



HER EYES

AND MY

VOICE :

PERFORMING

TO OBJECTS

ROSALIND NASHASHIBI  
in conversation with  
VANESSA VISUAL  
and VIRGINIA VERBAL

ANTHEA HAMILTON  
Future Plans

KHADIJA CARROLL  
That Breathed

CONNIE BUTLER  
Performing to Nobody, Somebody

ANDREAS FLOXNER  
From The Dictionary

LAUREN GODFREY  
Peggy's Terrazzo and Henri's Jazz

ANNA HODGSON  
Décor

HELENA WALLBERG  
Collapse of a Poem

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*THE BOY WHO BREATHED ON THE GLASS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM*

*An Anti-Bellum Tragedy*

*Henry Mayo Bateman, A Criticism of Life, Punch, London on October 4, 1916*

Khadija Carroll  
That Breathed: The Vitrine as Intersubjective Device

*Before you begin reading please play the following video. Let it run while reading this text, let it play in your peripheral vision. Scan the QR code above or follow this web address and press play:*  
<http://vvvv.hotglue.me/thatbreathed>

VVVV and I are in the museum together re-enacting That Breathed. It is 2013 and we find that we do not breathe the same way as that boy did in 1916 [Figure 1]. The warlike vehemence has gone from our mouths. We treat the glass surface as a palimpsest on which to inscribe and encircle our performance to objects. In an aesthetic blurring of the objects behind the glass we watch our breathy condensation melt away. Objects turn into audience and we, instinctively tactile, trace what we cannot touch.

There is no object. We are all subjects, that is the proposition that I would like to investigate here. Using four works I will explore urges to destroy, horizontalise, and play with mirrored reflections. As responses to display, reflections and destructions of vitrines in particular are strategies for changing the existing vectors between subjects and objects.



Since its etymology comes from *capsa* and *capere*, the Latin verb to hold and it is neither void nor invisible as a cone of protection, what is the role of holding for the case? Could the glass case or vitrine have a kind of agency in holding?

Another question: how has the vitrine mediated the subject and the object, constructing both in different display conditions and traditions? The vitrines of the Wunderkammer became the anthropology museum's vector of subject-object relations. VVVV and I are in the Cambridge Anthropology museum's gallery, a space that has become, during my residency here, a theatre for these performances.

Built within the very architecture of the museum, pedestals and vitrines are a structure of thinking. That structure frames any subject and object that enters the space but typically remains unanalysed despite its effect on the formation of the ideas on display. I therefore hope to begin a theorisation of the vitrine to unravel its political implications and conceptual iterations.<sup>1</sup>

On one hand the vitrine has responded to the needs of conservation and the focus of anthropological containment for scientific study. On the other, the status in many cultures of objects having agency has reflected back on Western museum vitrines as embodying the colonial politics of holding subjects contained, as objects. It is no surprise that indigenous conceptual artists have taken on the vitrine as a palimpsest of the anthropologically constructed being-on-display (Fig. 2). Politicised acts of aggression towards the vitrine turn on the philosophy of vitrines in the first place, the hold they have on objects to remain objects.

In Victorian museums the vitrine is a carefully sculpted barrier and as barrier it is also a provocation. Henry Mayo Bateman's comic *The Boy who Breathed on the Glass at the British Museum: An Ante-Bellum Tragedy* shows the defiant act of breathing on the vitrine, which proves to be a fatal act.<sup>2</sup> A breath the shape of

a megaphone lands the boy in prison and he returns a broken man at the end of his life to breathe his last, even larger megaphone shaped breath, onto the glass case. Subtitled *A Criticism of Life* and published in *Punch* on October 4, 1916, it reflects the relativity of destruction in the midst of WWI. However, what the megaphone breath says about the sanctity signified by the glass is that the treasures of the British Museum will outlive any war or protest waged against the state and nation that the museum represents.

The boy breathes vehemently on the class of revered objects that come with Victorian high culture. After WWII, painters embarked on a leveling of the contexts in which art was traditionally viewed. Since the 1960s one can trace a history of exhibitions in which the body of the viewing subject becomes ever more encompassed by and definitive of the work. As Rosalind Krauss puts it, the painting salons' verticality is rendered horizontal by Jackson Pollock. In *Formless* she argues that Pollock and Richard Serra "rotate work out of the dimension of the pictorial object altogether and, by placing his canvases on the floor, to transform the whole project of art from making objects, in their increasingly reified form, to articulating the vectors that connect objects to subject".<sup>3</sup> The floor, David Gettsy has gone on to say, is the horizontal field on which the work and the viewing subject meet.<sup>4</sup> Breaking from the architecture of pedestals and salons, performance and relational aesthetics has sought further common ground on which to stage increasingly three-dimensional and immersive experiences.

### Structure and Danger

To interject with a further mirroring: there are cultures in which there is no object. Pollock was looking at Navajo sand painting to level and destroy vertical, figural objects. Yet those cultures in which sand painting was a way of telling stories were not telling stories of destroying the object in the sense that Kraus' reads Pollock. Indeed focus on destroying the vitrine for

3. Rosalind Krauss/Yve-Alain Bois: *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York, Zone Books, 1997, p. 97.
4. David Gettsy / Alexandra Gerstein, *Display and Displacement. Sculpture and the pedestal from Renaissance to post-Modern*. London, 2007.

Figure 2 Kamahi Djordon King, 'Jacky Jacky in a box', performance, Federation Square Melbourne, 2010. Photo by Steven Rhall.

1. In its Subject/Object Series Ashgate Press is publishing a volume of collected essays on the Vitrine in the near future. The research presented here grows from a past volume in that series entitled *Sculpture in the Museum*. Khadija Carroll: *Object to Project. Artist's Interventions in Museums*. London, Ashgate Press, 2012.

2. Thank-you to Dario Gamboni for this reference, which appears in Dario Gamboni: *Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution*. Reaktion, 2007, p. 98.



Figure 3. Jason Hall, *Auto-repatriation Kit, mallet, suitcase, foam, various dimensions*, 2007

the sake of critiquing the state and a subjecthood imposed by it has a trajectory in Western culture, à la the boy that breathed.

The boy at the British museum obscures the view of the objects on display and thus undermines the very purpose of the vitrine while bringing its materiality to the fore. Similarly destructive in urge, the invitation that the Auto-repatriation Kit makes is to break the glass case and free the Hei Tiki indicated by the empty inside (Fig. 3). To the Maori some Hei Tiki have agency, history and identity when they are given a name. That is they have the ability to affect things, to embody people, and thus to acquire histories larger than the object [it]self.<sup>5</sup> To free objects like the Hei Tiki (that are made to be worn on the body) from behind the glass with conceptual destructions such as Auto-repatriation Kit have become one of the strategies employed by indigenous activist artists.

Read in this context of postcolonial museum critique, the British Museum cartoon echoes the source communities that contest the possession and display of their material culture in museums. Those debates are common in collections of anthropology, articulated for instance by Marilyn Strathern.<sup>6</sup> As the first appointed curator of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge in 1967, her philosophy centers on a regional display in which “the viewer does all the work”. By this she means that the case “is an invitation to focus”, an intellectual exercise in which the subject projects themselves through the glass onto the object. The cases contain ideas for study in this display philosophy; they are not political subjects.

The history of the civilised displaying the savage as a means to critically assess Western society is embedded even in the very architecture of museums. For instance the MAA anthropology gallery is a circle around which the viewer moves from most savage at the beginning to most civilized at the end. How can museum narratives such as this display art in the terms of the culture it came from, when that culture was never held in the vessel of the display case?<sup>7</sup> However inviting

it is to have a miniature world to enter, to escape the actual world, those worlds in the museum are not efficacious indexes.

The destruction and leveling of what I am exploring here as *Vitrinendenken* (vitrine thinking) is inflected differently in works that use the vitrine as mirror. Transfixed as artistic narcissists are by their own reflections in the glass, the vitrine has been picked up as a device for exploring intersubjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Dan Graham’s intersubjective devices (e.g. *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1975) made the recognition of each other the central import of the sculpture. Graham’s exploration of the intersubjective reflects back on all exhibitions being experienced as encounters between viewing subjects and subjects on view.<sup>9</sup> Play with reflections in the vitrine is almost the ultimate acknowledgment that its glass is not invisible and without agency in the exhibition.

The vitrine is a kind of screen that already breaks up the image of the object by producing a vertical surface on which the image can be perceived as flattened. It is imagined to be invisible but it is not. The most extreme example perhaps is the common effect of time on the liquidity of glass. Gravity produces a lifelike movement on the surface of the vitrine as the glass flows like geologically slow water. No amount of glass cleaning can remove this presence.

The aesthetic problem of holding a sculpture in a vitrine is epitomised by a description in Hamo Thornycroft’s 1885 Royal Academy Lecture.<sup>10</sup> He sees a porcelain bird of paradise unfinished in a vitrine presented as the centerpiece of a shop in Staffordshire. When Thornycroft returns to the shop years later he finds the sculpture broken because, in its overwrought mimetic verisimilitude, it is too fragile to exist outside of the vitrine. The vitrine itself is ruined Thornycroft says, unknowingly emphasising his argument that the New Sculptors at the time were seeking to animate without objectifying. With the slow destruction of self-breaking glass, the conventionalism, stylisation and even immorality of realism is crystallised by the image of the broken vitrine. That a sculpture would require a barrier to keep hungry

8. If one expands the definition of the vitrine out to encompass those glass case works made by sculptors in reference to the vitrine then there is a vast range of contemporary works to include. There is not space here to make a comprehensive survey of all these, which include Joseph

Beuys and Yoko Ono.

9. Charlotte Klouk: *Spaces of Experience.*

*Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000.*

New haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.

10. David Getsy: *The Problem with Realism in Hamo Thornycroft’s 1885 Royal Academy Lecture* [including annotated edition of 1885 Thornycroft manuscript], *The Walpole Society* 69, 2007. pp. 216-217.

5. I owe my understanding and the image of the DIY Repatriation Kit to art historian and owner of the work Damian Skinner.

6. Interview with Marilyn Strathern at the reopening of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge in May 2012.

7. This is the research question of a collaboration between the author, Alana Jelinek, and Damian Skinner working towards a proclamation for museums wanting to invite artists to work with their collections.

fingers from touching seems proof of the excessive sensuousity that Thornycroft is railing against. The standardised cage of glass for almost every item in the anthropology museum conventionalises the objects into desirable commodities whose exotic allure is heightened by the fragile and forbidden nature of being in a vitrine.



Vitrinendenken

Vitrinendenken is a way of thinking about the display of subjects and objects through an analysis of the qualities attributed to the architecture of the vitrine. Understanding the vector between subject and object as “the horizontal field of an event” in Krauss’

Image: VV, VV and Khadija Carroll at The MAA - Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Universtiy of Cambridge.

terms, the exhibition can act as a vector that connects objects and subjects. Indigenous artist Kamahi King, British satirists of the museum, and contemporary artists such as Dan Graham and Jason Hall are assembled here to represent the spectrum of responses to the vitrine. The spectrum has greater extremes, for instance the opposite of a denial of the subjectivity of objects can be found in the objectum sexuality in which people live in active sexual relationships with seemingly inanimate objects such as the Golden Gate Bridge and the Berlin Wall.<sup>11</sup> The hard separation between scientist and the object of study as material without agency is the other end of this spectrum. As a product of that thinking the vitrine makes a persistent claim to be a functional container, once glass and now Perspex, it is a chameleon that can claim a neutral philosophy vis-à-vis the space and subjects it holds.

The vitrine is a period piece of exhibition design that requires a further historiography of the philosophical conditions under which it became popular. This brief return to the discourse in post war art history about the physicality of the support shows implications even in the vitrine for subject-object relations in flux. Opened up to becoming a vector also of indigenous understandings of object as subject, the vitrine is one of contemporary art’s experiences of intersubjectivity. A history of exhibitions that have expressed the relation between viewers through displays that include vitrines is yet to be written and would address the epistemological problem of being on exhibit and to-be-looked-at.

We should not underestimate how strongly the notion of an object and a subject is embedded in art history and other disciplines that crystallised in the Enlightenment and its dominant scientific paradigm in the nineteenth century. Departing from the assumption that the hard separation between subject and object has been disqualified when conceived as dialectical opposites, this paper reconceives not only of the magical object on display as art or anthropology, but the agency of the architectural objects that we have built to define objecthood.

11. See author’s interview on the National Geographic Taboo channel feature, *In Love with the Berlin Wall*, 2011.