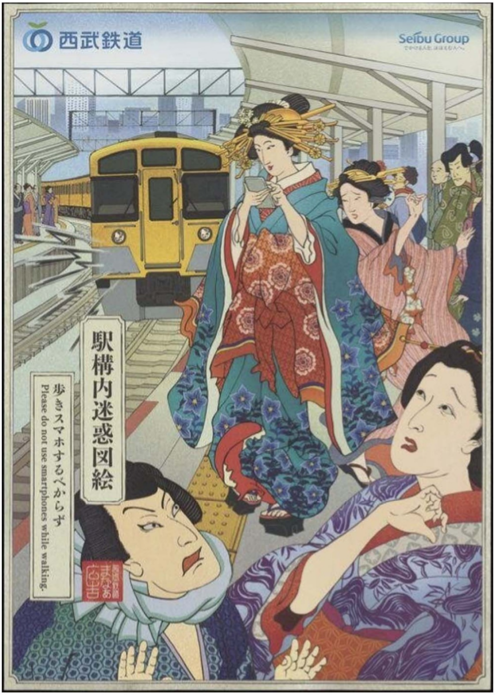
OUR PROJECTS DIGITAL RESEARCH

THE V&A RESEARCH INSTITUTE (VARI)

Search by object, artist, maker...

Colin Priest

March 14, 2022


西武鉄道
Seibu Group
駅構内迷惑図絵
歩きスマホするべからず
Please do not use smartphones while walking.

Please do not use smartphones while walking poster illustrated by Takahiro Kadowaki, 2017. Museum no. FE.272-2018 © Image Victoria and Albert Museum, London

There is an equal measure of excitement and trepidation when a magnifying glass icon appears on the computer screen. Timed with a cursor blink comes a multitude of internal questions; '*Where am I?*' and; *What am I looking for?*' Across these split seconds of working algorithms and technologies, geographically somewhere between A-Z, an institutional gate is about to open. While an antiquated image of the magnifying glass stirs memories of Sherlock Holmes or Inspector Clouseau, the friendly icon quietly nudges precision and serendipity. From here, the keyboard becomes a key's ward to unlock the gate, chancing a rolodex of terms, dates and places. Looking longer though, the magnifying glass also looks back, asking '*Who am I today?*'

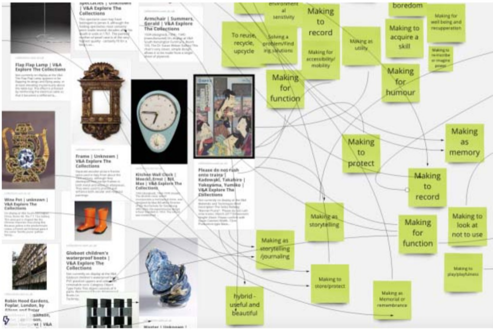
This last question came to mind when I joined a series of events and activities by V&A Research Institute (VARI) Show+Tell+Share Fellows Matilda Pye and Cara Gray to contemplate how I engage with a museum and its online collection. The invitation came primarily as my work lives in various forms. With a background in architecture, my spatial practice involves digging in places, enlivening archives, collections, ephemera, spaces, buildings and landscapes. Meanwhile my role as a Senior Lecturer on the Material and Spatial Practices Programme at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London, requires multiple forms of teaching, research activity and knowledge exchange. I am also a curious 'local' resident, a stone's throw from V&A East's emerging sites in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

My first encounter was a 'sound walk' in December 2019 around Hackney Wick facilitated by vocalist and sound artist Natasha Lohan. The group activity involved slow, silent walking through the network of hidden routes and alleys around Hackney Wick, ending at St Mary of Eton to warm-up and share our thoughts over tea. The activity required gentle concentration and camaraderie, tracing infrequently used routes to heighten new sensitivities and perspectives of a familiar place. It brought back memories of local projects, like Bow Bells Ring, completed along the Olympic periphery in 2011 and numerous 'study walks' with students since. Deeply rooted in the 'Where' and 'What', stories about how the area had changed mixed with objects and moments, and merged to manifest in tears and laughter, igniting the mutable prospect of 'Who' as we search a place.

Bow Bells Ring, commissioned by View Tube Art and Invisible Dust, Leaside Regeneration and Create, 2011. Image: Colin Priest

The second encounter was an invitation in May 2021 with 11 MA Interior and Spatial Design students from Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London, to test how users might 'search' a collection through the idea of 'polyphonic' objects. This took place online due to pandemic restrictions, and because of student familiarity with virtual activities, beforehand, like detectives, we individually sourced a 'beautiful' and 'useful' object from the digital V&A collection. Collectively using Miro, we traversed our complex and personal histories. Circling past, present and future stories; one of my objects was a Seibu Railway etiquette poster, above by the illustrator Takahiro Kadowaki and art director Yumiko Yokoyama. First spotted during a Wayfinding Summer School in Tokyo and my subsequent memory of seeing it in the V&A Japan Gallery just before lockdown, it felt relevant.

Upon searching the online collection came a discovery of the complete series, each narrating spatial thoughtfulness on the move. In this way, the careful act of 'searching' *JAPAN TRAIN POSTER* became a moment of comforting affirmation and surprising illumination at a time we were unable to travel. Connecting and building upon existing knowledge of another time and place, linking personal and professional interest to expand a binary of 'seeing' and of 'being seen'.


Flap Flap Lamp | V&A Explore The Collections
Armchair | Summers, Gerald | V&A Explore The Collections
Frame | Unknown | V&A Explore The Collections
Kitchen Wall Clock | V&A Explore The Collections
Please do not rush onto trains | Kadowaki, Takahiro | Yokoyama, Yumiko | V&A Explore The Collections
Wine Pot | unknown | V&A Explore The Collections
Globoot children's waterproof boots | V&A Explore The Collections
Robin Hood Gardens, Poplar, London, by Alison and Peter
environmental sensitivity
boredom
Making to record
To reuse, recycle, upcycle
Solving a problem/Finding solutions
Making for accessibility/mobility
Making as utility
Making to acquire a skill
Making for well being and recupperation
Making to re-inscribe or imagine
Making for function
Making for humour
Making as memory
Making to protect
Making to record
Making as storytelling
Making as storytelling /journaling
Making for function
Making to look at not to use
Making to play/playfulness
Making to store/protect
Making as Memorial or remembrance
hybrid - useful and beautiful

Screenshot from the Show+Tell+Share Miro board

Together, the encounters uncovered the pluralities of the 'Who' we search for. Whether in-person or virtual, the personal inevitably merges with the professional; temporal experiences, loose connections and stories go on to magnify how reciprocal and interconnected the process of detection can be. Akin to museum classification, when we click the *Search by object, artist, maker…* our simple action also extends a stronger sense of cooperation to ask; '*Who are we searching for?*' Our results orbit our professional and personal selves, family, friends, colleagues and people we may never know.

SEARCH THE COLLECTIONS SHOW TELL SHARE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Priest

March 14, 2022

I am a London-based artist, designer and academic. With a background in architecture, I create place-based works that incorporate moving-image, installation, writing, performance and archival material. Public encounters gently rub…

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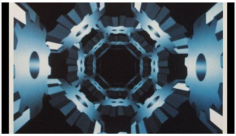

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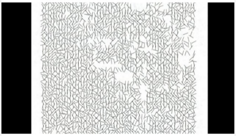

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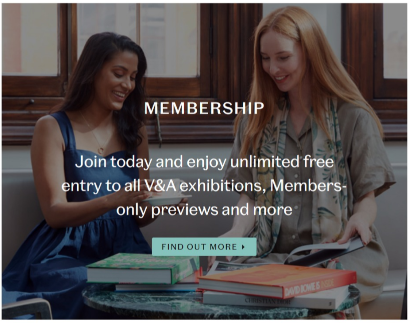

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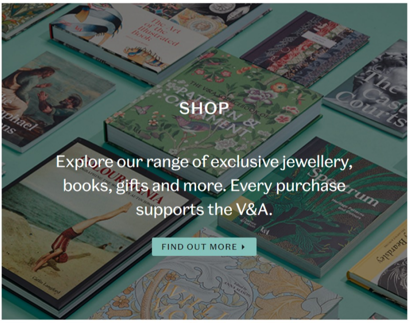

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