

Review: Exhibitions as experiments

Lucy Kimbell

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An occasional visitor to Imperial College London, a university specialising in science, engineering and medicine, I am often drawn to the objects that are on display throughout the building. Come out of a lift, for example, and you are suddenly presented with some machinery in a glass case with all the gravitas of a museum piece, even though you are in a corridor. Despite a background in engineering design, I find it hard to “read” these objects, but I welcome their being there. They serve to remind visitors and regular building users how scholarship and innovation are tied up with material artefacts. In my own institution, Said Business School at Oxford, which opened its first university museum in 1683 (the Ashmolean), we are starting to design our own collection of objects. Inspired by my colleague, business historian Chris McKenna, we are developing a collection of management artefacts, to be arranged around the business school, bringing to attention the technologies implicated in the work of managing and organising. From 2x2 matrices to early fax machines, we think it’s important to make present the artefacts that have become invisible to many people, but without which managing and organizing does not happen. This collection may not bear the historical weight of the objects in the Ashmolean, but like that museum, which was a site for public demonstrations of scientific experiments, we aim to use the exhibition format as a place of experiment (Macdonald and Basu 2007).

For practitioners and scholars interested in art and design, contemporary exhibition practice offers a valuable way to learn about, think about and experience art and design. Exhibitions can be sites for the generation, and not just the reproduction of knowledge (Macdonald and Basu 2007). Three exhibitions held in the UK in 2008 offer different ways to think about what exhibitions do, with quite different modes of engagement and argument. *Wouldn't it be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design* was at Somerset House, London; *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, was at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London; and *Imagining Business*, which I was involved in curating, was at Said Business School, Oxford. Organized and supported by quite different institutional arrangements, the three exhibitions had some important similarities. All three included works by both artists and designers. All three claimed to be staging an argument. But perhaps the important difference – and this relates back to the opening paragraph – was the situation of the third exhibition, held in my own institution during a scholarly workshop to which the exhibition was connected and for which it raised uncomfortable questions.

Wouldn't it be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design at Somerset House coincided with the London Design Festival, when the city was briefly full of designers and their work, in public spaces, shops or studios as well as the large institutions. Previous versions of this show had been in Geneva and Zurich, and its genesis included master classes and symposia at art and design colleges in Switzerland, in which some of the exhibitors were involved. In their foreword to the catalogue, Katya García Antón, Jean-Pierre Greff, Christian Brändle and Hans-Peter Schwarz (García Antón et al 2007) explain the exhibition aimed to do two things. Firstly, it explored the intellectual and physical territories of and boundaries between

art and design. Secondly, it aimed to share “some modest utopias” (García Antón et al 2007: 34). What this meant in the exhibition was that visual artists, graphic designers, fashion designers, product designers and others had their work shown side by side, without it be labelled as either art or design. As for the modest utopias, the work selected for the exhibition – much of it shown for the first time – was in the realm of proposals or design propositions (Romme 2003). Coming mostly from Europe, the exhibition contributors did indeed seem to be exploring both present and possible futures, but with a twist. The duo Dunne and Raby are well-known as exponents of what they call “critical design” (Dunne 1999), in which design practice takes on a role of intervening into contemporary problems through making artefacts for display and engagement. In this show, Dunne and Raby presented work from *Technological Dreams Series: No.1 Robots* (2007). This took the form of short films in which strange objects (the robots) – able to move and make noises – interacted with a woman whose cautious enquiries into their properties prompted both humour and anxiety. In the gallery, the projection of the highly stylised film showing these encounters, with the objects on the floor in front, served to make visible the various layers in construction of the work.

Martí Guixé, who calls himself an ex-designer, also presented work which could be termed critical, in his case a critique of the institutions that serve to valorise some kinds of objects and cultural production. He showed his *Museum Guixé* which, at first glance, appears little more than a few things arranged on a blanket, inspired by street vendors who can wrap up their wares in seconds and disappear if trouble comes. Adopting this form as a structure for a museum highlighted how such institutions operate both as a system of display and of retail. This was one of the most uncomfortable works in the show – avoiding the visual seduction associated with consumerist design, but remaining in mind for weeks after. As a whole, this exhibition presented a vision of design and art practices playing a role in visualising futures but without any hint of the techno-utopias that are sometimes implicated in this kind of activity. These futures were pragmatic rather than visionary, institutionally aware rather than politically naïve, contextually aware rather than simplified.

The second exhibition, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, was organized by the V&A (Crowley and Pavitt 2008), an internationally-known museum of design and the decorative arts part funded by the UK government. The exhibition title makes clear its intention – to present an argument about the effect of the Cold War and the post-war political settlement on design. Including work by many different kinds of designer – from architecture, to fashion and product design as well as work by film-makers and visual artists, this show was a highly crafted experience in which the visitor walked through a carefully constructed scholarly argument in material form. There is not space here to discuss it in detail, but a couple of elements stand out. The rebuilding of post-war Berlin and Moscow, for example, turned into a material reality the political visions that were enacted in those cities. Stalinist aesthetics with plenty of ornament and expensive materials were followed, after Stalin’s death, by an industrial architecture in which a new life was imagined for a world free of the friction caused by possessions (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 147).

In industrial and product design, the development of European industries was supported by funding from the Marshall Plan between 1947-1952. Containing the

threat of communism was tied to developing consumer societies, and this led to Marshall Plan support for Italian design industries, for example, during a period when iconic designs such as Piaggio's Vespa were produced. The propaganda went both ways. An exhibition of Italian artisanal and industrial design in 1950 called *Italy at Work* toured 11 institutions across the USA, funded by the Italian government and ultimately supported by American money (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 81). This exhibition and the handsome catalogue that accompanied it offer a densely argued account of how global politics shaped design, and how anxieties about communism and consumerism were worked by artists, designers and film-makers into the things they made, whether these were posters, furniture or films. As Crowley and Pavitt argue, "Design was not a marginal aspect of the Cold War but central – both materially and rhetorically – to the competition over the future" (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 14).

The final exhibition, *Imagining Business*, was one I was involved in organizing in collaboration with sociologist Nina Wakeford and curator Alex Hodby (Hodby et al 2008). The exhibition came about when my colleague Paolo Quattrone told me about an academic workshop he was organizing with Christine MacLean and François-Regis Puyou at the school. Their event had a focus on understanding visuality and visual objects with the title *Imagining Business: Reflecting on the Visual Power of Management, Organising and Governing Practices*. I proposed an exhibition of work to accompany the workshop by artists and designers who, in different ways, were involved in imagining business or making visible how it is imagined. The exhibition was open for three weeks, reaching an audience of visitors and day-to-day building users as well as the workshop participants. This was a modest affair which aimed to show projects that made manifest ideas about organising and managing in works situated around the school. Design consultancy live|work, for example, help their clients uncover potential for new services, typically using visual methods. The consultancy showed large posters from a project for a client which produces data for other businesses. Before live|work's involvement, the client gave its customers long paper sheets covered in numbers, an unreadable excess of data. The designers helped their client identify what customers needed, and designed a web-based tool for manipulating and visualising the numbers, in effect creating a new service enabling them to use the data.

Artist Chris Evans showed his *Radical Loyalty* project (2002-ongoing), in which he plans to build a sculpture park in Järvakandi, Estonia. The sculptures intended for the park follow his conversations with senior executives from large organizations working in retail, telecoms, energy and other industries, asking them to describe what they understand by "radical loyalty". Evans has created sketches and maquettes for the sculptures which will eventually be built in Estonia by artisans whose job under Soviet occupation was to create public monuments. In this and other projects, Evans muddles the role of artist, patron, entrepreneur and muse, here, working as an intermediary between executives, artisans, and visitors to the future sculpture park. The exhibition included signage from the park and a booklet which included sketches and descriptions from Evans' interviews.

As part of the academic workshop, I organized a walk around the exhibition accompanied by some of the contributors giving an introduction to their work, with sociologist Noortje Marres as discussant responding to each work as we visited it in

turn. This was an experiment, in an exhibition which itself was an experiment. Conceived of as a kind of paper in material form, the exhibition was created to complement and contribute to an academic workshop in which researchers typically present from their (written) papers accompanied by slides of images. We dispensed with the text and Powerpoint and instead walked around looking at artefacts, a process of observation and discussion that was unusual in a management conference.

Considered together, the three exhibitions discussed here share the idea that exhibitions are sites in which visitors can experience and study artefacts and learn from them and about them. Where they differ is, perhaps, the discussions and knowledge that they attempt to contribute to. Viewed through the lens of Macdonald and Basu's (2007) idea that exhibition practice is a site for knowledge generation, not just reproduction, the exhibitions did different things. The first exhibition, *Wishing Thinking...* was open to the general public but publicised within a design festival and sited in a building known for displays of design and art. It presented a vision of art and design practice as visualizing futures without the romantic, utopian or dystopian associations that often accompany such endeavours. At the V&A, producing a heavyweight exhibition and illustrated catalogue such as for *Cold War Modern* is a core part of the museum's practice, relating in different ways to its collection and many other formal activities. The visitor experience, catalogue and retail aspects brought together a coherent argument that the Cold War had an important effect on design over several decades of the 20th century.

The third exhibition described was the most slippery – neither a stand-alone exhibition supported by an organization used to producing such events, nor a fringe event at an academic workshop, it brought objects and practices that are usual in the other types of venue into a business school. It presented artefacts created by artists and designers within a context in which other kinds of object are usually attended to, whether spreadsheets, Powerpoint slides or – in scholarly workshops about visual artefacts – pictures of things. This siting of *Imagining Business* laid grounds for collisions during which new knowledge might possibly be generated. To what extent it was successful at doing so, other writers will have to judge.

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