interview with her.

ii. On improving the *Contact Zone*

The Rapid Response Collection has done superbly in encouraging individuals to contribute with their own ideas and opinions as to what the next acquisition ought to be. However, from looking to the various Tweets on the subject (as seen in Chapter Six), there has been little follow through on this activity. Indeed, it seems that the first aspect of the *Contact Zone* – that of soliciting information, has been enacted, however, it has not been utilised to the full potential. It may be advisable for the collection to employ the same tactic that the Dundee branch of the museum utilised when creating their Scottish Design Gallery, through asking members of the public to suggest pieces which they felt summarised Scottish Art and Design.

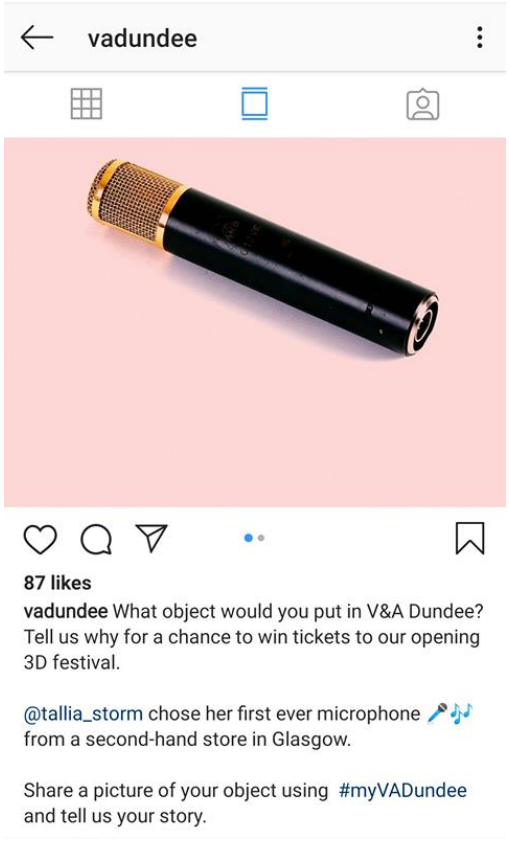


Figure 83: Example of the V&A Dundee's Public Engagement (Instagram.com)

If such a tactic was employed it would be possible not only to extend the overall profile of the collection but would also encourage individuals to feel they have a stake in the museum, ultimately an improvement in the overall position of the collection. Following through is crucial to this.

iii. *The Social Life of Things*

The third chapter of my thesis focused on an examination of Appadurai's 1986 concept of *the Social Life of Things*, written of in the book of the same name, and elaborated upon by individuals such as Kopytoff and Hoskins (Appadurai 1986). This theory suggests that objects have Social Lives both in relation to human entities and independently. I began by applying the theory to the Brexit Leaflet as acquired by the Rapid Response Collection in 2016, using it as an example of how objects acquired may not be those of the greatest pecuniary value, but instead of great significance in society and design.

Further to this I turned to Kopytoff's understanding of the theory, considering how there are different ways in which an object can be considered as having a *Social Life* (Kopytoff 1986). I began by looking to the example of the Corbyn T-Shirt as an expression of the power and capital held by an individual. The second example, that implying a lack of the existence of standardised taste, was extended by looking to the Rapid Response acquisition of a tile from Grayson Perry's Essex House, a piece from a designer renowned for the fact he is not universally popular with regards to the work he creates. The final sphere which Kopytoff hopes to identify as linking to the *Social Life* of a piece is that of its resolute uniqueness. Whilst he elects to use an example of a Picasso, the Rapid Response Collection offers a 3-D printed gun as the most appropriate example of a similar kind.

After this, I examined the musings of Alberti, considering the way in which the object and museum are linked in an understanding of the context of the pieces (Alberti 2005). This is interpreted through looking briefly to the historical legacy of museums and the way in which they have been constructed to create and maintain knowledge through this – elaborated upon in my fourth chapter. Attention is paid to the way in which the individual object is considered by Alberti to have vaguely human characteristics, with its biographical life considered from the vantage point of it having a birth, life and death (though when each of these occur is understandably subjective). Analysis of Alberti's model is considered with specific reference to the anti-homeless spike, in the hope of developing an understanding of manufacture in the life of the museum piece.

After analysing the work of Alberti, I turned to the work of Hoskins, looking specifically to the agency held by objects (Hoskins 1998). Hoskins' hypothesis is, again, heavily reliant upon an understanding of the context within which pieces were created and exhibited. The creation of pieces and the way in which they were selected for exhibition is also discussed under this model, with specific reference to the pieces plucked from their own world, without ever having been used, for example the Louboutin shoes. This suggests that the Rapid Response Collection exhibits pieces not only due to their *Social Life*, but also due to their socio-cultural context.

iv. On re-understanding the *Social Life of Things*

Whilst the selection of pieces for the Rapid Response Collection is done first and foremost with a reference to the world of design, this by no means suggests that these pieces are without an interesting *Social Life*. Indeed, every example from the collection, without exception, is included due to the significance of its *Social Life*, in addition to its own design prominence. With the collection acting as custodian to the first app acquisition of the museum to date, it seems that our understanding as to a piece's social life is changing somewhat, and in understanding of this, it is perhaps worth noting that the acquisition of objects is linked now to the *Social Life of* all *Things* like them. The idea of authenticity is similarly drawn into question, as the piece on display is quite like any other app of the same kind. With regards to understanding the *Social Life of Things* in a new way, the Rapid Response Collection is already leaps and bounds ahead of its contemporaries, and if it continues in its present manner, I am confident it will aid a re-understanding of the *Social Life of Things* fit for the modern era.

v. The Role of the Curator

Having relied heavily upon theory for the first two chapters, it feels that chapter four offers a welcome turn to the more practical world of museology. The chapter begins with an introduction to the role of the curator, examining the way in which the position has changed over the past few decades through considering the work of O'Neill (O'Neill 2012). The museum began as a place understood to indicate some kind of bastion of knowledge, in which the curator was imbued with some kind of god like power in terms of defining their own personal museological universe. This is followed to the role in the 1970s which sees curation divide into those who consider their role to be an audience mediator, and those who deem the position as one to provide an overall experience. This change is followed into the 1980s, which O'Neill considers to mark the new role of the curator as the author of an exhibition, linking to the position of the curator as an individual (O'Neill 2012). This development paved the way for the change in the 1990s, with the curator now becoming a fully-fledged celebrity which O'Neill considers as the 'curator's moment'. This is then concluded with the consideration of three overall

thoughts – first and foremost the way in which our forgetfulness of the 1920s-50s has led to a tendency to replicate this style of curation in the present. The second – the way in which our now unclear understanding as to the role of the curator has led to a lack of understanding as to what the actual role entails. Finally, O'Neill wonders as to whether the curator as a singular entity is problematic in a more global world. With the current trend of curation, it seems pressing that establishments prove themselves to be relevant, and it is this which is essential to the future of collections such as the Rapid Response.

The second part of this chapter focused upon my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection since its conception. I detailed the ten questions I asked Gardner, prior to looking to her responses to them, structuring them with reference to the foundation and conception of the collection, before looking to the historical context of the pieces' acquisition. Further to this I looked to the way in which the collection is considered by its chief curator as fitting into the museum overall, with Gardner acknowledging that the collection is one far more capable of risk than other collections within the museum. The nature of the collection is examined after this, with a discussion as to the way in which pieces escaped acquisition or were perhaps not the best fit for such a collection overall. The geographical origins of the pieces were examined after this, before turning to the relationship between the collection and other museums with exhibitions of a similar nature. The questions conclude with an examination as to the way in which the collection has been utilised to extend access to the overall museum, with this continued in my next chapter looking to the pieces such as the Xbox Controller made for individuals who are not fully able bodied, as well as the Tom of Finland Stamps which are able to represent the LGBTQ+ Community in the museum.

vi. On Re-evaluating the Role of the Curator

Having acknowledged the extent to which the role of the curator has changed in the past, it seems viable to consider the possible future of the curator for the Rapid Response Collection. Whilst Corinna Gardner has done a superb job in the overall objects acquired thus far, it seems wise to cast the net a little wider, employing a

technique which involves the engagement of those from a far wider variety of backgrounds. As such, the use of Social Media ought to be employed as an inexpensive way to reach a far wider pool of individuals than other more targeted methods might attempt. In extension from this, the idea of the curator as a collaborative role is one which the V&A could do well to develop upon, creating a sense of curation in which stakeholders have a clear and coherent understanding of their own place in the museum. As such, the V&As Rapid Response Collection seems the ideal space to endeavour to reform our conventional understanding of the curator.

vii. The Audience

It would not be proper in a thesis about museums to ignore the group who is arguably the most important – the audience. In apology for leaving them until last, they are given two chapters to themselves. The first of which focuses on the nature of the museum audience, something which is fundamental to the overall understanding of the collection. After all, an exhibition is only as good as those who go to see it.

In this chapter I began by introducing the concept of the *underrepresented* those who are not included in the museum discourse, not because they do not exist, but instead because they are excluded. I look to the two varying definitions of the *underrepresented*, considering the conventional 'disaudience' as those who do not visit the museum. Whilst this is an essential aspect of study, it is not in keeping with the definition I include in this Thesis, and I display a preference for the term as understood with regards to those represented in the collection.

I elaborate upon this under the term of 'Social Justice' with attention paid to the objects, which I feel specifically, encompass this (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). The Refugee Flag offers an excellent example as to how design can also exhibit a social conscience, displaying those who are often voiceless in the museum space. The exhibition of the Pussy Hat, a piece of protest fashion from the marches against the presidency of Donald Trump also indicates the way in which the V&A is not afraid to engage with the contentious political issues. Such an action is furthered by the choice to exhibit the Xbox controller, made for those who are not

able bodied, allowing them to play without the limitations posed by a standard controller. This is something, which ought to be applauded, in much the same way as the exhibition of the Tom of Finland stamps, a representation of the homoerotic as part of the everyday. Exhibiting pieces such as these extends the representation of the collection, and as such indicates a museum, which is endeavouring to be inclusive.

viii. On the Future of the Audience

The position of the audience is one which is now central to museology, if works such as Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* are anything to go by (Simon 2010). As such, the Rapid Response Collection ought to give due consideration to the way in which their exhibition reflects and includes audiences. With pieces such as the Pussy Hat, the Tom of Finland Stamps, or the Xbox Controller, it is clear to see that steps are being made so that the collection can be as inclusive as possible. However, it might be an intelligent next step for the collection to consider the way in which groups can be asked to speak for themselves – perhaps asking individuals how pieces of design reflect them. Once again, it seems the best possible conclusion for the museum to encourage the opinions of others in their space in order to demonstrate how the collection can be used to develop a sense of community in the museum space.

ix. Visitor Perspective

What better way to understand the perspective of the museum visitors than to use their own words? As such, I elected to consider the Social Media profile of the collection, looking to the publicly available information on the platforms of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I began by looking to the way in which the visitor experience is understood in the academic discourse, focusing on the work of Stephanie Moser and her article on *The Devil is in the Detail* (Moser 2010).

Further to this, I examined the public discourse on Facebook, Instagram, and most importantly Twitter. The feedback on the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive, and as such crystallises the public consideration of the collection as

being different from my prior analysis. Through using such techniques, I have hoped to offer a contrast between the work of academics on theory that can be applied to museums and the way in which the public considers collections. The way in which both groups interact which exhibitions such as this is indicative of the importance of considering museums from both a theoretical and from a practical sphere.

x. On the role of Social Media

With the Metropolitan Museum of Art hiring 70 Social Media Experts in 2015 (contently.com), it seems that Social Media is no longer a dirty word in the sphere of museology. Indeed, the tool is a gift, allowing for inexpensive and extensive engagement with audience who might otherwise be excluded. As such, it seems wise that the Rapid Response Collection continues to develop its social media influence, furthering their overall sphere of influence. With only 44 posts on Instagram at the publication of this thesis (one of which is my own), in spite of the collection's clear relevance, it seems that with a little more attention, the collection could rise to the top of the museum world with regards to its status.

The launching of a campaign to increase the overall profile of the collection is one, which seems advisable. One would expect a spectacular rebranding of the kind that fits with the V&As overall ability to market themselves.

7.3 Why should the Rapid Response Collection make changes?

The Rapid Response Collection is already a space, which serves to challenge the conventional understanding as to the role of older museums such as the V&A. Indeed, the establishment they come from a rich legacy of establishments, which have been at the forefront of museum change for some 160 years. In order to continue on this legacy of change and revolution, it seems wise that the museum endeavours to employ more modern techniques, especially those which allow the establishment to reach the largest possible audience.

7.4 Why is the Rapid Response Collection the perfect place to make these changes?

The Rapid Response Collection offers the perfect space for these changes to be made for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the collection is one which was built to be revolutionary. Indeed, it was created with the idea of developing the position of art and design in the modern world, and in turn could act as a figurehead for this kind of change in other collections of this kind. This coupled with the transparency of acquisition distinguishes it from its sibling collections.

In turn, whilst the museum has a bright future, it would be unhelpful to forget its past. After all, the museum is by Gardner's own admission 'long in the tooth' (Appendix A, 138) and as such has a relatively stable status. Indeed, it is one, which is acknowledged as bringing with it sufficient intellectual and historical clout that any change, which occurs here, has the potential to ripple throughout the museum world. The past and the present of this collection mean that its future has the potential to be unbelievably bright, and with this it seems that the Rapid Response Collection can affect and maintain longstanding and meaningful change, the kind of which any museum ought to be proud.

7.5 The end of the end

The Rapid Response Collection is one which is built upon strong and stable foundations, and as such the analysis in this thesis has been appropriately critical. With an understanding of its past, and an analysis of its present, it is my hope that this conclusion has acted as a suggestion for the space's future, with specific attention paid to the Social Media profile of the collection. A museum is only as good as its collections, and these are only as good as their audiences. The Rapid Response Collection's 5-year history has been illustrious, however, there is still much further for it to go.

Abstract

In 2014 the Victoria and Albert Museum unveiled a new branch of curation – the Rapid Response Collection. Intended to exhibit modern art and design, it offers a far cry from the initial collection of the museum, comprised largely from the 1851 Great Exhibition. The Rapid Response Collection prides itself on two key aspects – the first, the extent to which it offers a reflection of contemporary art and design. The second – the transparency of curation, with each and every artefact acquired also put on display.

This research is based on Pratt's concept of the *Contact Zone*, a theory which suggests that the donor and exhibitor of an object occupy different parts of a power structure, applying the theory to the exhibition as a whole, the objects independently, and the online profile of the exhibition. The next focal point is Appadurai's *Social Life of Things*, which suggests that objects have biographies independent to human entities. This is substantiated using a range of objects from the collection. Further to this, the impact of the curator is considered with regards to how an exhibition is curated through analysis of the work of O'Neill. This is supported with reference to my interview with Corinna Gardner, curator of the Rapid Response Collection from Sandell's perspective on the space of Social Justice in Museums. The final chapters focus on the status of the audience, considering first the way in which different groups who are often excluded from the narrative find a space in the Rapid Response Collection. The final chapter looks to the Social Media Profile of the collection, utilising Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to support this.

Overall, I note various successes of the collection, especially the representation of groups who are often excluded from the narrative, and the promising Social Media profile of the collection. I consider the way in which various changes, such as a renewed Social Media campaign, may increase the overall access and reputation of the collection.

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Appendix A

Transcription of Interview with Corinna Gardner 25th March 2019

Victoria and Albert Museum

Can you talk me through how the Rapid Response Collection came about?

So, I sit in the Design, Architecture and Digital department in early 2013 a group of curators was appointed to form a section within an already established collections department, Fashion and Textiles, and we were very much appointed with a remit looking for that design in society. So the V&A is the longest standing and largest design museum and as a new curator to a team of more than a hundred, the question might be how do I come to this work with a new and different approach, but also why or where might one consider how the practice of design has changed and how we feel we want to represent that within the institution? So that was Design and Society, but also, we have very brilliant curators collecting chairs or collecting pots, what else can I do? Particularly if you think there are 25 or so of us who have some reach into contemporary practice as a Curatorial Body and so it was how can we look beyond the walls of the museum to find out what designed things are resonating in public? And so, it was as much to say what are the design things that enable us within the institution to ask the pertinent or urgent questions of the day? So the aim was to bring in the modest, the popular, and things which are designed by those beyond the professional sphere, which is also reaching beyond an expanded definition of what design is.

I know that each piece is very different, you have the tile from Grayson Perry's Essex House, you have a Burkini, there's a great variety in that could you talk me through how do you go about acquiring a piece for the collection?

So, the most important thing, or quality, or characteristic of every object is its design and so it's very much the design of the object which has to be at the centre of the questions being asked. And so, you mentioned the Burkini, so we brought that object into the collection at a time when it was being contested in several court cases, in the courts of Southern France, and the beaches of Southern France, and it was there at a point when women were seeking to wear that garment and spending time on the beach and swimming and the legislature was seeking to ban its wear - so at that point in time the design of the object enabled us to ask questions about the changing demographics and the mass movement of people. The object within the collection was of interest to us for a variety of reasons - we are a national collection of Fashion and Textiles, so we have swimwear in the collection. It's an object that speaks of a desire for modesty - we also have that within our collection. It's also an object that talks about the female body as a site of legislation, which again also has a long tale of history. We have to be able to justify the acquisition of a Rapid Response Object in absolutely the same manner as any other acquisition, so it needs to have both a design narrative at the time of acquisition for Rapid Response, but then also a comfortable place within the frameworks of the collections, but also, if very contemporary, towards a purpose of this broader definition of design.

How do you see the Rapid Response Collection in relation to the rest of the museum collections?

So Rapid Response Collecting sits under my watch in our department, my colleagues and I have our own individual collections expertise, and Rapid Response sits alongside that. Every object is that of design, some of them are very modest, some of them less so, some of them are objects that without the museum acquiring them would be very hard to see them in public, the others are extremely

public, by bringing them into the museum you see them differently. The thing that is characteristic to Rapid Response and different to any other mode of acquisition in the museum is our curatorial action is public and transparent, so every object goes on display on entry into the institution, so you have a clear trajectory of my and my colleagues' work since we opened the gallery in July 2014. And that publicness of action is a key characteristic of Rapid Response as an acquisitions endeavour.

How might the V&A's overall curation policy shape what you can and cannot do with the collection?

It's a good question actually, I think the fact that we are long in the tooth, we have more than 160 year history and we are extremely broad in our collections which very much enables a broad approach but it's also what gives Rapid Response meaning because our past enables us to understand our present and think forward into our futures and Rapid Response sits within that nexus and finds purpose from that. I think if I reflect on the reactions and collaborations with my museum colleagues as peers; I think they are often surprised at the latitude I'm given within this work and the appetite for risk or indeed a sense of - what is it to fail when I'm making acquisitions? The current climate within museums is one of constraint and reducing resource and the idea of acquiring something which may not hold its value has a particular sense of risk. Rapid Response Collecting for many is very high risk in the sense they think the objects are being acquired in such a fleet afoot manner that actually that sense of whether they will stand the test of time is more a question that my absolute view is that I am working in the contemporary and shaping a contemporary history. If I am acquiring objects of the contemporary with a five- or ten-year distance, it's with the lens of history.

Do you think it is fair to refer to the collection as a 'contemporary ethnographic' one?

I mean there is absolutely an ethnographic inflection towards it, but I don't think the Rapid Response is operating in a vacuum, in the sense of if you look beyond

Rapid Response into broader museum practice across both the V&A and sector there is a greater interest and investment in context narrative and individual, and I think that is very much one which you can see in contemporary art. Many contemporary artists, their medium is context and so it's of our time but also I think you live in a world rich with digital media which also work on the basis of personal narrative and timeline which I think shapes a collective view on the world and museums, and curators don't operate in a vacuum, but in wider society. That's the case for artists, so whether I consider it to be ethnographic is a much broader question, certainly an investment in the individuals who make these design, or consume the objects is clear and if I look to the work of my colleagues, for example, who are working in periods of the past often when making collections displays they're search is for the object which makes the connection with the individual so in a sense Rapid Response has that quality to its approach of acquisition.

You mentioned in your Stanford Lecture that you would have been very interested in acquiring a ballot slip from the Scottish Independence Referendum, in retrospect, are there any other pieces that in retrospect would have been nice additions to your collection?

There are lessons learnt, objects that got away, and indeed a sharpening of understanding that is the design of the object that has to come first. And this is, you asked about ethnography, there is an interesting question and distinction hard all be it to make within social history and design. And I think examples of objects that have been suggested to us where we have said they are evidence of an interesting occurrence as opposed to able in their design able to raise a pertinent question, you might say Malala Yousafzai's school uniform, she wore at the time of the attack on her school bus is evidence of an occurrence, its making or its design or its form does not enable us to ask bigger questions. Another example would be a brick from the compound from which Osama bin Laden was assassinated, and again, interesting and with aura as that object might be, it is not an object of design in the terms of what I would want to bring in to the institution. Other objects that have got away, so you mentioned the ballot leaflet, and that was

the kind of economy of language and its design in terms of its graphics, another example might be an Aston Martin accelerator pedal which the company had to withdraw on the basis of their having inadvertently using counterfeit plastics, the nature of the counterfeit and the fake in today's society is a very charged and political questions there is no evidence that it was less or more safe, but it couldn't be verified, but you think about it as an object of distributed manufacture, but also one where a brand seeks to shape its identity through nationality, or Britishness, and then with an item which brings such sharp focus to the sense of global manufacturers is interesting to me.

Do you consider the geographical origin of a piece when making an acquisition?

I'd like to be more global in the work that we do. We're an institution which claims to be, and asserts to be, the leading museum of its kind in the world. If we have that global ambition, we need to demonstrate it in our acquisition, is my view. And Rapid Response has a particular character in the sense that it puts at question the idea that the design museum is solely there for the laudatory or contemporary design acquisition and I think often it might be considered that the Rapid Response is wagging fingers at changing rates of development elsewhere in the world which I think is a misunderstanding, but it's also an interesting way to think about the idea of globalisation, diverse or socially dynamic design and society.

Will there be an R.R. collection in the Dundee branch of the museum?

The answer to that is clear at present because Dundee is not an acquiring institution - it doesn't collect for itself. Rapid Response is a model of acquisition which a lot of my colleagues, nationally and internationally within the museum sector have looked at and there are other museums that in similar ways, adopted or adapted ways, seem to work in this model, but my colleagues across the departments here suggest objects for acquisition with Rapid Response – it goes beyond my team and department, but it's not yet one which has been franchised.

What relationship does this collection have to other R.R. collections, for example those in Ireland or Berlin?

Given that we only have 12 objects on display at any one time the practice and profile of Rapid Response punches well above its weight and I have consistently been in conversation of exchange between colleagues, nationally and internationally, about Rapid Response and its about thinking about design today, but also as much about the museum in contemporary society and it's that character, as much as how to acquire contemporary art and design, that has been the point of discussion and learning the sense of exchange as opposed to my proselytising.

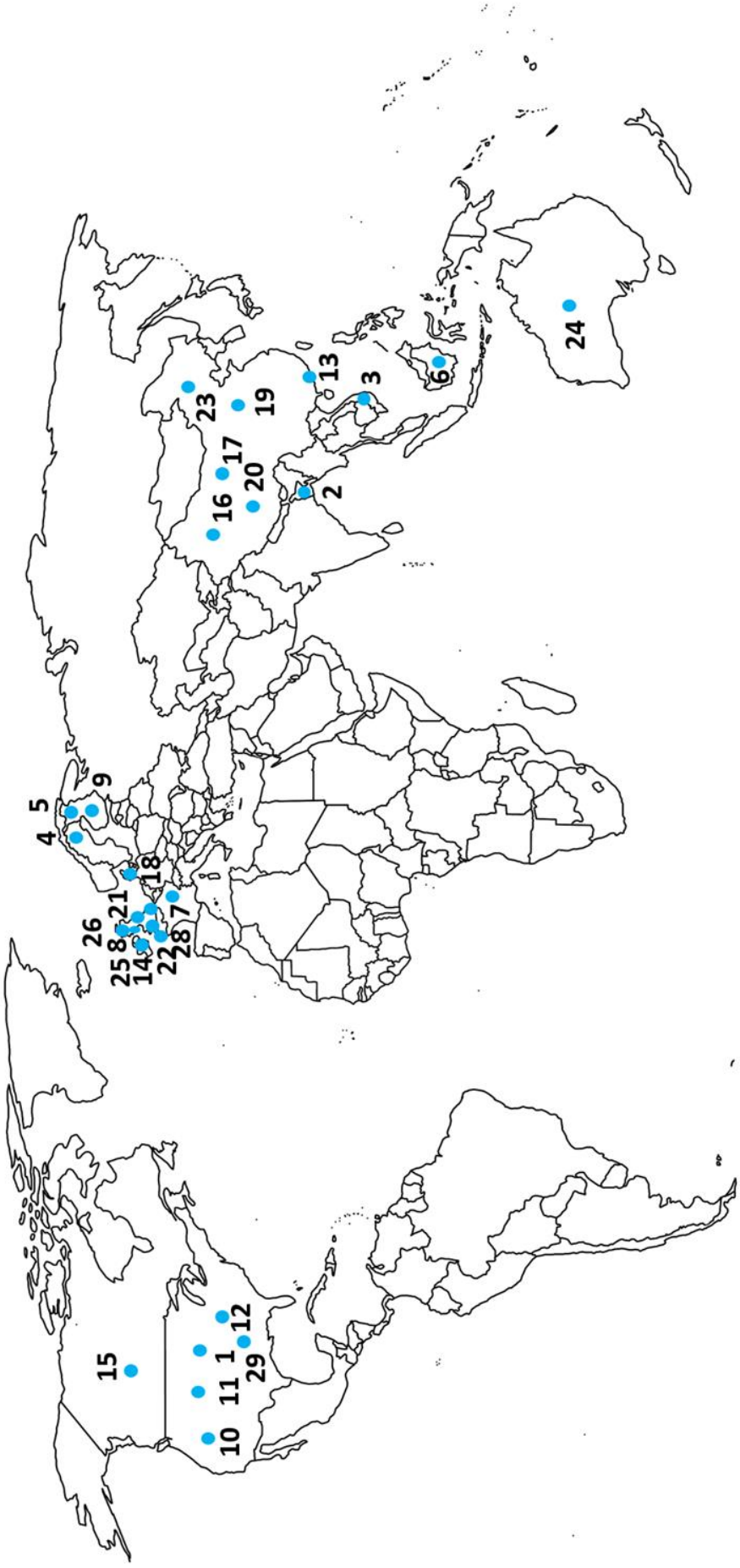
In what ways would you say the R.R. collection broadens representation in the museum?

I think that is an important quality of Rapid Response, I think design collections as a whole, and the museum here, the V&A is no exception, has so far been constrained to that particular authorship and geography. I often say my collections are like duty free shops, you see the same collection of objects in museums across the world and anything and everything that broadens an understanding of design, and in some ways I'm resistant to the definition of social design, I think all design should be social, and so that's where Rapid Response is striving toward a much broader or expanded understanding of what design is and how it shapes a role of how you and I live together.

What do you think Queen Victoria and Prince Albert would have thought of the R.R. collection?

Good question, one I've not been asked before (this question is incomplete due a technical error).

Appendix B



Key for Map

1. The Liberator, 3D printed hand gun, designed by Cody Wilson/Defence Distributed, manufactured by Digits2Widgets, 2013, US.
2. Trousers, retailed by Primark Stores Limited, 2013, Bangladesh
3. Flappy Bird, mobile application, programmed by Dong Nguyen, developed by GEARS Studios, 2014, Vietnam.
4. Lufsig, soft toy, designed by Silke Leffler, retailed by IKEA Limited, 2013, Sweden.
5. UltraRope, lift cable, KONE Corporation, 2014, Finland
6. Katy Perry false eyelashes, manufactured by Eylure, 2013, Indonesia.
7. Fifi shoes, Christian Louboutin Ltd, 2014, France
8. Vype Reload, electronic cigarette, CN Creative, 2014, UK
9. Tom of Finland stamps, made and retailed by Itella Posti Oy, 2014, Finland.
10. Oculus Rift, virtual reality headset, invented by Palmer Luckey, manufactured by Oculus VR, Inc., 2014, US.
11. Thermostat, Nest Labs, 2014, US.
12. WT41N0, wearable terminal, Motorola Solutions, 2013, US.
13. Umbrella, Umbrella Movement, 2014, Hong Kong
14. Architectural spikes, manufactured by Kent Stainless Ltd, 2014, Wexford, Ireland.
15. Personal Genome Service – v4 Ancestory Edition, personal genetic testing kit, manufactured for 23andme by DNA Genotel Inc., 2014, Ottawa, Canada
16. Mon Mon, soft toy, Dan Dan Man/1 more Design, 2015, China.
17. X-TIGI S18, mobile telephone, manufactured by X-TIGI, about 2010, China.
18. The Research Institute, Lego set, designed by Ellen Kooijman, 2015, Denmark.
19. Hello Barbie doll, designed by Mattel, Inc., developed by ToyTalk Inc, 2015, China
20. iPhone 6, designed by Apple Inc. 2014, China

21. Julie Tile for A House for Essex, wall tile, designed by Grayson Perry for FAT Architecture, 2015, UK.
22. Bolide HR handlebar, Pinarello Lab, 2015, UK.
23. Blackphone, SGP Technologies SA, 2014, China
24. Ahiida Modest-Fit Burqini, swimsuit, designed by Ahida Zanetti, 2004, Australia.
25. Vote Leave 'Help protect your local hospital', leaflet, designed and printed by The Printing Shed, 2016, England.
26. Zano, drone, Torquing Group, 2015, Wales.
27. Refugee flag, designed by Yara Said, commissioned by the Refugee Nation with the support of Amnesty International, Film Aid, Makers Unite and U-able, 2016.
28. Corbyn t-shirt, designed by Bristol Street Wear, 2017, Bristol, England.
29. Pussyhat worn at the Women's March in Washington on 21 January 2017, designed by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, co-founders of the Pussyhat Project and Kat Coyle, owner of Los Angeles yarn shop Little Knittery, knitted by Jayna Zweiman, 2017, US.
30. Xbox Adaptive Controller, developed by Microsoft.

Note: Objects 27 and 30 are not featured on the map due to the V&A Collection not noting their geographical origin in their catalogue.

Appendix C

Timeline of Acquisition for Rapid Response Collection
2013
The Liberator
Trousers
2014
Flappy Bird
Lufsig
UltraRope
Katy Perry Lashes
Louboutin's
Vype Reload
Tom of Finland stamps
2015
Mon Mon
X-TIGI S18
The Research Institute
Hello Barbie
iPhone 6
wall tile
Bolide HR Handlebar
Blackphone, SGP Technologies SA
2016
Oculus Rift
Learning Thermostat
WT41N0
Umbrella
Architectural Spikes
Personal Genome Service – v4 Ancestory Edition, personal genetic testing kit
Ahiida Modest-Fit Navy/Turqoise-ButterFly Ice/Silver Burqini
Vote Leav ct your local hospit e leaflet
Drone
Refugee Flag
2017
Corbyn
Pussy Power Hat
2018
Game console controller
2019