

A Museum Guide to
Chan's Cabinet of Curiosities (or your 15 minutes of fame)

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Abstract

My work involves the creation of an experimental space in order to explore how contemporary craft can be reframed within the artistic institution. In this space, a facilitated exchange of displayed objects will occur, where the audience will have the chance to participate in the development of my project. It is important to note that my work will carry itself out in exactly this order: theory, practical work, and then audience participation.

The initial decision to create this experimental situation, stemmed from my interest in challenging the traditions which define the artistic institution, especially in relation to craft. My paper will therefore be a method of contextualization and through the analysis of the institution, the craft object, and collecting practices, I will provide a background for why I believe, institutional experimentation should occur. The next phase of the project is practical work in the studio, where the original objects for this project will be created. The objects will be governed under the criteria of being either in ceramics or glass, and will be personally handmade, hand-chosen, and/or hand-altered, all serving as a statement of contemporary craft, seen through the eyes of a student/craft-practitioner/artist living in Sweden from 2009-2011. The last part of the project will take place after the examination, when audience participation occurs. The interactivity of my work and subsequent action of exchange will not only readjust my vision of contemporary craft, but it will also serve as a model of how material culture can shift based on contributory democracy.

Through my work, my main aim is to challenge the potential of many things- from the definition of craft and its contemporary representation, to the formation of material culture, to the role of the artistic institution, to the democratization of art and trust in audience participation. My hope is that many questions surrounding these topics will be answered, but also that many more questions will be raised.

Introduction

This paper is not meant to be read through in the conventional sense. It will not make sense if one were to read it from cover to cover, in chronological order.¹ It is meant to reflect the way one navigates through a museum: our eyes jump from object to object, our minds from thought to thought. Sometimes we skip or overlook what doesn't interest us. Sometimes we walk in circles and go back to certain objects that catch our eye.

This paper should be viewed as a museum guide that corresponds to its accompanying project. It focuses on you as the representative audience member, who can choose to go from point A to point C. Please navigate through this paper in the same manner. This is a short story where through text and reflection, one can personally experience my cabinet of curiosities.

¹ For the sake of readability, it is highly recommended that you print the entire thesis out for a more convenient reading experience.

Welcome to Chan's Cabinet of Curiosities

You walk into a room with four white walls. It is like a typical art space, conventional, pristine, devoid of external context. It is a space for the exhibition of objects. It feels as if you have been somewhere like this before. This particular room is a little different, however. The walls are lined with wooden shelves that run perpendicularly from ceiling to floor. On every shelf there are objects. Not just a few random objects here and there, but row upon row, are objects on every shelf, maybe even a hundred. They are placed like the prized trophies that usually grace other art spaces, with plenty of surrounding white wall space for contemplation. The objects in this room ask the viewer to interpret them differently though. There is a sense of grandiosity, of wonder in the sheer amount of objects that fill the room. It's almost claustrophobic in a sense, as the objects although inanimate, seem to overcrowd the room. You stand in the middle of the organized chaos, letting your eyes drift from object to object. There is something else about this room that is different, and you focus your attention on the artist's chosen objects. There is a sense of materiality that surrounds you. It is like conceptual art, but with a flavour of handicraft to it. And although not everything is handmade, many of the objects are. And everything is either made from ceramics or glass.

Something in your mind clicks. You look again at the project. Visually, it is as if a secondhand store, an artisan's studio and an art gallery have met and time has suspended them at a crossroad. The styles are a mish-mash of random colours and themes and the only common ground that they share is in materiality. You scan the walls for an explanation and feel a sense of relief when your eyes find a white placard to rest upon. You walk towards it, and it reads:

Welcome to Chan's Cabinet of Curiosities (or Your 15 Minutes of Fame)

*We hope that you will enjoy what you see! If you really like what you see and want to own one of the objects, well now you can. Everyday from **14.00 – 14.30**, we will be opening our cabinet doors to the public. All you have to do is replace the ceramic/glass object that you take with a ceramic/glass object that you own. It is best if they have corresponding values (ie. one object's worth is equal to the next).*

If you would like to participate in another way, we are holding events everyday right here, throughout the Spring Exhibition. Please refer to this schedule for the times of the events.

May 18th @ 14.00 Fika and trade

May 19th @14.00 trade, 15.00 guided tour

May 20th @14.00 trade, 15.00 workshop

May 21st @14.00 trade

May 22nd @14.00 Fika and trade

May 23rd @14.00 trade, 15.00 special guest talk

May 24th @14.00 trade, 15.00 guided tour

May 25th @14.00 Fika and trade

May 26th @14.00 trade, 15.00 work shop

May 27th @14.00 trade

May 28th @14.00 trade, 15.00 guided tour

You take a step towards one of the shelves and as your mind begins to fire questions of why? what? how?...

1. *You notice strange looking graffiti on a vase... (turn to page 3)*
2. *A teacup catches your eye... (turn to page 4)*
3. *You want to know how you can earn 15 minutes of fame... (turn to page 7)*
4. *You overhear someone saying, "This has been done before..." (turn to page 5)*
5. *You decide to leave... (turn to page 6)*

You notice what appears to be strange looking graffiti on the bottom of a classical blue and white vase, turned onto its side. It looks as if somebody has come in to knock porcelain's status off of its pedestal, defacing the preciousness of the ceramic object by contaminating its pure white face with black plebian scrawl.

Your curiosity is piqued and you take a step closer. You were right, it is vandalism, but purely in a DuChampian sense.



Work in progress. Vivian Chan's studio. 2011-03-11.

What has happened? What is this? Is this still a vase? Clearly it has been altered enough so that it no longer is like the other vases that belong to the official category of "vase-ship".

So you ask yourself:

- 1. What has changed? What is this thing? (turn to page 15)*
- 2. What does this mean? (turn to page 22)*

There is a particular teacup that catches your eye. Its delicate porcelain has been enhanced by a romantic motif of flowers.



Blue Vintage Rose Porcelain Teacup¹

You walk closer to the cup and stand there, staring at it and reminiscing about your grandmother and what this teacup stands for. Perhaps it is not your grandmother, but your friend's grandmother. Or "the grandmother", who collects porcelain tea services and locks them away in her ancient wooden cupboard, only to unearth her collection when the rare visitor arrives. It is this teacup that tea or coffee is served in; rendering temporary function for the single object that usually is only seen as a part of the greater collection. It is a collection that not only stands for a gathered assortment of porcelain service-ware, but also represents social class, taste, and background.

This teacup here has been ripped out of its original context. It is not sitting in the grandmother's wooden cupboard, amongst its brothers and sisters as an "official set". It has been transformed from being a teacup into being a "thing", a mere component in a different type of collection. Its role shifts and it is now in a collection of craft objects, which stand to represent: an art project within an art institution, an example of contemporary craft, and a model of material culture.

You ask yourself:

- 1. How will this tea cup further transform itself? What does it stand for and how can I contribute? (turn to page 7)*
- 2. So what is this teacup exactly? What is this "thing"? (turn to page 15)*
- 3. How can I even relate? I grew up using mismatched tableware. We weren't collectors... (turn to page 9)*

¹ Blue Vintage Rose Porcelain Teacup. <http://food-and-drink-pictures.blogspot.com/2010/02/blue-vintage-rose-porcelain-teacup.html>

Two people enter the room behind you. They stop near you to look at the objects.

"I like it," you hear one of them saying.

The other person clearly disagrees. You can hear it in the tone of the voice. "But I think this has been done before."

You don't mean to eavesdrop, but now your interest has been piqued. You look more closely at one of the objects and think:

1. *Didn't she steal the idea of the interactive museum space? (turn to page 25)*
2. *Is this really a white-cube space? It looks a bit off-white... (turn to page 11)*

You turn around and you decide that this is enough, for now. The room is overwhelming. You think you understand why the artist has decided to create this project. It seems to be a form of experimentation that questions the potential of many things- from the definition of craft and its contemporary representation, to the formation of material culture, to the role of the artistic institution, to the democratization of art and trust in audience participation.

You also feel a little curious about the transformation of the craft objects in Chan's Cabinet of Curiosities. You think to yourself that you might even participate. What will happen to the object that you take? Who was its former owner and maker, and what new meanings will you imbue into the new object? And who will replace your object with another one? Will they be of equal value? What will this new owner think and do with his/her object?

How will this project carry itself out? Will any of it work? Only time can tell. As a model of material culture and institutional experimentation, time here plays an important role. As Lind suggests, "a model can be understood as something simultaneously real and fictional; it is concretely physical, and often has a function or semi-function while it is at the same time a representation. As a prototype, a model can be made to test an idea, and it can compare and evaluate by being made into smaller, larger, or equal scales. This projective quality of the model as a rhetorical figure makes it particularly suitable for speculative approaches, for work that asks questions or starts a process in order to discover something that was not previously known."¹

How will material culture and the representation of contemporary craft shift in the setting of Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design? Which questions will be answered and which questions will be raised?

Stay tuned for part 2 of the exciting transformation of Chan's Cabinet of Curiosities and find out what happened to your 15 minutes of fame!²

To be continued...

¹ Lind, 2010, p. 94-95.

² Documentation and reflection of the project after its transformation during the Spring Exhibition will be attached at a later date. This information will also be accessible after the exhibition, online at: <http://www.15minutes.vivianchan.de>

How to gain your 15 minutes of fame or The definition of the craft object in my own terms

In an interview with Christina Zetterlund (former curator of Gothenburg's Röhsska Museum of Design and Decorative Arts), questions around craft and its representation were inexplicitly asked. From this conversation, one particularly vivid image struck me and has remained with me ever since. It is the image of craft being one of Cinderella's sisters. In our discussion, Zetterlund posed the hypothetical question: What does craft have to cut off in order to qualify within the art discourse?

The hierarchal order that craft feels, where it is always inferior to art, where it must continuously justify its existence, has been the subject of many discussions. Craft is something that most, if not all of us have touched at some point in our lives. The very word conjures up notions of making and function. It calls attention to the skill and the beauty of hand-made processes. At the same time, "craft is something that [...exists] everywhere and nowhere."¹ It can be found within our homes (weaving itself in and out through our everyday lives), in artistic institutions (think investigative craft in art universities, temporary and permanent collections in museums and galleries), in commercial settings (from craft fairs and small-scale gallery-type shops like Blås och Knåda in Stockholm, to large-scale corporations like IKEA), and even online (think DIY sites, Etsy, and blogs on craftivism).

The act of making is not just "present in the area labelled craft, but in so many areas of our society"². Craft should therefore be recognized for its interrelationship with material culture: it not only produces material culture (and the objects which surround us), but also reflects upon it. In reference to craft being one of Cinderella's sisters, this answer was given in context to a question asked about how contemporary craft is exhibited today. In her answer, Zetterlund says that she would like to see more scenes taking an experimental approach to how craft is communicated. The problem that craft often faces, is that it has difficulty in being able to define exhibition spaces without going through art or being interpreted by art. The choreography of how craft is navigated (in comparison to how art is navigated) is completely different. The discourse of reflection and criticality that the art community spends on "art objects" isn't spent on everyday objects. And when the materiality of craft isn't highlighted or discussed in an exhibitionary context, then craft becomes demoted to just being "weak art".³

But what if we ignore all of this and not allow "envy to kill [...] craft", as Garth Clark puts it, and do as he says, admit that craft is dead, take its remains and re-give it life?⁴ What if we choose to forget craft's "inferiority complex" and take Clement Greenberg's advice to heart and instead, be more concerned with achievement, rather than opinion?⁵ What if we were to temporarily ignore the background debates and silent hierarchies that devalue craft and for a moment, not divide the art, craft, and design fields? Instead of thinking that there is only one art, one craft, and one design, what if we turn things around and envision the possibility of having many arts, many crafts, and many design fields, overlapping and informing one another? "Art sometimes needs a special room of pretending to make things

¹ Christina Zetterlund interview, 2011-02-28.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Clark, 2008.

⁵ In 1979, during his keynote address for the Ceramic Art Foundation's first international conference, art critic Clement Greenberg said to the assembled delegates, "You strike me as a group that is more concerned with opinion than achievement."

happen and to create dialogue,”⁶ says Zandra Ahl (professor of the ceramics and glass department at Konstfack, University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm). What is considered and justified as contemporary art is often highly dependant upon the institution. So let us take this and “craft’s death”⁷ and use this situation to our advantage. Craft will never be equal to art; it is different, because craft has different methods of becoming alive. Its non-art status should be viewed positively, as it enables craft to push boundaries differently; there is more room to negotiate what it can be within and outside the institution.⁸

So finally, what is craft to me as a maker and how can you, as an audience gain your “15 minutes of fame”? I want my rules to be simple. I want you to trade one craft object for another. In this case, I would like the object to either be mainly made in ceramics or glass. It should feel like it carries a tradition of making- whether in form, decoration, technique, or function. It should look like it has the potential to tell a story. I want my audience to recognize that we are co-participants in creating my Master project, so there should be care in how objects are handled, perceived and traded. The method of democratic contribution in my Master project should reflect the fact that we all have an equal say in how or what is contributed to our present day material culture.

Basically, if it feels like you can trade it because it is a craft object, then it is a craft object.

You think you begin to understand a little bit better, so you... (turn to page 2)

⁶ Zandra Ahl interview, 2011-02-10.

⁷ Clark, 2008.

⁸ *ibid.*

I grew up using mismatched tableware. We weren't collectors... right? or A definition of collecting and collections

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, collecting is defined as an action, which “bring[s] people or objects] together into one body or place; gather[s] or exact[s] from a number of persons or sources; gather[s] an accumulation of objects especially as a hobby.”¹ Wikipedia’s page on collecting states that collecting is a “hobby [which] includes seeking, locating, acquiring, organizing, cataloguing, displaying, storing, and maintaining whatever items are of interest to the individual collector.”² Even from the beginning, our attempt of reaching a formal definition of the word “collecting”, yields the description of a word that is attached with a surrounding context of methods and reasons for the specific action.

One of the first theorists to define collecting is Walter Durost, who in his book on children’s collecting activity, writes that “a collection is basically determined by the nature of the value assigned to the object.” According to him, if the predominant value of collected objects for the person is intrinsic (valued primarily for use, purpose, aesthetically pleasing qualities), then it is not a collection. If the predominant value is however, representational (valued for the relation it bears to other objects and ideas), then it is the subject of a collection.”³ For Russell Belk, a researcher and professor of marketing, collecting is a “selective and active, acquisition”. It is a “possession and disposition of interrelated sets of differential objects (whether material or immaterial), that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning.”⁴

It should be noted here, that in searching for a definition of collecting, we should realize that this simple act of “gathering objects” is much more than a mere “hobby”, (as the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Wikipedia claim it to be). It is instead an action imbued with meaning, more akin to a complex form of consumption, where objects stand for more than they appear and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. According to Belk, who classifies collecting into multiple dimensions of how collections can be organized, labelled, and displayed⁵, display appears to be of great importance to the collector. How a collection is displayed (within the home or within the artistic institution) is a direct reflection of the ideas and values of the collector. The collection serves as an extension of the self; while our post-modern consumerist society demands constant self-identification and categorization, our sense of self-definition is oftentimes dependant upon our possessions. We are who we are based on the clothes we wear, the car (or lack of car) we drive, the restaurants and concerts we visit, and the way we decide to furnish our homes, etc. Likewise, museums build collections which define their image. One can look at the kinds of “ideas that are staged” in the temporary exhibition of a museum, in comparison to those in the permanent collection.⁶ The display of a collection represents the collector’s taste and judgements. It is exhibited for others to see and approve of, whether it is the permanent collection of Swedish 18th and 19th century paintings in the National Museum of Stockholm, or in a collection of fine vintage wines, exotic travel stories, or even the accumulation of friends on popular social-networking websites, such as Facebook.

A collection in any shape and form requires time and effort in order to keep it organized and intact. In a symbolic sense, one could even say that while the collection gives the collector

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collecting>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collecting>

³ Durost, 1932, p. 10.

⁴ Pearce, 1994, p. 158.

⁵ Pearce, 1994.

⁶ Christina Zetterlund interview, 2011-02-28.

something (an identity), the collector also gives back by putting him/herself into the collection through its necessary maintenance. Keeping a collection alive, in turn gives life to the character of the collector; the collection helps to define the collector by fulfilling his/her fantasies and helps develop the collector's sense of mastery, constructing meaning and purpose into the collector's life.⁷

So you grew up using mismatched tableware: it was a mixture of ceramic, plastic, and glass wares with an assortment of different styles and motifs, stemming from different countries. Your grandmother didn't own a porcelain tea service and you don't know anyone who does. So what does this mean?

It means that it was a collection of mismatched tableware, a collection nonetheless. We surround ourselves and live everyday life through functional objects. It is these objects, as background supporters of our daily existence, which make up our material culture. We curate the material culture that we live in, choosing and discarding certain objects daily, for whichever reasons. "The everyday destabilizes the agreements we have on aesthetics, on quality"⁸ and what qualifies or doesn't qualify as an object that "works" or is "good enough". So who is it that "defines what should be represented in craft books and museums? There are several ceramic objects that will always be shown in every design book, but what about all the other cups and plates that a lot of people are using?"⁹ It is therefore important to think about whose meaning-making will be represented in the present and the future, and whose will be left out.

You think to yourself:

- 1. What does she mean by material culture... (turn to page 22)*
- 2. This still doesn't explain why people collect things... (turn to page 29)*
- 3. I don't want to be left out in meaning-making!.... (turn to page 17)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

⁷ Pearce, 1994, p. 317.

⁸ Christina Zetterlund interview, 2011-02-28.

⁹ *ibid.*

Her cube is off-white
or What is the artistic institution?

In our minds eye, many of us tend to associate “real” art spaces with the white cube. Within this white cube, are unwritten rules and prescribed behaviours; signs outside the museum doors depict lines drawn harshly through ice cream cones, cameras, mobile phones and dogs. This means no eating, no picture taking, no talking and no animals: pictograms, which translate across all cultures demand silent comprehension as we are expected to respect this quasi-religious atmosphere. Nobody is allowed to touch anything, laugh, cry, and of course, nobody talks loudly.

This was not always the case however, as the institutional art space comes and passes under the eye of scrutiny time and again throughout art history. According to art historian Charlotte Klonk, the museum was once a widely accessible public space for “romance and lived physicalities” in the late 18th century. This is evident in Hermann Schlittgen’s *Kunst und Liebe*, a caricature where among other figures; a man is depicted flirting with a young woman, while the woman’s mother sleeps on a sofa in the background. He appears a little apprehensive at first, but the woman reassures him that her mother will continue to sleep soundly.¹



Giuseppe Gabrielli. *The National Gallery 1886, Interior of Room 32*²

Documentation shows that people visited the National Gallery in London shortly after it opened up in Trafalgar Square in 1838; they brought their animals and children to have picnics and discussions. The museum was an alternate option to the park on rainy days, and provided a space for meeting people, exchanging ideas, and other public activities. Not only

¹ Klonk, 2009.

² Giuseppe Gabrielli. *The National Gallery 1886, Interior of Room 32*.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giuseppe-gabrielli-the-national-gallery-1886-interior-of-room-32>

was the use of the museum space different, but the design and interior décor of the museum wasn't always white either. Before the First World War, it was popular to show art pieces against strong colour backgrounds that would contrast the dominant colours of the displayed paintings, so that the artworks would stand out. The Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany for example, hung German Expressionist paintings that exhibited heavy black outlines against a white background, while a painting by Rembrandt would be shown against a different colour backdrop. Period furniture and objects were also placed near the artworks in order to help contextualize the paintings and create the "appropriate" setting.³

Changes started to slowly occur however, during the 1920s, when colour theorists, psychologists, businesspeople and artists started to influence the interior design of the exhibition space. Discussions about white being a colour that connotized notions of purity and infinite space started to surface. Artworks were given an increasing amount of space, hung at eye level and radically, in a single row. Patterned and coloured wallpapers started to disappear, as well as surrounding furniture and objects. It was through this gradual shift in interior decor and room layout of the museum space, did the concept of the white cube begin to slowly take form and become standardized. And when the Museum of Modern Art in New York had their first exhibition inside the white cube in 1930, every other gallery followed suit.⁴

Questioning the origin and history of the white cube also inevitably brings into question the activities that occur within the space of the white cube. What other conventions do we accept and follow unquestioningly? The format of the temporary display was introduced in Italy and Paris in the 1600s, in which artworks would be displayed for 6-12 weeks. This was introduced and established in connection with the exhibitions of London, "at a time when the city sought to compensate for the fastidious nature of its collections by ensuring frequent temporary displays."⁵ Now it has become a standard framework of time for museums to follow, changing their exhibitions every 6-12 weeks and ignoring the necessary in-between time for critical reflection and/or audience response.⁶

Our behaviour within the museum has also changed drastically, from the 18th century museum space, which Klonk describes, to the pristine, religious environment of the 21st century.⁷ According to Tony Bennett, this is due to the "exhibitionary complex", which explains how the museum public is constituted and encouraged to behave. It begins in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, when public punishment in Europe (which used to be a source of mass entertainment) migrated to spaces behind closed doors. Human bodies and objects that were related to punishment were now placed in museum spaces, open to the public. It became possible for the masses to gain knowledge through inspecting the exhibited items. People became subjected to knowledge that was administered through various regulations and systems of the institution, while at the same time, this knowledge opened up an arena for engagement and possible change. The exhibition became a space that allowed people to exercise self-regulation through self-observation while being entertained; people visited museum spaces to be educated and be seen doing so, while observing others and him/herself.⁸

³ Klonk, 2009.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Lind, 2010, p. 137.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Klonk, 2009.

⁸ Bennett, 1995.

Although the institution has evolved throughout history, it has always held onto its reputation as “instrument or platform for the prevailing order of social values.”⁹ In all of its many guises, it still functions steadfastly to guide society through a logical structure of certain actions and behaviours. It functions as “a collectively accepted system of rules (procedures and practices) that enables us to create institutional facts.”¹⁰ Therefore, in an ideal situation, society and the institution would give each other the structure and the mutual potential for action that both require in order to promote and sustain democratic values. In reality however, as Nina Möntmann writes, there is often a “side effect of bureaucracy, hierarchal paternalism, exclusion and generalization that comes into play.”¹¹

The artistic institution, although formally an institution, operates distinctly from the other institutions (ie. state authorities, trade unions etc.) in that art spaces aren’t given direct participation in the political processes of society. Instead, they are given indirect commissions to produce images of realities that are easier for the mass public to consume. They are expected to create escapist environments and parallel universes for entertainment purposes. According to Möntmann, artistic institutions however, have the advantage of having a changeable profile (ie. the museum director can stay within certain boundaries, while at the same time, change the program direction completely). They also benefit in having a subversive social potential (ie. other institutions are required to regulate and legitimize certain hegemonic social forms, while art spaces are allowed to challenge these hegemonies.)¹²

One should however, stop and ask the question: Who takes advantage of the unique position that artistic institutions have?

While large museums that have secure budgets and broad social recognition “prosper” financially and socially, they must also appeal to a broader and more diverse public with “necessary exhibitions”. Large institutions like the Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm for example, whose “main objective is to illustrate and offer an active platform for architecture, design and sustainable urban development”¹³ might aim to provide this platform for all disciplines, with an ideal goal of catering to both architects and the public, 50/50. Reality often dictates necessity however, especially nowadays, when it is often the case that the number of its visitors equates the worth of a museum. Here, the Swedish Museum of Architecture is no different. Its programming must focus on the larger public, so that instead of a 50/50 focus on architects to the public, the figures are more like 30/70. How critical one can really be within such a space also becomes problematic. According to Magnus Ericson, (sakkunnig form och design) of the Swedish Museum of Architecture, “We need to always think about how an audience might read the exhibition. The goal is also to create a space for discussion and to generate critical dialogue, but this is difficult, as public institutions have to be neutral.”¹⁴

With large museums under fire, we have on the other side of the spectrum, less “official” and smaller galleries, which pioneer experimental projects and propose social change. They are the ones that address an alternative public and end up becoming what Möntmann terms as “wild children”. As wild children, these types of institutions operate more closely to artists

⁹ Möntmann, 2008.

¹⁰ Searle, 2005. p. 21.

¹¹ Möntmann, 2008.

¹² *ibid*.

¹³ http://www.arkitekturmuseet.se/english/about_the_museum/

¹⁴ Magnus Ericson interview, 2011-02-11.

and their practices, rather than directly with governmental instructions and regulations. The wild children also differ in that, without private corporate interest, they oftentimes have problems with financing. There is little interest in supporting artistic institutions that cannot give back in a way that “counts” in a contemporary society (ie. the effective production of mass images and revenue from a paying mass public).¹⁵

So where do we go from here? After a quick whirlwind tour, jumping through different points in history, we are back where we were, within the white cube. Although there have been small deviations along the way, the artistic institution has developed for the most part, in a fairly linear manner. Its “entrenched modes of viewing” have remained the same, and there has been “little challenge to individual contemplation, and certainly no departure from the idea of the spectator as consumer”.¹⁶

The institution is weighted down by its past and its politics; its standards and interior architecture have been designed and re-designed. But in the end, it has always suitably performed as “a space of public interaction and communication [...allowing people to explore] issues relating to human social interaction.”¹⁷ One can therefore interpret this optimistically, and think about the scope of change that an institutional space can provide. Artistic institutions are unique from other institutions in that they also host activities, which can define and re-define our (and the building’s) identities.

So you wonder:

1. Besides from being just a museum, what else can an art institution be?

(turn to page 19)

2. Didn’t she steal the idea of the interactive museum space? Is this her solution to the alternative institutional space? (turn to page 25)

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

¹⁵ Möntmann, 2008.

¹⁶ Klonk, 2009, p.222.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

What is this thing?! **or What is the craft object?**

When one searches for meaning behind the “thing”, there are a number of approaches that one can take. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “thing” as “a product of work or activity; the concrete entity as distinguished from its appearances; an inanimate object distinguished from a living being”¹ amongst many other definitions. Psychoanalytic theory relation to the “thing” is that object relations are what help to explain our idea of identity formation. For sociologists, “things” are the physical manifestation of culture; for anthropologists, “things” are the objectification of social relations.²

Things, in the sense of being inanimate objects surround our environment and our daily lives. They exist unobtrusively and escape our attention until they are called into use, defining the world physically- whether through being a cup that holds liquid in order to quench our thirst, to being a wall that demarcates the boundaries, which separate space.³ Things play an important role in mediating the link between a person and an object, providing actions of exchange and meaning making between person to object, and person to person. They give a sense of direction as to how people can relate physically to each other within their surrounding environment, while creating material evidence that reflects a certain sense of cultural and individual identity. But what or where is the “thingness” in the “thing” that gives it such power?

In his paper on “The Thing” (originally delivered as a lecture), Martin Heidegger questions the essence of the “thing” by analyzing the ceramic jug. He searches for meaning behind the object by comparing the representative idea of the jug to the actual physical manifestation of the jug, and asks how we can truly know what an object is, when we experience it only within certain frameworks. Here, there is little difference between the actual object and the idea of it. Even if one were to recognize the jug (whether real or imaginary) as being an object that has a function and a form and say that it is made of a particular material, the qualities that create the jug’s fundamental essence of being a jug remain a mystery. His conclusion is that the jug’s essence (or “thingness”) does not lie in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds it. When the maker creates the jug by shaping clay and bringing forth an object into empty space, he/she shapes the void. For Heidegger, an object’s “thingness” exists only in relation to its surrounding environment. The jug shapes the surrounding void and is in turn shaped by it.⁴

Does this mean that all “things” being shaped by the same void, are therefore equal in value and power? The implication of a democratization of objects seems a little far-fetched, as common sense can inform us that a ceramic jug does not equal an abstract painting. Nor does it equal a car or a marble sculpture. It would be naive to say that an intrinsic sense of hierarchy is nonexistent here, as we cannot help but mentally compare values based on notions of uniqueness (and rarity), skill (whether an object has been machine-made or handmade- and by whose hand?), and materiality. Where does “thingness” of craft come in then, and what is the “craft thing”? According to R.G. Collingwood, “craft things” are clearly separate from other “things”, in particular, “art things”. He forms a specific set of criteria that distinguishes art from craft, the most important being that the difference lies in between “planning and execution”, such that the “result to be obtained [in craft] is preconceived or

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thing>

² Attfield, 2000.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Heidegger, 1971.

thought out before being arrived at.”⁵ The craftsman produces objects of function and “knows what he wants to make before he makes it”⁶; he is able to predict an outcome, which through a learned skill, produces a preconceived result. This outcome then results in practical objects, which are devoid of all other purpose or meaning. On the other end of the spectrum, art differs in that it expresses emotions, which craft cannot. He ignores the fact that art and craft often overlap in practice and goes on to say that art, unlike craft, adeptly explores the possibilities of articulating a feeling and the greater unknown.⁷

For Collingwood, craft is a necessary, but not sufficient part of art making. The idea that craft consists of nothing more than technique and function, and is devoid of thought or social status is interesting, in that according to this definition, craft as pure method and technical skill, should then in all aspects be equalized. But it is not. We do not attribute the same level of craftsmanship to a machine that can produce well-made ceramic mugs, as we do to a potter sitting at his/her wheel producing a similar “product”. Nor can we separate “well-designed” pieces of architecture (which may be referred to as “art”), from their basic function as being a building with an obvious utilitarian value. Some other examples of artworks that challenge Collingwood’s division of art and craft, are Meret Oppenheimer’s fur-lined cup (*Objet (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*), Marcel DuChamp’s urinal and Grayson Perry’s vessels. Where is the line that draws the difference between craft and art, and why can’t craft objects evoke emotion and “explore the greater unknown”, while performing their utilitarian purpose at the same time? It seems therefore, that it is neither the technique, the function, nor the materiality of an object, that makes an object a “craft object”, but its surrounding context. As Alison Britton writes, “the first vessels to use clay are thought to have been woven reed containers plastered with a layer of sticky clay to make them waterproof. Even in this there is an ambiguity between pot and basket. Being a vessel is not very demanding. Once the functional requirements of holding are fulfilled, there is still plenty of room for interpretation and variety of outer form.”⁸ Today, meaning seems to take priority over materiality, when craft objects come into focus and are analyzed. Whether it is in the traditional artistic institution, the antiques shop, the dinner table or even IKEA, the objects do not have to have passed a “good design” test in order to qualify as a viable subject for investigation.⁹

Because the relative value of different objects is “determined within a discourse of art and aesthetics”¹⁰, it becomes difficult to determine what type of objects could legitimately be categorized as falling under the heading of craft. In the context of the everyday, our visual encounter with everyday objects evades and distorts the intended sign-value of an object and becomes an insignificant and direct act of consumption. Craft then becomes a “secondary form of fine art”¹¹, represented here and there, yet elusive of a singular definition.

And so you think:

1. *How does the artist here define the craft object? (turn to page 7)*
2. *This doesn’t make any sense. So what exactly is the object? What does it mean and how does it hold meaning? (turn to page 22)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

⁵ Collingwood, 1938, p. 418.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Britton, 1982, p. 442.

⁹ Thakara, 1988.

¹⁰ Attfield, 2000.

¹¹ Attfield, 2000, p. 20.

I don't want to be left out of meaning-making! or Cultural Custodianship and the Archive

What if nobody engaged in the activity of collecting- what would be the costs, culturally speaking? The 16th century European Wunderkammer (the cabinet of curiosities) displayed collected objects of wonder, an early form of the museum for the public. Each object in the Wunderkammer was labelled and had a story to tell: of its origins, its functions, how it was acquired and etc. Categorization and naming helped people to distinguish whether the object fell onto the side of “us” or “the other”.¹

It is a powerful role that collectors have, in that they must accept the responsibility of “playing God” and deciding the fate of an object. The displayed collection represents a complex matrix of knowledge, histories and beliefs. It serves as a platform (whether in the guise of an institution, or online, or in a shop, etc.) that constitutes political, social and psychological implications. To gather seemingly “worthless” objects and reject other objects, reveals the nature of knowledge of the material collected, a knowledge of materiality that we can all somehow identify with (for example, one can sense that some materials and making methods are “worth more” than others).

The collector has an important role to fulfill in how he/she decides to curate objects and make meaning out of them. According to Giorgio Agamben, a political philosopher, the position of the collector is one that must reorganize information and reframe the past so that old ideas are reintroduced into a new light. The reframing of objects liberates an object from its “binds of function” and transcends it into the realm of art, where its value is able to increase and its authenticity is able to be indefinitely preserved. As the value of an object is transformed however, the object must also leave behind its original context and its former identity of function. To Agamben, the “new object”, with its renewed function should be viewed only as a medium that transmits social and cultural truths; it creates meaning which connects us, as an audience, from the past to the present, and onto the future.²

It should be noted here, that collections are never neutral. There are no rules for who the collector is and can be. The act of collecting is a culturally significant gesture of memory and agency, and the assertion (and reassertion) of value constantly rewrites the present, as well as history. Collections are pictures that need to be reframed and texts that need to be re-contextualized.³ When objects go through their transformation, ideas have a high potential to become (selectively or inadvertently) altered or lost. And who is in control of that? Who watches and makes sure that things (objects and their ideas) are represented and preserved accurately and in their entirety?

I, as a craftsperson-artist believe that we are all equally responsible for the contribution and maintenance of our material culture. We can all apply for the role of cultural custodian, a job which demands little pre-requisite skills, but the background experience of previous interaction with material culture. The creation of material culture is a blind and therefore democratic process, which reflects the values and concerns of our present day society. Material culture and how it is archived is a representation of our connection with our surrounding material objects and their social processes. The concept of an object being “good” or “good for something” (whether within a collection or not) is largely, a cultural

¹ Kiendl, 2004, p. 13.

² Agamben, 1999.

³ Kiendl, 2004, p. 17.

choice. Sometimes its cultural necessity can outweigh its original functional intention.⁴ We should therefore think about why material objects are created, collected and preserved and what they have to say about our society. How are they used, framed and reframed; how are they displayed and archived? How do they reflect our present day and how will they represent our current material culture in the museums and internet sites of the 22nd century?

You agree, the making of material culture is important, but:

- 1. What exactly is material culture?... (turn to page 22)*
- 2. Why do people collect things anyway? ... (turn to page 29)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

⁴ Pearce, 1994, p .6.

The Museum as

or Asides from being *just* a museum, what else can an art institution be?

Due to the nature of a museum's content and its hosted activities, a museum cannot exist without being in close dialogue with society's general system of values. The art museum, like any other institution, reflects upon the state of our current neo-liberal social condition. Whether large scale or small, government-funded or privatized, the art institution functions as a part of the public sphere. Due to the potential impact and power that institutions have in shaping society, it therefore comes as no surprise that the museum has also been criticized so often and been likened to a variety of other public spaces.

In 1967, Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson published a dialogue¹, which questioned the identity and potential of the artistic institution. In the text, they posed issues, which are still highly relevant to the museums that are running today. For example, what can we expect from an artistic institution and what do these spaces do for society?

For Kaprow and Smithson, the museum is a **mausoleum**, as the two spaces are similar in that both pay respect to the dead. Museums illustrate the idea of art and life being related by "assembl[ing] all 'good' objects and ideas under one roof"², but decontextualize objects by "ripp[ing them] out of total artistic structures and giv[ing them] a whole new classification."³ The curators and museum directors create a myth of action or excitement around the object. Specific identities are established when the art object enters the physical context of the museum and the categorical names assigned to art objects makes everything credible and worthy of veneration. Little dialogue exists between artist and audience, or audience and object however, as the audience is expected to go through exhibitions, wandering, deprived of all senses, and literally drift from one "void" to the next. Five years later, Smithson elaborates on the idea of detachment of the art object from "the outside world", by comparing the museum to the **asylum** or the **jail**.⁴ "Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells- in other words, neutral rooms called 'galleries.' A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces [are separated from society by the curator and] seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence."⁵ The artworks are compared to "inanimate invalids", which await critics to pronounce a diagnosis. After being deemed curable, they are then integrated into society, but only after they have been abstracted, neutralized, rendered ineffective and "politically lobotomized". Art objects must be "reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise"⁶, before they can be deemed "safe" enough to be consumed by the mass public. Classification within the art institution and the categories of "good art" and "bad art" thus belongs solely to a commodity value system.⁷

This commodity value system is also addressed by Maria Lind, curator, art critic and the present director of Tensta Konsthall, who views "many institutions for contemporary art [...] as **parking houses**, into which artworks are deposited."⁸ Lind writes that the positions and roles of who, what and how exhibitions are to be produced are standardized and designed

¹ Kaprow & Smithson, 1967.

² Ibid. p. 49.

³ Ibid. p. 48.

⁴ Smithson, 1972.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kaprow & Smithson, 1967.

⁸ Lind, 2010, p.138.

by a team of people constrained by economic and bureaucratic principles and distanced from art. Exhibitions therefore either run punctually, one after another, or they run in tandem if the institutional space so allows. The institution becomes a closed, self-sufficient system, where as an artist, art professional or audience member, one knows the proper codes of conduct around the invisibly prescribed rules.⁹ The problem with this is that there is little room for consideration of the actual art objects/ projects.

The kind of setting or presentation of particular artworks is often ignored, as institutions become branded spaces. They become akin to **shopping malls**, where private financiers are more interested in positioning the institution as an instrument for profit and the production of a corporate image (rather than art.) The ideal public, which is an anonymous mass of global consumers, is targeted, and curators and directors are employed for their management and marketing abilities, and their viewpoints of profitability. The trend is to create a business infrastructure that operates like the MOMA franchises.¹⁰ Art institutions become spaces that not only display art, but also display people having coffee and eating cake, buying books and other gifts. They are like **airports**, transient spaces which host a mass of openly visible commercial activities. The airport provides the means to another location, and the art institution provides the means to becoming more “cultured.” Consumerism is the bonus by-product from visiting such a space; one only needs to look at how coffee-table books and art-related souvenirs may dominate certain museum shops, to see the clear evidence of commercialism.

Consequently, there is oftentimes little consideration as to whether an artwork is at its most effective within an exhibition space. There are no written rules that determine whether works belong within the white walls of an institution, or function better over a screening, a conversation, or a workshop. Lind asks why the logic of institutions should be allowed to impose itself upon the logic of art, when it is art that gives institutions their reason for being.¹¹ This is a question that has been raised many times in different forms, as curators and artists use the museum format as a **muse** for their artistic projects. Projects of institutional critique arise when artists and curators make transparent their positions as producers for the public sphere and invite the participation of certain public groups in the meaning making process of an exhibition.¹²

From the viewpoint of the art institution being an important and contributory aspect of the public sphere, it is necessary to realize that there is diversity in true democracy. The trends towards privatized, monitored and exclusive spaces for art (such as the Pinchuk Art Centre among many others)¹³ must be challenged. The true public sphere is constituted in a collective process, and therefore it is the role and the responsibility of the art institution to recognize the public’s competences and use its authority in a positive sense. As Magnus Ericson of the Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm says, “We must avoid simplification and underestimating the public. We [the institution] should be aware of what

⁹ Lind, 2010.

¹⁰ Möntmann, 2008.

¹¹ Lind, 2010, p.144.

¹² see page 25 for artistic examples of institutional critique.

¹³ <http://pinchukartcentre.org/en/>

The Pinchuk Art Centre is owned by multi-billionaire Victor Pinchuk and houses artworks by artists such as Hirst, Murakami, Koons, and Gursky, a collection, which was guided by the hired expertise of Nicolas Bourriaud. It is the only open and free to the public contemporary art museum of its kind in Ukraine, yet all of its involved curators, critics and artists are non-Ukrainian. Pinchuk was also invited to represent the Ukrainian pavilion in the Venice Biennale of 2007 and 2009.

we're doing, as we have a responsibility for setting the standards of discussion. We shouldn't underestimate our ability to be neutral and always be self-reflective and self-critical."¹⁴ A proposed alternative outlook for the museum is to allow its space to be used as a **laboratory** or **community centre** of sorts, a space for experimentation and social gathering, which gives visitors the opportunity to position themselves beyond the role of the passive consumer. Art institutions should be seen as a site for people to imagine their existence as a larger social structure; they should be viewed as platforms for the participation of public representatives. According to Nancy Fraser, the "validity of public opinion and the empowerment of citizens vis-à-vis the state, are indispensable for the concept of the public sphere within the framework of a theory of democracy. Without them, the concept [of democracy] loses its critical force and its political frame of reference."¹⁵

Instead of always associating the future with progression and change, we should perhaps be taking the time to pause briefly and look back to the past. Perhaps the institutional art spaces of the late 18th century didn't hold concepts that needed to be improved upon. Why was the change necessary? A space for social gatherings, public acting and thinking around contextualized art objects seems entirely necessary today, especially when the artistic institution is being compared to jails, parking houses and shopping malls.

You ask yourself:

1. *Were the art museums of the 18th century really better? (turn to page 11)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

¹⁴ Magnus Ericson interview, 2011-02-11.

¹⁵ Fraser, 2005, p.1.

**Again... what is this thing? What does it mean?
or Semiotics and the Construction of Material Culture**

If one were to look at a portrait of Charles V of Mühlberg, one would not the aged ruler of Mühlberg, Germany, and think about his deeds and all that he accomplished. One would see the brushstrokes that characterize the work of Titian and see a Titian painting. It is irrelevant whether Titian was an accurate painter and if the emperor truly looked and rode his horse this way or not. This action of transformation, where the object becomes a representation while distancing itself (as a physical object) and acquiring a new meaning, can also be found in other, more craft-related examples. Take the case of the Grecian vase for example, which unrecognized for its function, now stands for the rise and fall of a mighty empire, or a contemporary example, the Grayson Perry vessel, which isn't really a vessel, but is instead the masterwork of a Turner Prize winner.



Charles V at Mühlberg. Titian, 1548¹



Grayson Perry, 2003 Turner Prize reception²

What role does language play then in this object/subject transformation, for it seems to be only words that are instigating the change and (re)identifying the object. It is words that reduce an object into a form of visual imagery, that highlight the “dynamic interplay between the object and its social meaning”³, so that the object not only becomes a part of a system of signs and representations, but also cannot exist purely as object nor subject. The object through analysis becomes dematerialized and is “denied the reality of physical thingness”⁴; its meaning gets divorced from the object. According to Roland Barthes, “we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.”⁵

¹ *Charles V at Mühlberg*. Titian, 1548. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tizian_082.jpg

² Grayson Perry, 2003 Turner Prize reception.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/2003.shtm>

³ Attfield, 2000, p. 16.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Barthes, 1957, p. 159.

Let us explore this dematerialization of the object by looking at an object from the National Army Museum of London: an infantry officer's red jacket, which was worn by Lieutenant Henry Anderson at the Battle of Waterloo. Its connotations and historical context is extremely personal and possesses the value and emotional tone of a souvenir (it is nostalgic and is a bittersweet representation of the past). So how does this jacket as an object, shed its physical identity as a mere jacket and work as a message-bearing entity? According to Ferdinand de Saussure, society "chooses" from a large range of possibilities what an object's individual nature will be, a choice that isn't forever fixed, but will become altered when circumstances change. This choice gives the society a large range of communication possibilities, including a body of material culture (in this case, the jacket). To be of social use, the object must function and communicate within socially understood rules which command a broadly ranged means of social support (ie. institutions such as the National Army Museum of London.) The support is a part of the local systems of domination and subservience, which thereby forms a part of the local ideology.⁶

Part two: if one were to break the object (the red jacket) down even further, one could analyze this scenario through semiotics. In semiotic terms, the *signifier* (the pieces of sewn together red fabric) and the *signified* (the way western Europe produced items in 1815 and their desire to define armies through coloured jackets and ranks) make up the *sign* (the jacket, which stands for bravery, egalitarian ideals, the entire battle of Waterloo, etc.) Meaning is thus created (and is constantly recreated), and the *sign* (the jacket) is then made available for constant symbolic reuse. Because of the object's history and its preservation, (currently the housing of it within an institute), it can now represent a time of romance, when life was more exciting and meaningful compared to today. It is also used to symbolize an important event, the victorious outcome of the event, and can embody the ideals of 19th century Britain.⁷

Recognizing this process of symbolization of the object allows for us to locate objects within their specific social contexts. This action allows for us to see the object as an important part of life, where objects are not only appropriated by consumers and then consequently consumed, but also make up the "'stuff' of everyday life".⁸ We must therefore acknowledge the whole ensemble of objects (the "stuff") that make up an environment and "investigate the non-verbal dynamics of [...how] people construct and interact with the modern material world."⁹ Material culture describes how objects move through what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "different regimes of value"¹⁰, in which objects are enlivened through various types of human involvement and interaction. It explores how objects cannot be classified as "good or bad", "right or wrong", since objects are only intermediaries between people and the physical world at large. Meaning is created not only through the production of new and unique objects, but also when the social interrelationship between people and the physical world is played out. This "stuff" of everyday life aids and informs us of how we are identified and ordered by the objects that surround us.

Objects that everyone knows and can identify, objects that are archived eternally in books and museums, and objects that remain as a constant in the backgrounds of our everyday lives play an extremely important role in society. An object that is connected to the

⁶ Pearce, 1994, p. 19.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Attfield, 2000.

⁹ *ibid.* p. 12.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 34.

constantly receding past becomes representational of an entire period of time and its entire society. It becomes immortalized and forms a framework (for us in the present) that allows us to understand better how our relationship with material culture of the past operates. It teaches us how we can construct our ever passing present. The choice of what is archived (and what deserves to be archived) is therefore crucial, as the object only takes on life or significance when we read into it and develop its meaning. We, as an audience are responsible for interpreting (and/or reinterpreting) the meaning of an object, a “virtual” exchange, which extends far beyond the mere perception of what the object presently is. This interplay of meaning creation can create and/or affect the present reality, which puts us, the audience in the position of the storyteller. The need to decipher meaning gives us all the chance to bring out both what is within an object and what is within ourselves, which democratizes the experience of visual consumption and transcends the object from the mere status of materialism to individualized experience.¹¹

You want to know:

- 1. more about the “thing”. How can it be defined? (turn to page 15)*
- 2. how the artist here defines the craft object... (turn to page 7)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

¹¹ Pearce, 1994, p. 26.

Didn't she steal the idea of the interactive museum space? or Relational Aesthetics and Other Relations

One cannot speak about interactive art which challenges the art institution without immediately thinking of Relational Aesthetics. Relational Aesthetics was first defined in 1998 by French art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Esthétique relationnelle*. According to Bourriaud, it is "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private sphere."¹ In other words, relational artworks create social environments for people to come together and participate in shared activities. Through working within the realm of creating and questioning relationships between people, objects, space and time, its goals are to analyze the methods used for social exchange and communication processes, and to make art relevant to its current time, space and audience.

Concerns over collaboration, audience participation and democracy appear to be the core issues of relational aesthetics, but these questions of course, are not new. If one were to go back into the 1960's one would see that the Fluxus artists already began using performance as a means to highlight connections between everyday objects and art. Fluxus art was also often presented as "events", where these events, under minimal instruction, grew into performances which integrated audience members.²

If one were to go even further back, one could visit "The Abstract Cabinet", which was a collaboration between art historian Alexander Dorner and artist El Lissitzky in 1926. "The Abstract Cabinet" was a space for art which attempted to form integrated environments, where art works weren't autonomous, but historical and contextualized. Works by Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Picasso and Kandinsky were arranged in relation to each other within a room full of narrow slats painted white on one side and black on the other. The idea was to question the passive role of the spectator, as the white and black slats changed colours whenever audience members walked past them to view the artworks. The wall therefore, became an object in itself; it was interactive and invited the audience to "create", an action that is within the art-context, traditionally associated only with artists.³



Kabinett der Abstrakten. 2009. Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg⁴

¹ Bourriaud. 2002, p. 113.

² Higgins, 2002.

³ Newhouse, 1998.

⁴ Kabinett der Abstrakten. 2009. Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. <http://www.halle-fuer-kunst.de/jahresgaben/2009/moaa2.php>

Interactive and participatory art works not only confront the narrow definitions of what art is and how it should be experienced, but many artists have been using the museum as a muse to critique the institution as well. For example, from 1935 to 1945, Marcel DuChamp created his *Boîte-en-valise*, a series of portable museums of his own work, reproduced in miniature, packed in customized collapsible suitcases. The mini-museums, modelled after a salesman's sample kit, carried replicas of DuChamp's "whole line".⁵ As he once declared, "the creative act is not complete until the spectator brings the [art]work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications."⁶ His intention was for the audience to unpack and explore the components of the mini-museum themselves, which would allow the audience to free the art from the confinements of institutional authority. Through *Boîte-en-valise*, the audience's experience of DuChamp's works are restaged, which in turn creates the possibility for an unmediated experience of art.⁷

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is another artist who also creates situations in which the museum is challenged, so that art can be perceived in an unconventional way. Through what she calls "maintenance art", Ukeles questions the social constructions of aesthetics by revealing the conditions of work and addressing the stereotypes which tend to be associated with maintenance workers. In *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976), Ukeles joined a sanitation bureaucracy and collaborated with 300 maintenance staff in the cleaning of floors and elevators of New York museums and office buildings. By exhibiting the photographs she took of the men and women working and publishing their discussions on whether their labour is considered to be art or work, she challenges the cultural values that define what art is. Through her collaboration with "non-artists", Ukele built a platform for participatory democracy which questioned the definitions of work and art within the artistic institution.⁸

Or let us take Apolonija Šušteršič's participation in the Moderna Museet Projekt in 1999 for example, where she transformed the temporary project space of Stockholm's Moderna Museet into a fully functioning light therapy centre. For six weeks in February and March, this light therapy centre was advertised in Stockholm's newspapers, inviting audience participation and offering light therapy for free. While enjoying their light therapy session, participants could borrow a book from the adjoining library and read about light in art and architecture, or institutional critique (how museums are forced to function more and more like the entertainment industry.) By analyzing the museum's social and economic structure and adding another "side attraction" to the Moderna Museet's already existing book store, souvenir shop and restaurant, Šušteršič raised questions about the museum's role in the public sphere and in our daily lives. Šušteršič describes her own role as a "constructivist activist" and claims to work at the intersection of contemporary society, art, and architecture by activating situations, which question spatial relationships within society.⁹

The very term "institutional critique" suggests interventions, (art-)political activism and investigations into the role of the artist, the institution, and alternative methods to what usually occurs in the traditional art space.¹⁰ In all of its historical emergences, institutional critique tends to be directed against the art institution, critiquing its ideologies and representative social functions. Projects of institutional critique tend to arise from a "parasitic perspective"¹¹ and attack the institution aesthetically, politically, and theoretically.

⁵ Chambers, 2006, p.399.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Judovitz, 1995.

⁸ Krug, 2006.

⁹ Lind, 2010, pp. 88-90.

¹⁰ Sheikh, 2006.

¹¹ Möntmann, 2008.

One should however, take a step back and look at this ongoing critique from another perspective, and rather than “seeing the institution as a problem, see it also as a solution.”¹²

Alternative museum concepts do exist, and sometimes not only through an artist’s intervention. The Kulturhuset in Stockholm for example, brings together libraries, media, reading rooms, theatres, gallery spaces, cafés, restaurants, shops, and areas for chess, art and children. They personalize their web-based advertisement by offering “something for everyone, including you” and “put on thousands of contemporary cultural events... daytime and nighttime.”¹³ It is a cultural centre open for the public, and rather than expecting the masses to merely reflect upon culture, it is designed for the public to create, participate in, and consume culture as well.

Another cultural centre that emphasizes the museum as a social space is the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. By displaying contemporary art in a studio-type setting or within an “experimental laboratory”, the Palais de Tokyo serves as an improvisatory art centre that invites artists to develop the building’s ever-changing space. With its current plan to remodel one of the exhibition spaces until Spring 2012, its programming has been developed correspondingly and progresses around one room, which is transformed through each artist’s intervention. Its uncustomary opening hours (from 12.00 – 21.00) also reflects a different outlook on the museum’s role in society. This museum is for the public and its opening hours are set to fit the “urban lifestyle”.¹⁴

Operating independently of the physical confinements of a permanent museum is MAP (Mobile Art Production), a Swedish organization, which develops new ways of displaying contemporary art. Being in dialogue with the artists allows for MAP to locate suitable situations, moments and places for specific art projects. Unique exhibition forms are provided as an alternative to traditional art institutions. For example, in *After Hours* by Mats Hjelm (with choreography by Dorte Olesen), public art and dance were combined in order to question human existence and longing. This art project took place in January 2010, in a SEB office at Sergels Torg in Stockholm after closing hours. From the street, people could see lights turning on and people interacting in more humane and intimate ways than is the norm for an office space. In this sense, the goals and actions of MAP stem from the art, rather than the institution. Its engagement with the artist and the public creates projects that are situation specific and provide the grounds for a relevancy that makes art more accessible to a wider public.¹⁵

The term “relational aesthetics” is often associated with certain artists and their artworks, and there are also a few examples of relational models for the institution. But what about a relational method of practice? According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics focuses on shifting the focus from the singular art object to the kinds of encounters it produces. The temporary collective that forms through the art object creates meaning, and only does so when people come together, interact and create discussion.¹⁶ If the need for contextualization of an object and audience relevancy is considered as key points for artists who practice relational aesthetics, then they should perhaps consider looking to craft practitioners for inspiration. As mentioned previously, the practice of relational aesthetics is not new; craft practice is a relational method that has already existed for thousands of years. Potters have been making functional ceramics, which pose as waiting points for social interaction. They by their very nature “prompt” inter-human relations and operate performatively in rituals of eating, drinking and social exchange. From the fuddling cup (a

¹² Sheikh, 2006.

¹³ <http://www.kulturhuset.stockholm.se/default.asp?id=5617>

¹⁴ <http://www.palaisdetokyo.com>

¹⁵ <http://www.mobileartproduction.se/English/index.html>

¹⁶ Bourriaud, 2002.

ceramic drinking vessel made of 3 or more interconnected cups, which function as a three-dimensional puzzle), to medieval puzzle jugs (perforated ceramic jugs, which demand the user to solve riddles and drink the contents without spilling), to the whole development of cultural identification behind tea service/tea ceremonies.¹⁷



Fuddling Cup, anonymous (German) c.1690¹⁸



Exeter puzzle jug, anonymous (France) c.1300¹⁹

Relational aesthetics aims for accessibility in the usage of art, while potters have always been inclusive in that the objects, which they make have always been utilitarian. Art often discriminates due to its demands for a certain prerequisite knowledge and socio-economic status. In comparison, craft is more relational, being democratic in that anyone can approach a ceramic vessel without having to be previously “trained” in the field of craft. Everyone knows how to use a ceramic vessel, and anyone can start a discussion surrounding how or why the craft object was made.

It occurs to you that craft is not often seen within white cube type institutions. You wonder why this is so and ask yourself about:

1. *The origin of the white cube... (turn to page 11)*
2. *The definition of the craft object... (turn to page 15)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

¹⁷ Chambers, Gogarty, & Perron, 2008.

¹⁸ Fuddling Cup, anonymous (German) c.1690. <http://www.dia.org/object-info/3dc5e243-ad33-48b4-a1df-1eaf8f1662d0.aspx>

¹⁹ Exeter puzzle jug, anonymous (France) c.1300. <http://www.antique-marks.com/antique-terms-p.html>

Why do people collect things? or A Brief history on Collecting and Collecting Practice in Contemporary Society

The act of collecting in western society was first documented in the Middle Ages, as pilgrimage brooches during the 1270s were collected as popular souvenirs by the devout. There is also evidence of an early form of the “souvenir stand”, which was built in 14th century Jerusalem, in Harat al-Turufiyya, which specialized in the production and sale of souvenirs for visiting Europeans. However, the greatest impact on collecting behaviour in western society happened in the late 18th century when the Industrial Revolution hit Europe. Britain in particular, began to mass-produce cheap, commemorative, decorative pottery, which was designed for popular consumption and was commonly available, as well as widely collected. The Industrial Revolution transformed and expanded the range of items treated as collectibles. A rise of the newly prosperous bourgeoisie led to a new interest in things for the home and there was suddenly extra money to be spent. This sudden democratization of collecting behaviour along with the technology of mass-production during the Mid-Victorian period gave rise to the souvenir industry. Collecting was no longer just for kings and the church, and collections in the home consisted of curiosities and antiquities of the day, from postcards to cigarette boxes, sundials to figure heads, and even cradles. As popular collecting became socially sanctioned and even encouraged as a means of self-education, attitudes towards collectors began to change. Museums of natural history were built to house collections, and the movement for rational recreation supported museum visiting and collecting as educational, self-improving and respectable. During the mid-late 19th century however, collecting began to take on a whole other meaning and purpose. The mix of capitalism and consumerism in western countries, in combination with increased leisure time and a disposable income led to feelings of nostalgia and alienation for the new middle class. Collecting behaviour grew into something that also justified our sense of being; it gave a sense of control to the individual and soon developed into a significant aspect of social identity.¹

Let us imagine the vinyl record collector for example. He/she owns hundreds of records on jazz music, and therefore we will probably assume that surely, he must be an expert on what constitutes good or bad jazz. Or take Becky Martz, who owns a banana sticker collection with over 9000 types of banana stickers.² We consequently assign her with the status of banana sticker expertise, meanwhile attaching possible traits of ingenuity, originality or even eccentricity to her character. This act of gathering together specifically chosen objects for purposes regarded as special is a social phenomenon.³ Not only can collections be seen as sources of pleasure, social identification, economic investments, and/or opportunities for the exhibition of logic, unity and control. Collections are also indicators of a society’s cultural and social capital; they are a form of materialist consumption and the result of consumer culture taken either in full-control or taken to excess.⁴ Collecting behaviour has created a large entertainment industry- evident in the many art, science, and historical museums which house collections, the abundance of fairs and conventions for collectors, and the websites and TV shows which socially reward collecting and collections, (such as the BBC Antiques Roadshow⁵ or websites that showcase the world’s largest collection of object x).

¹ Martin, 1999, p. 29.

² <http://www.beckymartz.com>

³ Martin, 1999, p. 5.

⁴ Martin, 1999.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mj2y>

The BBC Antiques Roadshow is a television program which follows antique appraisers travelling throughout the UK in order to appraise collected antiques brought in by locals.

Collecting can therefore be seen as an action, which offers a surrogate community to the individual; it can in some way, restore the lost values of communal identification and social belonging. This sense of social belonging becomes deeply attached to the material objects collected, objects which can be personally selected and arranged, displayed or hidden. The connection and control of material culture offers a tactile understanding of the world, where the desire for material goods becomes an act of re-staking one's claim in society. Belonging can be defined here by material abundance, and anxiety can be tempered and kept at bay through material possession.⁶ New relationships with objects are also formed when one can design and purchase his/her psychological self. Individual objects take on new functions and are made to stand for a greater part of the whole. Collecting thus becomes a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self and culture. It is a means of defining and asserting an identity- the collector builds the collection and the collection helps build the collector.

And so you want to:

- 1. Help build this collector... (turn to page 7)*
- 2. Question the building of material culture. What does it mean?... (turn to page 22)*
- 3. Collect yourself. You don't want to be left out of meaning-making... (turn to page 17)*

or you turn around and you... (turn to page 2)

⁶ Shuker, 2010, p. 8.

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