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Natalie Kane* talks to Gil Pasternak**

Collecting Digital Designs: Reasons, Definitions, Challenges, and Implications

Gil Pasternak (GP): In 2017 the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) appointed you as the first Curator of Digital Design in the history of the institution. What informed the decision to create this specialist position?

Natalie Kane: The V&A has had ambitions to collect digital objects for some time, but it took a few steps to get there before creating a dedicated collecting position. The V&A first made some experiments in exhibition-making as a means to understand digital design within the institution. In 2009, for instance, the museum opened the exhibition *Decode*, which was curated by Louise Shannon and featured digital design practice current

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at that time. In 2013 the V&A appointed Shannon as Curator of Digital in the then newly formed Design, Architecture and Digital Department (DAD), where she stayed until 2016. The DAD was formed in 2013 from the Fashion, Textiles and Furniture Department with the aim of developing a collection about design and society. I was appointed in 2017 to collect digital design more specifically, which was really exciting as it was the first collecting position dedicated solely to developing that area within the museum, although my colleague, Corinna Gardner, Senior Curator of Design and Digital, also folds this into her wider responsibilities across the department. My role is really meant to reflect on how we live with digital culture and digital designs in society, and simultaneously enable other curators in the museum to collect digital objects in all the departments across the V&A.

GP: I assume there is a wide range of digital designs to choose from. How do you decide which to collect?

In line with our 2019 collecting strategy, which I developed alongside Corinna Gardner, whom I mentioned earlier, we collect those that have become important to society at some point and, broadly speaking, we work around four key strands. One is “innovation”, which we understand as the work of change-maker visionaries and change-making objects, such as objects that have gone on to influence the field of design, the industry, and social conventions more broadly. We have an Apple II computer, for instance, which we collected alongside the same model of the Sanyo monitor that Steve Jobs used to take to trade fairs when he was on the cusp of making it, so to speak. Because the Apple II paved the way for homeworking, we have also acquired an advert from the “Scientific American Magazine” of June 1977, showing a guy working in his kitchen next to a woman who is cooking. The second strand is “tools”. Here we collect software and digital processes that make other designs possible. One good example is our acquisition of the MakerBot.¹ “Public” is the third strand, which refers to designs that can describe how we are living with digital technology and culture, with all the social, political, and technical concerns that they raise. In 2016 for example, the V&A acquired some elements from WeChat, the Chinese social media platform, being the most popular social network in South Asia. At the time of acquisition, the platform had over 800 million monthly users so it was important for the museum to recognize the impact of this digital design. The acquisition includes two app files, 150 of the platform’s most popular GIFs, including sketches of their designs, as well as a dinosaur toy that parents

¹ The MakerBot is a 3D printer.

would operate through text messaging to make it say something to the child or to make its heart glow. Finally, we have the “critical” strand, which means objects that can demonstrate issues around digital designs, like the activities they trigger and their intangible characteristics. A good example is the Pussyhat. The original design patterns were disseminated digitally via the Women’s March Facebook group, and the hat turned into a symbol of female solidarity on social media after more than half a million people wore it during the 2017 Women’s March in Washington DC. But, just for clarity I should stress that all these examples can fall under more than one of the strands.

GP: In what way is developing a collection of digital designs different from developing any other collection?

There is still a lively debate across the sector about how precious, or not-precious at all, digital elements are, partly because of the tendency to create linguistic and philosophical comparisons between analogue and digital. What a file is in the context of a collection, for instance, and how we should handle different digital forms and formats is something that needs to be thought about really carefully. I do not mean it only from a technical perspective, for which there are good digital preservationist and archivist practices that we can learn from, but also from a curatorial point of view, in terms of how to understand and assess the many elements that together make up a digital design and what can constitute a digital design collection. A significant part of my role within DAD is to drive the strategy and collecting policies specific to digital, and then work with my colleagues to shape them into our wider collecting ambitions. These kinds of issues must be taken into consideration to make sure that we are looking after our digital collection with the same level of care and attention as we do with other collections, in terms of preservation, security, and legal protection.

GP: Do these issues around digital collecting call into question curatorial approaches to cultural heritage more broadly?

For me cultural heritage is everything that anyone ever makes and what everyone produces. It is all the things that we create; all the things that make meaning of who we are. Digital technology and digital culture have made it a little bit more complex. First, people with a more traditional approach to museum objects tend to be very particular about the difference between analogue and digital, finding it difficult to grasp how a Twitter feed, for example, can be as valuable as a Grecian pot. Secondly, there is a lot of complexity to consider when looking to collect a digital design object. If we take the iPhone as an example of a socially and culturally valuable object,

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collecting only the hardware is like collecting half a painting. It can only take us so far in explaining what that design is really doing, because the digital experience, with all the people behind it and their interaction with one another, is completely lost without the software. So digital culture has suddenly called into question what we normally preserve. It has shown us that we need to find ways to complement what we already collect with other designs and objects, such as artworks, videos, and contextual materials, without which the main objects will not truly be able to help us understand the impact of that design on society. In this sense I would say that digital designs invite a renewed approach to cultural heritage, making it more obvious that intangible heritage is as important as tangible heritage.

GP: It sounds by extension that you are not fully in agreement with the general understanding of digital heritage as a sub-category of intangible heritage. Is this a fair observation?

Digital heritage is intangible in some ways, but it does have a materiality and that is the challenge. It is simultaneously tangible and intangible. The designs exist in material forms and each has a substance that sits on different infrastructures. At the same time, their outputs are intangible in that they mainly materialize temporarily, through the involvement of the people who use the designs. So, digital heritage collections can easily become ephemeral if we do not find a way of capturing how people have interpreted the individual designs through use; how they have performed the digital object, socially and culturally. The performance of digital culture is as important as the digital design and it means that we cannot always follow traditional object-centric collecting methods. If we wanted to make a collection around Instagram, for example, there is no point in just showing a snapshot of Lil Miquela, for instance, without the other stories and profiles on Instagram.² We will need to show her in a feed with other people's Instagrams to fully explain how people performed Instagram and what it was like to chance upon Lil Miquela in real time. And although we cannot always put those things on display together and forever, they will be associated in the collection and the record will show that they came in together at the time of acquisition.

GP: How does the V&A characterizes what counts as a digital design then?

For the V&A, today, collecting digital design means trying to capture anything that is digital, was created digitally, or interacted with the digital domain in some respects. We redefined the institution's collecting strategy in 2019-2020 and it was

² Lil Miquela is a CGI-rendered fictional character with a lively Instagram profile.

the first time we included digital design as a separate collecting priority. Digital design did appear in the strategy before but it was mentioned only very briefly. It took me and my colleagues almost two years to define what we see as digital design and how we understand it in relation to the museums and heritage sector. We had many conversations with colleagues, designers, and practitioners to understand it also from their point of view, in connection with their professional experiences and interests. The resulting document essentially explains that digital design has no immediate edges or boundaries, precisely for the reasons I explained earlier when we talked about digital heritage as something that exists in-between tangible and intangible heritage. To define what we mean by digital design we wrote that it “consists of but is not limited to: product design, software, and physical computing; systems and industrial design; web design and social media; interaction, interface and information design; videogames and communications design; new media and computer programming”. We have also made it clear that “digital design works across both the physical and digital domain, and intersects with other forms of design, for example, architecture, textiles and ceramics, furniture and fashion, among others”. We felt we had to offer an extremely broad definition because digital design is not a category by itself; it is not a discipline.

GP: What would you say has made it so challenging to create a collecting policy for digital designs?

There were a number of factors. To begin with, we had to make it work within the existing V&A collecting policy, which already specifies the institution’s reasons for collecting objects. Various departments at the V&A, including ours, had collected digital objects previously, but no department had formally sought to set out a digital design strategy for the museum. It was also not easy to describe the full scope of possibilities for collecting digital, especially when the debate about what is digital design is still very much ongoing as the field itself is still developing. Identifying areas of focus posed another challenge. We wanted to be more inclusive of non-Western designs and audiences, but it was equally important for us to account for the fact that technology moves across borders and territories. Similarly, we wanted to be more inclusive of stories and spectrums of design, from DIY and maker communities to the very shiny high-end, which also borrow from one another. Working around all these issues made it difficult to define the boundaries of the collection and describe clearly what exactly we were proposing to collect. It is not as simple as deciding to acquire, say, a particular Eames chair or Canova sculpture, where we can probably just choose one example for collection and that would represent a good experience of those objects. The problem with digitality is that it is often large, diverse, distributed, ephemeral, and experienced

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at a scale and magnitude that makes it difficult for us to represent it in a singular object. This does not mean we cannot find a way to represent these characteristics; we just have to think differently about what the object can be. There are so many options and possibilities. Following definitions and boundaries is not going to be one hundred percent workable all the time.

GP: In connection with your comment on non-Western designs and audiences you stressed the fact that digital technology crosses territories and borders. Does this mean in your opinion that collecting digital designs can by default contribute to the decolonization of museums and heritage institutions?

I am very wary about the idea that somehow collecting digital designs or digital heritage in general can by itself lead to the decolonization of museums and heritage institutions. Digital technology definitely crosses boundaries, and it is also true that many people and cultures interact with digital designs. But this does not mean that everything digital is free of cultural, racial, or individual biases. Digital design objects are perhaps even more challenging because they exist in the very recent past, as well as in the here and now. We will never quite know their reach and impact on society, so our understanding of them will always be only partial. This is not least because new digital things are created all the time, on an increasing scale and complexity. They are widely and variably distributed, thus the conversations around them evolve rapidly. Having said that, we do already know, for example, that issues of digital technology disproportionately affect black, Indigenous, and people of colour, both in terms of working conditions and the exploitation involved in the development of new tools, devices, and systems. It is important for me and for my colleagues to acknowledge these kinds of issues that we bring into the collection through what we acquire, both in terms of our policies and the objects we collect. I am very keen for instance to collect the critical practice of artists and designers that unpack the sociopolitical or sociotechnical aspects of digital designs whenever possible; they can make such issues visible, whereas the designs by themselves usually cannot. So at the end of the day I would argue that a digital collection is very similar to any other collection in that its diversity and inclusivity depends on what is collected, who collects it, and how.

GP: Are there any areas that pose more difficulties to collect around than others?

We tend to encounter complications when it comes to industry, especially when we want to acquire software and platforms for preservation. Large companies in particular are often hesitant about whether or not they feel comfortable letting us collect certain elements, such as the source code of a piece of software. They may

similarly not be so enthusiastic about us making their designs or aspects of their designs available for the public to access and study, which is the remit of many museum policies, including that of the V&A. Usually their main concern is that someone might copy or use their work to develop something else. Intellectual property laws, copyrights, and issues around software licensing, for instance, often become really obstructive in this context, creating a barrier between cultural and innovation heritage. In meetings with people from industry I emphasize that we can do many things to protect their legal rights. We can create single terminal access, for example, which means that the designs would only be available for viewing on certain computers at the museum and nowhere else. These kinds of solutions have led to successful agreements in many instances. However, more often the issue is how their designs might be understood within a museum collection, as acquisition means handing over certain rights, for example, the right to decide how the acquired object will be displayed and presented in future exhibitions. In order for us to properly acquire the digital assets of a digital design with any success, we often have to work directly with the company that made it. This inevitably means that there is a level of negotiation about how that work is to be represented in the museum, for example, “the brand”, which sometimes leads to friction when it comes to deeds of gifts and accessioning. Companies will normally want to control how they are seen, which I understand from working alongside industry prior to working in museums. They are therefore less willing to lose certain control over their designs, while usually any form of control will be relinquished through traditional deed of gift frameworks. At the same time, I make special efforts to help them realize that we want to capture their work in our collection because we think it represents an important component in the history of design that we would like to enable generations to come to explore and understand. It is a truly fascinating conversation; one that I am only just starting to understand the boundaries of, and I hope to work closer with industry to find out how we can solve this issue.

GP: Speaking of concerns about appropriation, the gradual shift of heritage collections online has arguably made them more vulnerable to manipulation and misuse. Have you considered any special strategies to protect the historical and ethical integrity of your collection?

This is such an interesting question for me, because Henry Cole absolutely loved to copy.³ He was the one who pioneered the copy, and so the V&A has a long history of copying cultural heritage. Personally, I am a big fan of copies and, in general, the V&A does let people take photos of objects on display and so on, even if with

³ Henry Cole (1808-1882) was the founder of the V&A.

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certain restrictions. There is no doubt, then, that people will make memes and similar digital renditions about objects in the V&A collections all the time. Digital culture is even more uncontrollable, with people always changing and misusing stuff. That is the joy of digital culture and the Internet. In this sense, it is almost inevitable that people will treat digital heritage the same as anything else digital. I do not really know if there is anything we can do about that and I am not sure we should be controlling that. It is not our job. We are responsible, to a point, to present images of the designs the way they have been intended by their authors or the designers, as documented in the collection's records. After that point, we cannot really do anything about how visitors might use their pictures of these images once they leave the museum and any of its online platforms. It is like "death of the curator".⁴

⁴ The made-up expression "death of the curator" is a reference to Roland Barthes's famous essay, *La mort de l'auteur* [The Death of the Author] of 1967, in which, broadly speaking, Barthes argues that any piece of writing can have more than one meaning and its author cannot, and should not, control how their pieces are interpreted.