CONTENT & DISPLAY: REPRESENTING THE CONTEMPORARY

Jane Pavitt

The purpose of the Spiral is to provide a platform for the presentation of the contemporary – in visual culture, ideas, attitudes and experiences. In an attempt to capture the character and ethos of the building, it is first necessary to ask ‘What is contemporary?’ and then ‘Whose contemporary?’ In doing so, I hope to distill some of the ideas and debates about appropriate content, and also to suggest how a visit to the Spiral might look and feel.

The use of the term ‘contemporary’ as opposed to ‘modern’ is significant. ‘Modern’ carries implications of ‘modernism’ and the ‘modern movement’ and suggests a periodisation of art already ‘claimed’ by such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Barker 1999)¹. ‘Contemporary’ is intended as a more inclusive construction, which can embrace all modes of creative production from our current age. Contemporary is simply ‘to be in the same time as’ and can therefore suggest a multiplicity of practices and ideas, contradictory as well as complementary.

The grand cultural institutions of the 19th century – museums, libraries, academies and professional societies – created systems for ordering our experience the world. Collecting, whether of natural specimens or the objects of artistic production, was one means of imposing order on to experience. Objects and specimens were both intended to take their

places within linear and genealogical maps, each prioritised by a different ordering criteria. In decorative arts collections, for instance, material and historical period were usually prioritised as means of classification.

The 19th century museum is an appropriate metaphor for that century’s understanding of the world – an attempt to impose order and rationality, to classify and regulate, and also to disseminate knowledge about the ordered world. In the 21st century, the most dominant model of information ordering and dissemination is the web. As many have pointed out, the experience of information in the 21st century is decentralised, non-linear, non-sequential and suffused with randomness. Whether one takes a critical stance on this or not, our own personal expectations of knowledge and experience-gathering will be profoundly affected if we are active participants in a ‘digital culture.’

The arts are still largely ordered and cat-

102 egorised according to systems that have been in place for at least a century. These systems tend to separate the fine from the decorative arts, and impose divisions between the products of science and the products of the arts. In education, museums, publishing and most other aspects of the culture industries, art is separated from craft, science from art, the natural from the artificial, high technology from the handmade. We are slow to follow from the example of practice, where increasingly the most innovative work is found at the boundaries of those categories, and at the elision of those barriers.

'Innovative' could include work which does unexpected things with technology or materials or form, which is experimental, which questions our expectations. 'Innovative' is also that which challenges the conventions of accepted practice, questions the value systems attached to making and using, and demonstrates a critical awareness of the context within which it is to be seen, used or experienced. Innovation can be understood technically, aesthetically or intellectually. It incorporates that which may have otherwise been termed *avant-garde*, or conceptual.

As a platform for such work, the Spiral will provide a space for public engagement with new ideas. However, innovation and experimentation are only two aspects of visual culture, and will be balanced by the exploration of other spheres of creative practice. In order to do this, we will work with very broad based definitions of practice. Faced with the 'superabundance' of things in contemporary life, the Spiral must respond to shifts in discourse and to emergent new disciplines and ideas.

The Spiral will explore the visual and creative worlds of fashion, architecture, design,

craft, photography and digital media. It will incorporate the fine and performing arts into its remit, but its aim is not to define the boundaries of creative practice, but rather to leave avenues open to a more interdisciplinary view of practice.

The primary aim of the Spiral is therefore to present and interpret contemporary creative practice in its widest sense. This means practice by individuals – designers, makers, performers and authors, as well as the practice of creating things, images, thoughts and effects. It means an emphasis on the understanding of process – thinking, designing, making, fabricating, fashioning, engineering, replicating, digitising.

However, the emphasis on practice and process should not exclude the contexts within which they take place, nor the critical issues that design (in all its facets) may lead us to confront. The V&A has continually asserted the role of the Spiral as a space for critical debate, and a place where the 'bigger picture' surrounding the production and consumption of goods will always be apparent. It is important to acknowledge too that this approach can be fraught with difficulty. The 'tradition' of modern design museums, such as it is, has always tended towards the showcasing of what is deemed 'good' design. Museums confronting the contemporary must do so in the knowledge that the exhibiting of things is a kind of validation. It brings the museum into a more active relationship with both corporate and consumer culture, addressing the promotional means used to sell things, as well as the personal, psychological, social and cultural drivers to buy things. This is not a new issue, as Ian Wolfenden has pointed out 'the modern association of design with mass production and consumption has been difficult

for applied arts museums to accommodate.’ (Wolfenden in Pearce 1989) For a national museum to feature the goods of a major manufacturer may be seen as endorsement, so museums of design have traditionally resorted to the ‘fine arts’ mode of presentation (plinths, glass cases, white walls) in order to distance themselves from the commercial context of the objects on display.

Throughout the last century, the relationship between contemporary art practice and museum modes of display grew ever closer. Our experience of modern art is inseparable from the spaces in which it is displayed. As Brian Docherty has pointed out ‘a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th century art’ (quoted in Barker 1999). The modern art museum created spaces intended as contemplative cleansing and unadulterated, and much of the art on display was created with such a space in mind. The scale of fine art, whether painting, installation or video art, grew appropriately to fill such spaces, and in turn the spaces grew, so that only perhaps the Bilbao Guggenheim has space enough to make Lilliputian the works on display. The display vocabulary of white walls and clean lines filtered through to other kinds of spaces – retail environments, restaurants and even homes. The minimalist white cube has the power to turn any artefact into art work – displays of craft, industrial design, tools, engineering and all forms of detritus are subject to its aestheticising and ordering potential.

Issues of display and gallery interpretation are highly charged, because display can never be neutral. The visual organisation of objects in a space can communicate ideas more powerfully than a line of text upon a label. The authorial role of the curator is central to

any display, yet rarely is the individual author acknowledged – the use of the first person in exhibition text is rare, unless it is the ‘I’ of the artist or the designer.

The Spiral will have to employ a much wider range of display techniques if it is to challenge the validating nature of the museum space. This is not to say that validation is to be always avoided. The Spiral must always have the means to state ‘This is good’ and to inculcate a sense of wonder and appreciation in its visitors. Crucial to the Spiral is the concept of ‘critical curatorship,’ where the ideas and opinions of authors will be apparent, and there will be space for the ideas and opinions of its visitors in response. The Spiral will not be neutral territory, but rather one where visitors can engage with debate, and understand the processes behind knowledge and expertise.

How will this be done? The evidence of this approach is as likely to be found in the physical nature of the displays as it is in an exhibition text. Exhibition text, accompanying soundtrack or voice over, will convey the character of individual or collective authorship, perhaps exploring the practice of selection, the methods of research, the evidence of thinking processes. Display techniques will aid the visitor in a greater engagement with the physical nature of the artefact (or its equivalent virtual or experiential character). Some displays might suggest the stripping away of layers to get to some meaning (revealing an object’s structure, a maker’s intention, or a company’s strategy). Other might play on the iterative process of object use and interpretation, suggesting through display the adding of new layers of meaning through use and context.

There is no blueprint for the design of Spi-

104 ral displays. The galleries will not be fitted with standardised exhibit cases, plinths or stands. As far as possible, the design of displays will follow the narrative intentions of each topic. With this principle in mind, it is possible to imagine the breakdown of conventional notions of curator and exhibition designer, and a greater fluidity between their roles. After all, curatorship is a specialist mode of authorship (as design can be) and the Spiral can provide the opportunity for a greater range of people to engage in curatorial activity. We may invite scientists, philosophers, anthropologists (as well as artists, architects, designers and writers) to curate on themes of particular interest. Bringing one subject specialism to confront another is a way of ensuring that conventional modes of discourse are periodically challenged, and our methods of interpretation tested. Examining visual culture through the lens of genetics, for example, in the light of the Human Genome Project and its huge implications for our understanding of human creativity. In the 19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution provided a model for the classification of objects as well as peoples. The mapping and sequencing techniques of the Human Genome Project may well yet provide the model for a 21st century 'order of things' (Ridley 1999).

One of the difficulties facing the Spiral is how to define our object of study. In the absence of a single term to cover the range of disciplines the museum represents, I have used the term 'design' – although this has its drawbacks. We might refer to 'the arts' or 'visual culture' or even 'material culture'. None of these are wholly satisfactory. However, if we acknowledge that categories of objects/practices rarely remain stable for long, then a sense of how they change might offer fruitful areas

of investigation for our audiences.

To take one example; the practice and understanding of 'design'. The term has many roots, and is now understood to broadly represent a process and a product, a value as well as an activity. Definitions of design go beyond the professional and intentional, design is also a human activity in which we might all engage. It is a component of research and development in many spheres (such as engineering, software, social organisation). As Judy Attfield has put it, design should be considered as 'a process through which individuals and groups construct their identity, experience modernity and deal with social change.' (Attfield 2000) In the words of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, 'commodities are thoroughly socialised things.' (Appadurai 1986) Museums must seek to interpret this process of socialisation if they are to understand and represent design culture at all successfully.

Moving away from the narrow confines of design appreciation, curators of the contemporary will be able to address issues such as consumer behaviour and the role of objects in the formation of self and group identities. As well as the personal, a radical agenda for the Spiral might involve addressing the political issues surrounding the production and consumption of goods in a global society.

In the last two decades, the term 'design' has acquired a pejorative association with the consumerist excesses of contemporary society. Hal Foster, in his recent collection of polemical essays *Design and Crime* (2002) argues that the inflation of design to such heights in recent years has left little space for independent thought or 'running-room':

'... the rule of the designer is even broader than before: it ranges across very different enterprises (from

Brand.New, V&A exhibition, October 2000–January 2001. Installation designed by Heatherwick Studio showing The Field of Brands. The exhibition curated by Jane Pavitt and Gareth Williams.

Martha Stewart to Microsoft), and it penetrates various social groups. For today you don't have to be filthy rich to be projected not only as designer but designed – whether the product in question is your home or your business, your sagging face (designer surgery) or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums) or your DNA future (designer children).'

Such critical thoughts should be given 'run-ning-room' in the Spiral, to fulfill its role as a forum for debate.

Whatever the range of issues presented at any one time in the building, the close observation of material things will be paramount to Spiral practice. As I write this, scientists in London and Boston have just successfully completed the first public demonstration of long range sensing – enabling two people on opposite sides of the Atlantic to move an object simultaneously, both able to experience the sensation of touch, pressure and movement.² We may feel we are moving into a world where the virtual is paramount, but our

106 fascination with the physical nature of objects has not been displaced. The investigation into the physical character of objects – how they are made, how they feel, function, communicate – is a Spiral objective based on a basic human instinct.

The traditional ‘materials and techniques’ approach of the V&A has provided us with unrivalled specialist knowledge and collections – and the Spiral will investigate new ways of interpreting artefacts, bringing making and materials to life for contemporary audiences. To give one possible example: in the late 1990s, research students working at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab developed the means to use conducting threads to embroider circuitry onto fabric, a process they named *e-broidery*. Neil Gershenfeld, director of the Media Lab, described how ‘using filaments of Kevlar and stainless steel, they were able to program a computer-controlled sewing machine to stitch traces that could carry data and power, as well as sense the press of a finger’ (Gershenfeld 1999). This is one of many recent experimental examples of wearable technology, which at first found only specialist applications, but now is being taken seriously by high street labels such as Levi Strauss (Bolton 2000). MIT’s own experiments brought them into contact with other specialist design ‘realms’ such as fashion and jewellery.

The *e-broidery* experiment engaged technology with clothing, exploring the sensory as well as the pragmatic benefits of wearable, personalised computing. It crossed the boundaries between high technology and craft, using centuries-old ways of making to enrich what was just becoming technologically possible. There are many parallels to be drawn between the crafts and computing, as explored recent-

ly by Malcolm McCullough in his analysis of craft in the digital realm (McCullough 1999), and also by Sadie Plant, in her analysis of gender and computing (Plant 1998). My example also offers a way of envisioning a potential ‘Spiral’ interpretation of an artefact.

Weaving stories around objects is a means of drawing upon the rich reserves and knowledge in the museum, by drawing analogies with other objects, materials and technologies. Placing a work of high-tech experimentation into the realm of art and design interpretation can make it (and technology) more accessible. Confronting issues of use and sensory experience can make objects ‘come alive’ for the visitor. Also, in a neat reversal, contemporary artefacts can re-invigorate our ways of looking at historical artefacts. Media Lab’s *e-broidery* interpreted in the context of the V&A’s collections of historical embroidery could reveal surprisingly rich evidence – of making, using and imagining objects in both the past and the future.

CONCLUSION

The culture of experimentation and ideas I have described will not be ‘born’ with the opening of the new building – it must be fostered within the museum in preparation as we also build new partnerships, new ways of working, interpreting and displaying ideas to our visitors. The Contemporary Team at the V&A, established in 1999 has built a successful programme of exhibitions, events and collaborations that has broadened the reach of the V&A in terms of both subject matter and audience. The ‘contemporary’ identity of the museum is already far more visible and lively than ever before. This work has also fostered a new contemporary research culture, working

in partnership with artists, designers, critics, academics and educators.

The principle of gallery 'interventions' has brought a closer relationship between our historical collections and contemporary mission, enlightening audiences with new ways of looking at things. The *Give & Take* project of 2001, in collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery, introduced contemporary artists works into the V&A's galleries, setting up a dialogue between past and present, as well as between museum's and artist's interpretations of objects.

The museum's programme of major exhibitions has also featured several major shows which brought new kinds of interpretation to contemporary subjects, namely *Brand.New* in 2000 and *Radical Fashion* in 2001. *Brand.New*³ examined the subject of consumerism in the context of branding (Pavitt 2000) and *Radical Fashion* invited cutting edge designers such as Hussein Chalayan to create evocative 'self-curators' of their work (Wilcox 2001). Within the museum, new approaches to contemporary collecting are challenging the conventions of object type and material, to reflect global, societal, technological and material changes to object cultures. Already, the Contemporary is a museum-practice 'in the making'. Once the Spiral is open, practice 'in the making' will not stop – as it intended that the process of innovation, experimentation and renewal of ideas will be the only thing in the building *permanently* on display.

NOTES

1. The first art institution to use the term 'contemporary' in its title was the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston in 1936, a non-collecting institution based on the German Kunsthalle model.

2. Two research teams from University College London and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have worked on this project to manipulate computer generated objects in virtual space, and to generate the sensation of touch and force as it happens. BBC News, 30/10/02.
3. For an examination of the exhibition and its critical contexts, see Stephen Hayward, The Branding of Modern British Culture: Consumer Citizenship and the Age of Anxiety, in *Journal of Design History* Vol 14 No.2, 2001, pp.141–149.

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Note on Author

Jane Pavitt (M.A. RCA) is the University of Brighton Senior Research Fellow at the V&A Museum. She spe-

108 cialises in 20th century and contemporary design, and in particular concerned with the collection and interpretation of product design. She has curated several exhibitions, including *Designing in the Digital Age* (V&A 1999), *The Shape of Colour: Red* (Glasgow 1999) and *Brand.New* (V&A 2000). Her publications include the accompanying book for *Brand.New* (V&A 2000) and *Buildings of Europe: Prague* (Manchester University Press, 2000). She is currently working on plans for the V&A's new 20th century gallery, and preparing a

book and exhibition on contemporary lighting (*Brilliant*, 2004).

Jane Pavitt

Brighton Fellow

*Adr: Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington,
London SW7 2RL England*

Fax: + 44 20794 2584

E-mail: j.pavitt@vam.ac.uk