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In what ways can Rapid Response Collecting be utilised by museums as a curatorial approach in advocating increased democratic and egalitarian approaches towards art within society?
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MA thesis in Cultural Studies
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Abstract:

Rapid Response Collecting (RRC) is a recent approach in museum collecting, in which museums acquire objects considered reflective, illustrative, or exemplary of recent trends, current topics or social concerns. As objects gathered through Rapid Response Collecting reflect existing societal narratives, they are more ‘commonplace’, distinguishable from the high-end objects museums have traditionally focused upon. Such objects include born-digital artifacts, such as software or games, 3d printed objects, or political paraphenalia; items that are indicative of the narrative of the now. This approach towards collecting, as well as the type of objects collected, symbolise a change from the kinds of artifacts typically collected and presented as well as a change in priorities.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how important societal issues or narratives are acknowledged and addressed through the growing discourse around Rapid Response Collecting; equally through the approaches of collecting and display, and furthermore, to see if this collecting method encourages, or responds towards, a more democratic approach within museums, with regards to its increased focus of inclusivity towards its visitors and its collections. I will argue that the recent application of Rapid Response Collecting within museums encourages a more democratic approach with its audience, both through establishing connections within a wider community as well as assisting in shifting former classist associations present in museums. I will observe Rapid Response Collecting as a process within the bigger picture, reflecting the larger, ongoing shift within museums and art institutions. My research into Rapid Response Collecting will be through using the current exhibition, Design 1900 – Now, in the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London, as my case study, whilst my methodology regarding this project has been informed through interviewing two curators who helped to establish the inception of Rapid Response Collecting.

The approach of Design 1900 – Now combines Rapid Response collected objects, objects of the present day, that are deemed significant in their design, and how they reflect the ways we live, which are exhibited alongside objects from the last 120 years. I will use Design 1900 – Now to answer my initial question; if the approach of Rapid Response
Collecting can be utilised by museums to help advocate increased democratic, or egalitarian, approaches towards museums and art within society. As Rapid Response Collecting is an evolving and ongoing means of collecting and curation, emerging only into the mainstream within the past decade (at the time of writing), there remains little academic research upon the topic (although scholarship is increasingly being developed), so I shall be substantially drawing upon my own original research, based around the exhibition *Design 1900 – Now*.

My approach will be framed through a combination of both museum studies and cultural studies theories. Within the framework of cultural studies I will observe Walter Benjamin and his concept of the aura within art, and how it responds to Rapid Response Collecting. I will further apply Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts around social classes and the accessibility of art, to consider how the approach of Rapid Response Collecting promotes increased democratic access within museums. In my introduction, I will outline some contextual aspects of the approach of how Rapid Response Collecting both reacts to, and offers a progression from, typical curatorial attributes.

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters, which shall observe the development and change within museum collecting and curatorial approaches, using a case study of the exhibition *Design 1900 – Now*, currently ongoing at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I will structure my questions around the frameworks of cultural theorists Walter Benjamin and Pierre Bourdieu, in order to understand how our perception towards objects has responded to reflect classist changes, with the practice of Rapid Response Collecting in museums.
With many thanks to my supervisor Sigurjón for all your assistance, to Jake, for your time, and Alex, for your patience.
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Chapter One; Introduction.

In *The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) Walter Benjamin discusses the developmental changes that influenced the processes of mass manufacturing and replication. Shifts within production methods saw the transition from unique ‘artisanal’ and creative techniques of artifacts and their subsequent replacement by automated mass manufacturing, with objects consequentially shaped by what Benjamin refers to as the „aura“¹, the unique quality that surrounds an artifact. Considered to be the particular feeling, or emotion generated by experiencing an object profound in creation and execution, the aura came under threat as the introduction of mass manufacturing prompted copies of objects and their increased availability, consequentially resulting in a decline, both within the ‘aura’ and the object’s monetary value, as Benjamin acknowledged that “what withers in the age of technological reproducibility of the work of art is the … aura” (Benjamin, 2006, 22). Holding a connection between the historical origins of the piece and of the present, the onset of mechanical reproduction dislocated the essence of the aura, refuting any notions of both space and time, and so, with this loss of aura, the space between the object and the viewer significantly decreased (*op. cit*).

Although Benjamin responds towards modernity’s affects with evident despondency, it appears Benjamin elicits a sense of mourning for the losses in art and culture pushed away with the mechanisms of Modernism, and what Marx refers to as the ‘debasement of experience’, that occurred with the emergence of automated production.

This loss of the aura is what Benjamin refers to as *erfahrung*; seeing the purpose of art being reversed, when experience has been diminished to incoherent moments, leading to a loss of authenticity, or a decline in the value or memory. This shift from *erfahrung*, which is time as duration, is reflected in particular moments, such as religious ritual. It is this definition to which the aura belongs, whilst the ‘lesser’ category of *erlebnis*, that denotes time to be singular moments, and the emergence of, and into, modernity. A

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¹ „What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws itself on the shadow of the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance…” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*; 1999; 518).
consequence of this shift results in the development of what Horkheimer and Adorno consider ‘the Culture Industry’. Art, culture and issues of aesthetic value are overridden by an emphasis on commodification; how culture can be capitalised upon, either for the purposes of economic gain (profit, capital) or used for controlling the masses (advertising, propaganda). Benjamin’s observations highlight mechanical reproducability with the development of film and photography technologies, arguing these new forms present greater possibility for replicas and accessibility, as opposed to traditional forms of theatre and painting. Indeed, for Benjamin – the diminishment of the aura was so profound, and influential, regarding the influence of photography, to the point that the art of painting, as a medium, he believed may vanish.

Benjamin’s ideas surrounding art were influenced by the ideas of poet and critic Paul Valéry, who deliberated that comprehension and behaviour towards art and creative techniques are required to continuously develop if we are to comprehend works within the contemporary time. Despite the nostalgic tone surrounding the loss of the aura, this loss gives way to a new process, that „compensat[es] for the decline or sacrifice of the aura, or even of art in the traditional sense [of] political aesthetics of revolutionary intervention in society“ (Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art, 48). So Benjamin is recognising the democraticisation of art, prompting increased accessibility, as well as a wider evaluation of what art’s ‘worth’, or value might mean. Benjamin’s politics, inspired by Marxism, see both revolutionary potential and a defence against totalitarianism in this.

2 “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever-greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. “ (Benjamin, 1999, 218)
"We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art."


One can argue that the diminishing of the aura coincides with the emergence of democratic ideas, and Benjamin ties this in with the loss of religious authority in an increasingly secular age. Valéry comprehends how time and space have permanently transformed, resulting in a revolution, both in fields of knowledge and creativity, particularly altering space of the museum, a meeting of space and time, and thus their interpretation of the past, must similarly change (Ducci, 2013, 38). With the class system showing signs of dissolution, what was attached to the artwork by the ruling classes, limiting or restricting accessibility and knowledge, no longer held its ideals, and thus high culture was affected with the introduction of mass production and replicas to the point of them being so far removed from their original that they enter “into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (Selected Works, IV, 254), instead presenting an ushering in of accessibility. Benjamin’s deliberation is that „mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works of art – a control without whose aid they could no longer be used“ (Photography, 521).

The more democratic offering adjusts the perception to how traditional art has been comprehended. Indeed, technical reproduction has emerged as a creative, or artistic practice within its own means, hence, “the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Selected Works IV, 256).

As the introduction of mass production became widely felt, its application across many spectrums consequentially resulted in enabling educational opportunities across society, with the everyday person permitted in experiencing education combined with leisure, increasing accessibility to engage with culture, thus flattening the divide between bourgeois and lower classes. As John Berger says in Ways of Seeing (itself significantly influenced by Benjamin’s thinking),

„When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings [...] Because of the camera, the painting now
travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified”

(Berger, 1972, 19-20).

The introduction of new artistic forms, therefore, alters our perception. Relating to the picture (perspective), the advent of reproduction and subsequent loss of aura, came to reveal a different society, the perception and accessibility of art in that the social function of art has been irreversibly altered. It has also seen the loss of ritual, which has been replaced by the political, and also, the exhibition value of an item. The legitimacy of its aesthetic change, is „subordinated to political truth, which is communicated to receivers concerned with revolution“ (Rochlitz, 1992, 48). The fall in the aura sees the emergence of democracy, and transformations from this de-auraticisation, inevitably resulting in the liberation of art from its prior exclusive accessibility within the upper class spheres, instead, removing prior restraints, through bestowing greater availability upon and towards institutions. Thus, this ‘tradition’ faded, no longer an upper-class domain, and shifted the accessibility of art, permitting engagement for the masses with the everyday person accepted in visiting institutions and accessing forms previously unavailable to them.

Museums have continued to find themselves in flux through attempting to fulfill requirements towards various audiences, and through the creation of more personal or engaging narratives. Whilst a democratising shift has continued, museums and art institutions remain situated at a cross-roads, particularly with the advent of a ‘new museology’ movement that emerged in the 1990s, prompting a paradigmatic re-orientation regarding democratic ideologies, a crisis in voices, and compromising agency.³

³ However, these concerns are often pushed aside to make room for blockbuster edutainment, ancillary education and apprehension towards potentially displeasing financial benefactors, to which museums are most reliant upon for funding, yet still pertaining to reach the largest audience demographic. For more on the ‘culture industry’ see the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, associates of Benjamin, who responded to the popular culture they encountered on arriving in the U.S. after fleeing Nazism. Insomuch that we are customed and conditioned to recieve culture in a particular way, any movement extending out of a passive acceptance of culture, is often considered as ‘shock’ value.
Whilst the concept of the aura has already been subject to thorough application in art, I consider that this still retains its relevance when utilised through my analysis of the Rapid Response Collecting approach, a method of collecting and displaying items of the present time, currently ongoing at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, in the exhibition *Design 1900 – Now*. Many of the objects collected through this project are mass produced, or better known, offering familiarity to some museum visitors, as opposed to items of fine art, or high-end artifacts that museums typically collect and display. Benjamin’s thoughts on collecting perhaps hold a similar parallel to that of the aura, in that “the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter” (Benjamin, 1969, 67).

As objects collected through Rapid Response Collecting are of the present, the ‘now’, their brisk accession is indicative of ongoing contemporary narratives; do they reflect an updated version of the aura, either through the object’s innovative design, or in what they represent, or symbolise, for their user? Do they elicit a new type of ‘aura’? The items that are displayed tend to be mass manufactured, or feature copies; copies of which have been repeated infinitely. As the authenticity of these objects is so far removed, possibly altering our perception of them, we tend to look at the objects conceptually: how do they relate to our ways of living? Rapid Response Collecting engages with the circulation of cultural production with authentic voice and agency, creating and possibly enabling a continuation, or a re-invention of the concept of aura. The exhibition *Design 1900 – Now*’s curatorial narrative „aims to position design as a means for understanding the way we live together, and to explore how designed things prompt us to ask questions of our past, present and future“.

Therefore, the recently emerging methodology of Rapid Response Collecting can be presented as an empirical example connecting to larger systems, whilst emphasising the position which museums currently find themselves, particularly in addressing the above concerns of emphasising democracy. In the context of an approach within a larger scope, Rapid

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4 See also Brenna, Brita, Christensen Hans Dam and Hamran Olav(eds), *Museums as Cultures of Copies: The Crafting of Artefacts and Authenticity*, Routledge, 2020.

5 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/a-new-20th-and-21st-century-gallery-at-the-va
Response Collecting feels to symbolise an illumination of the problems already described.

In this first chapter, I have introduced Benjamin’s idea of the aura within art, and how the loss of aura has resulted in democratic impacts, outlining its relativity to the concept of Rapid Response Collecting and how the recent introduction of this approach has considered to change museum perspectives. The second chapter will observe and offer an analysis of museums evolution, from their original inception of private collections and ‘wunderkammers’, to their focus more upon visitor experience, consequentially evoking change in visitors and the self. Extending on this, I shall look at the sociological class divisions within art, applying the framework of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of codes, ‘habitus’ and cultural capital, concluding this chapter with considerations surrounding the lack of neutrality in museums.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss collecting practices and the development of institutional and contemporary collecting in museums, including the example of Swedish collecting project Samdok, as a means to understand social elements and implications of change within collecting practices. I shall consider definitions of the contemporary and examine how value is measured in contemporary objects, leading into observing curatorial practices and developments, from ideas surrounding the critical curation of the 1960’s through to more contemporary awareness and acknowledgement towards the more recent inception of curatorial activism.

In Chapter 4, I intend to outline previous influences leading up to Design 1900 – Now, namely, the V&A’s Circulation Department (1947 – 1977), the Rapid Response Collecting Gallery (2014-2019), and museums updated collections policy upon contemporary collecting.

Chapter 5 will then be based upon reflections upon my case study, the V&A’s exhibition Design 1900 – Now. I will observe how the approach has responded to, or addressed current, vital narratives, through different thematic explorations, including environmental concerns, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, examining particular objects, and considering their auratic response, as well as the considerations around inclusions of original and reproductions of poignant objects on display. Furthermore, I will address the shift towards digitalisation, regarding the increased acquisition of digitally native objects,
and the impact that digitalisation can have upon museums, and visitors relationship with items.

Chapter 6 will conclude my findings. I will determine if Rapid Response Collecting permits a more democratic approach within museums, and return to the frameworks of social theory, namely the concepts of Benjamin previously considered, deliberating possible new interpretations of what constitutes the aura, and finally, deliberate the future of collecting in museums.

Overall, this thesis will present an analysis of the exhibition *Design 1900 – Now*, to present how the application of Rapid Response Collected items respond to social narratives, and develop a more democratic means of curation and collecting.
1.2 Methodology:

As my thesis considers an ongoing exhibition, in which items can be regularly (and unexpectedly) updated; added as well as removed, many of my sources are of a digital nature. I wanted to conduct my research into Rapid Response Collecting by talking to people who were involved with spearheading this project at the V&A, which, although I did achieve, it wasn’t without its challenges. Whilst collecting data, which was gathered through the medium of interviews, I encountered issues regarding both access and time. Whilst I was granted interviews, both kept being postponed, and when I did finally conduct them, the interviews didn’t go as I had originally anticipated. Using a qualitative interview method, I interviewed both Corinna Gardner, who is currently the senior curator of Design and Digital, and Kieran Long, the former head of the V&A’s Contemporary Architecture, Design, and Digital Department (2013 – 2017), and who is currently director of ArkDes (Sweden’s National Centre for Architecture and Design) in Stockholm, Sweden, who, together established this project at the V&A.  

Although residing in Reykjavík, Iceland, I visited the V&A museum and subsequent exhibition for my case study, Design 1900 – Now upon numerous occasions. With the initial idea to undertake this approach as a project was forming, my first visit to Design 1900 – Now, was in August 2021, and the last, April 2022, but during my visits, all collection displays had remained static. As Rapid Response Collecting is a collecting approach that sees the acquiring of objects as they appear in the media, or which respond to particular events or happenings, my initial idea was to visit periodically, to get a chance to see how the Rapid Response Collected items evolved over an extended period, with the exhibitions narratives responding to events or occurrences, but, as I undertook this project during ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, for reasons what I assume to be pandemic-related, no new items were accessioned. During the timespan of this project, I did not expect a huge fluctuation of objects to be accessioned, I did, however, anticipate some change, due to the projects overt nature, which is to obtain objects into the museum whilst they are in the media, but seemingly with the ongoing pandemic still casting is shadow, the display remained the same throughout.

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Whilst my visits to the V&A museum were physical, (although with pandemic restrictions, many museums emphasised online engagement), my interviews took place digitally. Whereas digital interviews offer initial convenience, they also presented me with a very defined and specific time-frame of 45 minutes to obtain the relevant information I anticipated, which, one interviewee opened with overtly stating that point. I found undergoing interviews digitally lacked the aura of meeting the people within the exhibition, or museum habitat, which I am writing about. Obviously, as one interviewee, Kieran Long, resides in Sweden, this wouldn´t have been possible, but I would have preferred to go to the museum itself and discuss the project within the gallery walls, to get a better, and maybe more natural understanding when speaking to Corinna Gardner, but this was not responded to. The allotted time regarding online platforms wasn´t sufficient, particularly when attempting to steer the conversation to retain its relevancy regarding my research, which didn´t always go to fruition, for the second interaction emerged as more of a monologue, where I wasn´t really able to ask the questions I had done with my first interviewee. Therefore, the two interviewees presented me with an unequal measure of data and I ended up receiving two rather different pieces of information than I had anticipated, essentially leaving me unable to collate or compare the responses to get a more broader and thorough scope of the exhibition and the ongoing project. During my visits to the exhibit at the V&A, I found myself in an unexpected informal talk with a member of the gallery staff, which proved illuminating. Although the pandemic restrictions affected my ability to more thoroughly inquire about the exhibition, and to talk with one of the curators, the online presence through which I instead conducted my interviews is a further example of the mechanical reproducability that Benjamin talks about.
Chapter Two; The Role and Development of Museums

In this chapter, I will observe how museums’ roles have developed and responded to societal transformations, shifting from their initial inception of display cases, for exotic and rare artifacts that were accessible for the upper classes, and signifying the shift from passivity, through to today’s emphasis upon inclusion, active debate and consideration within these institutions. By presenting a more thorough understanding of the social implications that museums elicit, both upon their collections and their visitors, I will apply social frameworks, namely those of Bourdieu, and his concepts of codes and the ‘habitus’, to better observe the socio-political associations of cultural institutions and further understand their accessibility, through how museums can emphasise a more democratic approach.

2.1. The development and progression of museum artifacts and representation.

Before the 19th century, museums served as receptacles for an assortment of objects, conserving curios and exotic, as well as rare and sanctified objects (Weil, 1995). Often emerging from private collections of art, their initial purpose was to display exemplary objects; items of beauty, a scholarly nature, or artifacts considered ‘exotic’, or rare. The inception of museum collections were built upon private compendia, often based around imperialist, or upper-class values, or niche objects. Emphasis was placed solely upon presentation, not deliberation, to which museal power was authorised through the curation and exhibition of these specimens. The deliberate lack of circumstantial, or relative information surrounding the objects, generated a restricted experience or understanding, rendering the objects conformation to the institution, consequentially creating a specific object experience. However, the early presentations of exotic curios transformed with Victorian perspectives, which, in turn, catalysed a change in museum utilisation. As museums increased, so did the power display that often reflected their patriotic and imperialistic foundations. The choice of objects and power, reinforcing and revealing a national identity, was asserted through imperially obtained items that surfaced alongside the political revolutions at the end of the 18th century, and the advent of emerging modern nation-states. Industrial and global expansions, patriotic endorsements and wealth saw “museums crop up in all the postcolonial nations of the world, becoming an
essential element in their development strategies” (Levin, 2002, 52). Indeed, the Enlightenment rhetoric encouraged the importance of education, especially within the realms of technology and science, was considered paramount in establishing good societal foundations, and in combination with the emergence of democratic thought, served as a catalyst in transforming previously unaccessible private collections. Thus, the decline in museums authority resulted in a transformation into public space. Indeed, the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) was an early example of the shift towards educating the lower classes. Their exhibitions offered the presentation of artifacts through varying compositional and curatorial considerations, as a way to educate the lower classes, consequentially leading museums to embrace augmented, democratic perspectives, or ideologies, but also with privileged values and understanding. This approach additionally saw a way to promote control and affect its visitors through its institutional quality, as opposed to educating with exhibitions, offering lower classes a more social education, than the axillary one for upper class visitors, encouraging a gradual assimilation into the bourgeoisie.

2.2. Socio-political class and concerns of neutrality

Trust may be portrayed, both through museums careful presentation of themselves and their cautious object acquisition and consideration towards displays. Despite museums bestowing themselves as a pinnacle of trust regarding what is, and isn’t, truthful, particularly in a world consistently, and increasingly inundated with a constant noise of news sources and information, museum curators were placed in the top 5 of the most trustworthy professions, according to a recent Ipsos Mori Poll, perceived as a bastion of truth.\footnote{https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row} With the elevated position of museums placed alongside healthcare workers, Gardner informs me that it
“comes from a perspective of thinking of reliable fact; we’re in a world of vast swathes of information, and sources aren’t necessarily clear and known. Museums have been in the fierce light of criticism, and rightly so, in the last number of years, of actually what narratives are we upholding, whose narratives, what polyphony are we actually bringing to the work that we do and inevitably that now brings us into contact with the cultural.”

(Gardner, Interview, 2021)

Despite museums’ presentation of demystifying objects, their inevitability towards bias and other signifiers, remains. Museums are not, and will never be a blank canvas upon which artifacts are presented, for, as an institution, their position will never concede neutrality. Accordingly, their collecting methods unsurprisingly induce concerns, both around neutrality and democratic concepts.

Although museum entry is free, with the lack of financial requirement encouraging egalitarian access, as an institution, it still requires particular knowledge to enter. I will apply the framework of Bourdieu’s concepts to enlighten the apprehensions regarding accessibility within upper classes, and aesthetics. Although these concepts have been thoroughly applied within the sociological understanding of institutions, to understand Rapid Response Collecting’s more democratic approach, it is necessary to present them. As Bourdieu acknowledges,

“free entrance, is also optional entrance […] This false generosity is misleading, for free entrance is reserved for those endowed with the ability to appropriate the works, have the privilege of using this freedom and who find themselves consequentially legitimised in their privilege, that is, in the means of appropriating cultural goods.”

(Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production, 1993; 236).

Free museum access is dependent upon whether the individual can read what Bourdieu refers to as ´codes´, in approaching and then entering the museum. To understand our perception of what people are seeing, or experiencing, it is imperative we apply our knowledge of these codes, essentially the ´knowledge´ that one must access, or read within social situations and cultural endeavours. These codes are also signified, and re-

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8 Within the UK, entrance is free to museums permanent collections. Touring, or specialised exhibitions tend to have an entrance fee. Free entry presents a particular perspective of the museum, placing it upon its visitor.
enforced within the structure, or exterior, of the institution, which are ‘read’ on entering, as “no matter where the art was displayed, the ‘public for art’ effectively included only those who were capable of critically informed, aesthetically disinterested judgment” (Ibid; 3-4). Indeed, Bourdieu notes that a certain amount of knowledge of such codes are required, as “divergence between the more or less complex and subtle code required by the work, and the competence of the individuals as defined by the degree to which the social code, itself, more or less complex and subtle, is mastered” (Bourdieu, 1993, 224). To interpret a deeper understanding in translating these codes, competence in deciphering art emerges from a particular ‘habitus’, the ‘habitus’ of which is considered “a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world (Bourdieu, 1998, 81). The notion of ‘habitus’ can be shaped and gained by repetition, building upon it through repeated exposure to desired artistic or cultural situations, or atmospheres. Shaped through repetition, the ‘habitus’ has become a ritual, in turn, reinforcing patterns of social, and cultural codes, building upon cultural capital, and consequentially, social navigation. These codes are not explicitly taught, but are gleaned; reinforced through repetition and exposure, from particular (middle-class) backgrounds and milieu, strengthening cultural and social capital, for trajectories into cultural fields, results in the ‘habitus’ “becom [ing] active in relation to a field”10 (Bourdieu, 1990, 116). Essentially, repeated exposure to such artistic or cultural situations and atmospheres reinforces patterns of social and cultural codes, creating the ‘habitus’, and the concept of social ‘fields’.

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9 Additionally, In understanding these codes, the art historian Panofsky notes that one has to perceive art in a certain way, after we have the basic understanding of it. His notion of secondary strata, that is, “the secondary or conventional meaning, the world of specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories and allegories [...] the deciphering of which falls to iconography, and, on the other hand, the intrinsic meaning or content which the iconological interpretation can recapture only if the iconographical meanings and methods of composition are treated as cultural symbols, as expressions of the culture of age, a nation or a class” (Bourdieu, 1993; 219).

10 Bourdieu links French citizens artistic tastes, to their positions of social class, in that aesthetic tastes are constructed by a socially ingrained ‘habitus’. Those of the Bourgeoisie have been exposed to fine art and therefore have a taste for it, whilst the working -classes have not had access to high art, unable to refine the appropriate ‘habitus’ for this (Field of Cultural Production, 1993).
Although with their inherently classist nature, museums have begun to step back from more traditional representations and associations. As the domain of the higher classes is presented within the conceptions of codes, ‘habitus’ and subsequent accumulation into cultural capital, that, in turn, permits social elevation and class movement within society. Bourdieu’s consideration of the reluctance to some, in entering a museum, is limited, for “admission to the art world require[s] appropriate social standing but also a mastery of critical terms and history” (Ibid; 3). It is also imperative to understand the museum is an institution of power; those who are entitled to these institutions, according to Bourdieu, are certain individuals constantly educated to both enjoy, and have the ability to comprehend art. Within a rigid, societal hierarchy, particularly one still “dominated by class, in which art and cultural knowledge continued to circulate as an elite commodity and [to which] museums depended on the rich for support, it was at best highly idealistic to expect art to cease to function as a badge of privilege” (Ibid, 13). For Bourdieu and Darbel (1990), art museums were the domain of the upper classes with a restricted interest towards working-class people, who might sense these institutions to be ‘inappropriate’ for them. This construct shapes and defines our class identity, formed through an individual’s sharing of the same cultural ‘habitus’, and aesthetic tastes, constructed by a socially ingrained ‘habitus’. Whereas members of the Bourgeoisie have been exposed to fine art, enhancing their proclivity towards it, the working-classes have less accessibility to art, unable to refine the appropriate ‘habitus’ for this cultivation (Bourdieu, 1993). The amassing of these constructs results in overall cultural capital, containing the social abilities of a person, for, amassed cultural knowledge bestows standing and power, and to which, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu; 1984, 2). Certainly, understanding the codes built into both the institutions exterior, and the exhibitions, prompts the consideration around the lack of neutrality within these institutions, as Sandell notes, “there is no neutral position and exhibition-makers face choices concerning the ways in which they develop narratives” (Sandell 2007: 195). It is imperative to also dismiss the myth of what Bourdieu refers to as the ‘fresh eye’ (1993; 217), rendering it invalid, for “there is no such perception which does not involve an unconscious code and is considered a virtue attributed to naïveté and innocence.” (Bourdieu, 1993, 217). The idea of the ‘fresh eye’ doesn’t exist, have already been, and will continue to be, subject to unconscious bias.
Placing objects within museums modifies our perception of them, altering their aura\textsuperscript{11}. This concept is echoed by anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), who presents the assertion that within the museum, objects are not found, they are made. Museums do not just gather valuable objects, but make objects valuable by gathering them, with the museum producing cultural knowledge through arranging how its sanctioned materials are viewed. Those gleaned by Rapid Response Collecting offer another kind of aura, which I consider to be ‘of the now’, but this is something I will consider in detail in a later chapter. Although no longer on display, an example of how the aura can be altered, is through the example of the Katy Perry false eyelashes which still remain part of the Rapid Response collection\textsuperscript{12}. Long, one of the original curators of the project, emphasised a key point of Rapid Response´s perception, which is to view these objects through a different symbolic means;

There were objects in the project, the Katy Perry eyelashes, you could buy on the same street as the V&A, on Brompton Road. The question then comes, ´what’s the difference between seeing them in Boots [a British pharmacy chain] or seeing them in the V&A?´ It allows yourself a sense of space to think, ‘I’m not a consumer now, so what question am I being asked, in this public facility [...]and where I’m not being asked to buy anything, so how should I think about this object here, as opposed to the way I think about it in Boots?’“

(Long, Interview, 2022)

Whilst the majority of these objects collected through Rapid Response Collecting are mass produced and readily available, in a retail atmosphere they feel almost without context, yet altering this context of their presentation and their purpose, influences our engagement and perception of them. The understanding of curatorial practices and institutional structures and their ideological dimensions doesn´t necessarily mean the

\textsuperscript{11} For further reading on how the perception/aura of an object changes by its being placed within a museum, see Branham, Joan R “Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space.” Journal of the Walters Art Gallery, Volume 52/53, 1994/1995

\textsuperscript{12} Whilst there isn’t space to extend futher, the different narratives that can emerge around these everyday objects that are taken from their original context, and placed in the museum also feels reminiscent of another of Benjamin’s texts, the essay The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov (1936). Each time the tale is retold the act becomes a unique event within a wider process of replication, allowing the story to be perpetuated, a form of reproduction, like the replica of objects in the museum, and the reconsideration of our relationship towards these objects.
viewer is left passive in the face of the museum’s ´authority´. Awareness of these constructed narratives, often projected as a sole ´fact´ or ´historical truth, has the possible consequence of the viewer making their own meaning; the opportunity for a gentle unorthodox protest towards cultural hierarchies is raised, and the autonomy, and breaking down, or preventing of rigid rhetorics which can congeal and even ossify over time, in more stable or traditional institutions of museums.  

2.3 Museums as Contact Zone;

Whilst the power structure in museums is conceived through its exterior (and how objects relate to visitors), power structures are also retained in the Contact Zone. The Contact Zone is a concept originally conceived by Mary Louise Pratt, which Pratt defines as a „space of colonial encounters“ (Pratt, 1992, 6)  

Extrapolated from its literary origins, the Contact Zone is considered a „space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict“ (Ibid, 6). Well established within museology, the idea was developed further by James Clifford, who suggested museums as Contact Zones, re-addressing Pratt’s concept of the “Contact Zone” considering that Contact Zones are spaces where a merging, or meeting, of cultures and their varying histories, can be displayed and exemplified, as a means of engaging with critical encounters and nurturing discourse around them. This simultaneously questions the dominant western narratives, long been perceived as ´universal´, as well as the museum serving as a receptacle for the ´truth´ yet brings about a process of reconsidering other views upon the definitive truth, and what the role of the museum is. Museums as Contact Zones lets us consider more upon the power structures within museums, for the production of knowledge, has consequentially given way to multiple narratives, and questioning around the design, and presentation of exhibitions.

13 Such as the increasing awareness of “Museums are not neutral” movement that has been gaining traction, regarding museums carefully constructed narratives and representation. See https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more/we-are-stronger-together

14 See Mary Louise Pratt’s text Imperial Eyes, 1995

15 For further reading, see Clifford, James, “Museums as Contact Zones”, in Routes; Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century, Harvard University Press, 1997
As Lübker points out, “national, homogenous narratives now have to compete on equal terms with the many different narratives that were previously disregarded because they did not fit into the generalized “objective” historical truth” (Lübker, 2016, np). As the museum has emerged more as a place to encourage discourse, that is, emerging as increasingly inclusive and democratic, the focus shifts towards its visitors, instead of the objects. With the museum no longer presenting the considered definitive, or historical truth, the artifacts on display have consequentially resulted in their vital role; their focus is now upon the discourse that they incite. Visitor contribution has shifted the ways that museums have altered themselves, changing their focus more towards visitor engagement, participation, and experience, resulting in methods that emphasise these, and in turn, transform the museum for increased community-focus and more autonomous space, to which I would consider the approach of Rapid Response Collecting to reflect through its means of inciting more discussion.

I consider how Rapid Response Collected objects may likewise respond to Charlie Gere’s ideas within „the Internet as a Contact Zone“ (1997; 62). Gere extrapolates the concept of Pratt’s Contact Zone to the digital realm, observing how inequitable spaces emerge, providing a ‘negotiated’ space designated for particular interactions or communications, to maintain an imperialist agenda. Unlike Pratt’s perception of the Contact Zone portraying an unequal power balance, Gere’s observation upon the digital internet realm represents „the emancipatory reciprocal mass medium“, which has started to resonate in discussions of the museum (Gere, 1997, 62), offering deliberation for museums to reconsider themselves, responding to „this postmodern, post-colonial age“ (Ibid, 62), and continues to note that the museum “need not be thought of just as a storehouse of colonial plunder, nor a one-way medium, but as a place of interactive communication” (Gere 1997, 59). Many of the items collected through Rapid Response procedures are digitally influenced; either through the way they are designed, manufactured, or distributed.

Both equally within the manner of collections, and the visitors’ sense of self and objects display, Rapid Response Collecting can be said to reflect the ideas of Joanna K. Garner, Avi Kaplan and Kevin Pugh, outlined in “Museums as contexts for Transformative Experiences and Identity Development” (2016). The museums’ role, regarding their creation of individual and public identity is discussed, through observing
how educators and planners within the museum often anticipate and control social classes, goals, and ideologies, which endorse learning about specific orientations and experiences, and assessing the connection arising between the visitors’ sense of self, the ways the object is displayed, and the possibilities museums offer as educational (although more informal) environments. Whilst Garner et al consider that “artifacts can be leveraged to promote self-exploration and understanding” (Garner, Kaplan and Pugh; 2006; 342), the authors stress the immense potential museums and exhibitions have in being “environments for visitors’ personal development“ (ibid; 341), suggestive in the approach of Rapid Response Collecting to create a desirable experience upon visitors, is shown by the type of objects shown, and within the identities around these objects. Indeed, Jaspars extends upon this, reminding us that „our material lives are as important as our social ones, for one cannot exist without the other“ (Jaspars, 2019, 25), additionally accentuating these ideas around the object and our relationship with them, as „meanings and values are accumulated and then transformed“ (Gosden, 1999, 172). Certainly, the relationship between people and things becomes more imperative as the objects gathered and displayed through Rapid Response Collecting are often more familiar than the other pieces on display elsewhere in the museum. The direction of visitor engagement responds with the object, shifting from engagement, and onto the visitors self, and, in turn, contributes to the transformative experience. Its distinct approach incites the curators to introduce increased participatory approaches, furthermore encouraging collaboration and exchange with the community that uses the museum. This results in breaking away or challenging the typical western narrative that is often still adhered to, ensuring museums´ representation extends to a broader range, through depicting local communities and permitting them in presenting their own narratives, that are acknowledged through poignant moments around objects.

In our interview, Gardner expands upon the community focus, through an example of an Ikea soft toy, in the shape of a wolf, called Luftsig, which became an object of political protest in Hong Kong, and established into the Rapid Response display. This object rose to prominence, essentially through

16 Although, it depends to what people are going to see, and whether they want to escape the ´everyday´. However, this is not something that I will develop further here.
the transliteration of the name Luftsig into Mandarin and Cantonese, and the play of those two languages across mainland China and Hong Kong, but because the governor at the time was considered to be ‘wolf-like’. He had been imposed by mainland China, so having, or throwing this soft toy was an act of allegiance, and then dissent. There was a moment in the gallery when it was on display and there was a couple taking pictures of themselves in front of the display, [who] said, ‘we’re coming to visit from Hong Kong and we have looked around your many galleries and remarkable objects, but this is the one that means most to us because there is a sense of kinship with that object and the community that have it as part of your collections here’. Coming back to […] this sense of seeing yourself in the museum and moments of deep encounter is something I would like to achieve for as many people as possible.”

(Gardner, Interview, 2021).

Through enabling a more expansive representation within the ‘typical’ museum, encourages the museum to re-evaluate itself; both through the objects exhibited, and the curation of exhibitions, but also how its visitors engage, respond and associate with them, furthermore asking curators to reconsider their views or re-learn ingrained perspectives (Reilly, 2017). Typically, “museum education research has focused on ways to increase the sophistication of visitors’ thinking about artifacts and topics (ibid; 342), and whilst the ideas expressed by Pugh et al propose the opposite; that objects are used in a way to encourage a means of reflection and rumination within the audience and their understanding with these objects, that allow a unified emphasis upon both the understanding of an object, in permitting personal development. However, making personal meanings around objects typically tends not to be reinforced. Rapid Response Collecting incites the curators to introduce more participatory approaches, additionally encouraging collaboration and exchange with the community that uses the museum, for example, representing stories of local communities, therefore acknowledging them to present their own narratives. The V&A, now considered a global museum, than its initial origins as the South Kensington museum, so what some communities would apply for Rapid Response collecting in their museums, would depend differently. A new branch, V&A East, is estimated to open in 2025, in Stratford, East London, which may place more emphasis upon its local communities, as Gardner points out in our interview:

„Here in South Kensington, I don’t have immediate networks with local residents in a way that I might if I were in east London, no, but that’s not to say I don’t take the need to work closely with specific communities […] I do think museums today,
there is the hyper-local, there is the local and the international and we have to take them all, and you know, and those, if we are thinking about those communities we might want to welcome in to the building but we also have to think about all those communities in terms of our online offer and our online offer cannot solely be restricted to an effort to come through the door. Museums are no longer that. They are places of public discourse, in real life and online."

(Gardner, Interview, 2021)

Within *Design 1900 – Now*, the global encompassing of art and design development still has yet to fully reflect its aims, showing predominantly Western and Eurocentric objects. Returning to the museum as a Contact Zone, Jaspars points out „there can be no *contact zone* if there is nothing to be in contact with.“ (Jaspars, 2019, 23; Italics in the original), which brings us back to issues around curatorial approaches. Audience connections may be altered by this space, as a ´contact zone´, with the objects representing a contact zone unto themselves, although with its generally very western presentation, *Design 1900 – Now* has yet to reflect this.

2.4. Museum re-definition

To highlight museum developments, and for museums to retain their relevancy, the definition of what constitutes a museum recently underwent reconsideration, and in 2019 there was a proposal to update museums´ definition, by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The definition of a museum has only been subject to modest amendments over the past decades; the last in 2007, where the museum was defined as a “a non-profit institution [which] acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”17. As museums´ have more recently responded to a societal shift in becoming more visitor-centric, the consideration by the International Council of Museums´ to update the definition, reflecting museums evolution was subject to its voting upon. Its proposed update deliberated that

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Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing (ICOM, 2019).

Indeed, this new proposal recognises museums capacity, both in societal purposes, but also through influencing civic identity. Whilst the definition attempts to apprise and acknowledge museums poignant roles within society, this new definition, on its initial reception, was deemed controversial and derisive, met with responses that similarly reflect and present the current state of the museum field, which is one of transition, but more its overly politicalised tone, as well as overly ‘ideological’, or ‘radical’, yet simultaneously, its apparent ambiguousness was dismissed as overly ‘open’ to interpretation. As museums tended to be built upon, and correspond to orders embedded within colonialism (Tenenbaum, 2020), this inevitably altered the narratives to which European and North American museums are implemented. The issue around a proposed definition-change emerges at a period, particularly within Western museums, which have been subject to culpability from communities traditionally lesser-represented and marginalised within museums, in conjunction for a push to both de-colonise museums, and to address their previous colonisation concerns. Furthermore, some responses erred upon not wanting museums to have political involvement, but in my interview with Gardner, she prompts that whilst “as a curator [I] cannot but bring my politics to the office, but that said, I hold a responsibility in public trust and the public is broad, so in that sense, Rapid Response enabling a breadth of acquisition is also really important” (Gardner, Interview, 2021).

Conversely, the Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP), emphasise the importance of democracy in museums „defined as much through what and who they exclude as by what and who they include. The 19th and


19 https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/19/what-exactly-is-a-museum-icom-comes-to-blows-over-new-definition
20th Centuries saw fierce and successful struggles to expand who – in terms of class, gender and race – was to be enfranchised and included in the processes of governing societies“ (Sandahl, 2019, 8). Whilst democracy has always been deliberated, it feels like a fleeting, transient ideology that must be retained:

„Democracy – if that word or concept will survive much longer in the 21st century – is ideally about empowerment of individuals and communities as well as about processes for peacefully negotiating and mediating differences and divergent points of view. The last quarter of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new generation of museums defining themselves as places, where a plurality of voices can speak, and where strangers can safely interact."

(Standing committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP), 2018, np)

Whilst a new interpretation signifies a well-intentioned statement, particularly the updated responses of the museum’s function, the proposed definition was bypassed, failing to address the museums purpose resulting in an unsuccessful update. With museums positioned at cross-roads, an understanding of neutrality has transformed, as museums are ever more dependent upon

„Corporate, foundation, and private funding, while appointing more and more business people to their governing boards. The unspoken argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate government and private funders, real or potential. The simple truth is that corporations and the business community are themselves special interest groups, grounded in marketplace ideology and the political ideology that accompanies it”

(Janes, 2019, 8).

Collections have undergone a plethora of varying undertakings and purposes during their collection’s history, for research purposes (but which also signifies a bias within the research, subject to upper classes influences, etc), objects for exhibitions, and depicting narratives for how society relates to both the past and present (Pettersson & Kinanen 2010, in Häyhä et al). Items are retained through collections as they are considered to express ways of societal living, however, they additionally inform us about those who work in museums, curators, and their perceptions. A valid point attributed to Peter van Mensch and Leontine Meijer-van Mensch (2015, 24–26), is that discussion surrounding
collection development should be emphasised and developed, as opposed to focusing upon collection management.

Traditional practices around collecting have been challenged, and museums should echo the world during its happenings, or events, not retrospectively, and this is of precedence, to keep relevant for its public. But, the transition towards resolving these embedded practices, when there is openly awareness around problematic issues, is due to finances. An imperative concern in regards to future collecting and the way museums respond to changes, would be the re-evaluation of collection policies that are already in place, especially with particular rules within a systematic organisation, what Foucault refers to as “tabulation.” Requiring reconsiderations of relevancy, and for museums to avoid indulging in ‘object fetishism,’ in succumbing to over-powerment to objects, they need to ensure objects remain firmly anchored within contexts, and to not become what Knell refers to as “isolated tokens” (Knell, 1999, 6). The collection should be a continual process, of accessioning and deaccessioning, as not to produce dogmatic, monologic narratives, or to stagnate, but to retain its relevance within constant flux. The reassessment criteria, and the potential deaccessioning lifespan should also apply not just to those objects kept for future collections, but should govern present and older collections to ensure that the objects still generate discussion with their visitors to keep the museum discourse ongoing, otherwise “museums will lose their memory function; they will cease to be living institutions, but rather fossilized monuments to a vanished age” (Knell; 2016, 206).

2.5 Transient Perspectives

Within Rapid Response Collecting, the temporary, fleeting inclusion of objects that are often of a socio-political nature remains to contrast with the more cautious, and traditional values within the permanent galleries, therefore implying that museums encounters and acknowledgement regarding collectively pertinent concerns, continues to undergo negotiation (Varutti, in Sandell, R. and Nightingale, E. 2012, 250). Rapid Response Collected objects are collected because they say something about the way in which we live, and additionally, because their often political ideologies permit them to be placed transiently. Whilst museum or exhibition curators often include objects
of a political nature, they tend to be featured within a temporary framework (Ibid, 250). A conceivable motive may be that these viewpoints offer momentary perspectives, as opposed to permanent collections which avoid any defined socio-political offerings or controversy, for they are displayed often for an extended period (McWilliams, 2012). Signified possibly by the flags that overhang in between the Design 1900 – Now gallery into the atrium below; the Pride, Refugee and the EU barcode flags seem to imply that this area within the museum holds more liberal or encourages more controversial views.

![Image of flags](image.png)

**Picture 1:** View of the flags hanging into the atrium below; LGBTQIA+ flag, from 2018 (the flag has since been re-designed), the refugee flag (2016), and the EU barcode flag (2002) designed by Rem Koolhaas.

Why it is more acceptable to include political evocations within Design 1900 - Now, possibly for the transient display of some objects? Anything which is not white, or heteronormative is considered ‘radical’, additionally signifying change within museal perceptions, collections, display and museums’ overall role. Laura Raicovich in *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (2021), reminds us that

“in a society of white-supremacist, capitalist hetero-patriarchy, in institutions of white, Western primacy, any actively decolonial, pro-Black, pro-Latinx, pro-immigrant, pro–working class, pro-trans, pro-queer, pro-disabled, pro-family (by all definitions), and self-reflective feminist positions, are regarded as political by
default. They are perceived as aggressive, defiant, a challenge to the status quo, rather than as facets of reality that are coequal to the dominant story.”

(Raicovich, 2021, 105)

The V&A’s engagement towards ongoing concerns, regarding curational narratives, may reflect contradictory elements, particularly if the museum wishes to show responsibility towards the things they collect; raising awareness, collecting contemporary, advocating the importance, but also, shouldn’t the exhibition take a stand, enabling visitor responsiveness? Long mentions in his interview about negotiations with protestors for their artifacts, which could be „very difficult […] some of the protesters felt a bit strange about that and there was a whole negotiation, and that was really great for the museum, because this is another conversation that we need to have, these are cultural artifacts with a different meaning“ (Long, interview 2022).

Whilst museums are conservative by nature, literally through their conservation of objects and cultural artifacts, they function as a speculative platform. Janes acknowledges that “museums, as social institutions, have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance – the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo” (Janes et al., 2019, 6). Although the onus on Design 1900 - Now remains to be objects related to the global Covid-19 Pandemic, we still must deliberate the other stories that aren’t being told, signified by the choice of objects, particularly with other parallel social, political, and economic happenings ongoing during this period.

In this chapter, I have considered the development of museums and their artifacts have traditionally reflected socio-political classes, in turn observed and analysed through the framework of the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. I have discussed concerns of neutrality, and that museums will never be a neutral space. In turn, this is linked to the concept of the Contact Zone, that was examined through its different applications; through museology, and the digital Contact Zone. With transition that museums have undergone, concluded how imperative it is for the definition of a museum to be recently reconsidered, but the challenges in navigating this.
Chapter Three; The development of institutional and contemporary collecting and the influence of curational practices.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the historical context and perspective through which museums’ collections have influenced their visitors, and how these objects depict a particular narrative. In this chapter, I will continue to generate a larger picture of how museums’ objects become perceived in a specific way, and how the introduction of contemporary collecting has helped broaden perspectives and prompted change.

The following chapter of this thesis offers a reflection upon museums’ collections and their collecting practices, beginning with the example of Swedish contemporary collecting practice of Samdok. I will reflect upon how time imparts value on objects, through the definitions of the Contemporary and Contemporaneity, and how they influence the present. To get a wider understanding upon museum collections, I will observe the concept and development of curatorial influences and the mutable role of the curator, to ascertain the move towards an increasingly democratic inclusion and how curatorial influences shape the narrative; whose stories are told, through the choice and decision around each object and their subsequent display, additionally widening a perspective upon how collections and exhibitions and their narratives, are constructed.

Collecting has always been at the heart of what is in museums, with museums often defined by their collections. Susan Pierce, in her vast research around collecting, considers three comprehensive approaches. These are, souvenir, fetishistic and systematic modes of collecting (Pearce 1992: 68-88). 'Systematic collecting, “examples intended to stand for all the others of their kind and to complete a set, to ‘fill in a gap in the collections’ as the phrase so often upon curators' lips has it” (Pierce, 1994, 268-269).

With museums shifting towards emphasising increased societal and community engagement, a growing number of museums have shifted the focus from their collections, towards their visitors and visitor experiences. Combined with the influence of technology and digitalisation, the traditional idea of a museum is showing redundancy, and so for museums to retain their dialogue, it is imperative to:

20 For further reading, see Conn, Steven, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010
“Generate a critical museology, an engaged and informed dialogue reflecting on the process of collecting: the objects selected, how they are imagined and what they are intended to be. Such an approach emphasises not only how the act of collecting shapes cultural and historical representations to the museum public as well as forging a material archive for future generations to look back at, the act of collecting is also a selective process, which is as much about those objects bought forward as it is about those that are rejected.

(Were and King; 2014; 11)

Exhibitions tend to be constructed from museums’ collections, with research often dependent upon these collections, yet, incongruous with audience diversity, they often indicate a moderately reduced demographic. As Owen Hopkins acknowledges, in The Protean Museum, since museums’ establishment, they have

„relied implicitly and explicitly on their apparent ‘exceptionalism’ – the notion that the experience they offer is of an inherently higher order than visiting another visitor attraction. This exceptionalism rests not just on their public and educational missions – although that is important – but upon the way they are somehow perceived to exist outside of time, and above the mundane, transient realities of everyday life”

(Hopkins, 2020, 88).

Indeed, whilst this exceptionalism has been emphasised, it still remains or distanced from most visitors, prompting change in the way that people relate to objects, leading to changes through beginning to collect objects not so elite, or from totally different (lives), which results in the establishment of the application of the perspective of now.

3.1 Contemporary Collecting and the Samdok collecting project.

Extending out from the acquisition of collections, based upon assemblages of fine art and rare artifacts, collecting practices considerably expanded with the introduction of contemporary collecting. Contemporary collecting sees the gathering of objects within
‘living memory’ of the last fifty years, acquiring objects from the present to preserve them for the purpose of providing cultural and historical provisions for future generations.

Without the greater perspective of retrospection, this method of collecting presents difficulties in estimating the value of contemporary items from only within the context of the present. It serves as a continuous process of acquiring and discarding, but fulfilling its purpose can be onerous, for, how do we measure what is useful, or valuable within an object? Collecting from the past feels ‘simpler’, as there is less acquaintance with the objects and there are narratives which are already imposed, furthermore, elucidating the objects’ value. We are aware, through “constantly updat[ing] the knowledge of the collected items in order to understand what an item means and symbolises [...] is [to be] constantly participating in the creation of new knowledge” (Antoš, 2014, 127). Whilst contemporary art is the only ‘thing’ which elicits constant replenishment, the rest of older museal acquisitions remain in these “regimes of value” (Appadurai; 1986; 15). With age, we assume the object is more likely to accumulate value, but within our mass-produced, late-capitalist culture, it becomes easy to dismiss a majority of objects for their lack of ‘authenticity’, thus, their value declines. The construct that one narrative or value holds higher precedence over the other, is, however, its difficulty, through a means of interpretative contexts and authority 21. Evaluations and interpretations can be necessary to position the usefulness of the object, yet one cannot “guarantee, that the objects acquired now and in the future, will always be the ‘correct’ or the ‘most representative’ ones, or that the ones not acquired will not later be judged important” (Knell; 2016; 69). Whilst collections and classifications have often extended to fill in gaps in museums, such as particular time periods, “contemporary collecting attempts to rectify past omissions, to give voice to those previously ignored, and to capture a fuller, more nuanced record of society whilst material is abundantly available. It seeks to future-proof the museum for as-yet-unknown exhibitions and research” (Rhys and Baveystock, 2014, 15). Pre-occuations with owning items, more recently

21 Also, the ethics of acquisitioning of what to collect and what to show; what denotes the importance of display more than others, which also extends to the duty of collecting for future generations. See also the ICOM ethics for museums; https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf, but much literature has been written around this topic, such as Tristram Besterman’s „Museum Ethics“ in A Companion to Museum Studies. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011
perpetuated by rapid technological advances, as well as retaining items in the throes of obsolescence, can be merely a means of ratifying our existence in unstable political and social periods. People look to create nostalgic and sentimental sources of comfort and stability, and thus the idea that contemporary gatherers are bestowing knowledge for the future, can be easily marred. It’s usually assumed that ethnographic or history-related museums will apply this approach of contemporary collecting, as traditionally, “ethnographic and historical museums are considered to be in the function of keeping the memory of the community and society [and are] seen as having a special responsibility because they have to decide what the current generations will remember and preserve for the future” (Antoš, 2014, 115).

Contemporary gathering as a collecting practice was first applied as an established practice by the Nordic Museum in Sweden (Nordiska Museet), which created Samdok. Established in 1977, the project ran until funding diminished, in 2011. A truncation of Samtidsdokumentation (‘contemporary documentation’), Samdok was a collaborative and educational organisation aimed at contemporary gathering, it originated from the notion that many relics from Swedish rural life had been collected, yet very little from the present time had been kept for future generations. Whilst much of the objects in storage by Nordiska Museet, before 1970, were discovered to be primarily “agriculture and pre-industrial craft activities,” dating predominantly around 1750 until 1870, there were barely any objects that responded to “lower social groups and industrial activity” (Steen, in Knell, 1999, 198). As this museum collection is deemed to be reflective and be representative of a definitive “national memory bank of the Swedish people,” (ibid) most of the objects corresponded towards upper classes, with missing gaps from lower classes and more disenfranchised groups within Swedish society. In essence, Samdok’s ideology was to “collect today for tomorrow” (Steen, 1998, 154), by accessioning and archiving objects for future generations. The concept of present collecting with future consideration was perceived as quite radical, in that value was seen in the now 22. Samdok functioned

22 However, the Samdok project also emerged with a consideration for assisting immigrant integration, posing a possibility that it could be interpreted as a form of social engineering for immigrants, again, reflecting around the concerns and ideas around the concept of neutrality in museums. See Bodil Axelsson „The Poetics and Politics of the Swedish Model for Contemporary Collecting“, in Museum & Society, March 2014. 12(1) 14-28
through a co-operative approach, which presented both as practical and distributed accountability, with museums all over Sweden participating, which also enabled a broader collection of objects (Steen, 1999, 199 - 200), and pragmatically gathering objects that museums hadn’t always considered, such as those relating to groups often marginalised by society (including women, queer, and disabled people), items of popular culture and to take into account the re-considerations of space, for storage is costly and limited. (Axelsson, 2014).

Contemporary gathering is not a means of just acquiring objects portrayed as potentially useful or insightful, but a thorough process of deliberate thought and consideration involving layers of intricate factors, carefully curated to influence the construction of a collection, but one made for a future; an illusory construct of time which does not arrive as it is always projected forward. An object’s value is not always defined by the passing of time, as objects now considered an appropriate catalyst for future learning may acquire potential obsolescence that comes with passing time. Indeed, similar considerations are taken for the acquisition of Rapid Response objects, which are displayed as soon as possible, to generate discussion of the present and events of the purview, and Gardner acknowledges the extension to which one must consider around collecting a contemporary object;

"If you think of that object, what is it, firstly, think about its longevity into the future, how exhibital is it, do we have to, therefore, acquire a whole set of supermarket shelves, does a cardboard shelf cut-out mean anything in isolation? Those are the types of questions we bring to bear as we start to think around what an acquisition might be."

(Gardner, Interview, 2021).

Rapid Response Collecting is a shift in instutional collecting that has signified a (small) change in museology, with museums not waiting to receive items, or to buy something for a collection, but there remains an unevenness, or inconsistency, in museum collections, and Rapid Response Collecting can assist in helping to fill in the collections disparities 23.

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23 Or, as in the US, where museums sell off their collections, but in the UK, this is not a practice.
So does Rapid Response Collecting free collecting, and museum practices, from tradition? Customarily, museums tended to simultaneously depict the chronicles of their audience at that period, that of the upper classes, both through objects depicted and their surrounding narratives, consciously and unconsciously. Indeed, as „one of the foremost traditional roles of museums is to collect, then catalogue, preserve and interpret for posterity [...] inevitably influenced by both the attitudes and beliefs of those doing the collecting and by the challenges and obstacles they can often face at the time“ (Emmens and McEnroe, 2021, np). The shift towards including this way of collecting presents the chance to contribute to increased accessibility, and to respond towards a broader scope of society.

3.2 Considerations around the Contemporary and Contemporaneity.

Regarding the comprising of the present, I will deliberate definitions of the contemporary and contemporaneity, to depict the context for RRC collecting. As the V&A no longer collects contemporary pieces after 1945, how does collecting and displaying objects of the now complement other collections within the museum? Claire Bishop´s ideas in Radical Museology (2014) presents a way of curational thinking, as she addresses the term ´contemporary´, observing whether we are unable to understand, or be in the present moment, when considering the „radical understanding of temporality“ (Bishop; 2014; 6). In her reflection of going beyond the concept of time, Bishop defines contemporary in two terms, which she plays out against each other.

The first, Presentism, is:

“The condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking. This is the dominant usage of the term ‘contemporary’ in art today; it is underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety, and an acceptance of this incomprehension as a constitutive condition of the present historical era” (Ibid, 6).

24 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLl3nDGey34 2.21. The exception is fashion, which continues to be collected after 1945.
Essentially, this means a foreclosure of the future, or at least of the long view, or long term.

The second model is

“understood as a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality. Time and value turn out to be crucial categories at stake in formulating a notion of what [Bishop] call[s] a ‘dialectical contemporaneity’, because it does not designate a style or period of the works themselves, so much as an approach to them” (Ibid, 6-9).

Effectively, this second model of contemporaneity reflects a historicising move. This understanding deliberates both ideas of political and historical considerations, in addition to future contemplation. Both multiple temporalities, as well as specific moments are contextually integral to certain pieces, regarding Bishop’s concept of contemporaneity, through understanding different lenses of influences, upon an improved present or future. Bishop’s theories can be adapted to the topic of Rapid Response Collecting, in terms of looking at the position of when objects are taken into the museum, and how they are considered and displayed. Museums have started to look more directly at the ongoing present, with Bishop applying this dialectical method to three museums in her text Radical Museology, and although it pre-dates the introduction of the V&A’s Rapid Response approach, Bishop’s ideas remain highly appropriate. There isn’t a particular designation of design or history, that echoes Bishop’s point regarding ideas of ‘dialectical contemporaneity’, which is what she sees as the present socio-political condition, but refusing any awareness of presentism, alternatively to examine factors of the past, which have created our present. Ultimately, Radical Museology does hold too much emphasis upon the present, for the balance of the context needs to be retained; too early, and there is no context, too late, and the moment has passed.

If art is displayed, yet ultimately detached from connections to the past or vital historical framework, this can eventually render the understanding or purpose of the artwork, lost, as is the loss of Benjamin’s aura, compressing its context. The concept of contemporaneity focuses more upon the re-evaluation of museums’ past, presenting the possibility for previous re-evaluation and to regenerate the present. The word
contemporaneity signifies a time-based intricacy emerging from different and distinct cultural groups, locations and backgrounds, that come together within a similar cultural space, within the present. As Lund notes, contemporaneity considers the "bringing together of different, but equally present temporalities in our present time – the temporality of the globalised world." (Lund, Kunstkritikk, 2016). It is also concerned with how contemporaneity influences the perception of time, by the myriad varying people who reside in this space. I include these considerations of time, regarding Rapid Response Collecting, because museums, which comprise of different understandings of contemporaneity come to be reflected through "a more radical model [...] taking shape: more experimental, less architecturally determined, and offering a more politicized engagement with our historical moment" (Ibid, 6). These are some criteria that curators need to consider.

3.3 Curatorial influences upon museum display and representations.

I will look at the historical development of curators and curatorial change, from the 1960s, from the advent of critical curation, to the focus on curatorial activism and awareness. I will include some considerations of the changes and development within curatorial practices, by looking at how the exhibition encourages a more democratic approach towards its subject matter. My purpose of discussing curatorial developments is to perceive how these changes respond to institutional shifts that encourage increased social and more democratic methodologies. Rapid Response Collecting focuses upon more popular and recognisable items, and in turn, reflects varied ethos and demographics, that “seek(s) to tell the story of design in the round, but in the round means an openness and an enfranchisement of multiple views” (Gardner; Designweek.co.uk).

More effort has been placed in museal representations; who, or what gets to be displayed, to garner a wider depiction of people. As previously considered, through the framework of social theory, of Bourdieu, it is the upper classes that have access to these institutions, and who are also principally represented within them. Their stories are the ones depicted, and the visitors from within these socio-economic strata relate to them, whilst the lower classes tend to visit less, and if they do there is little for them to relate to. Whilst curation responds to different lenses, particularly in the age of social media, it is considered to be the vehicle for the message, connecting the object, or art, with its
audience. The root of the word Curating, from ‘Curare’, which is ‘to take care of’, this term was traditionally related to keepers of collections, within museums and galleries. Museum curators previously elicited a kind of institutional control, or power over their visitors, but presently their role has generally become that of “researching, acquiring, documenting, and publicly displaying art, the curator becomes the propagator of taste and knowledge for the public ‘good’” (Fowle, 2013, 12). The definition of curation is one which has varied interpretations, as its roles change, or have become part of the everyday, such as with digital influence. Curatorial practices continue to respond to external changes or movements, especially with the influence of technology, to the extent that everyone is a curator, particularly regarding social media. As an extensive and considered practice of deliberation and execution, museums position prominence upon expressing the significance of objects within in a greater perspective. Throughout each stage of museums’ existence, they have held the power of exemplifying, and determining their visitors’ opinions, for curating is a method of communication with the audience, the decision of what is, or isn’t, chosen, or considered valuable, in order to compose the definitive meaning or truth. However, as previously discussed, it has long been realised that museums are not, and will never be neutral, as O’Neill describes exhibitions, as being “contemporary forms of rhetoric, complex expressions of persuasion whose strategies aim to produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences” (O’Neill 2007, 244).

3.3.1 Critical Curation.

Curator Paul O’Neill’s book *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (2012) surveys in what way the curator’s role has changed over the years, and how this alteration re-defined not just the role itself, but also interactions between, artists, visitors and curators. The 1960s saw a tangible development in curatorial practices, through the emergence of Critical Curation; a response to this period of upheaval, social change and a re-questioning of freedoms, which were reflected in transition, and a change regarding the role of the curator. Once a custodian of private collections, through to a creator of exhibitions for the general public, the advent of Critical Curation saw the perception of curators and their roles emerging as a “space for critique “ (O’Neill, 2007,
the role of curators continued to respond to societal changes, emerging from the unnoticed keeper of collections, into the 1990’s trend of celebrity curators, often emphasising a Eurocentric standard (RACAR; 5). Curating had transformed into a means of critical intervention, and as a form of understanding contemporary culture, this new communication surrounding curatorial practice “placed an emphasis on individual practice, the first-person narrative and curator self-positioning” as curators mapped out “a relatively bare field of discourse” (O’Neill 2007, 242). Furthermore, the 2000’s curatorial vision transitioned towards more of a theoretical approach, and within critical curating, “the expanded role of exhibition-makers involves, at some level, an engagement with activism or social justice work” (ibid 6), additionally leading to a change and understanding with curators and audiences, towards a greater curatorial transparency, to which these ideas of activism, or radicalism, retain themselves as a key attribute (Jaspers; 2019; 52).

Indeed, what do Rapid Response collected items say, regarding their values and social relations, towards their audiences? Design 1900 - Now acknowledges public considerations and input, as stated upon the entrance, of the gallery wall; “We look forward to adding new acquisitions to the displays and welcome your views and ideas.” This inclusion of citizen curatorship was ostensibly mentioned in the previous inception of the Rapid Response exhibition, stating its welcoming of suggestions from the public, yet evidence was just as absent. Despite thorough research around citizen suggestions, I did not find evidence of the museum actively following up on this. This was further validated during my visits to the V&A, enquiring with gallery staff, who had no knowledge of public submissions and suggestions regarding either the previous Rapid Response gallery, or Design 1900 - Now, or aware this was even an option. However, in my querying regarding public suggestions was met with Gardner’s response that it wasn’t popular, but an attribute she
“would like to be more keenly felt and so the more we can do in terms of talking about it, public programming, getting the right objects, because then the right people, or different voices, or audiences come to see what Rapid Response offers an opportunity, so I think its a small step in the right direction, but the bigger picture, and the challenge and the inaccessibility of the arts is vast, and thats about what we, as institutions, choose to show, whose voices we seek to platform.”

(Gardner, Interview, 2021)

3.3.2 Curatorial Activism

The emergence of Critical Curation propagating a social ´justice´ approach, similarly overlaps with Curatorial Activism. Put forth by Maura Reilly,

[A]s we venture forward into this new century, it is imperative that art institutions examine not only their putative subjects, but their ideological biases as well. This will involve rethinking methodologies and iconographies for what they say, and do not say, about the constructions of race, gender, class, and nation. In such cases, critical theory is not enough; we must re-examine cultural objects and social practices to understand the patterns of everyday life that shape the past and inevitably imprint the future.

(Reilly, “Toward a Curatorial Activism” 2017, 22.)

Reilly extends upon these initial ideas in her text Curatorial Activism (2018), championing approaches away from those pertaining towards „mainstream curatorial tendencies“ (Ibid, 77), emphasising how museums and curators can unlearn their biases. Reilly’s plea for other perspectives within curation reflects the codified interiors and exteriors of the institution, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, through the framework of Bourdieu. Taking the binary of the white, privileged (and predominantly) heterosexual male; those outside of these definitions come under the umbrella of ‘Other’ - women, non-western, non-white, LGBT+, and implore museums and galleries to become more inclusive and demotic in their displays. ‘Curatorial Activism’ is a term Reilly applies in designating

„the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted
altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists."


The predominant and eternally existent concern, is whether curational ethics reflect the object or those of the institution? Are the ethics of the curator reflective of the work, the artist, or the institution of where it is being shown? One curatorial strategy Reilly suggests is a ‘relational’ approach, replacing typical canonical, linear white male narratives, with non-linear, multi-racial narratives that can be simultaneously present with multiple chronicles, which transforms into „exhibition-as-polylogue“ (Reilly, 2018, 29-33), anticipating that this „destructive centre-periphery binary collapses in favour of multiplicity and multivocality“ (*Ibid*, 156), and to which, Rapid Response Collecting, at least in part, offers (which I shall analyse further in the following chapter). Whereas this relational, multi-narrative approach places its emphasis thematically, as Reilly concedes, this specific approach can result in such exhibitions being misunderstood, placing the emphasis upon themes and without the historical framework (which can be applicable in Rapid Response Collecting). Mistakes are often made when pertaining to „mainstream curatorial tendencies“ (*Ibid*, 77), but, by breaking away from said conventionalities of curation, are not always met with agreeable responses, or an understanding.

Similarly to the ideas touched upon in Chapter 2, by Kaplan et al, *Curatorial Activism* extends upon self-reflexivity, how curators can furthermore consider a self-reflexive process through their understanding, and consider their curatorial practices as Reilly implores, “what can each of us do, as curators, artists, educators, gallerists and museum directors, to difference the art historical canon, and to offer a more just and fair representation of global artistic production?”25 (2017, 23) Reilly implores for museums and galleries to become more inclusional in their displays, and the types of other approaches within curator can be applied *Curatorial Activism* focuses on „significant, large-scale exhibitions at major museums that broke the rules by introducing identity-driven social issues.” (Lippard, in Reilly, 2018, 7), to which, I consider the V&A and its Rapid Response approach can similarly reflect.

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25 Riley, Maura. *What is Curatorial Activism?* 2017

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Aligning on from Reilly’s concepts, the unfurling of developing and responses of curatorial practices is succinctly put forth by Fowle, accentuating that its approach should

“Creatively address timely artistic, social, cultural, or political issues. It could be said that the role of the curator has shifted from a governing position that presides over taste and ideas to one that lies amongst art (or object), space, and audience. The motivation is closer to the experimentation and inquiry of artists’ practices than to the academic or bureaucratic journey of the traditional curator”

(Fowle, 2014, 16).

Whilst exhibitions are framed within a particular curatorial perspective, the aspect of framing is thoroughly ascertained throughout the institution, for what is presented is never neutrally or naturally just ‘there’ within, but results from a complex series of decisions, opinions, and agendas, for “exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication, for the exhibition display already guides and shapes meaning, itself ‘framed’ by the institution” (Karp, 2012, 15), which carries its own set of meanings. Despite undergoing persistent, curatorial change these crucial and varying concerns of the present can be enlightened or revealed by recent history “exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not [they] are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and others” (ibid 15).

3.3.3 Curatorial approaches in Rapid Response Collecting

With the application of Rapid Response Collecting, the traditional role of the curator has shifted again, for without the passage of time to position these objects, they are considered contextually, in the present, as a mediator of current affairs, and curator Kate Fowle notes the extra dimension of “negotiating real-world politics is as much a part of the day-to-day workings of a curator as exhibition research, whilst navigating diverse social and cultural situations is now tantamount to working internationally” (Fowle, YouTube, 2014). Objects acquired through Rapid Response Collecting, a form of

26 The structure of the institution itself presents codes which must be deciphered, which are placed upon sociological restrictions.
exhibition-based collecting, requires both placing contextually, and within a theoretical framework to understand and make meaning from their cultural significance, as, “after their acquisition, objects do not retain a fixed meaning” (Vergo, 2012, 67). Indeed, the meaning of each object is subjective to each individual interpretation, dependent upon the person and its context, as Alberti recognises;

„We can trace the careers of museum things from acquisition to arrangement to viewing, through the different contexts and the many changes of value incurred by these shifts. In doing so we study a series of relationships surrounding objects, first on the way to the museum and then as part of the collection. These are relationships between people and people, between objects and objects, and between objects and people. We encounter not only collectors, curators, and scientists but also visitors and audiences. In this conception, the museum becomes a vessel for the bundle of relationships enacted through each of the thousands of specimens on display and instore“ (Alberti; 2005; 560-561).

Furthermore, Alberti engages with the object and visitor relations. This is unquestionably, the fundamental aspect of an object, within its museal role, as it realises its main purpose; that of generating new accounts or understandings around knowledge, and power. But Alberti reminds us that the reception of the object is dependent upon its viewer (Alberti 2005, 561). As objects are presented with diverse meanings, they connect also through the means of people’s daily lives.

Because the V&A is an institution focusing upon design and fashion, the objects gathered through Rapid Response Collecting reflect the need and urgency for addressing and engaging with current cultural and political matters. The curatorial approach for this specific exhibition required looking elsewhere for objects, outside of typical collections. Whilst researching this project, the terminology of ´Rapid Response´ varies, depending on its subject; regarding public discourse, it is indicative of emergency services, or disaster management, but for museology, the term is something rather different (Cook, 2016), a hastening of a current practice. Design 1900 – Now’s „curatorial narrative aims to position design as a means for understanding the way we live together, and to explore how designed things prompt us to ask questions of our past, present and future“ (V&A blog)27. Within acquisition and display practices, the

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27 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/a-new-20th-and-21st-century-gallery-at-the-va
assembled objects encourage a wider reconsideration, or perspective, towards other objects within the rest of the museum, thus

“...making you see the rest of the museum afresh. Brimming with the embroidered thrones and lacquered vases of despots and dictators, these are objects over which wars were fought, trade routes opened, and empires built, next to exquisite trinkets that sent their makers blind. Rapid Response brings these stories to the fore, as a powerful reminder that, beyond the craft of their making, every object is political.”

(Oliver Wainwright, *The Guardian*, 2014)

Essentially, this approach is also more than recording the now for upcoming generations but requires the continuation of relevancy for institutions. Indeed, the curatorial approach is most different from traditional methods, as curators place emphasis upon contemporary debates and narratives instead. The relevance of the objects is much more deliberated, particularly as mass objects on display prevail also in reality, in the sense of outside of the museum, and away from the rest of the museum’s exhibits upon singular, rare artifacts.

In Kieran Long’s “95 Theses for Contemporary Curation “, he sets out points for a re-consideration of contemporary curation, contemplating how “museums should be topical, responding quickly to world events when they touch our areas of expertise,” concluding that “a museum is not a refuge. It is a place to encounter the world in a state of heightened attention” (Long, Dezeen, 2013). This project and approach towards collecting presents an inwards perspective in how institutions should reconsider their own collections, with how they, and their communities, make use of them. Hopkins notes that „the museum – and dare I say, the curators responsible – become the story as much as the object and the story it has been collected to tell.” (Hopkins, 2021, 388)

In this chapter, I have outlined approaches that have influenced and developed collections practices and perspectives, and how narratives can be shaped through curatorial developments. Both collecting and curation in museums have influenced the approach of Rapid Response Collecting. To conclude this chapter, after considering the developments of curatorial practice, the curation is as much exhibited, as the artifacts themselves.
Chapter Four; Reflections and analysis; The V&A´s exhibition, 1900 – Now

The previous chapter deliberated upon the implications of time and curatorial developments, and so this chapter will present the progression towards the first inception of the Rapid Response gallery, by first outlining the V&A´s Circulation Department and its forays into the contemporary. Although the V&A was the first museum to globally establish a permanent Rapid Response display, introduced in 2014 36, Rapid Response Collecting has only become actively utilised within museums in the past decade, such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin 37, to engage with recent anti-semitism and the National Museum of Ireland, responding to 2017´s change in abortion law. 38 Other examples include Florida’s Orange County Regional History Center, that collected and displayed a Rapid Response exhibition in the aftermath of the 2016 Pulse Night Club shooting, acquiring items of memorial, which, according to the curators, was to “assist our community in both its grieving and healing” (Schwartz et al, 2016, 106) and consequentially prompting discussion for contemporary issues. The chosen objects highlight poignant and relevant social and political issues, allowing the public to have their own debate within the walls of the museum, reinforcing a sense of relevancy that hasn´t always been present, especially within more relatable items, and generating new narratives around them.

Design 1900 – Now is simultaneously a permanent and temporary exhibition. Permanent, in parts, showing vital items of design importance, but also temporary in that recent items acquired through Rapid Response Collecting are swapped in and out accordingly, depending to their response towards vital events in the present, encouraging people to engage and discuss new dialogues and visitor relations, or responses, particularly as the field of design is one that is ever evolving as a response to our lives.

36 https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/rapid-response-collecting

37 https://www.jmberlin.de/en/rapid-response-display

38 www.museum.ie. See also; https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/how-the-national-museum-is-capturing-instant-history-of-abortion-referendum-1.3537495

With the application of Rapid Response Collecting considered a recent ‘trend’ within museum practices, an early precursor to this approach is the V&A’s Circulation Department, emerging in 1947 until its demise in 1977, due to funding cuts, so the objects were subsequently reintegrated into other departments. Consisting of a group of curators deeply committed to the contemporary, the Circulation Department innovately obtained and collected contemporary objects with the purpose of using these objects for educating the ´everyday´ person. Part of the department’s role focused upon running a series of exhibitions and activities for touring shows, as well as displaying other objects of interest, in local art schools and institutions. The Circulation Departments’ application towards contemporary pieces helped to distinguish another side, relative to the museum’s duty, which was consequentially more liberal in stance, and „redolent of modernity“ (Barringer; 2006; 135). As within other departments, objects purchased required the (unspoken) ‘fifty year rule’ (Weddell, 2012), but some objects within the Circulation Department were accessioned the year of their creation (Weddell, 2016, 18). According to Peter Floud, the director of the Circulation Department at the time, the „Department’s contemporary collections are now much more extensive than those of the main museum“ (Weddell, 2012). A fundamental rule regarding the Circulation Department’s touring displays was that they were exhibited for free to the public, within various art schools, galleries and museums, to increase access to its collections. These touring exhibitions were „especially prepared for the typical small

39 Within the past decade, the physical inception of the practice is becoming more applied, curators are utilising this approach to create new collections detailing notable social movements over time (Johnson; 2018) with projects including Archive-it (https://archive-it.org), “a subscription service under the Internet Archive (https://archive.org) that works with some 400 institutions including museums and art libraries that is devoted to helping institutions build online archival collections freely available on the web” (Giannini, 2019, 107).


41http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-no.-4-summer-2012/room-38a-and-beyond-post-war-british-design-and-the-circulation-department/

42 We can see what objects were originally in the collection, as they are marked with the suffix ´Circ, prior to their re-integration into other departments.
general museum which needs non-specialist exhibitions, appealing to a completely uninformed public“ (Ibid, 2012), and offered more in-depth and informative labels than would be shown in the V&A (Ibid, 2012). Whilst more instructive labels may come across as overtly condescending, their aim of educating as many people as possible through contemporary objects is democratic and reasonable. This approach is similarly reflected with Rapid Response Collecting, which places more contextual information to generate a greater understanding, particularly as a historical perspective has yet to grant value upon these items. In some ways, the Circulation Department was a prototype and a motivator, maintaining the museum’s relevance to its audiences and creating a connection to a sense of criticality about the world.

4.2. Rapid Response Collecting, 2014 – 2019

The first dedicated gallery space to Rapid Response collected objects opened in 2014, and items were „collected in response to major moments in history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. This new strategy helps the V&A to engage in a timely way with important events that shape, or are shaped by design, architecture and technology“ (www.vam.ac.uk). Understanding the development and practice of RRC and its possibly increased democratic perspective, it makes sense to reflect that

„The V&A sees itself as a museum of design process, and that’s a very interesting position to take. You’re not really just a museum of the finished thing, you’re a museum of what happened to get to the finished thing, and the question is whether a collecting institution shouldn’t also be interested in those things“

(Long, Interview, 2022).

The premise of Rapid Response Collecting was that „each new acquisition raises a different question about economic, political and social change, globalisation, technology and the law“ (www.vam.ac.uk). As a museum focusing on design, the V&A’s Collections Development Policy from January 2015 opens with the central role contemporary materials have, and their engagement with

„design’s central position in debates about globalisation, consumerism, ecology, politics and so on, to bring to the fore, the ethical choices made in creating a work of design, as well as technical and aesthetic achievements […] what is new, what
is influential, what is innovative or experimental, and what is representative of contemporary social and artistic trends in an increasingly global world.

(V&A Collections Development Policy, 2015; 5-6).

The V&A’s policy objectives distinguish a significant amendment, permitting the swift acquisition of original items within the design field, objectively distributing decisions previously left to individual curators and their approaches, and instead, permitting visitors to promptly encounter the most recent artifacts of global design.43

Tucked away at the back of the museum, originally in room 72a, the original Rapid Response Collecting was housed in a tiny temporary gallery reminiscent of a storage room. Challenging to locate, let alone stumble upon, it exhibited only 12 objects at a time, which were regularly rotated in and out.44 The display was constructed from metal-walled cabinets, with magnetic labels, permitting speedier acquisition.

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43 An interesting juxtaposition, and contrary to this approach, although still a collector of ‘everyday objects’, is the Museum of Everyday Life, in Vermont, USA. The objects are ‘less contemporary, even rather anachronistic.’ The museum’s curator, Clare Dolan, emphasises that ‘each of these interventions has ostensibly been replaced by more ‘modern’, or ‘high tech’ improvements – the match by the lighter, the safety pin by velcro, the sharpened pencil by the mechanical pencil or computer stylus.’ (Levine, 2015, 5)

Yet, for all progression, these fundamental objects remain in the now, ubiquitous and essential. The museum itself opens offering nullifications upon the traditional museum;

“The Museum of Everyday Life shouts out against the white walls of the traditional art and artifact institution:
No More Vitrines! Nothing Under Glass!
Down with the fetishistic worship of ‘authentic’ works by the Famous!
Down with sanctification of the ‘Original!’
Down with all things valuable and antique!
Up with a new kind of museum, living and breathing and common as dirt! (Dolan, in Levine, 2011)

In contrast to the timely acquisition of the Rapid Response Collecting, objects displayed in the Museum of Everyday Life, necessitates a more continuous focus, towards these more ‘rudimentary’ items to be considered.

44 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/a-new-20th-and-21st-century-gallery-at-the-vam
With its basic and functional acquisition, the Rapid Response gallery has been repeatedly likened to journalism, particularly with emphasis placed upon recent phenomena, as Kieran Long, previously a journalist, presents parallels;

„What you´re interested in is what has just happened [...] a logic of collecting at the V&A which says ´we´re going to wait to see what history proves to be the most important work of design, in the history of design, and then we´ll buy a work that reflects that status, but there are objects that might be more interesting now than they will be in 50 years“

(Long, Interview, 2022).

45 These pink hand-created Pussy hats were a symbol of solidarity for the Anti-Trump/feminist march in Washington, 2017. Created by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, with the aim of creating a million hats, through knitting, crochet or sewing, available using a free, downloadable pattern and symbolise a positive form of protest against the Trump inauguration. See also, Pussyhat.com

46 Such as noted in this review in the Guardian newspaper, by Oliver Wainwright https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/02/victoria-and-albert-rapid-response-gallery-unveiled
With the tinfoil display cupboards and magnetised labels, the Rapid Response gallery is aptly described as Jaspers to be something of „an afterthought“ (Jaspers, 2019), a sentiment to which is still reflected, albeit less, into Design 1900 – Now. This feels especially so, as there has been far less media coverage towards Design 1900 – Now, unlike its previous inception. This addendum also spills over on to its representations, and despite the museum still placing emphasis upon “an increasingly global world” as noted above in its collections policy, it still fails to fully reach these aims, inevitably radiating a predominantly western representation of design development, with the continents of Africa and South America, unrepresented (Jaspers, 2019, 23).

4.3 A brief consideration towards establishing Design 1900 - Now

With both the original Rapid Response gallery and the 20th Century Gallery closing in 2019, the choice to transition from a collections display purely dedicated to Rapid Response Collecting, into a combined approach proved to be both a matter of prosaic and conceptual matters, for, the previous exhibitions were influenced by the positioning of a members space above, conceding the museum’s imperative dependency upon finance, which would impede upon potential object damage:

„Over the course of time that Rapid Response has been in the location where it first was, we’ve opened up a membership room above, and they have created new windows, which bring more daylight into that area of the gallery and that is detrimental to the objects, so a very practical reason to kind of shift the location of rapid response was we needed to find a better context in terms of collections care and within that, certain other restraints.“

(Gardner Interview, 2021)

According to the Design 1900 – Now press release „this newly curated space brings together leading design objects alongside the first re-display of V&A’s celebrated Rapid

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47 The V&A’s blog which seems to be an outposting linked to its main website with articles predominantly written by volunteers, furthermore reinforces that this approach (although its more democratic, or inclusive attempts?) still remains to be considered an ‘experiment’, or an afterthought, or that the approach lacks some ‘profoundity’ to be mentioned in detail on the V&A’s main website, offering a short video, whilst any further information will re-direct you to the museum’s blog page.  

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Response Collecting programme since its founding in 2014. An amalgamation of both exhibitions, *Design 1900 – Now* consists of a re-inclusion of artifacts from previous collections, moreover, altering their context, or perception of these objects when placed within a different narrative. In a blog post, current co-curator Johanna Agerman Ross states that “over the last 18 months we have been working on a new curatorial vision for these galleries, aiming to tell a different story of 20th and 21st century, focused on design and society”, with the aim to reveal „truths about how we live“.

50 of the 250 objects in this collection are new acquisitions, interspersed throughout previously displayed objects. In my enquiries regarding this combined approach, Gardner tells me that „we thought it would be interesting to see how [Rapid Response Collecting] is understood and engaged with by audiences once it is put into a closer connection to the collections display“ (Gardner, Interview, 2021). Conversely, Kieran Long notes that „I think its a bit less clear, but I always said that the future of Rapid Response Collecting is not a Rapid Response Collecting Gallery, its actually that all of the galleries in the V&A collect in this way. So like, the Chinese gallery should have Rapid Response collected objects in it, the Islamic gallery should have Rapid Response collected objects in it. [...] I think as a story now, its a little bit more difficult to read, I think they just need to take away the Rapid Response Collecting brand altogether, I don’t think that it really helps. They’ve now established the logic thats in the 20th Century Gallery, they’re not going to stop collecting that way, so they don’t need the label anymore, probably.“

(Long Interview, 2022)

Whilst Gardner combines these approaches; a wider picture of objects, and the presentation of a larger context surrounding an exhibition, alongside a more ‘traditional’ means of display, this can certainly can help to fascilitate a better understanding towards some of the items. Conversely, Long’s point feels more valid, that, as a method, it should be extrapolated more widely, and, placed within other galleries, it may assist people in having a more nuanced, or relative understanding, and remain not isolated as a more niche technique. The combination of traditional curation alongside this method of collecting


49 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/a-new-20th-and-21st-century-gallery-at-the-va
also asks us to recognise the intertwining of the institution, the curator and the meaning, which is being put across to its reciever, thus we should consider the means to how museums convey their messages to the wider society, which often stem from pressing social, political and environmental concerns.

In this chapter I have reflected upon changes that have taken place within the approach of Rapid Response Collecting, through the Circulation Departments’ premise of emphasising the contemporary, offering the curatorial approaches have been amalgamated. I have also considered the initial introduction of a permanent space established for Rapid Response Collecting, and its assistance in conveying the different means of engaging with everyday objects, and understanding how they can relate to our lives, as well as updating their responses towards exterior narratives, moving away from collecting the past, keeping current narratives in consideration.
Chapter 5; An observation upon Design 1900 – Now: Acquisition, Aura and Democracy?

In place of aura, there is buzz.

- David Joselit, After Art.\textsuperscript{50}

This chapter addresses how the practice of Rapid Response Collecting in the exhibition Design 1900 – Now has affected changes through its ways of representation. I will present a fuller analysis of Design 1900 – Now, through both curatorial attributes in the choice of objects presented, and how their surrounding narratives reflect (a more democratic) society. Rapid Response Collecting acquires collects items at particular moments in time, whilst they are „still fizzy“ (Gardner, interview, 2021). With the decline of the aura as defined by Benjamin, and thus, to an extent a reduction in authenticity (in the sense of an original artefact), I will argue that authentity, in this case, isn´t always necessary, for copies still can give some semblance of the source, around which can be built the narrative. This shift can be regarded as the decline of a historicising gaze, no longer necessary in the purpose of the reaction towards, and of, art. I will extend my analysis upon looking at the effect of technology on collecting, displays and the implications it can possibibly have in the future of museums.

5.1. Curatorial model of Design 1900 - Now

Design 1900 – Now engages with six key themes, highlighted through significant objects of design; Automation and Labour - the 20th century until the 1930s; Housing and Living, exploring domestic modernisation from 1920 until 1940; Crisis and Conflict, the time between 1935 and 1955, of the war and its aftermath. Like its predecessor, the original Rapid Response gallery, it is equally spatially precarious, for Design 1900 – Now straddles a hallway, creating a literal interruption (or hyphen) when navigating the exhibition, which is split into two. The following half the exhibition is situated across the hallway, within what appears to be a library overflow room, hosting the sections Consumption and Identity, from 1955 and 1975, followed by Sustainability and

\textsuperscript{50} Joselit, After Art. 2013, 16
Subversion, overlapping with the 1960s until the Millennium. An element focusing on growing technology is under Data and Consumption, since 2000, showing the technological aspect of design, such as actual physical progression of technology, mapping now obsolete pieces, and including attributes from online platforms, such as WeChat emojis. Whilst the exhibition comprises of 250 objects depicting the last 120 years in design, some examples of objects, from across varying subsections, include; a Bauhaus ashtray, designed by Marianne Brandt (1924), Porcelain depicting soviet propaganda by Alexander Nikolaevich Samokhalov (designed 1923), 1920s hyperinflation bank notes by Herbert Bayer (1923), and Y-Stop by SVI Design, a leaflet presenting advice upon Police stop-and-search practices (2016), Jane Atfield’s Made of Waste chair (1992), Kim Kardashian’s book of Selfies Selfish (2015), a first generation apple iphone (2007), and a Vitra ‘back to work’ leaflet, (2020). The objects are considered for the significance of their ideas, and the concepts around them, not or their commercial accomplishments, such as „Heineken’s 1963 experimental WOBO bottle, that can be used as a brick when empty – a great idea that was never commercially progressed.“ (www.vanda.com)

Picture 3; Heineken WOBO bottles. Picture 4; „The Road Back to the Office“ printed publication, designed by AFKB with illustrations by Atelier CTJM, published by Vitra, 2020, Switzerland.

Both pictures; Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Whilst the book-filled walls in the second ‘half’ offer a refreshing aesthetic and complement the V&A’s particular, grand aesthetic, it additionally reinforces this

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51 A Chinese social media platform.
collection's idea as afterthought, in the sense this was the only available space (whilst the juxtaposition of the old texts reinforce the modernity of the exhibition).

Picture 3; An arial view of the second half of Design 1900 – Now, combining curatorial approaches.

Picture; V&A

Objects from assorted time periods are displayed next to each other, within thematic divisions, to better highlight how various design trends and shifts have asserted their influences upon society and history, extending on from, and offering, a continual evolution. Combining chronology and thematics, Design 1900 – Now pivots from a typically chronological, or sequential emphasis, extending out to simultaneously search, or explore within themes, when, characteristically, exhibitions have tended to focus on one. The combination of both permits a more nuanced design history to unfold, as opposed to typically visual design attributes. Instead, the combination observes the influences of design upon and within society, through an increasingly global context, which traverses an extensive range of foundations and concepts, echoing Maura Reilly’s
curatorial ideas of presenting information in a way that is „talmudic, wikipedia-like“ (Reilly; 2017, 15).

As a ´global´ museum, the tone of this exhibition adheres to a more international outlook, with key themes globally equitable: job automation, environmental trepidation and the recent advent of increased cultural awareness, which actively moves away from the post-industrial perspective that museums often focus on (V&A blog), and creating a sort of ´disruption´ within wider, and more typical, museal curation, that forces its visitors to instead question the bigger narratives around these particular objects. An updated colour palette helps to signify different attributes; pink to highlight the time period and peach for thematic representation, whilst the application of black symbolises Rapid Response Collected items, which, inserted „as individual moments throughout the gallery“ 52 53, reflect its more ´journalistic´ approach in the subject matter of the ´now´. 54 The labels offer extra contextual information about the object, „to highlight the international connections behind many of the objects designed “55. Labels note the objects acquisition date, designer, and in a similar nod toward the earlier Circulation Department, the inclusion of additional contextual information surrounding the object, to better understand the...

52 Picture 4; Displaying the representation of Design 1900 – Now, its curatorial and narrative layout. Picture authors own.

53 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/interpreting-design-1900-now

54 Indeed, its considered ´journalistic´ approach is also linked to the shift of reproducability, permitting a ´closeness´, both towards people and its accessibility. The removal of time/space, between stories and objects and the the lack of distance comes an approachability. Art has been liberated from its traditional techniques, and its reception, or perception, for a transferral of perception, regarding the aura indicates a considerable transformation within an awareness, or perception, of the everyday person. Which can also reflect Marxist ideas of de-fetishising and its critique, but there is little space to develop upon it here.

55 https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/interpreting-design-1900-now
consideration for the objects’ acquisition, and its broader, global context. This extra-textual information is communicated in accessible and informative language, whilst the lack of „museum speak“ acts to break away, and overcome former barriers between visitors, and information attained through typical exhibition texts and labels (Marstine, 2006). Emphasis upon inclusivity is acknowledged through the application of language on its labels, broken down and presented through a more ´everyday´ approach, applying the collective nouns ´our´ and ´we´re-´, affirming a reflection of global perspective and inclusive consensus. The V&A´s website notes that this exhibition is designed with an „interpretation that could work for anyone: non-specialist visitors, those with a key interest in design, informal learning groups, and people who don’t feel widely represented in the rest of the museum“ ⁵⁶. An emphasis upon a younger audience is noted by their partnership with school groups, as highlighted in their press release ⁵⁷.

Curatorial developments within Rapid Response Collecting have helped in promoting democratic approaches, through placing the focus upon so many attributes; inclusivity, special-colour-coded approaches, school groups and the (apparent) encouraging of submissions, whilst the exhibition’s innovative amalgamation of objects from the past 120 years presents a prevalent attitude to our increasingly fabricated society ⁵⁸ ⁵⁹. However, Design 1900 – Now emerges as overwhelming and confusing; the narratives lack clarity, and the emphasis upon inclusivity risks being more a gesture towards a buzzword in trying to make up for the rest of the museum displays, instead of making active changes there. The overt emphasis upon inclusivity and encouragement inevitably raises questions of neutrality, for the prominence of reaching out to communities, noted by its aim towards „people who don’t feel represented elsewhere“ (V&A blog), prompts a question about why the museum isn’t responding and addressing similar issues elsewhere within its collections/exhibitions, within a lack of acknowledged representation, particularly when Long remarks how

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⁵⁶ Ibid.


⁵⁸ According to my interview with Gardner.

⁵⁹ https://dundeedaily.co.uk/interpreting-design-1900-now-va-blog/
"None of these objects mean anything to you. They're all extraordinary. And you can sort of see that they're extraordinary, but they're quite hard to see and recognise because that visual language has gone from our lives. Like, we don't have salt cellars anymore, that look like that. We don't have a kind of swan shaped ceramic bowl that we keep our fruit in. But you do have Flappy Bird, and you do have, these kinds of things. I think there's a kind of recognition factor that I think is powerful and we can use, you know, it's a bit like that with the Primark jeans".  

(Long, Interview, 2022)

However, one democratic consideration for this collection’s project is that it doesn’t require funding from exterior sources, or patrons with vested interests. Rapid Response Collecting creates less interest from corporations, sponsorships, or other outside dominant interest groups, than, for example, ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions, that often have external forces becoming ubiquitous in their presence due to funding the project.60 Furthermore, all the objects are collected with the intention of being displayed.

This exhibition creates a lens that better displays our globalised world, asking visitors to contend with complex and challenging issues, affecting their own lives and communities prior, with issues such as housing and urban renewal, (Robin Hood gardens plan), homelessness (‘hostile architecture’), and migration, (Better Shelter’s flat-pack refugee shelter) police violence („Stop and Search“ advice cards), global warming, and environmental concerns (joey knitted pouches), in an attempt to encourage discourse by emphasising global trepidations. The change in museum perspectives are imperative in addressing important narratives of the twenty-first Century, responding to the various arising concerns by “taking a stand on contemporary issues, while often accompanied by numerous complex ethical dilemmas, is destined to become an increasingly central feature of 21st century museum practice” (Janes, 2019, 15). With global concerns becoming ever more pressing, the importance of “addressing climate change, wealth inequality, gender inequality, species extinction, nuclear proliferation, and many other issues” (Janes, 2019, 16) is becoming imperative. The approach of Rapid Response collecting has begun to address the important narratives of contemporary times through the choice of objects collected and displayed. As within other aspects of life, the emergence into this post-pandemic world is also a major turning point for museums.

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60 Recent examples include the V&A’s 2019 Dior exhibition, Dior, Designer of Dreams, sponsored by Swarovski crystals.
5.2.1 Addressing the global narrative of Covid-19

Whilst Rapid Response Collecting is a methodology „originally conceived for a sporadic phenomenon happening within a specific context during the early years of the 21st century [it has] gained much more traction almost overnight“ (Debono, 2021, 179), the pandemic of Covid-19 has been somewhat of a facilitator regarding its global practice. During my visits to Design 1900 – Now, the most prevalent narrative addressed was the (ongoing) Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, in ICOM´s „Museums and COVID-19: 8 steps to support community resilience“, ICOM lists Rapid Response Collecting as number 6; „Consider the possibility of Rapid Response Collecting and documenting the crisis and its impact“ 61. Such collecting will preserve knowledge for future generations whilst assisting with the re-conceptualising of other collections. Many other global museums have utilised this approach in collecting Covid 19-related objects, as the recent pandemic proves a poignant example displaying how the practice has been documented through various global institutions, and showing museums engagement with its communities, re-affirming a „deeper commitment in this mode of practice“ (Gardner, Interview 2021).

Currently on display (as of April 2022) are mostly objects related to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic 63 that both symbolise its physical transmission, but reflecting other consequences of the pandemic; two posters by Asian-American artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, that have been part of a public campaign to highlight the wave of racism towards the American Asian community in the US. 64

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61 Museums and COVID-19: 8 steps to support community resilience

63 A snorkelling mask transformed into a ventilator for use by Covid patients, (including a free patent pdf for distribution).

64 There is no space to diverge further here, but other museums globally have applied RRC as a popular method to collate/display the ongoing pandemic, in global and local communities, thus a growing body of literature has appeared documenting local and more national museums approaches to recording and displaying paraphenalia to the ongoing pandemic). See Mark Tebeau,„A Journal of the Plague Year: Rapid-Response Archiving Meets the Pandemic“ (2021) in Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals 2021, Vol. 17(3) 199–206
A pair of posters displayed in bus stops in New York, (2021) by American artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, displaying the wider implications that emerged because of the pandemic; racism towards the Asian -American community.

Pictures authors own.

Rapid Response Collected Objects specifically designed products for lessening transmission of the Coronavirus; designed 3d printed door-handles, to lessen physical transmission and melt-blown fabric, which is electrostatically-charged and non-woven, the demand for which, saw its value soar higher than gold due to its application as coronavirus mask filter fleece.

Picture authors own
Both the inclusion of the Rapid Response Collecting and its extension within the „Pandemic Objects“ project ⁶⁶ (a separate collecting endeavour by the V&A), reflect a contained intention; equally within museums adaptation in reacting to current and ongoing occurances, but furthermore, actively gathering items that are atypical to those the museum would tend to collect, in turn, prompting media attention (Hopkins, 2021). Whilst the plethora of media covering Rapid Response´s initial inception in 2014 highlighted this, it was further reinforced by the interviews I conducted with two of the curators.

5.2.2 Response towards climate and environmental narratives;

⁶⁶ https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/pandemic-objects
A sub-section focuses upon the climate crisis, through objects that simultaneously highlight and respond to vital environmental issues. One Rapid Response collected item currently displayed are hand-knitted pouches for joeys and other animals that were orphaned during the Australian bushfires of 2020-2021, providing animals with warmth and comfort.

With many objects in the rest of the museum are high-end, artisan objects, these objects are mass-produced, in a sense that they were hand-knitted, but through a distributed call for help, and a pattern template. These simple pieces of handicraft have been created by global volunteers in a similar way to the accession of the pink hand-knitted Pussy Hat (see picture 2 in Chapter 4) acquired during the first inception of Rapid Response Collecting.

The curatorial decision of placing the knitted pouch next to The New York Times’s front page, that lists Covid deaths for 17th May 2021, and a 3d printed bike seat, which, also not in chronological order, feels quite illogical. Whilst the intention is presumably to create a ‘slice’ of contemporary events and currents, to use juxtaposition and combination...
in a way that speaks to ‘now’ but requires the viewer to decide on a consistent, overarching meaning – if there is one.

Both the aforementioned Pussyhat and the knitted Joey pouches are seen as „digital design object[s] rather than fashion object[s], because their insemination, or distribution were disseminated through online platforms.”67 However, created by individuals through knitting or sewing, the pouches still retain the unique quality of its individual maker (so, in this sense, I suggest that they maintain an ‘aura’ as Benjamin would see it). In addition to highlighting objects that embrace recycled materials or actively reflect a pro-environmental stance, 68 there are objects that signify how our societal perceptions towards particular materials have changed, an example of this include a Chrome-plated modernist fan. As Gardner tells me, in our interview,

„Chroming, as a process, is deeply toxic to those who undertake that process, but also to the waste fluids that it produces, and waste-processes. It has been regulated out of use. A brilliant example of a changing attitude to the planet and the value of individual workers lives and health. There is an Emile Jacques Ruhlmann art-deco cupboard decorated with ebony and ivory; from a point in time where that extractive opportunity for the luxury material was a wonder, but today, we recognise that the use of ivory, as an example, is leading to the decimation of our animal population, and we are putting that object in that context, which is, in a manner, to celebrate that object, but also, to think critically about what that object can tell us about the point of its making but also the value that we, as a society, hold today.“

(Gardner Interview, 2021).

The changes within material focus, from the use of ivory, now an outlawed substance, but also the inclusion of objects that have now been made from recycled plastic. Plastic, which was once hailed as a material saviour, from both our reliance upon depleting natural resources, and surrounding ethical implications of obtaining them, has resulted in a terrible ecological independence for its overuse.

67 https://www.creativelivesinprogress.com/article/natalie-kane

68 Previous acquisitions into the collection include the design files for environmental group Extinction Rebellion.
The two objects signify how attitudes towards materials have shifted; the cabinet is a luxury art deco piece constructed with the now-outlawed and controversial materials of ebony and ivory. The introduction of plastic, once hailed as a wonder-material to prevent depletion of natural resources, has also come full-circle. The Adidas X Parley Ultraboost trainers displayed, are made from recycled sea-plastic, and „salvaged illegal fishing nets from 2015“ 69. With plastic having deluged the seas in recent years, these trainers depict our shifting perceptions and response around environmental concerns and ethical complications, most reflective with the prevalence of current conversations around this topic. 70 Although these items aren’t amassed by means of Rapid Response collecting, they still do elicit parallels, in the sense of being everyday objects (trainers, a plastic bag), and are very relatable, collected with the sole purpose of being displayed.

5.3 The Aura and Copies

69 https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/design-1900-now#objects

70 Additionally, the plastic bag, inscribed with the text „Into the weird; Adult film store“, advertises a fictional store. Printed by a grocery shop in Vancouver, Canada, as a way of discouraging people from buying bags, they became a cult item, the attempt of reducing plastic through embarrassment backfired, in this instance. See Serena McMahon „How A Grocery Store's Plan To Shame Customers Into Using Reusable Bags Backfired.“ NPR.org
Benjamin expresses how the viewer comprehends their meeting within the reproductive mechanism, or processes of the methods, with which he highlights using the example of the introduction of film technology. Benjamin contends that the audience associates more with the camera, with the technology, instead of, the actors within theatre and this idea is reiterated by Long,

What the V&A would say is you come to the aesthetic experience through an understanding of making [...] So the museum collects drawings and maquettes and models as well as finished artifacts. It always has done and still does. And that seemed to me to be a very interesting way to look at mass-produced objects “72

(Long, Interview, 2022).

Simultaneously, Benjamin willingly concedes the point that “in principle a work of art has always been reproducible” (SW IV, 1938 252). Benjamin’s line of reasoning is not only that, giving the famous example of the Mona Lisa, but now the reproduction is seen everywhere, thus bringing the idea that the process of reproducibility has become, an artistic process in itself; “the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Ibid, 256), but also a depreciation for the original, given its accessibility. By 1900, mechanical reproduction was a means for change regarding the influence of images upon the public. The authenticity of the object, its ´aura´ and what it held in its inception - has become jeopardised through reproduction - its historical link, and authority, consequentially, devaluing the original. Indeed, this new form of

72 Long continues with an example of the difficulty, regarding the museum’s presentation of the processes of objects,

„The V&A has a bit of a problem when it comes to mass-produced artifacts because those things are harder to describe. You know, you can go to a potters studio and you can understand her complete process from getting the material to the finished pot because she does all of that process in that studio, and in the ceramics gallery in the V&A, there is, in fact, a potters studio, you can see the studio and you can see the work. That’s harder to do for an iphone. How do you reflect, how do you be a museum of design process about an iphone? What does that actually mean, when your design process has to do with global mineral extraction, or global supply chains or gigantic scale, manufacturing facilities in China and the biggest company the world has ever known, which is apple. Is all the same thing? Is that all design process, the same way as the potters studio is a design process, or is it something categorically different? I’m not really sure about the answer to that. I think that it feels quite different, of course.”

(Long, Interview, 2022)
communication is information.” As the aura is subject to change, Benjamin notes that the medium is information, a concept that is similarly echoed in interview with Gardner:

„there is certainly a greater discourse around this mode of activity, trends, context is a really important arena of thinking at the moment, as in, Borys Groys said about the contemporary artist today, that context is their medium, and I think that’s a really interesting way of creative practice“

(Gardner, Interview, 2021).

Objects obtained through Rapid Response Collecting tend to be predominantly mass manufactured, often with hundreds, or thousands, made. A poignant attribute of this approach is the preservation of objects which have little value, which would otherwise vanish. As Kieran Long, the former senior curator of the department for Contemporary Architecture, Design and Digital, acknowledges, „sometimes it can be these very banal objects that can go away and are impossible to retrieve, because lots of valuable things are kept by people“ (Dezeen.com). But its often these very banal, everyday objects that are the most immediate and powerful in relaying the narratives of our time, and behind the way we live. These fragments preserved from history have a value for Benjamin, who distinguished a preference for ‘inconspicuous forms‘ – in the unfinished Arcades Project. „Instead of writing history through the study of great men, he aimed to disclose history through its refuse and detritus“ (Jeffries, 2017, 108). By embracing these more generic objects assists in prompting curatorial change; encouraging the curation of objects suggested by, or with, the local and global community.73 However, the global vision that the collection acknowledges, hasn’t been fully achieved. These objects reveal a different kind of aura; of global supply chains, Contact Zones, and the dichotomies of western consumption and eastern manufacturing, poignantly emphasising these power dynamics. As Jaspars notes, globalisation is presented through these power dynamics, a global approach no doubt, but in what other ways can a global approach be displayed or utilised? Not all of the objects on display are the original items which made news headlines, or which are about the topics expressed, but symbolise them in some way. Whilst Benjamin notes that „technological reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations

73 With the previous Rapid Response Gallery, the public were encouraged to submit their own suggestions of objects to include, yet, as previously mentioned, it wasn’t as successful as anticipated.
which could be out of reach for the original itself“ (Benjamin, 1935, 222), the inclusion of replicas can expressively reflect upon questions of the now. Examples of replicas, symbolising such moments, include cheap Primark trousers 74, and a square of hostile architecture, more colloquially known as ´anti-homeless spikes´, that are juxtaposed with an earlier inception, used as a type of street braille for the visually impaired, but the design has progressed from assisting the blind, to something more ominous. Manufactured by Kent Stainless Limited, this hostile architecture is created from steel, the spikes have rounded ends so as not to inflict damage, but to cause discomfort, their purpose described for „deter[ing] people from unwanted sitting areas such as windowsills and wall tops.”75

74 The Primark Jeans were made in the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh, which caught fire, and resulted in the death of over 1100 people, in 2013. The inclusion of a replica, (and in this example, which was possibly made in the same factory that burnt down) imparts an amount of authenticity, to some extent, although they have been recreated numerous times, and help to evoke the social implications that Rapid Response collected objects hopes to engage with.

75 https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/design-and-violence/kent-spike-studs

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/28/important-objects
This object’s aesthetics evoke a vital role in transmitting the physical epitome of its authenticity, and why it is such an important object in reflecting its social values. The object also shows the transition of the material and how its uses have responded to different needs. The traditional iron gates displayed within the V&A’s metalwork gallery were commonly used upon the homes of the wealthy, yet displaying the pieces of steel hostile architecture represents the change in how this material has been applied to reflect the considerations of public space, and furthermore, acknowledge the plight suffered by the homeless and a marked change in attitudes.  

According to the V&A’s website, “these spikes represent an often unnoticed type of design that expresses ideas about the differentiation between public and quasi-public spaces and the increased regulation of social boundaries through architectural design.”  

Whereas the example of hostile architecture depicted was bought directly from the manufacturer, Kent Stainless Limited, the actual piece of hostile architecture that originally made the news, triggering a social media backlash, was outside a Tesco (a popular British supermarket chain), in the wealthy Mayfair district of central London. Activists poured concrete over the recently installed hostile architecture, rendering their deterring properties invalid. The label briefly and vaguely touches upon the triggering moment:

„Metal spiked studs are an example of defensive architecture. Inserted into ledges or the ground, they deter people from accessing or settling in certain spaces. In 2014 they became known as #AntiHomelessSpikes on social media after they were used in London to prevent those in need from finding shelter.“

For Benjamin, „capitalism functions, in part, by creating exclusive spaces to keep out the undesirable and unmoneyed – be they gated estates, malls with security guards, or fortress Europe“ (Jeffries, 2017, 107) but like all commodities, they “encoded the dream wishes of the collective consciousness“ (ibid, 18). Obviously the inclusion of the original homeless spikes that triggered news articles would be more impactful, although undoubtably challenging to acquire. However, by presenting more contextual information

77 https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1296001/architectural-spikes-kent-stainless-ltd/
78 Ibid
79 Ibid
to their visitors increases the knowledge surrounding the initial incident and subsequent backlashes against hostile architecture, it doesn´t acknowledge the incident itself, or link to any media, which could easily be done within the ´afterthought´ of the V&A´s blog, for „even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be ´located´. That the „sphere of [creative] authenticity is outside the technical [domain] of mechanised reproduction“ (Benjamin, 1968, 214-18). Whilst the inclusions of copies consequentially liberate the piece, its release encourages the emergence of the masses, and thus the disadvantage of increased democracy comes the passing of an auratic (or aesthetic?) culture, for mechanically reproduced art, or in this instance, objects, are constructed for the masses.

Submitting copies can further reinforce the lack of neutrality within both collecting, curation and museums, that they are not and shall never be a neutral process, yet it is not to deny these copies stimulation for acknowledging vital topics and discussion. Whilst these objects don´t have the ritual aura suggested by Benjamin, as they are mass produced, they can be said to emit a new kind of aura; authentic objects that say something of the now. The aura tends to have a historical connection, so the application of Rapid Response Collecting updates the auratic concept to highlight the now, with the objects symbolising new thoughts and perspectives upon how we live. Whilst Benjamin suggests the “original is the prerequisite to authenticity [and that the] authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin, 2005, 4). The inclusion of a replica, obtained directly from the manufacturer, Kent Steel 80, can be considered in failing to transmit the aura of the original, prompting the backlash towards hostile architecture; its properties actively made invalid with concrete by collective The

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80 However, on searching Kent Stainless Limited´s online catalogue for this product, it seems to have since been removed, a possible consequence from the media furore.
London Black Revolutionaries. Yet simultaneously the technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself (Benjamin, 1935, 4). Whilst we are used to seeing copies of paintings and artifacts, the inclusion of copies of artifacts in the museum gives a chance to create a particular aura but it furthermore offers a trigger, or jumping-off point to the visitor, possibly leading them to question their relationship or understanding of these objects.

Authenticity emerges also from the reflective comprehension of around the piece within its presence in time, the response to it, its origins, and its possible damage (Van Den Akker, 2016). Conversely, one object displayed, for its authenticity and (damage) that wouldn´t be communicated through a copy, is Edward Snowden’s destroyed MacBook that the leaked NSA files were stored on. The laptop was destroyed by the British Secret Services.

Picture 9; Edward Snowden’s broken MacBook, that held leaked files (obtained 2015).

Picture: authors own.

81https://www.vice.com/en/article/dpwx5x/london-black-revolutionaries-have-claimed-responsibility-for-pouring-concrete-on-the-anti-homeless-spikes

82 There is much literature available about the inclusion of replicas, or fakes, within the museum, and why they are still vital, particularly in relation to accessibility. However, I do not have space to extend upon this, but further reading upon this includes Hillel Schwartz’s The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles, MIT Press, 2014

83 A particularly pertinent example, for an Icelandic context, would be the inclusion of the ´Necropants´ in the Museum of Icelandic Witchcraft and Sorcery (Galdrasýning á Ströndum). See https://galdrasyning.is
Indeed, a parallel to this is acknowledged by Kieran Long, who, in our interview compares these broken objects to relics deliberately destroyed in the Reformation period, which are similarly collected,

\[\text{“Because they were destroyed, because you see the evidence of their destruction. They tell you a story about Britains’ history, about religious history, as well as about the artwork itself. We can see the value in a broken laptop, because of a logic that was set down 150 years ago in the museum. So what we’re doing is not really subverting the V&A, but using the same logics, but with different types of objects.”}\]

(Long, Interview, 2022. Italics for emphasis.)

But Long also points out, Rapid Response Collecting, as a collecting project, its approach is a democratic one „in the sense that you have just the same conversations as one has about any of the very expensive artworks that the V&A have acquired [...] what we’re doing is not really subverting the V&A, but using the same logics, but with different types of objects. “ (Interview, Long, 2022). He reminds us that „museums in their nature are conservative, like, they conserve things. Small c conservative. So you need to work within that logic but also make sure that logic is being applied to the contemporary world, in a sincere and direct way“ (ibid). Benjamin would perhaps characterise this as ‘banal clarity’, in his provocative phrase from ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction‘. Conversely, in my interview with Gardner, she notes that “the history of archives, [...] are often places of protest, disobedience, radicality and [...] it’s because at the time of their creation, or at the time of continuations of their creation, there is an absolute care of how this object is looked after and respected, but potentially what is brought in, has a greater freedom” (Gardner, Interview, 2021).

As cultural institutions, museums still have challenges with relinquishing authority, to display current narratives through tangible and relative items. Benjamin´s notion of the ritual aura has long since faded and dissolved, and in the presence of instanteous copies and replications, it is no longer sought, replaced with repetition and variations on a theme that generate their own form of aura. Insomuch that we are accustomed and conditioned to recieve culture in a particular way, any movement extending from a passive acceptance
of culture is often considered as ‘shock’ value. Since, with Rapid Response Collecting, the historical element has been removed, more as many Rapid Response Collected items might already be familiar to us, and we regularly engage with them (such as the inclusion of mask material), but it can help to prompt more discussions, and the objects are removed and presented in a different perspective. Indeed, this also responds to the differentiation of what Benjamin considers as Cult value and Exhibition value. A footnote Benjamin includes in ‘Mechanical Reproduction,’ as a response to Hegel reads: “The transition from the first kind of artistic reception to the second characterizes the history of artistic reception in general.” (Benjamin, 1999, 238). This transition was taking place in his time, as new technological reproduction technologies liberate “the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin, 1999, 218 – 219). Thus, art emerged with an exhibition value, as opposed to its cult value (cult value also extends to being seen in museums or places of exhibition). The exhibition value that surrounds Rapid Response Collecting is the dialogue around how these objects of design tell us about the ways that we live. These items do not reflect the exceptional and genuine works of art previously revered, that do not serve as the reason for production. New reproductive technologies, that Benjamin notes as film and photography, typify the new purpose, or meaning of art. This new evolution, from cult, to exhibition value, serves as a revolution to a new awareness and understanding of art, for exhibition value depends on the object’s mobility. The exhibition value of objects, which deliberates visitors linking themselves to objects, and their authentic value, but they also want to be seen experiencing them. *Design 1900 - Now* wants to be linked to social media, to be associated with the artifact but also the ‘newness’ of the objects exhibited. This also connects to the idea of associated value, especially with social media emphasis, upon the transition, from cult value exchanged for exhibition value. The idea of wanting to be seen with these particular items, outside of their usual contexts, and viewed upon social media, prompting online engagement through designated hashtags, #Design1900-Now #design1900now. Whereas Benjamin's ritual aura may have been dissolved, there is still an aura - a commodity fetishism, as Marx would describe it - that increases the value, which is also important to bear in mind, particularly with the influence of technology.

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84 Even the hashtag was slightly varied, and in my search for online discussions/debates linked around this hashtag, I found that this endeavour was not as successful as anticipated.
5.4 Digitalisation and Relevancy.

As our engagement with objects increasingly take place through a screen, with technology altering how we engage with objects, screens, of which are also a developing, or more recent type of object in themselves, David Banash and Kevin Moist, the editors of *Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*, (2014) expressed the ways in which increased media, and the shift towards digitalisation, have consequentially resulted in inconsistent impressions within people and objects, which, progressively virtual, are mediated through technology; the accessibility of the internet brings us ever closer to material items, as “seemingly every possible kind of cultural object” becomes available, through clicking, in exchange for a price (Banash and Moist, 2014, ix).

There has been much written, or considered concerning the changes that digitalisation has brought and continues to bring, regarding museums, and whether museums still need objects, particularly as many of the objects collected are increasingly affected by technology, or natively digital, which leaves them progressively susceptible to technological obsolescence. The cumulative inclusion of digital artifacts, which have the advantage of being portable, adjustable and often augmented, offer the possibility of emerging and responding in ways that physical objects cannot. In order to display internet pages/games/digital influences, the museum is required to have the equipment, which includes a set of back up equipment, to display them, impinging upon collections space, as well as prompting

„caution around [an objects] longevity as something that is exhibitable into the future because I think the other thing that has to be remembered when acquiring, into a public collection, is that everything has a resource impact. So, it requires storage, it requires care, it requires staffing, so we need to be really clear and committed that that object merits, or can stand for that need or future demand [...] These objects have the same status and embeddedness in the collections as any other of our many hundreds of thousands of historic and contemporary pieces and so we have to be confident that they are able to stand that test of time, as best as we can, as we can´t know the future.”

(Gardner, Interview, 2021).

The prominent shift towards new technologies furthermore emphasise the multifaceted ways digital technologies continue to be eradicated and consequentially, requires
different procedures within collections and curation (Geismar, 2017). Issues concerning new kinds of duplicated objects, and their reproducibility, as highlighted by Benjamin regarding video, film, and photography have long brought about discussions around art and accessibility, but move away from previous issues around reproduction, and this “series of new kinds of object forms – valued, perhaps, not for their digital qualities, but for the ways in which they can be translated into museum languages of collection” (Geismar, 2017, 54-55). The emergence of the digital is not just reflected through the choice of objects, either through their process or their construction, but discussions surrounding this exhibition are encouraged also through digital means, prompting interaction through social media hashtag sharing, #design1900now to generate a continual discourse, in the hope that conversations which have begun within the museum space continue to respond and emerge also within the digital sphere. Gardner points out,

„the whole of our lives, presently, is orchestrated through stories, and storytelling, if we think of social media platforms broadly, and Rapid Response is born of a digital age and that ability to tell stories through things, I do think is shaped through the context of the here-and-now, but to be able to tell those stories that are immediately connective but that have scholarship and depth, is a particular skill.“

(Gardner, Interview, 2021)

As there was a strong emphasis on social media dialogue, I enquired within my interview with Gardner, as to how visitors have responded to the new combination of Rapid Response collected objects set alongside objects from other collections in Design 1900 – Now, but at the time of our exchange, the exhibition had been open for just a few months, so its initial reception remains something to be analyzed and considered. Furthermore, the adaptation and application of this method encourages a re-evaluation of the museum itself, through objects exhibited, visitor engagement, and a reconsideration of curatorial reviews, or re-learning ingrained perspectives, as well as updating the three-year lead times for large-scale exhibitions 85.

85 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/02/victoria-and-albert-rapid-response-gallery-unveiled
Additionally, one further point emphasised our increasingly digital lives, is how our lives have shifted, for

„So much of the means through which we navigate our place in the world, is in the hands of big tech who can really restrict how or what we can bring into the collection. If you think of books, there are copyright libraries to whom, every book that is published has to given. And so there is a democracy of access. We don’t have that in the digital world and I think a kind of policy shift there will be needed because things like apple, google, facebook, how do we bring those really important parts of design, but also, society today, into the museum, if we want to be critical, potentially, or if those organisations are impeding access, and so preventing a manner in which we might want to bring those objects in.,“ (Gardner, Interview, 2021)

This is a pertinent aspect, although which has really yet to unfold, is something that will likely have to be navigated, in the coming future, yet as time passes, and with museums switching more to displaying digital items, we can only wait to see how a democracy of access, if any, will unfold.

Rapid Response items may contribute in encouraging a better connection with visitors by focusing on considerably more relatable objects, which are familiar, or influence their lives, and to emphasise encouragement of suggestions from members of the public for Rapid Response items. 86 With fluctuations in curatorial jurisdiction, the

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86 When researching, I didn’t find ways to include an object for acquisition into the exhibition. Something which could have helped to increase accessibility would be the encouragement to contribute, despite just being informed in my interview with Gardner that this was an option, as she encourages people to „suggest an object whoever you are, you’re welcome.” (Gardner, Interview, 2021)

However, the museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, Croatia, which emerged around the same time as the original RRC gallery in the V&A, in (2013), is a museum purely based on donated objects by the public, symbolising their broken relationships. The whole museum network, including its two permanent museums in Zagreb and Los Angeles, as well as its temporary exhibitions that are periodically in different global areas, are based purely on donations (not kept in storage), from individuals across the world. People donate an object that symbolises a significant failed relationship in their lives, accompanied by its context, either through text or a small video or audio clip, from its author, uniting people based upon the (pretty much) universal experience of failed relationships and unrequited love. Its website describes itself as “an ever-growing collection of items, each a memento of a relationship past, accompanied by a personal, yet anonymous story of its contributor. Unlike ‘destructive’ self-help instructions for recovery from grief and loss, the Museum offers the chance to overcome an emotional collapse through creativity - by contributing to its universal collection.” (https://brokenships.com/explore?open=about-museum). Its collection includes all manner of mundane objects, including odd shoes, stuffed toy caterpillars, and wedding rings, but placed in context, the seeming banality of an old cup, etc, is broadened by perception of collections and the perspectives of material culture and use. The collection is constantly growing, as the museum invites everyone to share their item and accompanying story, either physically, or preserved digitally, and to “become a part of global emotional history!” (ibid).
inclusion of suggestions by people with knowledge in particular areas, such as academic theory cannot always be extrapolated to reality, and which should require public considerations, in its attempt to relate these objects to a current significance, consequentially making visitors feel they are actually part of the museums discourse, and in turn, prompting visability and emphasising an effort in breaking away from becoming another irrelevant institution that continues to perpetuate class divisions. When building collections, museums tend to consider a more long-term outlook, and although this exhibition offers a more immediate relation, by actively encouraging discussion within the museum, and connection with its visitors, to the objects in the exhibition, this proactive encouragement influences museums’ imploremt to show objects reflecting the present, the now. However, this still requires more consideration by the museum and its curators, as noted by Gardner.

In this chapter, I have deliberated upon the development and application of Rapid Response Collecting and its subsequent integration into Design 1900 –Now, with the premise of this approach resulting in a more relatable exhibition. I have suggested that Benjamin’s idea of the aura, the particular emotion or feeling around an object, can be applied to a new kind of feeling, that of the ‘now’ by seeing possibilities that continue to emerge from these dynamic objects of the present, as well as their exhibition value, through witnessing what they exemplify. My analysis of Design 1900 –Now led me to consider emerging possibilities around technological advancements. Although this means change, particularly in their requirement of adapting, this may foster connections with a broader range of people, increasingly able to relate to more recognisable or relevant objects.
Chapter 6: Conclusion;

Rapid Response Collecting is a means of challenging collecting practices, reminding us that museums need to correspond to the world as things unfold, or continue, which is not always retrospectively, and as public institutions, their duty is to respond and adapt, and remain relevant. I have suggested in this thesis that the introduction and application of Rapid Response Collecting promotes the inclusion of a wider demographic of museum visitors within society. I propose this method of collecting tangibly engages with the present, of our contemporary reality. There has been an evolution of museal responsibility of reacting to items which reflect our realities, and most vitally, to keep current, responsive and preclude stagnation, for „it keeps the museum looking outwards and engaging with topics that are in the news. It’s an opportunity to think afresh and respond in a more agile way” (Gardner, in Wainwright, The Guardian, 2014). The V&A has taken action in recreating and adapting to their responsibility and influence, with this new collections approach displaying their awareness to include „a plurality of lived experiences, histories, and identities“ (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013, 1-2). Through allowing collections and acquisitions to respond towards increased democratic focus, both in the method of obtaining objects, through extending upon former processes of accession, that often responds towards collecting objects to fill in a required gap, but also in the variety of objects collected, as many objects obtained through this approach are mass-produced, or more casual, „everyday objects“, which reflect upon current societal narratives, or act as a response to political events, such as ephemera from protests. I have sought an understanding to whether the application of Rapid Response Collecting considers a more democratic approach towards museum visiting. The practice pertains still towards „typical “museal representations, it however, influences a capability for a potentially more innovative offering, and a revolt against the status quo. Rapid Response Collecting can be seen as a fissure within typical museum depictions, or representations, as the shift to the digital, both in the influences of a growing number of objects displayed, but also encouraging an online discussion around them. Having considered how the influences of social structures, through the application of Bourdieu, and taken into account curatorial roles, to discern how vicissitudes within have altered developments in ways of increasing inclusivity.
Walter Benjamin, regarding his crisis over art and decline of the aura, in his essay *The Storyteller* (1936), came to understand that „this new form of communication is information“ (1968, 88). Noting the emerging tensions, the paradoxical and antimonical concerns concerning the decline of ´traditional´ culture, despite his melancholic tone, Benjamin simultaneously reveres the emerging possibilities. What were considered ´traditional´ forms had less to do with a notable oeuvre of work, or surrounding values, but rather, a continuity, through the experience and the information surrounding that experience, which continued to be relayed. Through acknowledging the decline of traditional artistic forms by the loss of aura, the palimpsest of media, social and otherwise, additionally affects our passive reception of information, consequentially compromising and homogenising our curiosity, for we no longer actively engage in seeking and engaging with stories as previously.87 After careful consideration and exploration of Walter Benjamin´s auratic philosophy, I may conclude that objects and their aura, or their associated value, can provide the foundations for significant interactions between the artifact and a broader range of individuals, or visitors. The function of Rapid Response Collecting transfers a prior emphasis from passive observation, into an evolving and progressive exhibition, prompting discussion and knowledge within audiences, both physically, and, as Gardner hopes, also the digital community. This display of objects reflect prominent narratives, prompting us to create discussions around them, in addition to creating a kind of living archive.

Rapid Response Collecting places or no emphasis upon the descent, or historical value of its items, placing them only within the present time of ongoing popular culture and subsequent public discourse. Michelle Cook considers that this way of collecting „renders counter-narratives visible, or at least discoverable, for perpetuity. After all, it is notoriously difficult to de-accession an object“ (Cook, 2016)88. Whilst

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87 As mentioned earlier, Benjamin addressed similar ideas in *The Storyteller* (1936), also exploring the comparable theme of ´reproducibility´ that emerged with technology and the wider shift in art and culture. Benjamin expresses how traditional oral storytelling is presented as a disappearing technique and the diminishing of ´traditional´culture, and the values and experience that surrounded this and this changed their means of interpersonal and societal interactions. Benjamin presents this in a similar tone of concerned melancholy as Adorno and Horkheimer, and the ways in which we relate to the world and to each other have undergone a massive transformation. This can be paralleled with the changes in curatorial practices and the introduction, or application of Rapid Response Collecting.

curators often work outside of time, navigating and connecting different temporalities, Rapid Response Collecting presents social responsibility within an opportune manner, enabling a greater range of people across various departments, as well as broadening out across the public who relate to these objects, even more so now that, „our world is digital, we need to be more able and agile and committed towards an engagement with our digitised and digital world, and how do we, as museums, who are so often focused on objects, come to that intangible, or immaterial, but real world of design and lived life?“ (Gardner, Interview, 2021).

Addressing museums shift from exhibition focus, upon a broader range of visitors, can be achieved, at least in part, by Rapid Response Collecting. However, this approach of collecting cannot generally be extrapolated to all museums, and, as previously mentioned, it is perhaps better suited to museums with a more ‘historical’ emphasis. The slight shift towards a less traditional approach, and an augmented democratic methodology, or focus through its inclusion of more ‘everyday’, or relatable objects, also doesn´t mean that museums will actively incorporate this, or even deliberate upon a more democratic or egalitarian approach. Whilst the approach may be more appropriate for museums with a historical emphasis, it is an approach that is gaining traction, for its reasons of encouraging a wider demographic, and increasingly relatable through its focus upon the now. This method also questions how museums have previously concluded and imposed precedence upon certain types of knowledge. Poignant examples in Design 1900 - Now include the complex production chains surrounding particular objects, like the Primark jeans and the first iphone. Rapid Response Collecting’s permanent application and engagement within a global museum (at least at the time of writing) demonstrates its undoubtably innovative approach. Whether this practice is successful in obtaining greater inclusivity, or enhancing a democratic approach, I would like to agree with my hypothesis, that Rapid Response Collecting can be utilised by museums to increase a more democratic and egalitarian approach towards art, and museum access, within society. However, as it is still a new approach, in actuality, it remains undecided,

This is also a detail Long re-iterates in our interview, that „all of those [Rapid Response Collected] objects, the V&A never de-accessions any objects so they are permanently a part of the collection. The V&A doesn’t de-accession anything, its attitude is, so once its there, unless it is in such a bad condition that it can’t continue to be in the collection, but unlike American museums, they don’t sell anything, because its a national, designated collection.“ (Long, Interview, 2022)
unconfirmed, as Gardner notifies me that „the work and the understanding of the gallery only really begins when the doors open, so I don’t yet have a sense of the impact, or the opportunity, broader opportunity, and perhaps also the limitation of these new displays are“ (Gardner, Interview, 2021), and to agree with my statement, this would additionally be subject to deeper and more thorough research on my behalf.

My interviewees, the two curators who established this practice at the V&A, hold somewhat contrasting viewpoints upon its future utilisation as an approach. Whilst Gardner, who partook in curating Design 1900 – Now, is curious to see in what other directions Rapid Response Collecting can be considered, as its application is „Able to tell those stories that are immediately connective but that have scholarship and depth, [which] is a particular skill, and I do think that is a powerful mode for museums, and I’d often like to think what it would be to do some Rapid Response collecting in some of our stores, like, how might we think about that approach, like we have in the Design 1900 – Now Gallery“,

(Gardner, Interview, 2021),

whilst Long conversely considers Rapid Response Collecting to be a „project product of its time, I wouldn’t claim too much for it as a radical influence on the future of V&A.“ (Long, Interview, 2022), but his view presents a thorough re-imagining of exhibitions, in suggesting the approach shouldn’t be isolated as one way to curate and consider an exhibition, but as an approach to be readily applied, through integrating it within other, more permanent exhibitions, as a means for expanding perceptions;

“I would hope, in the future, (Rapid Response Collecting) will be threaded through the whole museum, so the first step is to thread it through the 20th Century gallery, that makes perfect sense, and I think it helps you read some of those other objects in that light. The Japan gallery, the Chinese gallery, they have contemporary objects in them, they just don’t have contemporary objects of this kind. So the Chinese Gallery will have contemporary Jade sculptures, but it wont have any iphones. I always thought it is a bit of a misreading for China, and Chinese material culture today, or a deliberately partial reading. The future of Rapid Response Collecting is not a Rapid Response Collecting Gallery, its actually that all of the galleries in the V&A collect in this way“

(Long, Interview, 2022).
I consider the aforementioned perspective of Long, to be most apt, that Rapid Response Collection should be utilised throughout various exhibitions, especially within some permanent collections, to bring some depth, understanding, and to move away from possible imperialist or orientalist undertones, instead offering a wider, and more nuanced dimension. The museum can adapt more into an organic archive, locating it as a place that various members of the populace are able to involve themselves in a more united way of creating knowledge, that continues to respond and prompt discussion, particularly through objects that are more relative. As „museums are still recognised as platforms for and practices of objectification, stalwarts of materiality, places that fix and freeze the immaterial, the social and the performative in object form “(Geismar, 2017, 54-55), the concern of Rapid Response Collecting is its relevancy. As its name infers, Rapid Response Collecting is an approach for responding to a rapidly changing society simultaneously reacting to the museums changing roles, a complex and disconcerting increase regarding the combined progress of technological, social, and political developments within the beginning of the 20th century.

With the changes in the objects, and the advent of aura loss, our relativity towards them has lessened. Whilst pleasingly aesthetic, we are also detached from them. Correspondingly, the transferal of power from these items has similarly altered (at least somewhat), from prior, or more traditional curatorial expectations. As Design 1900 – Now places consideration upon benefitting a wider demographic of visitors (although, whether this has occurred, we have yet to confirm), the method of Rapid Response Collecting offers an opportunity to break away from, or challenge, typical western and Eurocentric narratives. Whilst a place for opportunity and amendment towards more traditional

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90 I consider this, with the conversation I had with Long in mind. We were talking about the Chinese and Japanese galleries in the V&A, which havent been updated for a long time, and how, with the lack of more recent objects, it remains to create an air of exoticism. Whilst there are many beautiful artifacts, the most recent object in the Japan gallery is a walkman, from the 1980s, which can perhaps perpetuate older generalisations regarding this display, as opposed to adding relatable objects. Indeed, the mass Chinese manufacturing movement, for example, has not been acknowledged, which has affected whole distribution chains, and this could be shown through the application of this approach, within the Chinese gallery, to bring it up to date and get a less “typical” portrayal. Furthermore, the V&A is arranged more through division of materials, and places, as opposed to time periods, so it would make sense, in the context of their particular museum, to update their exhibitions through their means, to keep them more “significant”.

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aspects, this approach, however, is not without flaws, and being situated in London, there is concern for continually imposing and validating western perceptions, particularly when the museum notably encourages a global presentation. Emphasis upon a westernised or more Eurocentric focus still holds prevelancy within museum display and institutions, distinct from efforts to promote moves of extending outwards, towards a more inclusive demographic.

Although still a relatively new strategy, the implementation of Rapid Response Collecting does require additional deliberation if it wishes to uphold a more democratic emphasis and represent a wider facet of visitors and society, in the sense of needing continuous updating and evaluation. This foundations of Rapid Response Collecting furthermore responds to long-term collections development, as well as changes within the times. Collecting, but also connecting, people, but institutions and realigning their values, holding a new kind of aura, of the now. Even if this approach doesn`t continue, or its application fades from use, Long points out some vital points about its perspective, in keeping museums and their processes more significant, to „look very rigorously at your own collecting logics and extrapolate them forwards and try not to be surprised at what you discover. I think what we can learn from Rapid Response, is not taking our own collecting procedures for granted, but using them more actively.“ (Long, Interview, 2022).

As museums are for the future, we still need to consider the future of collecting, whether retroactively, or within the present, and whilst there remains no definitive answer, its future application seems to lie both together with the continuation of relevancy, through a combination of both physical, and digital media. Accessibility is imperative to museums´ future, but it isn`t without the physical objects that can help to elicit some emotion within us, through narratives and updating, or reconsidering physical collections and combining them alongside the most recently acquisitioned artifacts to generate a more complete understanding of collections, and what they can offer us. If museums wish to continue creating relevant dialogues, they must continue to update their sources, adapting to continual change.
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