

Critical Theory and Practice in the Curation of Contemporary Design

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It is an interesting situation that within the growing academic discipline of museology, the emergence of issues focused on contemporary design and manufacture has, as yet, seen little published theory or research practice. My paper looks at work undertaken at The Design Museum in London and the Faculty of Art, Design & Music at Kingston University, to research the critical theory and methodology underpinning the practice of a very specialised area within museum practice: the curating and collecting of contemporary design.

During the three years between the time the MA in Curating Contemporary Design was first discussed and the graduation of first group of students in November 2002, more and more new museums and projects devoted to design and architecture have been established. Not only in the UK, but around the world, art galleries and museums are opening their doors with increasing frequency to exhibitions which encompass design, architecture and fashion. The global importance of new museums and exhibitions that attract tourists and visitors increasingly focus on the contemporary and the agenda of the contemporary has become increasingly more important, reflecting broadly on issues that explore national identity, even economic regeneration. Developments like this mean the possibilities and the venues for exhibitions involving design disciplines are richer than ever before. We are celebrating one such important project in Barcelona, a reflection of the growing interest in the cultural as well as the commercial importance of design.

It was the tremendous interest in the contemporary in the UK during the 1990s, that underpinned discussions with Paul Thompson, then Director of the Design Museum, now Director of the Cooper Hewitt, in which on the one hand we recognised the burgeoning focus on the contemporary (Gavin Wade's essays on issues focus on art installation rather than design) and on the other hand, a lack of curators trained to research and critically engage with the contemporary.

MA CCD title slide

The starting point for the MA is our belief that there is a growing demand for creative people who can curate, interpret and explain design culture and our aims were also to make a contribution to research and methodology underpinning curating in our field. I would like to discuss some ideas in progress which underpin the programme.

Our discussions focussed on the programme of the Design Museum acting as a kind of teaching laboratory for a new generation of curators and in September 2001 the MA in Curating Contemporary Design was launched, aimed at graduates who want to work not only in the field of curating design for museums but also the retail and commercial sectors. We set out to identify key research areas, to identify issues and questions that challenge contemporary design.

These key areas included

1. Mapping the history and historiography of the subject
2. To combine history and theory with professional practice to explore the field of contemporary design curating.
3. Identifying the important challenges and ideas facing design in the 21st century
4. To assess the impact of new technology
5. The importance of national identity and the impact of globalisation
6. New developments coming from design practice, including the move towards interdisciplinary or, what some people now refer to as, integrated design.
7. To document cutting edge practice within the growing number of newly established galleries and museums whose collections and agendas reflect these important shifts in contemporary visual culture.

The MA Curating Contemporary Design has two parallel but linked strands, History and Theory at Kingston and Professional Practice at the Design Museum. At the heart of the MA however is a course, Theory Of The Object, whose ideas overlap both areas. Theory of The Object is our attempt to map a theoretical investigation into the origins and character of the modern design museum from the 19th century onwards. To identify the distinct character of curating modern design by tracing its origins within the context of the 19th century museum to the 21st century 'musealisation' of everything'. It was from these debates that the way in which the collection and public display of contemporary design was defined. What we discovered was that there was little published research exploring innovative and creative practice from curators and theorists in the collection and public display of contemporary design. The historical map of contemporary design have not been consolidated in any formal method, offering only pockets of discussion and debate. But these ideas, indeed these displays should not be underestimated, they played an essential part in establishing the museum from the 19th century onwards as a central institution which helped to define our ideas of the modern era.

The methodology was to focus on the historiography of the subject and map out important critical writings. The first of which centred around the design reform debates at South Kensington in the 1850s, and the forces which brought into being a museum dedicated to the reform of taste and the collecting of a modern design. Known successively as the Museum of Manufactures (1852-6), the South Kensington Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum (from 1899) Anthony Burton's writings on the history of the V&A argues convincingly how this initial mission inspired the founding of many decorative art museums in Europe.

Museums in Prague, Stockholm and Berlin which went on to develop a much stronger theoretical base than the London museum which inspired them but whose approach was to be radically challenged at the end of the 19th century when an alternative theory for design and decorative art museums was championed by the American curator John Cotton Dana.

The inspirational figure for our field of contemporary design is undoubtedly John Cotton Dana (1856-1929) one of the key figures late 19th and early 20th century. In a series of seminal texts, Dana outlined a vision which rejected the European model towards treasure house collections and worked instead towards a distinctive and original American style at Newark Museum in 1920s. Central to his theories was his championing of the museum as an integral part of industrial society. but more importantly his notion that the museum served and defined community identity. This was the design museum with a mission –as reforming and educational, functioning as an intrinsic part of the community and serving that community.

He had, for example, a longstanding belief that museums in America should show American design. Dana's ideology centred round the idea of the museum as a workshop to educate the community about its own history, a view in opposition to his second book in which he roundly criticise the European model of the museum as temple.

Dana's ideas still impact on the critical and cultural concerns of contemporary design museology? The global importance of new museums and exhibitions is that attract tourists and visitors and increasingly focus on the contemporary. The agenda of the contemporary has become increasingly more important, reflecting broadly on issues globalisation, identity even economic regeneration.

A key case study, and an exemplar of the new diversity in acquiring the contemporary is the Collecting Now conference which Kingston organised jointly with the British Museum. Collecting Now explored the strategies underpinning the collection and display of the contemporary object through the case study of one of the most powerful museums in the world, the British Museum and opens up discussion of what has been considered a narrow field.

Collecting Now on March 8th 2003 at the British Museum was a conference to consider The British Museum's this museums little know policy, and mission for, collecting the modern with a brief to reflect more broadly on issues of globalisation, identity and the responsibilities of museum collectors. This mighty institution is better known for the glories of Egypt, Greece and Rome but the modern is a vital element of the museum. The British Museum has been acquiring the material culture of contemporary societies since its earliest history in the late eighteenth century. The challenge at the beginning of the twenty first century is how to select and how to present the products of so many increasingly fluid identities which as Frances Carey, Head of the museum's Modern Curator's Group described draws upon "recollected, sometimes imagined pasts, foreign media, symbols and languages, as well as apparently indigenous traditions". For the conference we chose case studies which reflect on issues of globalisation, identity and the responsibilities of museum collectors. The discussion focussed on different notions of the modern including The British Museum's most widely illustrated 20th century object, the tea-infuser designed by Marianne Brandt at the Bauhaus in 1924 asking the question - What makes an icon?

While other examples explored contemporary banknotes as a medium to disseminate and decode images of nationhood, with explorations of modernity and tradition in the work of Middle East artist Leila Shawa and others. Central Asian felts from Kyrgyzsta will touch on the issues of ethical collecting and intellectual property, and suggest bridges between contemporary collecting and British craft practice.

Locating the Contemporary: The Science Museum in London as a Case Study for New Practice.

For those of us who knew the Science Museum c.1991 it was usually as a place to avoid. The Science Museum has transformed itself not just into a museum that sets agendas for the now burgeoning culture of museum studies, purpose, function and use Crucial within this context are the proceedings of the museums Here and Now conference, edited by Carding and Farmelo 1997 which opened up, the whole debate of how science museums should tackle contemporary science and the follow-up publication, Museums of Modern Science, edited by Svate and Lindqvist 1999.

These publications highlighted a remarkable conversion from archaic Victorian temple to an institution whose use of design, display and technology is widely regarded as at the most radical in London. The focus may be on science issues but it is highly relevant to design.

The Science Museum is a rare thing in that it has specialised in the development of important creative partnerships, most notably for the new Wellcome Wing, in which the Museum matches its expertise with the talents of design teams who know how to collaborate. Casson Mann, of the V&A British Galleries and current Art Deco exhibition fame, are the best known examples but others include Chris Wilkinson and James Eyre, of Hulme and Gateshead bridges

The second was the Science Museum's determination to use the opportunity to tackle a major issue, the idea of a gallery without conventional objects. The fact is that the ideas, the inventions of the contemporary world of

science do not have objects to reflect the world of change. Or they are ineloquent black boxes or software programmes. How do you show people DNA, or the ideas of chaos theory or particle physics as conventional objects? Without objects to represent these ideas the museum had to revert to something else to create the memorable and that something else meant the museum looked to the world of art, the world of poetry and film to express and interact with the world of science. In this sense, the purpose, the function of the Science Museum's rationale cannot provide a model for other museum collections but it is an interesting direction for design. Museological innovations include the use of interactive displays that always derive from content and a new focus on audience feedback, in which visitor views are polled, documented and used as an ongoing information resource. People the Science Museum reminded us want to be involved.

Another museological approach interest to curators of design is the creative implementation of the Museum's longstanding commitment to integrate commissioned art projects within a science environment. It currently boasts more site specific commissioned art pieces in a non-art gallery space in the world. Why would a museum gallery commission art? The answer is simple it is another way of presenting interesting complex issues and to offer people another view. The Science Museum programme now in its seventh year has commissioned leading artists from Mark Quinn to Antony Gormley and a truly remarkable video sculpture installation from Gary Hill.

Integrated Design

Interdisciplinary work is a theme now at the heart of the new creative industries. Integration across design disciplines is at the heart of the new MA Curating Contemporary Design. The curation of design curating should and can cross disciplines to be at the centre of this new practice within the creative industries. It is a revolution in design practice which has still not been. I have used the term integrated design, it's called 360 Degrees, Interdisciplinary Design, even something identified as Pan Media. The ability to work across different design pathways is the way forward to compete in the changing global world.

Curating is an old style word –but it is a skill we believe is highly relevant to the increasingly important role of the creative industries within the UK and abroad.

The range of our students' backgrounds reflects the diversity of this changing world. They have come from the fields of design practice in architecture, graphics and fashion from traditional routes with first degrees in art and design history and from those already in work –looking to enhance their experience and qualifications. We are looking for graduates from practice, history and theory who can demonstrate an ability to work creatively and within a team.

The MA students have a range of interests and talents that is as broad as the field of design itself and that diversity is reflected in the topics for the course's dissertation ranging from: Government policy towards the creative industries, education for design museums, design museum web sites and the location of contemporary design shows within historical building.

The Kingston/Design Museum MA ambition is to excite young curators about these possibilities, by introducing them to some of the people most directly involved in the public presentation of contemporary design –through seminars, lectures and studio visits with exhibition designers, architects, product designers, theorists and curators and those involved in the promotion of British design overseas. A vision for the 21st century underpinned by a grounding in the history of design curating and in the practicalities of organising, interpreting and promoting design exhibitions. This year we have involved students with research projects at the Museum including Unseen Vogue, the Conran Design Collection and Philip Treacy exhibitions.

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