**Introduction: Artists Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities.**

**Part 1: Histories of the Artist as Museum Professional – Linda Sandino**

The title of this publication plays on the interdependent and conventional association of artists with museums: ‘work’ is here used as both noun and verb to refer to the cultural products or activities that artists produce, *and* to denote the active labour involved in being a museum member of staff. Our discussion about artists (taken in its broadest definition to include anyone who attended art school) working as museum employees arose initially in the context of the V&A oral history project, the aim of which is to explore the history of curatorial practice at the V&A in the post-war period.[[1]](#endnote-2) Some of the curators I had interviewed were art school trained, but, as my co-editor pointed out, ex-art school individuals and practicing artists work in many other areas of museum. Why wasn’t the project extended to recording their experience? This question led to our undertaking to go beyond the taken-for-granted assumption that of course museums provide a ‘natural’ place of employment for artist. We wanted to explore the specific conditions that make the museum a congenial and enabling workplace for art school trained individuals and artists to discover what kinds of agency are enabled by working in museums and galleries. Following an exploratory network seminar at Chelsea College of Art in March 2011, we held a two-day conference at the V&A in October 2012. This publication includes several of the papers initially presented at that event and at the seminar.

From its nineteenth century origins, the V&A was intended to be a resource of inspiration for artists, designers and manufacturers.[[2]](#endnote-3) Consequently, from the beginning artists and designers were involved in shaping the Museum as a specific kind of institution dedicated to exhibiting examples ‘good’ art and design, enshrined even in the design of its buildings, which until 1991 included Royal College of Art studios. One of the many artists who worked on the decorative schemes was Godfrey Sykes (1824-1866) whose contribution, along with that of his co-workers, is explored by Christopher Marsden. Given the legacy of the symbiotic relationship between art as practice and as history, it is perhaps not surprising that the research on artists as museum professionals should have arisen from within the V&A. It is, moreover, not insignificant that this research is framed by our (the Editors) different but complementary disciplinary backgrounds in history and in arts practice as these are the two fields that have framed and subsequently shaped the function of the art museum, as well as art education and what artists do (see Pye below).

The first section ‘Histories of the Artist as Museum Professional’ focuses on the Royal Academy, the National Gallery and the V & A, spanning broadly the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century institutional contexts. We felt it was important to acknowledge and document the distinctive, if at times similar, conditions in which artists conducted their professional lives in somewhat dissimilar institutions. The Royal Academy was set up, as Charles Saumarez Smith points out, to be ‘run by artists for artists’ (Saumarez Smith this volume). Despite this ideal scenario, here too a tension existed between the study of the history of the art of the past as a resource of exemplary production against that of the present. Drawing on the history of the Academy, Saumarez Smith maps the factors that have led to an increasingly prominent role for the contemporary artist-curator and what he sees as the de-professionalisation of the museum profession.

Somewhat later in 1894 The National Gallery in London was the focus of another struggle over the supremacy between historical expertise and connoisseurship with artistic practice. The appointment of a new director generated public debates about the merits of continuing with the Gallery’s tradition of appointing painters as directors. What were the qualities necessary to lead an art institution? Why was it necessary to be a painter? Were connoisseurs more impartial and better equipped to judge the merits of its collections? Or, were practitioners more knowledgeable about the particular qualities and requirements of art galleries and their contents? Susanna Avery-Quash and James Carlton-Page examine the National Gallery’s tradition of appointing Painter-Directors in the context of these contemporary debates, suggesting that it was the establishment of art history as an academic discipline in England in the late 1920s that would eventually lead to the appointment of an art historian.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Although the polarization of art history and art practice centres on issues about who should steer an art museum, it also begs the question about who the museum is for and who its main audience is, or should be? For artists these debates continue principally because of the legitimating power of museums as gatekeepers to sanctioning contemporary work and its future status as worthy of incorporation into the historical canon that museums, despite themselves, continue to construct. However, as this book argues, this is too simplistic an explanation for why artists ‘work’ in museums. In her account of the career of Martin Hardie (1875-1952), artist and Keeper of the Department of Engraving, Illustration and Design at the V & A, Margaret Timmers shows how the combination of curatorial and practice-based expertise, not to mention a modest and generous disposition, contributed to Hardie’s success as artist and museum professional. Timmers notes the value of the proximity of the Royal College of Art where Hardie honed his printmaking skills as well as meeting and working alongside contemporary artists. With his keen interest in process, Hardie’s acquisitions for the collection encompassed both contemporary *and* historical works supported by his curatorial obligations in drawing up catalogues of works in the department’s collections. However, equally striking is breadth of Hardie’s interests fostered by his curatorial responsibilities, not limited by personal artistic tastes, as the National Gallery debaters assumed.

As a museum of art *and* design, the V & A is historically encyclopaedic and comprehensive in its collections, but its structure has, for the most part, maintained a focused approach to object and material scholarship except for the Circulation department which in the post-war period until its closure in 1976 (due to government cuts) numbered a high percentage of ex-art-school employees. As we have seen, of itself this fact is not unusual, but the Department had a prominently socialist ethos that included members of the Communist Party. My paper explores how left-wing, art-school affiliations in the aftermath of World War Two found a form of active expression in the mission of the Department.

While being a member of the Communist Party and being an artist are not incompatible, it is surprising to find these allied to museum civil service work. One of the central concerns of the research into artists working in museums has been to explore the subjectivities of the artist-museum professional. Elsewhere I have argued that the personhood of ‘artist’ is always ‘in-process’ but nevertheless dominant.[[4]](#endnote-5) Research into artists as museum professionals presents the variety and contingency of what it means to be an artist, how that designation comes about and how it is, or is not maintained. The importance of examining historical contexts is, as Paul du Gay has argued in another context, how it shows the ‘specific forms of personhood that individuals come to acquire in distinctive setting. With this emphasis comes recognition of the plural and regional character of ‘personae’ and the importance of not leaving them ‘underdescribed’’.[[5]](#endnote-6)

The debates at the Royal Academy and The National Gallery were possible because certain qualities cohered around the definitions of ‘artist’ and ‘connoisseur’; they were, in du Gay’s terms ‘organized’ identities that emerged from specific conditions and flourished in specific contexts. How museums have provided the settings, or environments, for the deployment of ‘artist’ can only be explored by acknowledging the particularity of each institution within its historical moment. Moreover, working in museums at whatever level, is always a relational endeavour; solely one individual achieves little despite the delusions of autocracy. Godfrey Sykes working with the engineer Francis Fowke is one example. In addition, however, it is also the practices, or work protocols*,* and how these are managed by individuals that contribute to the various forms of personhood, in our case the artist-as-museum professional. Even this, as the first section has demonstrated is not a singularly coherent set of attributes or activities.

The final piece in this section is a performative artwork made for and delivered at the 2012 conference by the artist Neil Cummings. It acts as a bridge between our two sections, between histories of the artist as museum professional and the exploration of the contemporary conditions that have led artists to seek work as well as make work in and about museums. Cummings’ art practice, as he states, is multidisciplinary requiring ‘an intense period of research within the specific contexts in which art is produced, distributed and encounters its audiences.’[[6]](#endnote-7) His work encapsulates many of the concerns and the approach that we and our contributors have aimed for in this publication. Cummings’ *V&A Bicentenary* presents a future-history of the V&A, a reflection of an ‘institutional subjectivity, or how the V&A became conscious of itself’.[[7]](#endnote-8)

**Part 2: The Museum Environment as the Content of Cultural Production - Matilda Pye**

The second half of the book deals principally with artists (in the terms set out above) but focuses on current interventions and subjectivities in museums. The section is made up of contributions in which individuals reflect on their subjectivities and their inconsistent, human relationships to work, ambitions and identities. It begins with my own auto(biography) of becoming a museum professional in relation to a particular moment of art school education practice (s) in the 1990s. I hover between the generational experiences of my two museum interviewees whose experiences have contributed to my essay : one stands more firmly in separating *work* from *practice*; the other, in a parallel move to that of Paul Greenhalgh (see Preface) , recognizes a decision to create a career beyond the art school whilst acknowledging the identity, practice and know-how gained as an art student have informed her present curatorial role in the V & A. The speculative act of thinking and dwelling in the museum that I take echoes as well that of other contributors to this section: the artist Martha Fleming, who describes herself as ‘stranger, go-between’ and ‘doubledouble agent’, and the designer Calum Storrie who reveals his penchant for ‘uncertainty, porosity and making strange’.

The phrase *artists work in museums* might most commonly bring to mind a commissioning process whereby an artist is asked to actively ‘interfere’ with art history, or the space and architecture of a museum or gallery. Think Corneila Parker, who was ‘interested in the possibility of taking something familiar or clichéd and changing it, in an attempt to trigger new layers of meaning’ by wrapping a (Duchamp influenced) one mile of string around Rodin’s *The Kiss* at Tate Britain in 2003[[8]](#endnote-9), or Anthony Gormley’s *Field* (1989 – 2003) made and remade across the world. My aim for this section, but also the research as a whole, was different. It was to highlight that museum workers are cultural producers behind the scenes working as collaborators and co-producers who bring a skill set, knowledge and expertise, often anonymously, usually quietly and flexibly, to change museums as institutional and public spaces and the meaning of collections within them.

Artists are invited into the museum on different terms and contracts to play, interpret and find inspiration from collections and the institution, two such in this section being Zandra Ahl and Keith Harrison. Ahl was commissioned to interpret the contemporary design collection at the National Museum Stockholm, and Harrison, was ceramic artist-in-residence in a purpose built studio in the Ceramic Galleries of the V & A. What interested me about their interventions (as well as that of Bettina von Zwehl’s whose images are on the covers of this book) was that their attention and curiosity focused on the institution and its largely overlooked content, i.e. its staff who shape and infect histories of collected and curated objects. Ahl and Harrison highlight the complexity of acting inside and outside the museum. The outcome of Ahl’s commission was a film, ‘which raised questions about gender, about the relationship between the Museum and the artist and about the right to interpret history*’.* Her role and ambition was to interrogate the ethics of museum interpretation*.* In a parallel mode, Harrison describes how:

My position as an invited artist-in-residence 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. As a resident I felt I was someone in a position somewhere between a guest given their own set of keys to come and go as they wished, and a seasonal employee with both my own and external expectations of occupancy.

This book is the outcome of attempts to explore and document how some artists as museum workers define their ‘work’. It weaves between roles that are given, roles that are taken, and roles that are contested: as Fleming notes, ‘When does the artist’s engagement with museums start to become simply ‘working in museums’ and when does the ‘stranger’ become and insider? Crossing that line, and slipping behind the desk, something happens’. The contributors allude to temperament in interesting ways; there are best and worst case scenarios described by Storrie ‘like being a kind of service engineer, someone who arrives on the doorstop to fix a problem. At best it can be a proper collaboration where the roles of curator and designer begin to blur.’ There are also issues of pride as one of my interviewees remarked*:* ‘If one’s an artist, whatever one’s day job is, there’s a certain shame involved, in having it [a job], because if one were a more successful artist then one wouldn’t need to have one. At root that is one’s relationship to one’s job’.

In her essay ‘Curating the Educational Turn’, Sally Tallent, Director of the Liverpool Biennial (formerly of the Serpentine Gallery) commented on the increasing significance of ‘flexible platforms’ and the diverse forms of artistic practice all of which require co-producers and collaboration:

Since the 1990’s many artists and curators have embraced the idea of creating flexible platforms for presenting work, extending the institution and its functions and absorbing aspects of the institutional critique proposed in the 1970’s. The ‘new institution’ places equal emphasis on all programmes and creates spaces and modes of display that reflect this, including archives, reading rooms, residency schemes, talks and events as well as exhibitions[[9]](#endnote-10).

She concludes by noting how such platforms can generate their own particular problematic in relation to educational remits: ‘Whilst it is possible to commission artists and to create projects in which learning can be produced, it is perhaps harder to find time and institutional space to look critically at what is produced and (*how*) to discuss the value of the work’. [[10]](#endnote-11) The Artists Work in Museums project has provided an opportunity to begin to examine some of the aspects of the contribution to which Tallant alludes in her essay. However, it is the collaborative element of museum work that, as several of the contributors to this book have demonstrated, is the vital engine of museums: from that between the artist Godfrey Sykes and the engineer Francis Fowke in the nineteenth century V&A, to Keith Harrison’s work with Martin Bastone experimenting together to explode an iconic drum kit.

Bettina von Zwehl‘s images, which appear on the front and back covers of this book, were made during her residency at the V & A in 2011. *Made Up Love Song[[11]](#endnote-12)*, consists of a series of images of a member of the museum’s visitors services team, Sophia Biricorang, who von Zwehl photographed in the same place in the museum at regular intervals throughout the residency. Lucy Soutter describes von Zwehl’s process thus: ‘While most photographic portraits focus on the outer projections of identity, what we might call personality, von Zwehl’s work examines the person as a responsive, physically embodied form*.’* [[12]](#endnote-13)How museums act *on* individuals and *how* they act *in* museums is one of the key questions that the essays in this book seek to explore.

1. L.Sandino, ‘News From the Past: Oral History at the V&A’ *V&A Online Journal* 2 (Autumn 2009) <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-02/news-from-the-past-oral-history-at-the-v-and-a/> Accessed June 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See A. Burton, *Vision and Accident: the Story of the V&A*, (London: V&A Publications) 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. See C. Saumarez Smith, *The National Gallery: A Short History,* (London: The National Gallery and Frances Lincoln), 2009 for an account of the Gallery’s directors. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. L. Sandino, ‘Artists-in-progress: narrative identity of the self as another’ in M. Hyvärinen*et al* (Eds) *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, (Amsterdam and Philadelphia PA:John Benjamins Publishing 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. P. du Gay, *Organizing Identity: Persons and Organizations After Theory*, (London: Sage 2007) p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. <http://www.chelsea.arts.ac.uk/ccwgraduateschool/ccwstaffresearchprofiles/professorneilcummings/> Accessed May 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Cummings has also produced imagined futures for the Moderna Museet, <http://www.neilcummings.com/content/museum-futures-script-0> and for the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol in *Self-Portrait: Arnolfini* (Bristol: Arnolfini 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. *The Distance (A Kiss With String Attached),* was part of Days Like These The Tate Triennial, Tate Britian 2003

www.frithstreetgallery.com/works/view/the\_distance\_a\_kiss\_with\_string\_attachedauguste\_rodins\_the\_kiss\_1904\_a\_mile Accessed June, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Sally Tallant, ‘Experiments In Intergrated Programming’, in Paul O’Neil & Mick Wilson (eds), *Curating And The Educational Turn*, (London, Open Editions/de Appel 2010 ) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. The title is ‘semi-borrowed’ from the Guillimots’ song 'Made up love Song no 43’; not to be taken literally but it sets the tone of how von Zwehl approaches her work. (von Zwehl to Sandino email, 18 June 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Lucy Soutter, *About Bettina von Zwehl*; [www.bettinavonzwehl.com/main.html](http://www.bettinavonzwehl.com/main.html), Accessed June, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)