

Collecting Pandemic Phenomena: Reflections on Rapid Response Collecting and the Art Museum

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Abstract

Rapid Response Collecting has been a most apt methodology with which to document the COVID-19 pandemic for an increasing number of museums. As the phenomenon unfolded across the globe, museums searched for and head-hunted the truth-revealing objects that could tell the stories and histories of the present to current and future generations. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic took Rapid Response Collecting to a higher level. A methodology originally conceived for a sporadic phenomenon happening within a specific context during the early years of the 21st century gained much more traction almost overnight. This paper shall make a case for a better understanding of the potential use and application of Rapid Response Collecting by art museums. It shall look into the defining values of this collections development methodology and how these can be applied and adopted when acquiring works of art. In doing so, it shall seek to understand to what extent the mainstream version of Rapid Response Collecting can be adapted for the needs, purposes and requirements of the art museum.

Keywords

collections management, activities, collections, museum, type, cultural heritage, research and topics, museum, subject focus, case study

Defining Values

It is, indeed, the case that Rapid Response Collecting is primarily concerned with historic phenomena. The focus undoubtedly lies in managing a practice that can

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empower museums to collect the ephemeral and the momentous that might be difficult to acquire once the phenomenon is over. The practice itself was conceived in response to the 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, which stands for an unprecedented event in American history (History Responds 2020). The initiative, spearheaded by the New York Historical Society, was then rooted in the immediacy and necessity of collecting material culture from major events as the phenomenon unfolds or in the immediate aftermath. This is the overarching guiding value that has informed Rapid Response Collecting practices, and continues to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic. I choose to quote Aaron Bryant, curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, whose intentions mirror the original values and ambition of Rapid Response Collecting.

“It is critical that we collect so this moment does not get lost. . . History is happening right before us. . . If we don’t collect this stuff, who knows what happens to it.” (Bowley 2020)

Bryan’s arguments have, indeed, informed a particular approach to Rapid Response collecting that acknowledges the connection with human experience as the guiding principle (Tulani Salahu-Din 2019).

Design as Yardstick

This history-driven collections development practice was to be taken forward by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2014 to address the institution’s design-centered collections development ethos. The shift was almost akin to a logical sequel that placed the spotlight on the process—design—through which historical phenomena transform every-day objects and ephemeral material into material culture of evidence and relevance. This well-known example of Rapid Response Collecting practices is focused much more on design *“and how it reflects and defines how we live today. . .”* with the museum *“. . . looking outwards and engaging with topics that are in the news.”* (Collins 2014). Many of the objects collected so far have been newsworthy either because they advance what design can do, or because they reveal truths about how we live.

Values for the Art Museum Yardstick

For the simple reason that Rapid Response Collecting is, by and large, understood to be a response to historic phenomena, it may well be the case that museums with a

history informed ethos, albeit mostly focused on the contemporary, are better posited to adopt this methodology. The artist-centered focus guiding art museum institutions might inform a narrower selection of material culture to consider, possibly at the expense of historic relevance.

The Victoria and Albert Museum has succeeded in taking the practice a step further only when looking at design through the social lens. By comparison, art museums seem to be struggling to adopt the practice for varied reasons. More often than not, the works considered are broadly classified as made or created in response to phenomena. The historic, the ephemeral and the temporal qualities that Rapid Response Collecting seeks to capture might also be secondary to the aesthetic significance which regulates and informs the art museum's standard collections development policies. The dialectic between artworks and phenomena might also have significant overlaps with the ways and means of how art museums handle their acquisitions policies.

An Art-value Driven Methodology

I would like to propose a categorization wireframe, applicable to all media, and informed by three guiding values, for an art museum to consider when looking at collections development phenomena through the lens of Rapid Response Collecting. The essential yardstick and the basic value would certainly refer to works of art and artistic production created during times of phenomena where the artist reacts to the unfolding circumstances in much the same way as he seeks inspiration from other sources. The second yardstick or value is more akin to war journalism where the artist's presence on stage or his close proximity to the phenomenon as it unfolds provides the work of art with the measure of immediacy that Rapid Response Collecting seeks to capture. The third guiding value, which would be the one best informed by Rapid Response Collecting principles, would refer to works of art that capture the zeitgeist of the phenomenon as lived and experienced directly by the artist.

This yardstick builds on the core values that have shaped Rapid Response Collecting as a collections development tool to address the immediacy of phenomena as they unfold and which can rethink this collections development methodology as a valuable tool at the service of the art museum. A stricter interpretation of Rapid Response Collecting would refer to works of art or artistic production that are an integral part of the same social and historical fabric that shapes and gives meaning to the phenomenon. A loose interpretation of Rapid Response Collecting would refer to artistic production in response to or inspired by the phenomenon as it unfolds.

This categorization is by no means exhaustive and should be read as a tentative wireframe of sorts through which to home in on the collections development values to potentially guide the use of Rapid Response Collecting by the art museum. There would certainly be a healthy measure of overlap between each category as described. Besides, museums would also need to consider a distinct set of variables that go beyond their collections development ethos. The ways and means of how phenomena unfold certainly has to feature in the equation. Not all phenomena evolve the same way as the COVID-19 pandemic did. Public manifestations of protest, for instance, are generally more localized and contained and would, by consequence, warrant a greater presence and measure of direct engagement by the museum at large. A second variable would concern the ways and means how an art museum defines the artwork and artistic production in general.

Classifying Case Studies Afresh

There are certainly case studies to evaluate and consider for each of the categories proposed. A good example of works of art produced during the COVID-19 pandemic falling within the first category would include much of what features on the COVID-19 Art Museum online project. This digital platform branded as a museum proper has shared works of art from around the world mostly informed by isolation and lockdown circumstances that informed perceptions, feelings and points of view about COVID-19 (Peleshuk 2020).

A good example of the second category, informed much more by a close proximity to the phenomenon as it unfolds, is the project launched in March 2020 by the International Center of Photography (ICP) calling photographers to post and tag imagery of their experiences as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded also using the hashtag #ICPConcerned (ICP 2020). The works featured in the #ICPConcerned exhibition were up and running as of June. Indeed, as the project website clearly states “*There are great challenges but photography has always thrived on challenge and proved its ability to adapt.*”

A good example of the third and final category would be Ai Wei Wei’s feature-length documentary about the lockdown in Wuhan, China (Bramesco 2020). Entitled *Coronation* and released in August 2020, the artist makes use of filming done by ordinary citizens living in Wuhan when placed under an unprecedented lockdown. This film repertoire becomes the raw material for the work Ai Wei Wei produces, knowing too well that his process is being directly influenced by the circumstances he is living through much like those that produced his raw material. Indeed, Ai Wei Wei is living through the phenomenon in much the same way as the artists featured in the COVID-19 Art Museum project. Yet, his reaction is much closer to Rapid Response Collecting

thanks to its immediacy and its unique character of being of the same fabric as the phenomenon itself.

Less Speed, More Haste, Much Thought

Paradoxically, there is very little in this categorization that requires a rapid response by art museums. Indeed, the vast majority of artworks have a permanence that makes them transcend phenomena within which they are conceived. It is certainly much more within reach of any curator's remit to do so with much less rapidity of response required. Incidentally, rapidity of response should always be measured and thought out as much as possible. As Ellie Miles, Curator at the London Transport Museum rightly points out on Twitter

"Contemporary collecting isn't about reacting the fastest to events, the rapid response thing is a bit of a red herring. Take time, breathe, and act safely as you can. Don't burn out racing to get a responsive project underway in a race against time. Curating means taking care. Do all you can to ensure you and others are safe as they can be physically and mentally." (Miles 2020).

This does not mean, in any way, that Rapid Response Collecting is not as potent a tool in the hands of the art museum as it is for its history counterparts. It is certainly the case that by adopting a structured value hierarchy approach to the phenomenon, there is much that the art museum can acquire and secure for posterity that has the intrinsic qualities of material culture that history museums are after.

More Potential to Explore

Meta data generated around material culture, particularly works of art, can also be the focus of Rapid Response Collecting practice. This might relate to the documentation of creative processes possibly including include raw footage, props, accessories and other ephemera that can be easily lost over time.

There is also much that can be potentially lost and which Rapid Response Collecting can decisively address. As the mask becomes a symbol of protest and the pandemic in general, so has Edward Hopper's paintings and Jose Manuel Ballestrer's 'empty' masterpieces (Ebert 2020; Jones 2020). Indeed, both have been singled out for their silence and latent absence of life even though both Ballestrer and Hopper were not reacting to the pandemic when creating their works. This is the layering that Rapid Response Collecting seeks to capture with material culture that acquires meaning the very moment it gets contaminated with the social ambitions of the unfolding phenomenon.



Figure 1. The Getty Image Challenge as conveyed through social media: My fiancée says I'm handsome...like a Japanese woodblock print. Here's to the Getty Museum Challenge - Image URL - https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/gl7tul/my_fiancée_says_im_handsomelike_a_japanese/, accessed 12 August 2020

Missing Out?

Art museums might have missed on using Rapid Response Collecting to capture the global phenomenon that the Getty Challenge presented (Barnes 2020); (Figure 1). Indeed, the Getty challenge was not addressed specifically to the artistic community but was picked up by many keen on interpreting their choice of work of art. The challenge was picked up by a global audience taken forward in multiple directions and some of the responses are nothing short of a high-quality creative production, as in the case of the featured comparison posted on reddit.com subsequently shared on multiple social media platforms. There is more to this initiative than meets the eye. This challenge holds potential to be studied and understood as one of the first global experiments in visual literacy featuring people from around the world choosing their favorite work of art, evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting their choice and communicating it on social media platform. Indeed, Rapid Response Collecting may be much more incisive to determine new layering and meaning in response to phenomena. Aaron Bryant's arguments to collect the moment in order to minimize the risk of loss and forgetting hold true in the case of the art museum too. So long as the need is there, Rapid Response Collecting can be the right tool to match the unfolding circumstances irrespective of whether the need is mainstream or response-driven.

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Author Biography

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