

# Finding a new voice

## Musings on objects, audiences and Science Gallery Melbourne

Rose Hiscock

Museums, galleries and libraries play many roles: they are repositories of collections and knowledge, custodians of change, and reflections of society. To remain relevant they must constantly adopt new methods of interpretation and communication. In this context of change, the voices of audiences and collections are no longer passive; objects are brought to life through immersive exhibitions, and audiences are embedding themselves within exhibitions.

The role of 'voice' in exhibitions and collecting institutions is varied and sometimes contested. For the University of Melbourne's new gallery for young adults, Science Gallery Melbourne, the ability to incorporate and convey the voices of artists, scientists, academics, audiences and objects will be critical to its success.

### The voice of an object

The voice of an object was brought to public attention late last year in a public event staged by Joe Corr , the 48-year-old son of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. On 26 November 2016, Corr  loaded a valuable collection of punk memorabilia onto a barge on the River Thames in London and set it alight. Reported to be worth £5–10 million, Corr 's punk collection included garments designed by his fashion

designer mother, and memorabilia associated with the Sex Pistols, the band managed by his father. Corr  torched the collection as a public protest against plans to celebrate 40 years of punk, a commemoration that he believed was anathema to the movement's core values. Summing up his intent, Corr  said: 'The Queen giving 2016, the year of punk, her official blessing is the most frightening thing I've ever heard. Talk about alternative and punk culture being appropriated by the mainstream'.<sup>1</sup>

Joe Corr 's act captured the attention of the international media, creating a field day for sub-editors across the world, with headlines steeped in punk references:

Anarchy in the UK: Punk memorabilia goes up in flames on River Thames.<sup>2</sup>

Malcolm McLaren's son Joe Corr  burns \$8m Sex Pistols hoard: How punk is that?<sup>3</sup>



Never mind the b\*\*\*\*s, here's the fire brigade! Vivienne Westwood joins son Joe Corre as he sets fire to his  5 million punk collection in protest against the movement going mainstream.<sup>4</sup>

'Punk is dead': UK relics to go up in bonfire of the profanities.<sup>5</sup>

Memorabilia torched on London barge to protest punk gone rotten.<sup>6</sup>

As he lit the barge, clad in hat and bandana, torch in hand, Corr  made a number of statements about his decision to burn his collection rather than bequeath it to a collecting institution: 'Punk was never ever meant to be nostalgic and you can't learn to be one at a Museum of London workshop';<sup>7</sup> and 'Rather than a movement for change, punk has become like a fucking museum piece or a tribute act'.<sup>8</sup>

Joe Corr 's act elicited strong responses from popular commentators, as well as from the museum profession. Singer Henry Rollins wrote in the *LA Weekly*:

Corr  was seemingly angry that the 40th anniversary of punk was being celebrated at all ... he showed great disrespect to the

artists who created all the things he set ablaze, as well as depriving people from all over the world of the joy of getting to look at it.<sup>9</sup>

*Smithsonian Magazine* observed:

In a statement sure to raise the ire of archivists and cultural historians, Corr  announced that he will build a bonfire out of his personal collection of punk clothing and memorabilia ... to protest the Punk London, which is being put on by organizations such as the BFI, the British Library and the Design Museum.<sup>10</sup>

Corr 's wilful act of burning his collection creates a museological tangle, extending beyond the domain of archivists and historians. By implying that a museum is an unsuitable venue to house a punk collection, Corr  questions the ability of the museum sector to collect and retain an object that embodies energy, emotion or tone. The discussion underscores a challenge for our sector: how do we ensure the primacy of a collection while finding the right voice for interpretation?

The voice used in museum interpretation is usually factual and balanced, the ostensible aim being

to enable audiences to draw their own conclusions. But this lack of a more personal or individual voice can lead to a boring and unengaging experience for the visitor. During my tenure as director of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, our principal venue, the Powerhouse Museum, hosted an exhibition titled *Disobedient objects*. On tour from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, *Disobedient objects* profiled the role that design has played in grass-roots acts of civil disobedience and protest. The exhibition was appropriately curated, commencing with a contextualising historic object—a teacup made to commemorate the women's suffrage movement—before focusing on modern-day ingenuity: a gas-mask made from a plastic PET bottle, a 'leaflet bomb', placards, home-made barricades and cardboard signs. Each section told a local protest story while demonstrating the ingenuity that can be found in everyday design. The result was an eclectic set of vignettes using everyday objects that included pots and pans, video, a car and a coffin. Although the exhibition aimed to draw audiences into a discussion about design, it failed to provide an emotive or engaging experience. The objects felt out of place in the clinical museum environment. They

belonged on the streets, in kitchens, in workshops—they were never meant to last. A placard hastily scrawled on a piece of cardboard is expected to be trampled on and destroyed in the heat of the protest, rather than housed in an acrylic display case in a museum, surrounded by walls, carpet, air-conditioning and security barriers. Chosen for their potency, these items became powerless in the museum setting. They'd lost their voice.

In presenting an exhibition on the subject of disobedience, the Powerhouse felt it important to provide a contemporary and local perspective on such a rich topic. It commissioned Brook Andrew, an Australian artist with Indigenous, Celtic and convict heritage, to develop a companion exhibition, which he titled *Evidence*. Andrew's work is distinctive and questioning; he uses motifs, symbols and pattern, often on a large scale, to challenge his viewers to look, and look again. In *Evidence* Andrew chose powerful and sometimes distressing objects from the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collection: Governor Lachlan Macquarie's chair, a set of convict leg-irons, an Aboriginal breastplate engraved 'Charley Prince of Oakwood 1864' and a series of museum stockbook entries, noting the arrival of an Aboriginal carved tree in 1923

and Aboriginal human remains in 1898. Andrew created a series of cabinets, plinths and peepshows in which to house the objects, encouraging audiences to view the symbolism of each item from multiple perspectives. Convict love tokens sat alongside the Aboriginal breastplate, speaking of a past that was both brutal and charged with a new sense of the colony's currency built on gold. Andrew also integrated his own artwork, including screen-printed imagery and inflatable objects, to honour the collection items while providing a cushioning device, a soft landing to help the audience see objects in a new light. The artist's hand was considered essential in curating an exhibition about protest and disobedience. In her catalogue essay, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences curator Katie Dyer noted:

By inviting Brook Andrew to work with the MAAS collection and develop a new body of work, the Museum has given the artists licence to ignore the sense of neutrality usually adopted for museum displays.<sup>11</sup>

*Evidence* provided a stark counterpoint to *Disobedient objects*. By providing a personal narrative, Andrew elevated, honoured and

imbued with meaning a series of inanimate objects. He reminded us why objects belong in museums, and he questioned their place as mere artefacts.

In a more subtle fashion, the exhibition *My learned object: Collections & curiosities*, held at the University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2015, gave artist and curator Dr David Sequeira licence to show his hand in the selection and groupings of artworks, natural-history specimens, teaching models, antiquities, scientific instruments, archival documents and numerous other object types. The result was a witty *Wunderkammer*, highlighting the idiosyncrasies and delights of the University of Melbourne's many cultural collections.

As audiences become more discerning and participatory, the choice, tone and diversity of voices through which museums communicate will continue to be important to the future of collections, opening a critical opportunity for universities to claim an important role. The University of Melbourne's practice of object-based learning fosters a direct and engaging relationship between audiences and objects, creating a more visceral experience. Collections that sit in universities have always straddled

the divide between voice, object and audience, providing a unique and potent opportunity for collections to remain relevant and charged. As classics scholar Dr Andrew Jamieson has stated: ‘widely used in teaching as a tool for the development of object-based learning, the artefacts give a sense of reality and immediacy to what may otherwise seem a remote past disconnected from modern life’.<sup>12</sup>

### Science Gallery: a new voice

Connecting a collection with modern life provides a fertile playground for the University of Melbourne’s new project, Science Gallery Melbourne—a venue where success will be measured by the ability to reflect, strengthen and extend the voices of young adults.

Located in the university’s burgeoning innovation precinct, and scheduled to open in 2020, Science Gallery Melbourne will present exhibitions and programs focused on arts and science, derived from the local and global creative and scientific communities. Emergent technologies, immersive learning and human interaction will be at the heart of the program offered in a series of contiguous and flexible galleries, theatres, laboratories, workshops and social spaces. Exhibitions will be developed locally and shared through



the international Science Gallery network and beyond.

While the intersection of arts and sciences provides compelling subject matter, the University of Melbourne’s investment in Science Gallery is focused on a particular challenge: inspiring young adults to pursue careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). It is estimated that 75 per cent of the future workforce will require STEM skills, but Australia’s graduate population is not keeping up. In 2016 the Office of the Chief Scientist released *Australia’s STEM workforce*, a report that highlights the economic value of the STEM sector and the gaps

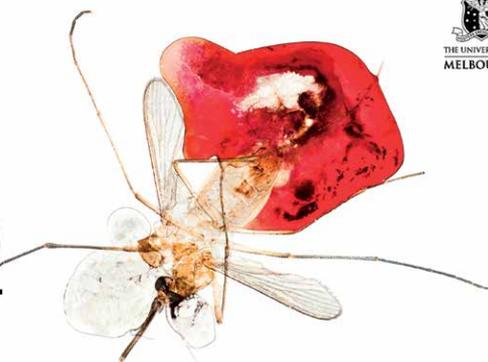
in the emerging workforce.<sup>13</sup> The report found that in 2014 STEM jobs had grown at 1.5 times the rate of non-STEM jobs. However, between 2006 and 2011, the STEM-qualified population grew by only 15 per cent, while the non-STEM population grew by 26 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Of particular note, only 16 per cent of STEM-qualified people are female.<sup>15</sup> If we do not remedy this imbalance, women will be left behind, and the workforce will miss out on extraordinary talent. Australia has an urgent need to train and inspire young adults to enter the sciences, particularly to encourage women and girls to pursue careers in maths and computer coding.

25.07.17–02.10.17

# BLOOD

ATTRACT &amp; REPEL

PART EXHIBITION, PART EXPERIMENT



Finding the right voice to attract and retain young adults to STEM is central to the purpose of Science Gallery Melbourne; to communicate with this age group, that voice must be reflective. Rather than following the traditional top-down, curatorial-driven process, the Science Gallery methodology draws inspiration from open-source systems, where ideas and content are generated from think-tanks and call-outs.

In 2017 Science Gallery Melbourne will launch its first program, *Blood*. The content for the exhibition has been sourced from a global 'open call' held jointly by Science Gallery London and Science Gallery Melbourne, in which 350 proposals were received from artists, designers and scientists around the world, on the subject of blood—viewed from the perspectives of stigma, identity, health, giving and taboo. To select the artworks, Science Gallery Melbourne's creative director, Dr Ryan Jefferies, worked with a curatorial panel that included a virologist, cardiologist, haematologist, Indigenous artist and performance artist. The chosen works will be displayed in a pop-up gallery on the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus and in a temporary laboratory built into a shipping container and placed on the steps of State Library

Victoria in the city. The Science Gallery team describes the program as part exhibition, part experiment, and the experience will be immersive: audiences will be invited to give and smell blood, provide their opinion, express their feelings, photograph themselves, map their emotions, meet artists, and discuss their experiences with student mediators. The program includes three research projects, a schools program and an extensive collaboration with science and journalism students.

The location of Science Gallery Melbourne in a university environment provides a framework for the voices of artists, academics, objects and researchers to become intertwined. Using the collision of arts and science and new methods of interpretation, the gallery also aims to make a valuable and fresh contribution to the museum, gallery and library sector. Experimental in nature, Science Gallery will provide a new experience through which young adults can test their voices.

Rose Hiscock was appointed in 2015 as inaugural director of Science Gallery Melbourne. Her previous roles have included chief executive officer of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum), head of marketing and commercial operations at Museum Victoria, and executive director of the Australia Council for the Arts. She is a board member of Back to Back Theatre and of Chunky Move.

- 1 Joe Corr , quoted in Tim Jonze, 'Malcolm McLaren's son to burn  5m of punk memorabilia', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2016.
- 2 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *ABC News*, 27 November 2016.
- 3 Karl Quinn in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 2016.
- 4 Matt Hunter in *Daily Mail*, 27 November 2016.
- 5 David Sanderson in *The Australian*, 26 November 2016.
- 6 William Schomberg and Georgina Cooper for Reuters, 27 November 2016, <http://in.reuters.com/article/britain-music-punk-idINKBN13M03P>.
- 7 Joe Corr , *Burn Punk London*, live stream, 26 November 2016, <https://burnpunklondon.com/>.
- 8 Joe Corr , quoted in Jonze, 'Malcolm McLaren's son to burn  5m of punk memorabilia'.
- 9 Henry Rollins, 'Burning punk-rock artifacts is not punk rock', *LA Weekly*, 8 December 2016.
- 10 Danny Lewis, 'Heir to punk royalty will burn \$7 million worth of punk memorabilia', [smithsonian.com](http://smithsonian.com), 16 March 2016.
- 11 Katie Dyer, in Brook Andrew et al., *Evidence: Brook Andrew* (exhibition catalogue), Sydney: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Media, 2015, p. 6.
- 12 Andrew Jamieson, 'Classics and Archaeology Collection', in David Sequeira (curator), *My learned object: Collections & curiosities* (exhibition catalogue), Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2015, p. 29.
- 13 Office of the Chief Scientist, *Australia's STEM workforce: Science, technology, engineering and mathematics*, Canberra: Australian Government, 2016, [www.chiefscientist.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/Australias-STEM-workforce\\_full-report.pdf](http://www.chiefscientist.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/Australias-STEM-workforce_full-report.pdf).
- 14 Office of the Chief Scientist, *Australia's STEM workforce*, p. 158.
- 15 Office of the Chief Scientist, *Australia's STEM workforce*, p. v.