Interview with Rory Hyde

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Interviewed by Dirk Vom Lehn and Wally Smith

Rory Hyde is a designer, curator and writer based in London. His work is focused on new forms of design practice for the public good and redefining the role of today's designer. He is Curator of Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Design Advocate for the Mayor of London. He was co-curator (with Mariana Pestana) of *The Future Starts Here*[1] exhibition, which was running at the time of this interview.

WS: We really enjoyed visiting *The Future Starts Here* exhibition. It provoked thoughts about the digital not so much being a medium, but more the content of the show. Do you think that's going to be an ongoing theme, that the digital is now something to be talked about and shown in the museum as subject and artefact?

RH: It's a really good question. The V&A has always been about making sense of the world through objects. Mostly these objects are historical, and we are making sense of the past. For this exhibition, we felt it would be interesting to apply that same approach to contemporary design and technology, to try to make sense of the future. So, in a way, this exhibition is no different from any of our other shows—whether they be Modernism or Art Deco—that look at how our culture is shaped by its design. We have adopted that same approach to the now and the future to frame the digital not just as a form of interpretation or communication, but as content and objects that can really speak for themselves.

WS: One of the interesting things about the exhibition is that it looks to the future, but it is a very imminent future. It's not science fiction; it's about things that are already here or are very close, like the driverless car and Amazon's Alexa.

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[1] *The Future Starts Here*, catalogue. Curators: Rory Hyde and Mariana Pestana, V&A Publishing, 2018, London.

RH: Yes, almost the first decision we made was to create an exhibition about the future without speculation, without making it about science fiction or design fiction. And to ask, can we talk about the future through the real? On the surface, that sounds almost impossible; but what we are looking for are the seeds of potential. What kind of a world do these things promise to bring about? How might they change the way we live together? Some of these things are more familiar than others. In the first section about the 'smart home', many of the things are commercial products you can buy, because that's a sector being pushed hardest on the consumer-facing side. Whereas for other issues like climate change, technology still has quite a different and more distant relationship to the individual. These are things you may never encounter outside the exhibition in your day-to-day. So, we worked really hard to discover what's next and to bring these things into view.

WS: I think it works really well because although talk about things like driverless cars and so on has become commonplace, not many of us have actually seen one, let alone been inside one and thought about how strange this technology is?

RH: I think that's right. You get a different kind of understanding from experiencing the object itself than you might reading about it in the newspaper or Wired or whatever. The film we have inside the car shows how Volkswagen is thinking about the kind of relationship you might have to the car; what they call 'emotional intelligence'. It's not just about how to solve the technical challenges, but also exploring the emotional challenges of a driverless car. That's pretty fascinating.

[INSERT FIGURE HERE]

The Future Starts Here exhibition 2018, V&A

WS: It's also interesting to see that the exhibition has strong architectural and urban planning elements that presumably come from your background. Its inclusion made me think about architecture as the more mature, older discipline and the digital as quite a young and immature field of design. I wondered if that was a conscious reflection, to bring an architectural sensibility to the social impact of the digital?

RH: I guess I think of these things in terms of the pace of change. There's this great diagram by Stewart Brand, which is called Shearing Layers2, where he describes the evolution of the construction of a building in different timescales. For example, the foundations might change every 500 years; the building might change every 100; the internal partitions change

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2 Shearing Layers was coined by Frank Duffy and later developed by Stewart Brand, *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built*, 1994, Viking Press.

every 10; the digital infrastructure changes every five and the furniture changes every week. All these different paces inter-relate to each other and I think architecture is somewhere on the outer level of change. It's a bit slower, but it lasts a bit longer; therefore, it has a different kind of consequence in the world, whereas the digital spins far quicker. It can have huge impact, but it doesn't have a legacy and it's immediately outdated. I see these different disciplines as cogs within a wheel that are spinning at different speeds, but the impact they have on us as people can be much the same.

DvL: How do you see the exhibition in relation to the rest of the V&A, which is of course a much more traditional setting in which visitors expect to see and learn about sculpture, applied arts and so on?

RH: In the introductory essay to the catalogue, Mariana Pestana and I write about the Great Exhibition of 1851, the first World's Fair and really the origin of the V&A. Prince Albert comes up with the idea of hosting a huge public exhibition, and invites designers from all the countries in the Empire to bring their best art, design and technology to London as a way of making sense of the Industrial Revolution. These objects then became the collection of the Museum of South Kensington, which was later divided into the V&A and the Science Museum, with art going one way, and science and technology the other. So, for *The Future Starts Here*, we were eager to bring these disciplines back into dialogue, as a way of making sense of the digital revolution.

The other way the show relates to the history of the V&A is how we introduce each section with an historic object, which is attached to a question. For example, we ask 'Who wants to live forever?' and display a religious relic that speaks about the afterlife. When we ask, 'Does democracy still work?', we present a suffragette scarf from 100 years ago. Those things are there to remind us that the questions that we're asking now are not new ones.

WS: How do you see in relation to the questions about the relationship between the digital and the real, and concerns about whether the digital is encroaching on traditional galleries and museums like the V&A, and possibly displacing older physical forms of exhibition? Do you see the digital and the real in competition, or do you see them as complementary?

RH: It's a difficult question and I have to say that even as a curator of the future, I'm still quite sceptical of too much technology in galleries. For this show, at one point we stripped out a lot of the screens and interactive interpretation. Even though there is quite a lot remaining, above all, we believe in the power of the object to speak and to tell stories. It doesn't need too much interpretation or trickery, you know. Perhaps I am quite traditional in that sense, but I like to have a physical object label. I like to have things written down. For me, that's a

sort of handrail for a visitor, a reliable thing they can grab on to. Everyone knows where to look.

I'm also interested in the exhibition as a public space, as a civic space, as a collective space in which you can have a discussion, argue with your friends and family. That's why we ask lots of questions. We hope people are talking throughout; we don't have headphones, which tend to put you in your own world. You've got to be aware of who you're going with and having that place of discussion. We see the exhibition as a public forum, a place for debate as much as a place of entertainment.

DvL: A few years ago, we saw a move towards digital labels and videos alongside exhibits to show how they work. Is that something you think is outmoded, or will that continue to feature?

RH: I think that can be really successful if done in a way that's complimentary to the object. For example, upstairs in the furniture gallery it's great to be able to show how something's made alongside the thing itself. It can be quite ambient and quite unobtrusive; a video with no sound, so you don't need headphones or other things. It can really make a work come alive and I think people love seeing behind the scenes, whether it's how that work was conserved or made, or its history.

WS: What methods do you use to learn about visitors' perceptions? Do you pursue an incremental prototyping approach to exhibition design and interpretation?

RH: We have market research, so we will prepare a suggestive package of what the exhibition is about, its content, and maybe its title and so on. We use the market research to test whether we're on the right track. The visitor numbers and targets here can be quite intimidating. For instance, for this show it's 200,000 over six months. So, very early on we tested this idea of doing a show about the future without science fiction as we discussed a minute ago. People responded really well to that and that gave us confidence, but it also gave the senior management team confidence in our approach and really brought us a lot of trust and space to develop it as far as we wanted.

WS: Once you've got an exhibition installed with an interactive component, do you evaluate it in terms of user-experience?

RH: We are constantly changing, so really once the exhibition is open we'll start watching how people interact. If there's a bottleneck, we might move some labels. We might remove some objects if necessary, and if people are missing things we might introduce new signage.

WS: So how long does that period of adaptation last?

RH: Probably a month. We have just installed new lighting on the aircraft exhibit to highlight it more, for example. It's one of those things that is so big and out of your line of sight you tend to miss it.

WS: I'd be interested to get your thoughts on whether it's still helpful to think about museum practices as being about collection, exhibition and then projection, or is the digital in fact breaking down the distinctions between those domains?

RH: I think they are still separate—in terms of the way the V&A works internally anyway. Maybe to the visitor, however, those separate categories are not relevant? If you think about what a museum is from a user-experience point of view, what are your touchpoints, what are the reasons for going? We're trying to apply some more of that thinking in the way we design our offerings as a whole museum. Something we picked up from a presentation from SFMOMA, as part of its rebrand, was that if you're actually going to make the decision to go to the museum, you need three things. One of them can be a great exhibition and that's what we've focused on, but it also might be a great shop and it might be a great café. Those three things together compel you to visit, or they give you the impetus to go. I think the digital is potentially what links all those experiences together, from the first time you Google the museum onwards.

WS: Thinking about the various institutions of the cultural and GLAM sectors, do you see the digital as somehow blurring the boundaries between them? Because we see libraries doing exhibitions now, and we see museums that are archive-like in terms of the way the public can access and use collections, and so on.

RH: It's a really good question and I think it's a really hard one for us to answer. I think libraries are a good example. At some point they had this crisis of relevance and felt the need to reinvent themselves. In answer to these challenges, they responded with 'we're not just books, we're about information and culture, and the communities and networks of all those things'. Somehow out of staring into the abyss, they managed to make themselves even more relevant than they were. I think that if you ask museum people generally what are you for, why do you exist—you know, those really big, confronting questions—and why do you get all this public money? They will turn around and say, 'the collection'. Like a librarian saying 'books' 10 years ago, it's just not a good enough answer anymore, because collections can be digitised. Objects can be found on eBay. Objects have many places where you can discover them and that's key. The thing that we used to cling to and lean on for safety was that we are keepers of national treasures, and that is still a big part of it. But it doesn't have that civic purpose underpinning it and I think that's the process that we're going through now in museums more broadly—that is to ask what is our public role? What

is our contribution to society? If it's not just objects, is it making sense of the world through objects? And how do you foster that sense-making?

Is it just through your learning programs, or your talks series, or can you host and create different kinds of experiences, different kinds of subjectivities and voices to be accessible to a broader public? Returning to your questions about the institutional boundaries, yes absolutely. I think the digital is forcing confrontation with those big questions in a way that might not have been necessary 10 or 15 years ago.

WS: Is there a struggle for each institution to maintain distinctiveness and difference?

RH: Yes, absolutely. We had a workshop the other day in which we were looking at all the taglines from museums around the world; for instance, the V&A's is 'Inspiring, Beautiful, Free'. The other museums are more or less the same—the greatest place for culture and the arts or whatever. You could easily switch them around and it wouldn't make much difference! One of the things that my previous show, *All of This Belongs to You*, was really looking at was this idea of the museum as a public space and asking, what is its role in society, and some of those really big tricky questions about the function of a museum today. Again, one of the things that inspired and motivated us were the Victorian origins of this institution. It was the first museum with late opening hours, the first museum with a restaurant and the first museum with gas lighting. That was intended so that working people could come here after their day of toil and improve themselves, improve their lot through exposure to culture and the finest things in the world—which when you say it like that today seems naïve and simplistic. But there's perhaps some great public ambition there about what it means to be a really democratic public place and a really democratic institution.

I am interested in reviving that ideal that the museum is a place for everyone in a different way now. What does it really mean to be inclusive on all those metrics of race and wealth? Because that's been a traditional failing of museums that they really are generally still, and despite their language of openness, places for the educated and elite.

DvL: Museums not only used to disseminate knowledge about design art, science and technology, but also shaped people's behaviour and conduct in public. Do you think museums are returning to this idea of bringing people together and fostering certain behaviours at a society-level?

RH: That's a really good question and we were talking about it this morning with a school group actually, in terms of the observation that the digital is increasing the atomisation of society. To take one example, we've just done a study with a polling organisation who asked the British public through their survey platform, if you're in an empty supermarket do you go to

the human who's scanning your groceries or to the machine? Seventy per cent of people answered that they would go to the machine.

If you believe in society, as I do, then you would know that those seemingly meaningless exchanges—of handing over change, talking about the weather, offering your seat up to someone on the bus—they're the things that make societies work. They're the things that bind people, and they're the times where we're confronted with the other in a way that is what builds civilisation. Many people are working really hard to eliminate those kinds of civil exchanges under the name of efficiency, or just because we have the technology—so we can.

Of all the things that are scariest for me in the current exhibition—from Facebook aircraft to driverless cars to cryonics—it's the atomisation of society through automating those seemingly meaningless exchanges. That worries me the most. Museums could respond to this atomisation I think, although we might pretend that there is only a one to one relationship between you, the visitor, and the art, when actually that relationship is more triangular, and more spatial, between you, the artwork, and the other people present. You're watching them and you're watching how they react to the same things: you're aware that you are part of a public again—a big public. You can't avoid that experience in a museum. I think we need to remember that that's what we curate and manage. It's not just about knowledge dissemination as a very technocratic process, but the museum is also a public space and there are few of these today where you're allowed to just walk in off the street and hang out all day, often for free. And unlike Starbucks or these other so-called 'third spaces', you're not even obliged to buy a coffee.

DvL: On that point, what mechanisms do you use to provoke audiences to engage and interact with each other?

RH: It's a tricky question. I mean we wouldn't be so explicitly hands-on in that sense, but we do use questions, for example, and hope they provoke discussions—or at least raised eyebrows. I find that you can read quite a lot from people without necessarily having to engage them directly, so that's one way. The other way is through training our gallery assistants, so they're there to enable those kinds of conversations. They know a lot about this show, and there are experiences which they are hosting, so for instance on the hour they will invite people to sit down in the 'restaurant for one' exhibit and tell them about the experience and the restaurant.

DvL: We now hope and expect that visitors will interact and communicate with the exhibits and each other, but this is a departure from some years ago when passive spectatorship was the expectation from many curators.

RH: I hope we can get away from that sense of the museum being too intimidating, too much of a sacred space where you're expected to be quiet and reverential. That's certainly the feeling that you have in different galleries where people tend to speak in whispers. In our space, we've got a soundtrack, bright colours, and lots of audio, so hopefully that breaks down some of this reverential feeling that you might have in a museum exhibition.

As part of the *All of This Belongs to You* exhibition, we rewrote some labels, looking at the social purpose of these objects. For example, there's a 15th-century wall relief of a Madonna from Venice in our medieval and renaissance gallery. She's there holding her cloak open, sheltering a group of people underneath. The conventional label describes the piece; the school it was derived from, its style, what was happening historically at the time and so on. We rewrote the label as a piece of social design in a way, thinking of the Madonna as a sign above a church, signalling to those who couldn't read that this was a place of charity, a place of care—come here and we will look after you.

We then worked with Muf Architecture/Art, who suggested that although the work had been severed from its context some 200 years ago, this offer of charity still persisted today. They argued that we are obliged to maintain that promise and proposed to turn this gallery into a place of charity. Muf worked with a charity called Women for Women Refugees, who advocate for women refugees' rights who are in detention and so on. The V&A hosted the refugees' English language lessons in the gallery and gave them tours of the content and so on to make some social space for them within that gallery. For us, that's what being inclusive can look like when reinterpreted through contemporary eyes and historical artefacts. That's probably one intervention I'm most proud of here.

DvL: In response to these big changes in expectations, do you think that future curators and interpreters will require a very different set of skills?

RH: I hope the role of the curator is changing. I mean certainly the stereotype of the curator with the door shut, working on their heavy books that they will release every 10 years, and never going in to the galleries, never talking to the public—I think that's changing. The curator's role is shifting more to one of a public host. You're expected to speak directly and clearly, and to be a strong communicator and interpreter of your material for a big public. I've already given three tours today of the current show!