

Book Review by Kate Wilson***Artists Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities.***

Matilda Pye and Linda Sandino

213 pages

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Published in 2013, *Artist Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities* addresses the current preoccupation with the relationship between artists and design practitioners, museum professionals and the institutions they work in. Through a compilation of papers delivered to an initial seminar at the Chelsea School of Art in 2011, followed by a two-day conference at the V&A in 2012, the book explores the relationship between practice and exhibition within a museum context. This relationship may have always existed but has perhaps evolved with a new agenda, a realization of collaborative equality between creator and curator (not suggesting that curators are not creative!) and how that might encourage a wider viewing/participating audience. The book cover itself reflects the contents with the circular apertures front and back showcasing two intriguing and beautiful photographic images from Bettina Von Zwehl's *Made Up Love Song* (2011). The series of images being a response to the V&A's collection of portrait miniatures, but using a museum worker as the subject, bringing to question the political hierarchies within such an institution.

The book's editors Linda Sandino and Matilda Pye sit either side of the artist/curator fence and in Pye's introduction she suggests the aim was not to focus on artist/practitioners 'interfering' with art history to 'trigger new layers of meaning' (p.15), a fertile but already well trodden path; instead it considers the collaborative element between the institution, its workers and the artists. So not only a response to objects but also place, politics and the general public. Pye states 'How museums act on individuals and how they act in museums is one of the key questions that the essays seek to explore' (p.17).

Essentially this is a book of two halves firstly considering historical contexts and secondly recounting the personal experiences of design practitioners and curators. Although the first section is rather London-centric, specifically focusing on the V&A, the National Gallery and the Royal Academy, each chapter identifies historic tensions between theorists and practitioners, how the study of art developed as a separate activity from the production of art with the rise of the art historian and how the qualities, skills and vision of each could influence the institutions they worked within.

Clearly historically art practitioners have had an active role as curators but Charles Saumarez Smith in his chapter on *The Artist as Curator* identifies Roger Fry as one of the few artists who also successfully *theorized* (my italics), but he was more acknowledged for his art criticism than his painting, ‘His understanding of art was always informed by his practice as a painter’ (p.26). In the main during the 20th century, as Saumarez Smith suggests, the post war museum professional would generally be humanities graduates with no great knowledge of contemporary practice; the required skills set did not necessarily demand it. It is only as museum culture has recognised the importance of the contemporary in relation to historical art production that the value of artists as curators, or at least part of the curating process, has been acknowledged. Avery Quash and Carleton Paget’s chapter continues this discussion with the focus on the role of director at the National Gallery and the power struggles and conflict of technical and intuitive knowledge over the impartiality of the museum professional in the various appointments since its inception.

Returning to the V&A as a focus Christopher Marsden’s chapter on *Godfrey Sykes and His Studio at the South Kensington Museum* explores the collaborative nature so intrinsic within the ethos of the V&A from its early days of engineers planning the buildings and artists designing and supervising the decoration, to artists still being actively involved and integral to the museum’s philosophy, be it in the current post-disciplinary context.

Similarly Margaret Timmers addresses the continuing theme with her biography of *Martin Hardie: Etcher and Curator*. Classically educated, Hardie’s passion for printmaking, a skill he developed for himself, also expanded into gathering a wide collection of graphic art such as the railway and theatre poster, tapping into popular culture in a new and exciting way but broadening the reach of interest by doing so.

The section concludes with a fascinating study of post war culture within the V&A by Linda Sandino, *Art School Trained Staff and Communists in the V&A Circulation Department, c.1947-58*. A time when the V&A positively sought to employ women and generally people with art school practical experience; leftwing and Communist advocates were also engaged (perhaps the museum was a safe place to keep an eye on them). Politically the ethos of the V&A has always been left of centre, William Morris was an active socialist and the museum was the first in Britain to focus solely on education in design. ‘Set up with government funding in the mid-nineteenth century, the collections were primarily what would now be considered a teaching collection for artisans and

manufacturers.’ (p.92). Whatever the motivation a mission of accessibility and equality persisted allowing employees to become ‘active participants in a strategy of object-based cultural diplomacy to manage the increasingly irreconcilable relations between East and West’ (p.102).

Sandwiched in the middle of the book is a filling of Neil Cummings’ confected vision of the future in his chapter *Victoria & Albert Museum Bicentenary 2057*. This is an edited transcript of his performance at the V&A conference, in which he explores the role of museums (specifically the V&A), amid political and ecological global chaos over the next 50 years. (One prediction maybe about to come true that of Nicola Sturgeon becoming Scotland’s First Minister, as I write this on the eve of the Scottish Independence vote!)

The subsequent section of *Artists in Museums* considers the museum space and its impact on individual’s experiences and Mathilda Pye begins with looking at *The Museum Environment as the Content of Cultural Production*. Interviewing a number of museum employees Pye identifies a common need to be in a learning or creative space where networks of likeminded people could be formed, or a place where artists could financially support themselves within a space of ‘gentility’ (Pye) where there was time to think.

Martha Fleming’s *The Science Lesson* succinctly acknowledges how with the development of research through practice a new platform for production has manifested for the 21st century artist. ‘Weaving between museum practice, academic arenas and artistic production over the past fifteen years or so has become a kind of survival tactic for many artists whose work does not fit neatly into a commercial sphere. For those of us who have been working conceptually for several decades, institutions of all sorts have increasingly become home from home and a place to practice...’ (p158) The museum space has also facilitated a less than traditional response from exhibition designer Callum Storrie, who writes about his *Delirious Museum*. Intrigued by Situationist strategies of unpredictability in urban spaces and using his in-house knowledge of exhibition spaces, Storrie challenged the expectations of the visitor within a museum context. However, not all artists’ responses are welcomed. Zandra Ahl’s account of a commissioned then subsequently banned film in her chapter *The National Museum of Stockholm and I - Examined*, perhaps serves as a reminder that not all institutions are willing to take the risk of allowing free reign for an artist challenging its bureaucratic and political hierarchies.

The final chapter is a conversation between ceramic artist Keith Harrison and Matilda Pye discussing his residency at the V&A in 2013. Harrison identifies the unexpected outcomes when working in that very public, yet private space of the studio in the ceramic galleries, and how he applied his creativity within that context. As with all Harrison's responses there is an edge of anxiety as to whether his intentions will succeed, or rather produce the unexpected, as in the delightfully incongruous piece *Lucie Rie v Grindcore*. Harrison engaged with the museum and its visitors through a series of planned *disruptions* that was to culminate in a reproduction of Keith Moon's drum kit (sadly not realised, however was re-conceived for his *Bustleholme* performance at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill on Sea). In her afterword Christina Atha states 'Personal involvement of the artist, not patronage, and passionate support for exploratory practices has allowed the museum's approach to evolve and involve' (p.204). Keith Harrison is a great example of this and as the practices of the post-disciplinary artist have matured into mainstream consumption, as a venue, the museum not only provides a 'performance' space but also a point of access for the public to engage with it, negating the need for the 'marketable' end product.

The nature of the content means that while there is some interesting factual historical background in the first section, much of the book is subjective and anecdotal. However, this is not a criticism as *subjectivities* forms part of the title and, in the process, raises questions about the culture/elitism/theory/practice and what function we want our museums to perform and how they should evolve in the future. It also identifies the ever-increasing number of educated art professionals, driven by process over outcome, who find the museum context a highly desirable space, not just literally as in scale but also to reach a broad cross section of viewers. Will there be enough museums to go round I ask?!