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Radical Craft Interventions in Museums and Galleries

Contesting Dominant Paradigms

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*'Curators and makers have a lot in common. They are trained to challenge, reinterpret and communicate the meaning, role and purpose of objects. Both professions use real and virtual artefacts to provoke curiosity, support learning and explore personal and collective identity. Museums can offer makers privileged access to their collections – and stores – and inspiring opportunities to extend their creative practice to new audiences. In turn, makers have much to offer museum managers, curators, educators and retailers in their ambition to make museums relevant to 21st century communities.'*¹

Despite significant progress in enhancing their social role and becoming more responsive to their diverse communities, museums are still considered to be complicit in the maintenance of the Western cultural dominant paradigms of 'heterosexuality, masculinity, and whiteness'² Normativity, in the sense of 'conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification',³ appears to be prevalent at multiple levels of museum practice,

from collecting and documenting, to interpreting and displaying both tangible and intangible material. Consequently, museums end up with collections and programmes that tend to exclude the voice of certain minority groups, as they do not fit the expected norms of gender, sexuality, class or race.

In particular, the sector still appears reluctant to engage confidently and on a permanent basis with sexual difference, experiencing a number of challenges when the topic is under discussion, ranging from complexities in documentation, interpretation and representational devices.⁴ There is still a substantial lack of relevant material in collections, as well as a lack of quality projects to engage sexual minorities in the life of the museum. The LGBTQ⁵ community is rarely included on a permanent basis, with the exception for example of Brighton Museum, Nottingham Castle or Merseyside Maritime Museum. Exhibitions or events focusing on sexual diversity can be easily classified as 'queer ephemera' separated from the

rest of a collection. Therefore, according to a number of scholars,⁶ museums are regarded as places reinforcing society's heteronormative way of thinking, rendering as deviant or worthless any gender and sexual identity at odds with it.

Although a range of curatorial techniques, involving special exhibitions, outreach programming, tours and workshops, are being developed in some, I believe that contemporary craft has a huge potential to unsettle normative museum narratives. In the toolkit produced by *museumaker*, this potential is described as follows: 'Contemporary craftspeople makers are interested in the world of ideas and the myriad ways their fingertip knowledge of traditional and new tools and materials can be employed to break rules and challenge accepted norms about form and function.'⁷

This article draws upon a number of cases featuring radical craft interventions. These include Fred Wilson's work on race in the US (e.g. *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society) and, particularly, Matt Smith's recent work on sexuality in the UK (e.g. *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery). I argue that craft interventions are effective in disrupting museums' normative practices, especially in conservative contexts. 'A craft artist reflects multiple subjective identifications that may (or may not) be readily identifiable in objects created by a maker'.⁸ Artists like Fred Wilson and Matt Smith, interested in raising awareness about issues

affecting people who share their racial or sexual identity, can help museums tackle sensitive topics more actively and creatively.

Based on my PhD research,⁹ I conclude that the cultural sector has to seek novel approaches to difference if it aims to become a proactive site of cultural diversity. Institutions, at least in the UK, have been developing a wide range of remarkable events and projects to reach out to disadvantaged and previously ignored communities. Yet from the perspective of sexual difference representation, I argue that museums need to expand their practice:

*'Although a variety of projects is favorable for increasing sexual minorities' cultural representation and visitation, one could come up with the following interpretation, that there seems to be a continuing focus on projects based on difference and separatism...perpetuating the core binarisms (e.g. hetero vs. homosexuality) upon which forms of prejudice (e.g. homophobic bullying) and social exclusion are based.'*¹⁰

Certainly, special exhibitions on race or sexuality can draw visitors' attention to these issues and encourage cultural inclusion. However, such initiatives may appeal mainly to people already familiar with these issues, or with close connections to the community on display. Strategies must be developed to reach the widest possible audience.

Intervention strategies

In my research I focused on two possible directions of a more inclusive curatorial practice. One was the

use of radical craft interventions by an externally commissioned artist. The case study was the exhibition *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (4 November 2010 – 27 February 2011) for which ceramist and craft artist Matt Smith was commissioned by SHOUT! Festival¹¹ and funded by the Arts Council to intervene in the museum collections and storage and through a variety of methods, ‘sometimes serious, sometimes humorous...change how you look at museums and question what you see’.¹² The artist visited the museum storage and exhibitions and made suggestions of way in which LGBTQ narratives could be introduced into the permanent galleries – through creating new ceramic pieces, or removing, adding and re-interpreting already existing objects.

Smith used white earthenware to craft most of his additions, including figurines like the *Figure of a Youth Cruising*¹³ with underglaze colour, or the figurines in *Reflection* coloured with car spray paint, or even everyday cookware items like the *Double-Spouted Teapot*.¹⁴ He also created *Green Carnations* from silk organza to decorate the very first statue one encounters in the first gallery to act as a signifier of the project and to inform visitors of the meaning behind carnations, as their green colour was used as a strapline on every label accompanying Matt Smith’s interventions.

The reason for embracing crafts amongst his interventions was very lucidly explained by Smith in the online exhibition catalogue: ‘using craft to

tell these stories seemed a natural decision. It has strong gendered links – woodwork for boys and sewing for girls – as well as a domestic connection. Its homely connotations make it an ideal vehicle for conveying potentially unsettling messages’.¹⁵

Another approach I considered was that of the well-known installation artist Fred Wilson in the US. His exhibition *Mining the Museum* (1992) at the Maryland Historical Society was based on an uncommon use of crafted objects to critique the tendency of museums to be, consciously or not, racially prejudiced. Fred Wilson juxtapositioned items on display or in storage, presenting on equal footing incompatible objects. For example, for *Metalwork 1793–1880*, he placed slave shackles with silver vessels in Baltimore Repousse style. For *Cabinet Making 1820–1960*, a wooden whipping post was displayed alongside elegant chairs made of rosewood, walnut or gilded wood, mother of pearl and brocade. As Berger puts it, Fred Wilson

‘attenuates a curatorial history, juxtaposing the expected with the unexpected, the ordinary with the unusual, in order to reveal its prejudices and omissions...Thus all of his extraordinary installations are preeminently allegories of absence and loss aesthetic meditations in which fragments from the historical past are brought together to reveal difficult truths about the present’.¹⁶

Based on these two examples, it could be argued that interventions that specifically attend to crafted objects could be an important way of challenging

dominant paradigms. Moreover, according to Sanders, apart from racial or sexual normativity, craft interventions in art collections can assist in unsettling the normative art canon, as both Wilson and Smith suggested. 'Integrating craft works into the fine arts halls, rather than assigning them to decorative art wings, could serve as a means of decentring the traditional canon and the elitist interest it serves'.¹⁷

Craft has a lot of potential to relate dynamically to collaboration and partnership, at least in the context of museums and galleries, and through craft, communities which are not part of the usual audiences can be invited to contribute to programming and collections. Craft related projects have been developed successfully in the past with people from minorities, as the *Craft and Wellbeing* report produced by Yair for the Crafts Council reveals¹⁸, enriching collections and 'promoting wellbeing and social interaction amongst people otherwise excluded from social and community networks.'¹⁹ Especially given the current lack of funds available for diversification of collections, intervening in permanent displays with items made by local people would be a creative and sustainable strategy, at least for museums, which promote themselves as safeguards of local history and art. Similarly, collaborative projects where craft makers are invited to work with groups and contribute newly made items could have multiple positive effects on audiences, and in turn on their engagement with and attitude towards

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the museum sector, as the *Making Value* report, produced by Schwarz and Yair for the Crafts Council in 2010 revealed.²⁰

There is another type of intervention in relation to decisions taken by museums about the value of the objects within it. In 2009, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) deaccessioned a number of objects from its collections, a practice that is still highly controversial.²¹ A local artist, Robert Fontenot, developed the project *Recycle LACMA* to express his and other artists' disapproval of deaccessioning, which they saw as a mishandling of a museum's collection. Fontenot bought more than 50 items, predominantly textiles and vintage clothing items – that had been deaccessioned,

which were then auctioned and exhibited in 2011 at Jancar Gallery in Los Angeles.

A dynamic use of crafted objects, especially in the form of artistic interventions has, I believe, great potential to be introduced in more conservative contexts than the US and the UK. Due to the subtle ways in which objects can be rearranged and integrated into permanent collections, craft intervention is regarded as a promising and significantly safer curatorial method for initiating discussion on contentious topics, especially in relation to violations of human rights.

A number of interesting points emerged from the small-scale audience research undertaken for *Queering the Museum*. The curatorial approach of integrating sexual difference through craft interventions and the depiction of sexual minorities was well received by visitors, even by people who disclosed that their personal or religious beliefs condemn, for instance, homosexuality. Intriguingly, respondents made direct reference to the subtlety of this mode of LGBTQ portrayal as a strength of the project, especially when compared to other shows where sexual difference is the sole focus. While these answers suggest a level of conservatism and homophobia, or at least discomfort with non-heterosexuality, one thing cannot go unnoticed: members of the public had considered sensitive and controversial topics they might otherwise not have engaged with. Metcalf suggests that crafted objects lend themselves to subtle and portrayals of otherness.

*'I believe certain types of craft objects especially objects designed to be used, rather than just looked at embody sympathy. Because craft objects are substantially handmade, traces of the maker's body and its movements often remain in the object: the potter's fingerprint; the silversmith's planishing mark; the stitches of the needle worker; the irregular form of a glassblower's vase. Such marks record the presence of a living person who exists at one "degree of separation" from the user. Ordinary people recognize this intuitively, and they read a craft object as a symbol of human presence...In an increasingly dematerialised world, these records of human presence become increasingly important to people.'*²²

Craft interventions like those of Wilson or Smith manage to integrate the voices of previously disregarded minorities into permanent collections. This might enable more people to encounter these stories, possibly for the very first time, as compared to an exhibition confined to a gallery space and branded as a project on racial, sexual or other identities. In this way craft can be political as well as aesthetic or functional. Furthermore, regular use of crafts in museum projects counters the usual hierarchies in which craft is subordinated and hence amounts to another type of critique. Sanders explains how craft's subordination in relation to art works in favour of 'those seeking to sustain class, race, and gender domination by means of formalist and traditional aesthetic theories that marginalise the craft experience and craft maker's subjectivity'.²³

Moreover, craft may be a particularly powerful tool in contexts where public discussion of 'hot topics' tends to be disregarded or even suppressed. The very nature of crafts, and people's familiarity with them, means that everyday products and materials are seen to relate to the experience of minority groups, stressing commonality and ordinariness, making difference perhaps less threatening.

Overall, I will conclude by suggesting that the use of radical craft interventions by contemporary artists is an important tool for a socially purposeful museum. There is a place for complex portrayals and explicit, provocative, segregated exhibition strategies. But the use of crafted objects to emphasise what communities share could be an alternative path to the representation of invisible identities, and one that might reach a wider audience.

Notes

1. O'Reilly, S. and Howarth, B., cited in *museummaker* (2011), *A Guide to Unlocking the Potential of Collections through Contemporary Craft*, p.6
2. Levin, A. (2010), 'Introduction' in Levin, A. (ed.) *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*. London and New York: Routledge, p.5
3. Halberstam, J. (2005), *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York and London: New York University Press, p.4
4. The work, though not very recent, of Gabrielle Bourn (*Invisibility: A study of the representation of*

lesbian and gay history and culture in social history museums, 1994) and the following up study on Bourn's findings by Angela Vanegas (*Representing lesbians and gay men in British Social History Museums*, 2002) offer an substantial insight into the reasons behind practitioners' reluctance to portray sexual diversity.

5. The acronym LGBTQ stands for people identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.
6. Sandell, R. & Frost, S., (2010), 'A persistent prejudice' in Cameron, F. & Kelly, L., (eds) *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 150-174 & Sanders, J. H. (2008), 'The Museum's Silent Sexual Performance' in *Museums & Social Issues*, vol. 3, no.1, Spring 2008, p.15-28
7. *museummaker* (2011), *A Guide to Unlocking the Potential of Collections through Contemporary Craft*, p.7
8. Sanders, J. H. (2004), 'Moving Beyond the Binary' in Fariello, M.A., & Owen, P., (eds) *Objects and Meaning; New perspectives on Art and Craft*. Lanham, Maryland & London: The Scarecrow Press, p.89
9. The provisional title of my PhD thesis is '*Museums and (hetero)normativity; Exploring the effect of inclusive interpretive strategies*'
10. Tseliou, M. A. (2013), 'Disruptive paradigms in museums and galleries: Challenging the

heteronormative frame' in *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*, vol.7, issue 2, p.112

11. SHOUT! Festival is the local annual festival of Birmingham on queer arts and culture taking place at various stages across the city. *Queering the Museum* was the first time that the festival was using Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery spaces among the places where its diverse events were taking place. The collaboration was extended to next year as well with a one-off LGBTQ tour 'Queering the Portrait' by David Hoyle.

12. Promotional leaflet of *Queering the Museum* exhibition 2010

13. The *Figure of a Youth Cruising* was one of the interventions critiquing the unconscious tendency of curators to display couples in male to female pairs. The accompanying label reads 'When displaying human figures, there is a tendency to pair up male and female figures into heterosexual couples. Often this is done with no historical evidence that the artist intended this to happen'

14. The *Double-Spouted Teapot* was one of the interventions to display aspects of gay slang. The accompanying labels reads 'Tearooming', American gay slang for anonymous male-male sexual encounters in public toilets'

15. Online Exhibition Catalogue of *Queering the Museum* exhibition 2010 <http://www.bmag.org.uk/uploads/fck/file/Queeringbrochureweb.pdf>

16. Berger, M. (2001), 'Viewing the Invisible: Fred Wilson's Allegories of Absence and Loss' in Berger, M. (ed.) *Fred Wilson; Objects and Installations 1979 – 2000*. Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, p.10

17. Sanders (2004) *op.cit.*, p.94

18. Yair, K. (2011) *Craft and Wellbeing* report of Arts Council. 31 March 2011. <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/pressroom/view/2011/craftandwellbeing?from=/aboutus/pressroom/>

19. *Ibid.*

20. Schwarz, M. & K. Yair (2010) Making Value: craft & the economic social contribution of makers. June 2010. http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/files/file/7cec2fd1e3bdbe39/making_value_full_report.pdf

21. Recycle LACMA <http://recyclelacma.blogspot.co.uk/>

22. Metcalf, B. (2004) 'Evolutionary Biology and Its Implications for Craft' in Fariello, M.A., & Owen, P., (eds) *Objects and Meaning; New perspectives on Art and Craft*. Lanham, Maryland & London: The Scarecrow Press, p.226

23. Sanders (2004) *op.cit.*, p.88