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Confront

# Enter Through the Gift Shop

by Daniel McMillan

*Upon entering the Whitworth Art Gallery, the viewer is immediately confronted, or cordially greeted, depending on how they have conducted themselves when entering, by visitor staff. Clad in washed out grey work jackets, the staff are our first brush with the gallery's recent re-branding and first clue to the kinds of objects on display in the gift shop: a collection united by an aura of authenticity, honesty and tradition.*

*The shop is split in to halves, two rooms located on either side of the reception area, across which sales staff traverse to meet with other members of staff in the gift shop adjacent. Items are displayed on plywood table tops, shelves and pieces of Scandinavian furniture. Prices and information, on near-by recycled card, inserted into slits cut into halved tree branches. Some simply state P.O.A.*

The meaning of the word 'curator', we are increasingly led to believe, is in crisis.

Coming from the Latin *cura*, care, the role of an art gallery or museum *curatore* of the 19th or 20th century was fairly straight forward - to care for the collection, to have knowledge of its history and to develop it through research and informed new acquisitions.

In the 1990s, curating came to refer to a way of thoughtfully selecting, displaying and re-framing objects and information. Its entry into the contemporary non-art lexicon in the 21st century has been duly noted.

Curators of public arts institutions frequently remind us of the word's origin, its unravelling in the expanded arts practices of the 1960s, and its misappropriation by the world beyond the museum.

The world beyond the museum frequently reminds us of the word's recent proliferation within contemporary culture and subsequent loss of meaning to the point that

anything can be curated – from the slightly ridiculous, to the increasingly ridiculous.

2015 saw the announcement that comedian Stewart Lee would curate next year's All Tomorrow's Parties music festival and the launching of Deliveroo in Manchester - an online high-end takeaway delivery service which will now deliver takeaways from a "carefully curated selection of restaurants" to the doors of discerning diners in the Greater Manchester area.

More importantly, in the context of this feature, the year also saw the reopening of the Whitworth Art Gallery and its new gift shop – a shop which emulates the curated 'aura' of high-end retail environments.

In popular usage, if something has been 'curated', its constituent parts have been filtered and selected according to criteria that seem to go beyond basic value judgements. Yet, the distinction between something that has and hasn't been curated is clear – a mark of superior quality and refined taste. 'Curating' objects imparts value beyond the value the objects implicitly hold.

*In the first Whitworth gift shop, the familiar art gallery gift shop books and postcards are on display, but appear to be a mere formality. On racking at the back we find catalogues of work by Whitworth-exhibited artists past and present, Cornelia Parker, Gerhard Richter and Richard Forster, as well as books on textiles in recognition of the gallery's industrial past. Big bumper Thames and Hudson / Phaidon art anthologies make appearances on the table in front, as do books geared towards converting the contemporary art viewer with a deep-seated suspicion of contemporary art. Of note: "Why your five year old could not have done that."*

*The postcards are displayed in vintage British-made steel filing cabinets – a nod to the gallery's permanent collection, similarly filed according to considerations of theme, medium, period or colour, in storage or in public rooms throughout the building. The viewer is invited to flick through at their leisure and pick postcards according to selection criteria already put to use in private postcard collections at home.*

The story of the contemporary art gallery gift shop begins in the 1980s, a decade which saw a need for British arts institutions to



Marble sculpture of Venus and Cupid by Le Moineau, The Victoria & Albert Museum. Two sandwiches from South Kensington take.

Where else do they give you  
£100,000,000 worth of objets d'art  
free with every egg salad?

**V&A** An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached.

justify themselves in terms of their economic value rather than their inherent cultural worth.

With depleting state funding, gallery's came to rely more heavily on donors, audiences and corporate sponsorship. In order to attract wider demographics, they needed to re-brand.

The V&A's notorious marketing campaign of 1988 saw Saatchi & Saatchi draw up posters which advertised the institution as "an ace caff with quite a nice museum attached."

Viewing art was marketed as an outing and gift shops became part and parcel of the experience. Browse the public halls, eat in the café and resume the act of browsing in the gift shop on the way out.

In the 90s, curators became part of this customer-focussed marketing strategy. It became their responsibility to reinterpret and repackage artworks from the permanent collection, to make complex collections of work more palatable as part of a wider streamlining of the art viewing experience.

Exhibitions began to resemble

events. Participatory art which provably engaged the viewer became a stock favourite among contemporary arts institutions and courting audiences became the major art gallery's primary concern.

*Elsewhere in the Whitworth gift shop, modern living seems to be the subject of concern. Hanging lamps by Normann Copenhagen are exhibited in their original packaging and, in order to demonstrate their functionality, out of their original packaging hanging from gift shop ceiling. A wider range of Normann Copenhagen products can be found at your nearest John Lewis.*

*Wooden chopping boards and porridge spoons by Hampsonwoods, a Hackney-based design duo, are displayed on racking to the right of the till. The items are made in small batches from ethically-sourced London plane trees. Further along the shelving we find more high-end homewares – plates and bowls by Aedler design and Japanese porcelain teapots by 224porcelain.*

*All items share a mute colour palette and express simplicity in design and form – for those who demand functionality and eloquence in equal reasonably priced measure. A*

*reconstruction of what these objects might look like on your own dining room table is installed in the centre of the room.*

With exhibitions being billed as leisure pursuits, demand for souvenirs rose. Unique ephemera closely related to the gallery's programme of events and permanent collection began to surface. In larger institutions, artworks from blockbuster exhibitions and by superstar artists from the permanent collection are transferred onto a range of affordable gift wares for you to take home.

In the Tate Liverpool at the time of writing, works by Lichtenstein, Warhol and Blake from the Tate collection are printed onto notebooks, tote bags and tea towels. Perhaps there are some conceptual underpinnings behind Tate's range of pop art merchandise, but the justifications behind other artist-branded items, a Mark Rothko fridge magnet for example, are slightly more suspect.

Despite the continued presence of exhibition/gift shop tie-ins, anyone who has visited major art galleries (The Tate, The V&A, the National Gallery etc.) over the past decade will no doubt have noticed a

general shift in the kinds of objects stocked.

Product ranges have become more broad, selections more 'considered', objects more 'unique' and more and more sophisticated homewares are adorning the shelves. Considerations of display have also become more pronounced. In glass vitrines in Manchester Art Gallery for example, art books are used as little plinths as part of a colour coordinated display of jewellery.

Gallery gift shops have thus started to resemble boutique retail environments - a market where the word 'curating' is used to signify the exclusivity and quality of the product range and the thoughtful, on-trend decision-making that has gone into bringing it to you.

*Back out in the atrium, on the walls outside the two gift shops, a range of limited edition prints are for sale. They are from the Whitworth Editions series – works created by previously exhibited artists exclusively for the Whitworth.*

*Pavel Büchler, chair of the gallery's Tuesday Talks series, is inspired by the gift shop's themes of labour, simplicity and nostalgia and chooses to exhibit*

*Honest Work (Violent) - a work from his recent and ongoing series of letter-press prints. The word in parenthesis appears without parenthesis on the top left hand corner of the page in violet ink. It comes signed and unframed in an edition of 26.*

*Another work from Büchler's letter-press series, Honest Work (Silence), in which the word in parenthesis appears without parenthesis on the top left hand corner of the page in red ink, was sold at Birmingham's IKON gallery in conjunction with the artist's exhibition earlier this year and is still available to purchase through the gallery's website.*

*The art collector on a budget may wish to know that it is £120 more expensive than the Whitworth Editions series Honest Work series print, despite containing the same number of letters, and decide whether their preference for the word silence over the word violent equates fairly with the difference in price before committing to their purchase.*

The Tate's financial reports provide some insight into the development of the gift shop from which it is possible to draw conclusions. Since 1996, Tate's shop, publishing and catering have operated under sub-

sidary company Tate Enterprises Ltd. (a practice many publicly funded arts and heritage institutions follow to allow profit to be gift-aided back to the institution).

The Tate's annual report for 2011-12 states that it "receives 40% of its funding from government, through Grant-in-Aid, and the remaining 60% is from self-generated sources." The year saw "a volatile and challenging economic climate" and a "15% reduction in Grant-in-Aid over settlement period 2011-12 – 2014-15".

Its report for 2014-15 drills home the importance of self-generated income in this economic climate, and notes the encouraging success of Tate Enterprises Ltd which saw its "best year to date in terms of both revenue and profit, contributing £3.6 million overall."

With an increased need for gift shops to generate profit presumably came a demand for more desirable products in line with the tastes of the gallery's clientèle. Institutions began selling items inspired by the collection, affordable limited addition artworks and began commissioning artists and designers to create exclusive product ranges.

With the need to compete in the art gallery gift shop market, gift shops looked to the high-end high street and began to follow whims in fashion and changes in season.

Yet, to imply that the Whitworth gift shop is related to cuts in arts funding is misguided. The gift shop arrived as part the gallery's recent £15million redevelopment project, funded primarily by the University of Manchester and a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In the case of the Whitworth, the gift shop does not seem to be a consequence of reductions in funding or a volatile economic climate . It does, however, seem to be a necessary addition to an institution with 'an international outlook' seeking to expand its brand.

*In the second gift shop, we have what seems like a fairly conventional gift shop collection: stationery, greetings cards, postcards and toys. Gradually, thematic links between the objects begin to surface. It is a collection curated around the great outdoors and the young explorer – using The Whitworth's heritage as the first English gallery to be built in a park as a source of inspiration.*

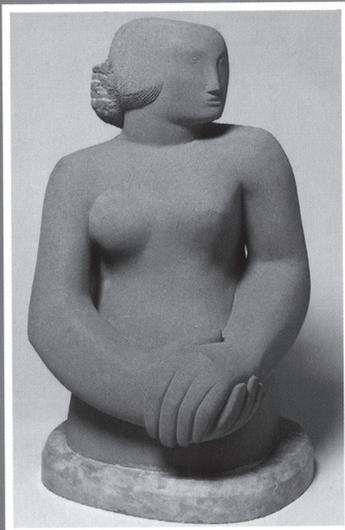
*On a dresser to the right of the*

*entrance we find a carefully curated selection of books, so carefully curated, in fact, that there are only two of them - 'Derek Jarman's Garden' and 'How to connect with nature'. On the wall above the dresser a poster on knot tying techniques instructs viewers to know their knots. Stanley flasks are conspicuously displayed beside bottles of Whitworth-branded craft beer - offering a sophisticated drinking alternative to the tins of Special Brew masked in black carrier bags favoured by the local homeless in the Whitworth Park outside.*

*Beside the dresser, slingshots fashioned from tree branches hang from pegs fastened to the wall. They are design items by High Wycombe-based Geoffrey Fisher Design, made from naturally fallen timber and priced at £26.50. Fisher's product range is described on the Whitworth website as encompassing everything, "from dustpans and brushes to coat hangers and hooks, from skipping ropes and skittles to slingshots and whistles".*

*The eagle-eyed gallery goer may have spotted echoes in the press release for the Bedwyr Williams' exhibition upstairs, which begins: "From a tiny pebble caught in a terrazzo floor, to the infinite enormity of the cosmos". It is a technique the gallery frequently*

**Barbara Hepworth**



**Figure of a Woman**

1929–30

**Others to collect:**

- Four-Square Walk Through
- Pelagos
- Three Forms

© Bowness, Hepworth Estate

*puts to use in its accompanying texts in an effort to convey its wide product range and the wide scope of arts audiences it caters for – from traditional culture vultures, to the older and home bound.*

Despite aforementioned trends, each gift shop remains unique to the institution in which it is housed. Its collection of books and postcards gives insight into its permanent collection, its programme of events and its history. The kinds of items it stocks reflects the institution's taste and the tastes of its core customer base.

There are several ways we can interpret this. One is that it is an act of resistance - a mark of staying 'true' to the gallery's cultural identity in the wake of its necessary commodification. Another, is that it is merely evidence that the institution has carried out appropriate market research and has a better understanding of who it is selling to.

Realising that its array of recycled pencils and tasselled leather bookmarks, branded with the gallery's logo, might be deemed 'cheap' or 'tasteless' by its more-cultured customer-base, the gallery now uses its very 'identity', a sure hit amongst

its regulars, as a brand to sell its wares. The kind of objects we now find in gift shops do not state the institution but reflect it – its 'ethos', 'taste' and 'personality'.

*What criteria can we use to assess the success or worth of the Whitworth gift shop other than judgements of taste?*

*One solution might be to evaluate it in relation to its aim – which seems to be that it offer a tangible translation of the new Whitworth brand. How successfully does the gift shop collection reflect the brand, or 'identity', hoped for by the institution?*

*The gallery's strategic plan, 2012-15, available as a PDF on the gallery's website, outlines the core values comprising the institution's 'personality' as follows: "accessible, confident, intelligent, quirky & fun."*

*With the possible exception of accessible (many of the objects will be unaffordable for the gallery go-er shopping on a tight gift shop shopping budget) four of the five values could easily be used to describe the collection, and the manner in which it has been selected and presented, as filler in a review.*

*Thus we can say it is a successful gift shop collection. 4 out of 5. Whether*

*or not it is worth a visit, however,  
will depend on your own 'personality'  
and how compatible it is with that of  
the collection on display.*

Daniel McMillan is a writer and artist based in Manchester, UK. He is currently participating in the Contemporary Visual Arts Network North West regional critical writing development programme, supported by Arts Council England.

[1] One of six posters from the advertising campaign for The V&A, produced by Saatchi & Saatchi. Paul Arden (Art Director), Jeff Stark (Copywriter), 1988.

[2] Barbara Hepworth playing card from Tate Art *Collector* game, currently on sale in Tate art gallery gift shops.

[3] Postcard selected from the Whitworth Art Gallery gift shop in response to the previous two illustrations.

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