**Ceramics and Politics conference, Holbourne Museum, 14 Nov 14**

**Politics, Crockery and the V&A**

1. Title: Thanks to Jo D and Holbourne for allowing me the opportunity to think about the problem of politics, of political engagement and commitment that I have been grappling with in my research on the history of curating in the post-war period at the V&A. Sandino mug.

2. Politics pervades daily life but in this talk I’d like to focus on the museum as the site of political actions drawing on examples from the late 1940s /early 50s to current examples of collecting, a residency and a commission. I use the examples to try to understand how what politics meant and means; how it is realised within a national institution as well as how it is constituted by other forces outside the walls of the museum.

As a working definition, I’ve drawn on political theorist Adrian Leftwich’s location of the common ground of the definition of politics as a ‘collective concern with the analysis of the origins, forms, distribution and control of power.’ These can be examined on the macro-level of government as well as on the micro-level of discourses and institutions: the arts (ceramics) and art institutions (the V&A).

3. Over the years, the V&A has had its identity crises. 1984 was the year in which the ‘Thatcherisation’ of the museum was launched when it ceased to be under the administration of the Dept of Education. Trustees appointed by the PM’s office, were put in place to appoint a director and manage the Museum. This form of management continues. In a very direct way, therefore, the V&A reflects the political interests of government.

4. One of the more intriguing parts of my research has been to look at what kinds of objects were collected at particular times by certain departments (and I will say more about this later). The so called Rapid Response Collecting was launched a couple of years ago with the aim of by-passing the lengthy acquisition procedures so as to respond to ‘major moments in history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. Ranging from Christian Louboutin shoes in five shades of ‘nude’; a cuddly toy wolf used as an object of political dissent; to the world’s first 3D-printed gun, each new acquisition raises a different question about globalisation, popular culture, political and social change, demographics, technology, regulation or the law’. (Katie Price false eyelashes).

The Liberator gun generated a lot of publicity for its makers Cody Wilson as well as for the V&A, whose number of visitors is a crucial factor in its reports to government. The gun which was made not to fire, was acquired as an example of new technology although Wilson claimed that ‘it has an artistic sensibility about it,” he “It’s a kind of demonstration, proof of the direction of our technical future.” [Telegraph 17. 9. 13]

The Kent Spike studs caused the Irish Examiner to comment: Those who do not approve of this miracle of craftsmanship call it “the anti homeless spike” and that’s where the V&A come in. Its exhibition featuring the Kent Stud is all about showing how design reflects “how we live together today”. How we live today is pretty much how we’ve always lived together: One lot wanting to limit the lives of the other lot. At least the aesthetics are improving. The Kent Stud may be related to the glass-topped wall, but in design terms, it’s streets ahead.’ [Terry Prone, Seats of Power, 4.8.14]

5. Acquisitions are often directly related to forthcoming exhibitions. Disobedient Objects, the curators claim ‘is the first to examine the powerful role of objects in movements for social change. It demonstrates how political activism drives a wealth of design ingenuity and collective creativity that defy standard definitions of art and design’.

Like the Liberator and the spikes, the emphasis is on ingenuity and collective action.

6. Carrie Reichardt was commissioned by the curators to produce a work, an ‘intervention’ for the exhibition which you see here. Carrie describes herself as a an ‘extreme craftivist and renegade potter’.

7. Her statement published on the V&A exhibiton website sets out her position.

I was struck by how much it echoes the Tory’s Big Society theme:

"There are the things you do because it's your passion," he said.

"Things that fire you up in the morning, that drive you, that you truly believe will make a real difference to the country you love, and my great passion is building the big society."

These schemes and others in the future, he said, would represent "the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street". <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10680062>

8. How does Carrie’s position differ from that of the politically committed, Communist curators who worked in the V&A’s legendary Circulation department? This department was responsible for sending out exhibitions to the regions, to art schools and local libraries until its closure in 1976 due to government cuts to the Civil Service. Until that date it was the only department to collect contemporary work, making significant purchases of studio ceramics which are now in the main ceramic collection [marked CIRC].

9. Communism and socialism dated back to William Morris and his influence and ideas on the arts and crafts movement were seminal. Elsewhere I have argued how they were also fundamental ethos to the ethos of public service that drove the character of the Circulation department, beginning with its Keeper Peter Floud who, as Barbara Morris insisted, instilled in his staff that ‘our job was to serve the public…that’s what museums were for: to inform, educated, and generally improve public taste…We were there to help [rather than] pursuing our own interests for the sake of it.’ Echoing William Morris’ famous dictum: ‘I do not want art for a few, anymore than I want education for a few, or freedom for a few’.

10. These socialist values were reflected in the department’s collections. It is significant that it contained a high percentage of Scandinavian everyday crockery, exhibited in the Modern Scandinavian Tableware exhibition of 1957. Here we have the Kilta range designed by Kaj Franck for the Finnish company Arabia and a coffeepot by the Swedish designer Stig Lindberg for the Gustavberg porcelain factory. The appeal of the democratic politics of Scandinavian provided a model that was specifically cited by curator Jennifer Opie when I interviewed her.

11. Finlandia was another landmark exhibition that brought the democracy of good design to London. The earthenware wall plaque is by the Finnish artist Birger Kaipiainen for Arabia. Kaipiainen had joined Arabia in 1937 and was one of the artists employed by the company to create studio ceramics. [ADD re: Scandinavian model of art/craft practice democracy].

12. One of the questions that has arisen is what happened to this political commitment in the context of life in the V&A? How was it maintained once the department was closed? Is political commitment, a lifetime project, or is it time dependant?

‘Is commitment an attitude, an inner sense, which once arrived at, is unalterable? Or do certain commitments contain within them a flexibility which allows individuals to accommodate to new and changing circumstances, while retaining the core of the original intended commitment? ‘ [Molly LoC 143]

Barbara Morris spoke to me about her disillusionment with communism in the late 1950s, as well as with contemporary party politics. Significantly however she retrieved her idealism by locating her affinity with the ideals of William Morris ‘a romantic view of Socialism’, demonstrating how a core of ‘the original commitment’ of a public service ethos, a belief in the power of beautiful things to change society and the museum’s role in disseminating this, could be maintained in her post as a curator in the V&A (she retired in 1978).

13. I now come to my final example: Keith Harrison’s residency at the V&A.

Keith reflected on his ‘occupancy’ of the V&A for a book I edited with a colleague Artists Work in Museums (Bath Spa Wunderkammer). Intriguingly he identified the public responsibility of the post alongside his own desire to ‘agitate from the inside’.

Keith extracts:

*I was aware of a strong element of public engagement as an expectation of the residency…. Preferring to present my work as an on-going process destined for the public domain…Perhaps my own prejudices defined the Museum audience as a cosy comfortable world of V & A visitors with middle class values, whose definition of a beautiful object would be seriously challenged by an act of destruction.*

*As an invited artist, the residency gave me a self-imposed remit to challenge the V&A; I was at the same time challenged by the Museum and its gargantuan scale and historic gravitas. I was agitating against, courteously but with determination, from the inside.*

14. During the residency, Harrison created a series of ‘lunchtime disruptions’ which he hoped ‘*would suggest a point of protest, an annoyance. I wanted to challenge the Museum structure and its public. Perhaps my own prejudices defined the Museum audience as a cosy comfortable world of V & A visitors with middle class values, whose definition of a beautiful object would be seriously challenged by an act of destruction.’*

The second disruption, Circulation, followed on from finding out about the department. As he noted:

*Being made aware how radical aspects of the Museum had been, I came to consider the Learning department and the residency programme as direct descendants of the ‘art for everyone’ ethos, a democratic embracing of the contemporary, as well as the Museum’s commitment to the conservation of the past. I think this work, of all the disruptions, is most completely of and about the Museum as an institution and its original political ideology.* [AWiM]

Rather than the objects, for Harrison it was, as he stated ‘ *the people [who] were the most compelling content and, in many ways, the individual made the institution less corporate, more humane and far more radica*l’.

15. To return to the question of politics and the museum: [Molly’s] political commitment contains four elements which need to be addressed when attempting its analysis:

* Intention: Is it a statement of intention or a description of an actual state of affairs? Is it identifiable? (e.g. membership)
* Duration: Is it situation specific, long-term or transitory?
* Action: Is it expressed only as a belief or as action?
* Priority: Is it a low or high priority?

At this point it would be specious to speculate on these in relation to my examples except to day that they all demonstrate distinctive features of intention and action. Duration and priority are more problematic in that they go to the core of how politics is lived and done.

The museum enabled Barbara and her colleagues to maintain their political ideals of public service; for Keith the residency afforded the opportunity to actively challenge the ideology of the museum’s hierarchy and local politics; but Carrie Reichardt’s statement demonstrates how the dominant institutions and ideologies can disempower radical strategies. Any radical edge has been obliterated. As Clare Bishop noted in her excellent critique of participatory art, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012:277)*:*

In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of egos levelled to banality. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.

16. To return to Leftwich’s ‘common ground’ for politics: it is through the analysis of its forms and distribution that we can understand the role that ceramics might play. Otherwise,

Slavoj Zizek noted to the Occupy Wall Street-ers:

There is a danger. Don’t fall in with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any change then?’ <http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript>