

National Maritime Museum Presentation

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We are Giorgio Garippa and Oliver Palmer, we're both artists and we often collaborate on art projects.

Today we're going to talk a bit about our interest in museums and of how – as two collaborative artists – we respond to museum collections. We are also going to speak a bit about how we approached our research for a project proposal for the PRM which is currently under consideration. We will also mention our attempts to identify the character of that museum and of methods by which we might be able to add to and build upon that character. As well as this we will cover our particular interests in the project and the constraints we identified, and we will read an edited excerpt covering the narrative that forms a part of the proposal itself.

You'll have to forgive us the slightly rambling structure of the talk – we felt it was more honest to not over-compensate for some of the holes or disconnects in our process; for the process of researching for the purposes of making art involve lateral shifts and associations that don't always have a completely logical explanation. We have tried to make explicit connections where possible but many other connections – including those you may make yourselves – are implied through repetition or the similarity of patterns in the thoughts, images and events outlined. We also hoped that some of the feelings we felt whilst developing a proposal through a series of serendipitous discoveries – and the excitement of that process – might be better represented by this format.

The proposal in question is for the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford – an unusual museum insofar that many of its defunct Victorian systems of categorising objects have been retained in the displays (as well as some of the quirky personal systems created by its founder, General Pitt Rivers).

When visitors enter the Pitt Rivers museum, much more than with many other museums, they are navigating without a fixed starting point. The openness of the entrance, the clusters (rather than rows) of exhibition cabinets – and even the low, atmospheric lighting – all contribute to a sense of mysteries to be unravelled and of new territories to explore. In that museum, not only do geographical territories mingle but also those of different times; as do different systems of categorisation.

The proposal was written with an emphasis that this particular project is intended to be open to change depending on the outcome of further research – indeed, we proposed a research stage of several months in order to encourage such a development. The proposed work, whilst being something we might produce, was primarily described to help give the reader a more concrete idea of a *possible* outcome of the research. The emphasis was on the residency-like characteristics of the project. Such an endeavour would only be possible with only possible with the support and expertise of expert museum historians and curators.

Now... we are both interested in history and in particular we are interested in how artists might work with or against what Robert Smithson identified as the mortifying effects of the museum and gallery space – that is, we recognise that when cultural artefacts are placed in the 'transcendental' space of the gallery or museum, there is a risk that they lose their charge. They are present but not present; they lose their function even where that function is highlighted or explained – perhaps even

more so as the act of overt explanation results in a fixedness that contributes to the objects' de-contextualisation and mortification. - - - and by de-contextualisation we mean the removal of the objects from the cultural conditions in which they were intended to be used.

*for the Q&A - - - that artists are trained to overlook intentions and concentrate their thinking in terms of reception in the here and now is probably the first point on which they differ from historians.

This is particularly emphasised by PR's retention of its historic forms of presentation – of what were called 'functional affinities' (where objects are grouped by common utility) and 'connection of form' (where they are grouped by similarities of form and arranged in to an imagined evolutionary sequence). These forms of typological categorisation, exaggerated by their contrast to newer forms of categorisation, perhaps help make more visible this process whereby objects are abstracted from their original symbolic systems. Indeed, PR's artificially retained system of presentation (that is, artificial insofar that it has been maintained despite – or even because of – visible changes in the cultural framework) is also another example of an artefact abstracted and removed from its original (Victorian) symbolic grounding. We are interested in how this process may also relate to art-objects as commodities more generally.

We see the artist's approach to the past as one that almost treats it as a flexible category – one that is always open to a renegotiation of its meanings and values. We seek to understand the artefacts not only through their past but to also read and think them through the present and possible futures. A part of our process has involved thinking laterally about the objects' past associations, almost free associating related historical events with more recent cultural products and events.

By incorporating the culture of the present and recent past we hope to create new openings for museum visitors to gain a foothold in the collections; to help them personalise and 'take ownership' over the objects. This would be a chance for them to not only understand the objects as they *were* but also a chance to understand *their present*; to reconnect the artefacts with contemporary experience and to *find a way in which the objects can have new social lives*.

** (for later in the presentation? → Q&A) We can only create (new) meaning for the living – the meanings of the past can be remembered and they inform the present as contributory factors of the present state of things - but they are no longer living. Insofar that they do, it is either different despite similarities (an unavoidable consequence of the changed context in which they exist or persist) or they are maintained artificially. The interventions of the artist seem to fall on the side of the artificially maintained past.

In addition to these general thoughts on museums and artefacts there were practical considerations and constraints that guided our thinking. Among these was the fact that the reserved spaces for contemporary art in that particular museum are limited to the periphery of the main space. There was also the more positive feeling we had that the museum's layout denied the possibility of a set route (or set of routes) through the space: its layout and numerous hidden drawers encourage a very different set of experiences for each visitor each time they visit. Further to this we perceived the experience of moving around such a space as one full of serendipitous encounters – historical narrative is turned on its head and the process of encouraging a personal sequencing of objects seems to be set in motion. This aspect of serendipity is something that we felt should be reflected in the nature of the piece we would be working towards – and that it would be beneficial if the main part of the work could somehow exist among the objects of the main room.

The project initially started with one small artefact in the collection: a stick chart from the Marshal Islands.

A stick chart is a type of map constructed from coconut fronds and shells. We were intrigued by the fact that whilst these charts showed the relative positions of islands, they primarily recorded the changes and distortions in ocean swells and currents as they approached and passed around the islands.

We started thinking about the unusual method of prioritising the representation of movement in space – of mapping flows (of wind, waves, currents etc.) - in relation to the movements of museum visitors: we wondered whether, instead of following preset narratives through the museum, visitors followed invisible lines of desire. Was there a way of observing how visitors following their impulses circulated around the exhibits?

It was at this point that we considered the possibility of reinterpreting an artefact through relatively recent events – we wondered how a Marshallese stick chart made 200 years ago might compare to one made now when we realised that one of the islands, Elugelab, was wiped off the map on the 1st of November 1954 when the United States tested one of the first hydrogen bombs there.

This in turn led us to look at maps more generally as well as other artefacts from the Pacific. It was then that we became aware of a number of items in the collection had been donated by Sir Edward Belcher – objects that took us across the Pacific to the Arctic. We researched his own unusual maps using books from the Balfour Library – a resource belonging to the PRM that has, as far as we can tell, not to date been highlighted by other contemporary art interventions in the museum.

Once we started following Belcher's routes, we found the man Belcher failed to find: Sir John Franklin – as well as his unfortunate crew. Franklin had been attempting to locate and map the Northwest Passage when he and his entire crew went missing. For years other ships were sent to locate them but to no avail.

Again, in a lateral shift, we began re-thinking the story through contemporary concerns: the Northwest Passage that so eluded Franklin and his contemporaries is now approaching a near all-year-round existence as a result of global warming – and once again nations are making subtle moves to assert their claims to the passage for transport as well as newly opened areas of ocean floor for oil drilling.

Belcher's memoirs and Franklin's letters reminded us of the sea-faring tomes pastiched and parodied in Gulliver's Travels and Robinson Crusoe – by all accounts Franklin, like Crusoe, was a very devout man: perhaps these volumes could be used as a resource.

We see this sequence of associative leaps – of connecting things in different ways to the 'norm' – as possibly being analogous to the logical leaps of the aforementioned typologies of *functional affinities* and *connection of form*.

Eventually, we developed a 'fake' narrative around the 'real' historical events of Franklin's expedition – thus opening up the possibility of questioning the distinction between fiction and reality (perhaps with historical narrative as a mediating term or synthesis of the two). Jacques Ranciere described how we essentially create fictions around reality – which is not to say that all reality is fictional but that we can only understand reality *through* fictions.

Now let me briefly summarise our narrative:

Sir John Franklin is recorded as having died on 11th June 1847 but his body has not been found since. Franklin went looking for the Northwest Passage but got lost, with his ships frozen in the ice.

All lines of communication were lost. After exploring the Pacific and the Arctic, Sir Edward Belcher (who donated many objects to PR's collection) set out to find Franklin but failed, abandoning his ships in the Arctic.

What if in an alternative reality Franklin hadn't died but had merely entered a cold-induced deep-sleep – one in which his burial led to an almost cryogenic state?

Fast-forward to the present day: global warming is melting the ice caps; a Northwest Passage is approaching the point where it will exist all year round. The ice in the Summer melts and doesn't fully recover in the Winter. Franklin defrosts!

The defrosted Franklin finds a diary that Belcher left behind with the ships *he* abandoned in 1854. Aware that Belcher was looking for him (but not yet realising how much time has passed, he retraces Belcher's routes – including part of his Pacific route) and finds more letters and traces of Belcher before arriving home. He eventually finds his way to the Pitt Rivers Museum and tries to make sense of the donated trinkets that are all that are left of the man who was searching for him and who he in turn has been searching for also.

During his journey he slowly becomes aware of the time-lapse and, in diary entries written as though they were letters to Belcher, he tries to reconcile the world he once knew with what he finds now. Upon arriving at the museum, he also muses on the change in the ways we categorise cultural artefacts (from 'functional affinities' or use-value to ...exchange value?) and tries to understand the changes.

We imagined our narrative being realised alongside a collection of cabinet-based objects (some real artefacts, some 'fake' artefacts) displayed and offered as evidence or background to the narrative. Elsewhere, subtly situated in the main area of the museum – and in keeping with the museum's propensity for serendipitous encounters – would be the 'main' part of the work.

The first idea was to have an actor dressed as Franklin, doddering around the museum, confused by the whole situation, accosting visitors as to the meaning of the exhibits – and of what they mean to them.

The second idea along these lines – the one to make it in to the proposal – was to have audio recordings on a series of subtly placed headphones: the visitors who notice them would be able to listen to an actor, again playing the part of the 'thawed' Franklin. He would give a voice to the earlier-mentioned 'fake' diary entries addressed to Belcher – until he slowly realises that he is long gone.

Jacques Lacan said that all letters – even those lost or not delivered – always reach their true addressee: the writer him- or herself. Perhaps this notion could be increasingly incorporated in to those letter-diary entries after that point of realisation that he has been cut-off from everything he once knew – that he has essentially become a time-traveller.

Owen Beattie who, in the 1980s took part in the exhumation of three frozen Franklin sailors who *were* found, echoed – or, more accurately, pre-empted – this thought, at least metaphorically, when he considered *their* posthumous experience in terms of time-travel: “Now, at least in body, they had explored through time, visiting briefly the 1980s”; “...it seemed they had lived again for a few brief hours during the Arctic summers of 1984 and 1986.” There is also the consideration of the fact that many people of the Victorian era would have seen the examination of exotic cultures and their artefacts as a form of time-travel – as a way for them to see, in their present, cultural forms that they believed primitive and therefore reflective of the distant past of their own ancestors.

For someone who woke up without having been interpellated into the established historical narratives, the present state of things would seem to be almost completely discontinuous with the past he once knew. He would be aware of his roots (in the past) but the discontinuity with that past would cause those roots to appear to have been cut short. They would relativise his own relation to his identity.

A lateral shift – that is, an association that could contribute phrases, imagery or structure to the final work – that emerged from this configuration of thoughts came from the similarity of the name of *Franklin* to that of *Frankenstein*. That the novel starts and ends in a failed attempt to chart the Northwest Passage and that the monster pursuing his creator, looking for questions regarding his identity, is himself pieced together from ‘artefacts’ (that is, parts of dead human beings) made this associative leap appear particularly pregnant with potential.

And we believe that these ‘sci-fi’ experiences aren't as removed from reality as it might first appear: they also apply to the real, lived time of a normal human life in *this* era:

There was a German girl from a village in the mountains who moved to London... .. for several years. She enjoyed the city initially but still essentially felt like an outsider – that it was not a place true to her (and that large impersonal metropolises like London are probably experienced as impersonal ‘non-places’ by many of its residents). When she returned to Germany she found that the passage of time had changed not only the village but her also – she found that the village no longer ‘functioned’ for her and when she returned/revisited London that *awareness* made that place also seem to fail to ‘function’ for her needs.*

*phrased in Giorgio's own words – though I think that ‘awareness’ and ‘function’ (you used function in this way when you told the story) are important words to incorporate. Then a quick word that as someone who left their homeland long ago that you understand this feeling described by the girl in the story.

This story – showing a possibly common feeling in an increasingly mobile and integrated world – hopefully illustrates not only the potential relevance of this aspect of the ‘alternative Franklin’ narrative to the personal experiences of at least a portion of the visitors to the museum, it could also be thought of as an analogy of the experience of any visitor to a museum when confronted by artefacts that are labelled as being relevant to or informing *their own* cultural identities – the separation by time and the abstraction of those objects *from* their socio-temporal context opens a gulf between them and the viewer – perhaps the viewer feels (even if just subconsciously) alienated from what they are being told are indicators of their own identity...? *****

How we understand history (and therefore the present) is a retroactive identification-cum-nomination of points of causality. Historians (and archaeologists) perhaps try to piece together the past in a logical, scientific manner (which is admirable) – but in so doing give culture a fixity that it can only *appear* to have insofar that it is consigned to the past. This is perhaps an unavoidable outcome of attempting to recreate the past as closely as possible to the ‘real’ thing: the only way to preserve it is to hypostasise it, to freeze it in place. (but even then, the tools to do so are entirely reliant on our current structures of thought – themselves changed by events of a past that we can only cobble back together in a Frankenstein-like manner. The artist, as we mentioned earlier, attempts to give fluidity to the meanings of those things in the present which appear to have some kind of fixedness – to enable a renegotiation of the meaning of cultural forms. And that is what we proposed to do with this project.