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Objects in Purgatory brooch exchange : storytelling artefacts as agents for audience engagement

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Abstract

An 'object in purgatory' is a gift you have received and don't want, but nonetheless feel compelled to keep. My Objects in Purgatory exhibition (2011) invited visitors to contribute their uncherished gifts, and relate the stories associated with them. Their contributions were exhibited, and in return they received a handmade brooch featuring an image of another visitor's uncherished gift. This paper describes how public display gave the gifts material agency—opening up a new shared space for reflection on the usually taboo subject of unwanted gifts. The use of display in the exhibition and in the brooches provided rich layers of performance, provocation and interpretation. The paper also establishes the Objects in Purgatory exhibition as a method that combines a form of artistic production— the participatory exhibition—with a form of exchange. The method engages the audience in active reflection on their practices of keeping home possessions, and develops an existing form of contemporary jewellery practice (the making of wearable memories) by employing brooches to reallocate the memories, obligations and feelings associated with unwanted gifts—thereby developing the relational potential of jewellery.

Keywords: contemporary jewellery, narrative, gift exchange, performative artefacts, exhibition as research, display

Objects in Purgatory brooch exchange: Storytelling artefacts as agents for audience engagement

Introduction

This paper establishes a creative method for engaging an audience in active reflection on their practices of keeping home possessions. I describe how the method incorporates elements of craft production, display, exchange, curation and audience contribution, and discuss how it develops an existing form of contemporary jewellery practice; the making of wearable memories. The method employs jewellery to reallocate the memories and feelings associated with unwanted possessions—and in this way makes a contribution to new knowledge.

The paper concerns a key exhibition in an ongoing creative project called the *Campaign for Objects in Purgatory*. The discussions are set out in two sections. Section 1 explores the event as a participatory exhibition, including the process of audience engagement, and my role as researcher-curator. Section 2 examines the brooch exchange that formed part of the process of audience submission. I will discuss the role of the brooches, which were initially conceived as a reward for participants, but in practice also acted as catalysts for disseminating the research, and demonstrated potential for creating new connections between people and artefacts.

Objects in Purgatory exhibition
The *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition took place in May 2011, and invited visitors to submit an 'uncherished gift'; a gift they had received and kept, but not wanted or liked. The artefacts and stories the visitors submitted made up the exhibition, which grew as contributions came in. In return for their contribution, each visitor was gifted a hand-made brooch. This process of audience engagement and participation is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1
Process of visitor engagement and participation

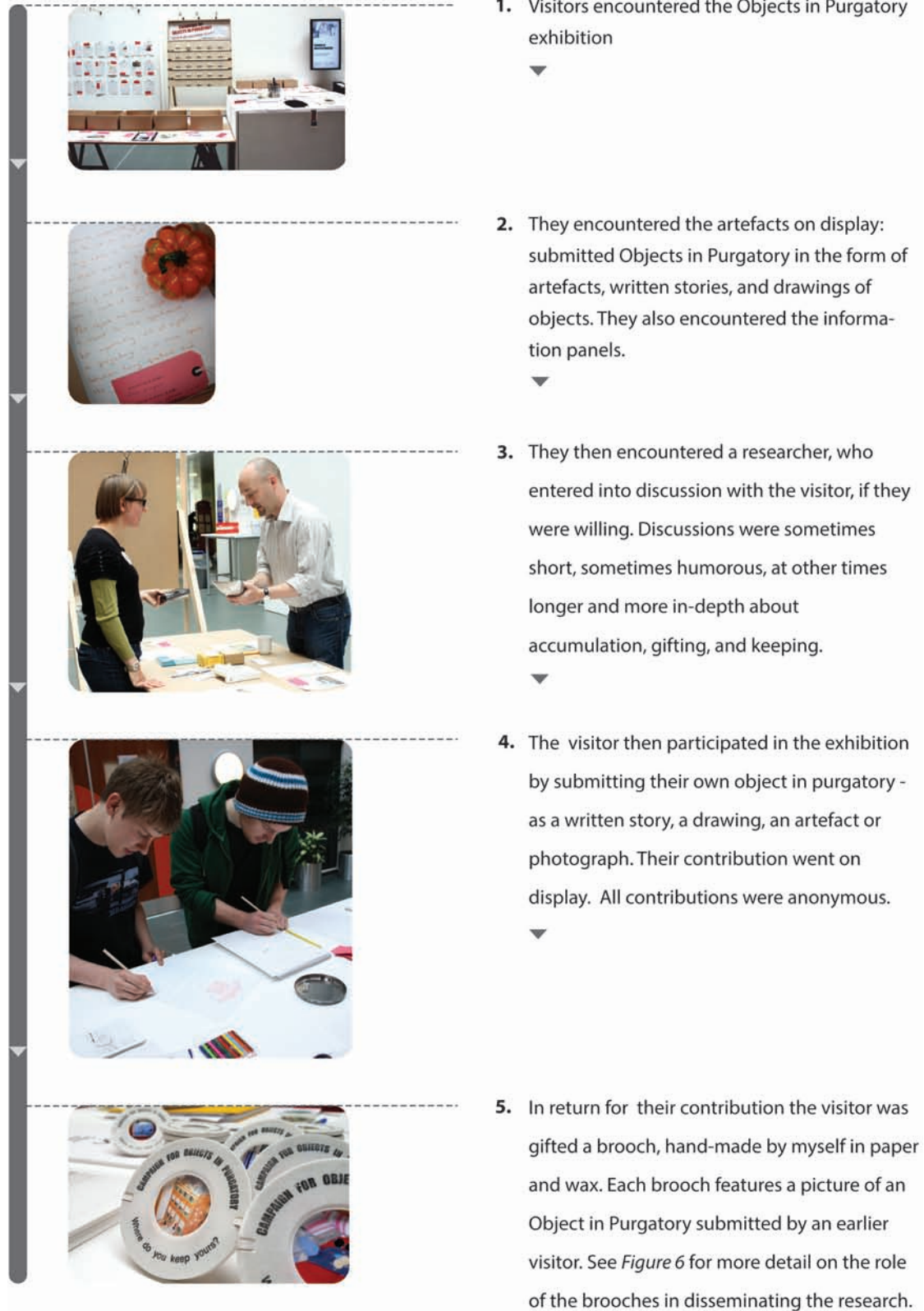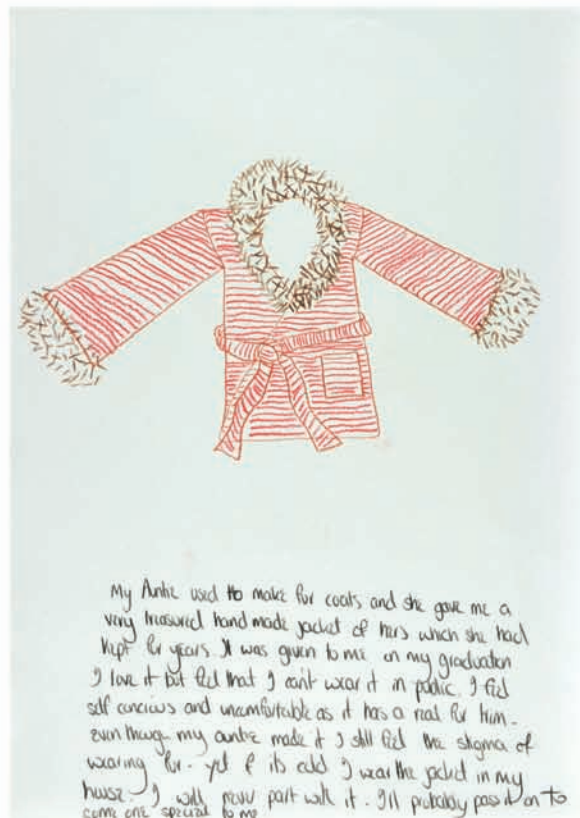Objects in Purgatory exhibition, SIA Gallery, Sheffield, 2011

1. Visitors encountered the Objects in Purgatory exhibition

2. They encountered the artefacts on display: submitted Objects in Purgatory in the form of artefacts, written stories, and drawings of objects. They also encountered the information panels.

3. They then encountered a researcher, who entered into discussion with the visitor, if they were willing. Discussions were sometimes short, sometimes humorous, at other times longer and more in-depth about accumulation, gifting, and keeping.

4. The visitor then participated in the exhibition by submitting their own object in purgatory - as a written story, a drawing, an artefact or photograph. Their contribution went on display. All contributions were anonymous.

5. In return for their contribution the visitor was gifted a brooch, hand-made by myself in paper and wax. Each brooch features a picture of an Object in Purgatory submitted by an earlier visitor. See *Figure 6* for more detail on the role of the brooches in disseminating the research.

Figure 2

Four Objects in Purgatory submitted to the exhibition

This was a corporate gift presented to me on one of my many visits to Taiwan. The object was given by wonderful individual of standing and the 'gift' was a mark of significance. The object has been kept a respect for this significance but importantly 'out of sight' in purgatory in a room space between living quarters and the...

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:
Glass pumpkin

LOCATION OF OBJECT IN HOME:
ROOM SPACE BETWEEN LIVING QUARTERS & GARAGE

THIS DIANA KRALL CD SITS AMONGST JAZZ OF A VERY DIFFERENT KIND. NEVER PLAYED, IT WAS BOUGHT FOR ME BY MY DAUGHTERS. IT HAS TO STAY AND WHO KNOWS WHEN I AM OLD AND GREY IT MIGHT SOUND DIFFERENT ?!

TO THROW OR NOT TO

My Auntie used to make fur coats and she gave me a very treasured hand made jacket of hers which she had kept for years. It was given to me on my graduation. I love it but feel that I can't wear it in public. I feel self concious and uncomfortable as it has a real fur trim. Even though my auntie made it I still feel the stigma of wearing fur. Yet if its cold I wear the jacket in my house. I will never part with it. I'll probably pass it on to some one special to me

I had two key aims in running the *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition. Firstly, I set out to collect uncherished gifts and their associated narratives in order to investigate keeping behaviours connected to home possessions. Secondly, I set out to expand my contemporary jewellery practice into research, and to animate the social agency of jewellery through an exchange (the exchange of artefacts and stories for brooches).

Uncherished gifts are a rich subject of study, as they usually embody an emotional tension, and this is played out in the way that they are displayed or stored in the home. The findings and analysis of the artefacts and stories collected through the exhibition, and the emotional tension associated with them, is set out in a previous article (See Keyte, 2013).

Section 1: Participatory exhibition

Process of audience engagement and artefact display
The exhibition was open to the public for 8 days in a university gallery space. Seventy-two uncherished gifts were submitted during this period, in the form of artefacts, photographs, drawings, written stories and audio interviews (see examples in *Figure 2*). When a submission was received, it was placed on display on the gallery walls and tables (see *Figure 3*). I had no prior knowledge of the exhibits, and the exhibition evolved according to the artefacts and stories that were submitted, and within the constraints provided by the gallery space. As it evolved and its visual impact increased, it developed an agency of its own that propelled data collection. After the visitor had made their submission, they were invited to select a brooch from a displayed series. Each brooch contained a photograph of an Object in Purgatory submitted by an earlier visitor. The brooches were displayed in a way that made them visible and accessible (see *Figure 4*).

Visitors' enjoyment of the process of contributing was evident in the consideration given to the quality of their drawings of uncherished gifts, and in their entertaining and humorous narratives. Annotated drawings were an especially effective vehicle for expressing the stories and feelings associated with the gifts (see *Figure 2*). Engaging participants in a creative activity such as making or drawing is a means of enabling participants' self-expression, and people are often self-motivated to share the products of their creative activity (Gauntlett, 2011). At the core of the exhibition was the sharing of a common experience—receiving a gift from a friend or family member that seems inauthentic or misguided. The exhibition became something of an 'amnesty'—an opportunity for people to share experiences that were normally not publically discussed and that remain in the private spaces of home.

A limitation of the method is likely to be the self-selection of participants: the visitors who chose to participate are perhaps only those who have experienced the scenarios associated with uncherished gifts and who care about them.

Public sharing of failure
The *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition builds on other contemporary participatory projects which rely on audience engagement and contribution. High-profile examples include: the artist–run exhibitions *Things* by Keith Wilson (see Wellcome Trust, 2010) and *Art Bin* by Michael Landy (see South London Gallery, 2010); the (ongoing) *Museum of Broken Relationships* by Olinka Vištica and Dražen Grubišić (see Vištica & Grubišić, n.d.), and the academic project *TOTeM* (see Speed & Macdonald, 2013). These projects demonstrate participants' motivation to talk about and share personal artefacts, such as possessions or artworks. In the case of Landy's *Art Bin*, the artist–participants were motivated to share the failed artworks they had created. Like *Objects in Purgatory*, Landy's project is constructed around the sharing of a scenario that is not normally publicly discussed. *Museum of Broken Relationships*, too, engages an audience through the cathartic sharing of a failure; the ending of a relationship. In these examples, the provocation to publicly exhibit artefacts associated with a failure proves motivating.

These participatory projects are all also concerned, to some extent, with the narrative that accompanies the submitted artefact. In the case of *Things*, *Museum of Broken Relationships*, and *TOTeM*, the stories are recorded and displayed, in acknowledgement of the value of personal and subjective narratives, and aiming to give them precedence over formal, historical narratives.

Figure 3.
Exhibition Space

Objects in Purgatory exhibition, SIA Gallery, Sheffield, 2011

Figure 4.
Brooch Display

Objects in Purgatory exhibition, SIA Gallery, Sheffield, 2011

My role as researcher-curator

I was solely responsible for initiating, developing and running the *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition, and my role included acting as exhibition curator. However, I was not a curator in the traditional sense of engaging an audience in authoritative historical or cultural narratives through predetermined artefacts. The narratives associated with the submitted artefacts were personal, idiosyncratic, sometimes humorous, and for those reasons were very engaging. Collections of artefacts that refute traditional and authoritative narratives are arguably more personal and engaging and open to visitors making personal connections (Saumarez Smith, 1998).

Every submission was displayed—none were edited out. While I had little control over the artefacts and stories submitted, I was able to influence the visitors' participation in several ways. I provided basic materials such as A4 paper and coloured pencils, and these provided parameters for the drawn and written submissions. I provided basic display equipment such as trestle tables and boxes, and I had control over where submissions were placed. I was able to place the submissions that provoked more responses in more visible locations, and these, in turn, influenced subsequent submissions. I started the exhibition by submitting my own Object in Purgatory, a faceted stone given to me by a relative which prompted interest from visitors—in fact several people coveted the object I found so ugly. In discussions with visitors I drew on my personal experiences of receiving gifts—I was immersed in the research, and in the sharing of common experiences.

Well established practices of co-curation and artist-participant collaboration exist in craft and art practice (Bishop, 2012; Millar, 2013). In some cases curatorial control is given more fully to participants, empowering them to take ownership of their contributions and shape the way they are presented to the public. This type of practice raises interesting questions about authorship, control and about the artist as facilitator rather than author (Shaw, 2004). *Objects in Purgatory* has more in common with the artist-as-curator projects described above, where the artist has curatorial oversight and is recognized as the creator of the project, but at the same time sets out to give public space to the personal contributions of participants. In the *Objects in Purgatory* live exhibition, I was firmly embedded in the research as artist, researcher, curator, participant and interpreter. This reflexive method enabled rich discussions through the mutual sharing of experiences and feelings. The method initiated a great deal of open discussion around the documented stories, but much of this went unrecorded, which raises the question of how this content might be captured.

Artefact as agent

It was evident to me through interaction with visitors that the submitted artefacts prompted and inspired them to reflect on their own experiences. Objects have the power to provoke associated memories of similar objects (see Proust discussed in Frayling, 1999, pp. xiii-xiv), and there are established practices of using artefacts as provocation in human-centred design research (e.g. cultural probes Gaver, 2004, critical artefacts Bowen, 2009). The display of personal artefacts and stories opened up new shared space for reflection on a subject (uncherished gifts) not usually consciously or collectively confronted. The represented artefacts were animated by the emotions and stories associated with them, and visitors responded to others' objects and experiences with empathy. Memories, emotions and identities are bound up in the material world, and I am drawn to the possibility that through the live exhibition memories were 'released' from the private spaces of home, to be reflected upon. In some cases, after reflection visitors decided to change either their relationship to their uncherished gifts (e.g. by passing them on), or their attitude to accumulating possessions.

By displaying the submitted artefacts I gave them public visibility; I curated a kind of public performance of artefacts and scenarios that are usually private and concealed from public view. Performative enquiry, as a form of qualitative research, is predominantly concerned with human performance rooted in bodily actions (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Lamontagne, 2012). However, I argue that the submitted Objects in Purgatory were performative artefacts, and equal agents in the rich discussions that grew out of their display. The displayed artefacts had the agency to provoke reflection, to prompt new human/artefact connections, and to influence people's behaviours. This notion of performative artefacts diverges slightly from Kristina Niedderer's (2007) definition of performative objects, which prompt a user to become aware of their behaviour by means of the object's function. My method sits comfortably in Brad Haseman's notion of performative research, which foregrounds practice-based research, where a presentational form (e.g. artistic production and display) is used to present the research whilst also being the research (Haseman, 2006). The *Objects in Purgatory* artefact display engaged an audience in the themes of the research, whilst also being pivotal in carrying out the research.

Display of artefacts and possessions: theory

Display is usually a means of communicating an object's value. It is key to consumerism; presenting commodities

persuasively to encourage us to buy them. It is also key to consuming artefacts in museums—museums show us which artefacts are authentic, and have a historical or scientific authority (Cummings & Lewandowska, 2000). In the home, selecting and rejecting possessions for display (e.g. on the mantlepiece) is an informal practice of curation that communicates and consolidates their value (Hurdley, 2013). The submitted Objects in Purgatory are often ornamental or decorative and designed with the intention of display, although uncherished gifts are rarely fully displayed in the home (Keyte, 2013). Exhibiting Objects in Purgatory, or drawings of them, playfully suggests their value or significance.

Section 2: Brooch Exchange

I expanded my ideas about display and performativity through the design and making of the exchange brooches. Each contributing visitor was gifted a brooch in exchange for their submission. I hand-made the brooches in paper and wax (see *figure 5*). Each brooch contained a photograph of an Object in Purgatory submitted by an earlier visitor. The process of brooch exchange is described in *figure 6*.

Expanding my contemporary jewellery practice
I had three intentions in designing the brooches into the process of audience engagement. My first intention was to design a piece of jewellery as part of a social interaction, to make it an active agent in a human exchange. Inspired by Bruce Stirling's notion of 'spimes' and Claes Oldenberg's manifesto "I Am For…", I wanted to make artefacts that did more than sit in a collection, to be passively consumed. I wanted to make non-technological artefacts that nevertheless stimulated interaction between people, and between people and things. This was out of a motivation to stretch the boundaries of the contemporary jewellery field by developing its relational potential, a desire echoed by André Gali (2014) in his article 'After the end of contemporary jewellery', urging the development of a new way of viewing and consuming contemporary jewellery.
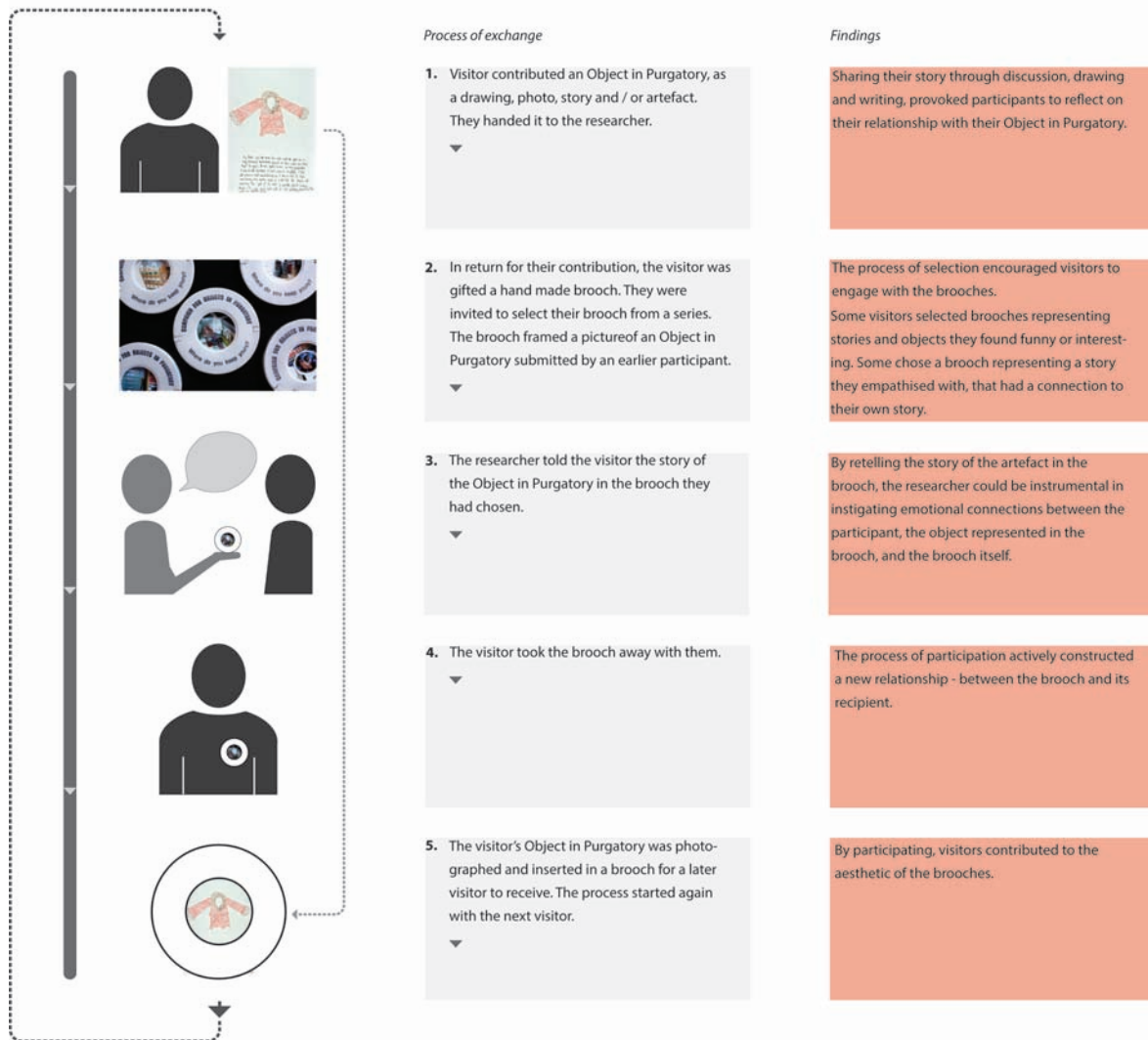
Exchange and obligation
My second intention in designing exchange brooches was to explore the obligation inherent in gift-giving. Giving a gift creates an obligation to reciprocate, discussed extensively by Mauss (1950/2004), and I wanted to draw attention to the instrumentality of the obligation in compelling the recipient to keep the gift. The brooches were invested with my labour and care, giving them value. Yet they were made from materials that are of little obvious value; paper, wax and a dressmaking pin. In presenting a visitor with a brooch I also gave them a dilemma; should they keep the brooch, and care for it?

Framing and Value
My third and final intention was to explore framing as a vehicle for communicating an object's value and giving it visibility. Brooches commonly frame things such as photographs, cameos or precious stones, communicating the value of the contents. In contemporary jewellery there is an established practice of using framing and composition to suggest associations, narrative, and evoke memories (Lupton 2007). For example, contemporary jeweller Bettina Speckner (2014) makes reference to Victorian commemorative and mourning jewellery, through her use of photographs, to evoke associations and memories. Curator Ellen Lupton discusses how jewellers employ reframing to protect, illuminate or hide a sacred item. The frame can confer value and status on the ordinary, communicating its treasured status. The frame 'performs its crucial task of foregrounding—of making present and visible—a framed object' (Lupton, 2007). I reframed the photographs of the submitted objects and drawings to give them new visibility as wearable objects. The brooches reframe the unwanted artefact and the memories and stories associated with them, and reallocate them to a new person. The brooch frames themselves hold value as objects invested with my labour, but also hint at a paucity of value, through their cheap, ephemeral, lightweight materials. As brooches can be worn they occupy a unique and personal display platform on the body, with performative potential (see Lamontagne, 2012). The brooches were, in turn, displayed in the exhibition on a custom-made display board, so that they were both visible and seductive. The process of brooch exchange is described in *figure 6*.

Figure 5

The Brooches

Each Object in Purgatory submitted to the exhibition was photographed and inserted into a brooch. The brooches were hand-made from emboseed cartridge paper, microcrystaline wax, and a dress making pin. Each brooch is 70 mm diameter.

Process of brooch exchange

Process of exchange

1. Visitor contributed an Object in Purgatory, as a drawing, photo, story and / or artefact. They handed it to the researcher.

2. In return for their contribution, the visitor was gifted a hand made brooch. They were invited to select their brooch from a series. The brooch framed a picture of an Object in Purgatory submitted by an earlier participant.

3. The researcher told the visitor the story of the Object in Purgatory in the brooch they had chosen.

4. The visitor took the brooch away with them.

5. The visitor's Object in Purgatory was photographed and inserted in a brooch for a later visitor to receive. The process started again with the next visitor.

Findings

Sharing their story through discussion, drawing and writing, provoked participants to reflect on their relationship with their Object in Purgatory.

The process of selection encouraged visitors to engage with the brooches.
Some visitors selected brooches representing stories and objects they found funny or interesting. Some chose a brooch representing a story they empathised with, that had a connection to their own story.

By retelling the story of the artefact in the brooch, the researcher could be instrumental in instigating emotional connections between the participant, the object represented in the brooch, and the brooch itself.

The process of participation actively constructed a new relationship - between the brooch and its recipient.

By participating, visitors contributed to the aesthetic of the brooches.

Use of exchange in contemporary jewellery

The brooch exchange relates to other contemporary jewellery projects incorporating forms of exchange, and in part builds on the tradition of 'pin swaps' at contemporary jewellery conferences and symposia, where jewellers swap individual pins they have made as a social ice–breaking exercise. Atelier Ted Noten's project *Wanna Swap Your Ring?* (Noten, 2011) invites visitors to swap a ring of their own for a ring produced in multiples by the studio. It sets out to play with ideas about value, and draws attention to jewellery as a form of artefact that attracts personal value, and that can also become a burden. The project claims to be a story exchange, but there is little record made of the stories, and while the project raises the idea of value exchange, it doesn't draw on the submitted rings as a resource. *Makers Move* (see Makers Move, 2014) is a story and artefact exchange that more actively seeks to capture the meanings of the artefacts. It engages participants in conversation about the meaningful personal artefacts that they carry with them (such as jewellery), and documents both the stories and the artefacts. The stories are recorded by the jewellers running the project, who also take a three-dimensional imprint of part of the artefact. The imprint captures a fragment of the artefact, and this seems to reflect the fragmented meaning captured by the story. A narrative can only capture part of an artefact's meaning, at a particular point in time, as meaning is both transient and fluid. In the case of *Maker's Move*, the narratives are presented in the third person, retold by the project curators, which suggests a layer of editing and interpretation that may change or obscure part of the original conversation.

Brooch exchange as an active process of audience engagement
Contributors to the exhibition were able to choose the brooch they wanted from the brooch display. They usually enjoyed this process, and enjoyed hearing the stories of the artefacts represented in the brooches. Their choice of brooch was often empathetic—they frequently chose brooches containing objects that related to their own contribution in some way. For example, a visitor who submitted a glass pumpkin he had received from work colleagues chose a badge featuring a photograph of a small angel ornament also given to the recipient by work colleagues. By telling the brooch recipient the story of the artefact in the brooch, I engaged their empathy, and made a further connection between the recipient, the artefacts, and me. The empathetic responses to brooch selection suggest the potential for the exchange to prompt further reflection on the submitted uncherished gifts.

The exchange brooches brought an extra layer of interpretation and provocation to the research, extended the exhibition beyond the exhibition space, and deepened discussions with visitors by helping spread the themes of the research by word of mouth. The brooch comes with a story, its own oral history, which has the potential to be retold by the brooch recipient. It is an agent in the process of storytelling and reflection. However, there are unanswered questions about the life of the brooches after having played their performative role in the exhibition. Do people want to wear them? How do they perform in the private spaces of the recipient? What sort of possession do they become?

Conclusion

This paper has established a successful creative method for prompting active reflection on home possessions. It is a method that combines a form of artistic production—the participatory exhibition—with a brooch exchange. The position of the artist as curator, researcher, participant and interpreter helps engage visitors' empathy, and encourages open dialogue on the themes of the research. The use of several forms of display—in the exhibition and in the brooches ultimately displayed on the body—provides layers of provocation and interpretation. It enables rich discussions through the mutual sharing of experiences and feelings.

Failed possessions and performative artefacts
This research and other similar participatory exhibitions show that visitors are motivated to share the stories of personal possessions, and the *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition worked as a kind of 'amnesty' for disclosing the stories of failed gifts. The research shows that people can be motivated to share the stories of failed possessions, and that artefacts can be agents in provoking reflection and remembrance, on a subject not usually consciously confronted. The display of uncherished gifts, stories and brooches both 'performed' the research and engaged an audience, developing existing theories of performative objects (Niedderer, 2007) and performative research (Haseman, 2006).

The findings suggest that the method can influence people's keeping behaviours, as some participants reflected that they should change their relationship to their uncherished gift. Whether these intentions were acted upon is unrecorded and could be built in to the method in the future.

Narratives
A key part of the method is the collection and recording of personal narratives of possessions. Personal narratives can tell us a lot about why and how people value their things, and how they attribute meaning to them. They are a means of gaining an insight into the private spaces of home and understanding how a possession can provoke behaviours and evoke feelings (see Keyte, 2013). Understanding these aspects of living with possessions helps us to 'unpick' consumption and accumulation practices. Personal, idiosyncratic narratives are valuable because they differ from dominant cultural narratives, such as those projected by museums and advertising, and it is important that they are given visibility and consideration. This method prioritises these narratives and employs them as a resource for developing the research, building on existing artist-led participatory projects.

The meaning and value associated with a personal artefact, especially one associated with conflicting feelings, is fluid and changeable. Recording narratives is a means of capturing the meaning or value of an artefact at a moment in time, but the research raises questions about how that narrative should be understood. Is it a reliable record? Can it only ever be a fragmentary representation of meaning? Can the recording of the narrative change or consolidate the meaning?

Brooch exchange
The incorporation of the brooches into the method develops the role of exchange in jewellery practice and exploits jewellery's unique capacity for communicating value and projecting a message. It also develops the relational potential

of jewellery by socially 'activating' the brooches, by placing them in an exchange and associating them with narratives and with an obligation. The brooches provide an additional layer of story-exchange, provocation and reflection. The findings suggest that the process of selecting a brooch instigated further reflection on the dilemmas posed by the uncherished gifts. This could be further developed as a means of 'drawing out' the meaning of the submitted objects.

Reframing and display

The research employs jewellery as a method of framing and display, to 'reframe' the dilemmas associated with the unwanted gifts. The brooches suggest new value or significance has been attributed to the displayed artefacts, and the unwanted memories are reallocated to new spaces and people. The focus on unwanted memories and transferring them to jewellery adds a new direction to existing jewellery practice exploring the containment and evocation of memories. The brooches also helped spread the word about the exhibition, and took the research beyond the confines of the exhibition space. Their role as 'tokens' that carry a message or transfer a meaning will be further explored in later research.

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Julia Keyte is deputy course leader for BA (Hons) Jewellery and Metalwork, and tutor in MA design, at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Her cross-disciplinary background in jewellery and product design has led to a rich range of professional activities, including craft-industry collaboration, product and packaging design, craft practice and curation. Her jewellery and products have been exhibited in international galleries and museums, and nominated for awards. Her long-standing interest is in using the critical potential of design to lift the lid on our relationships with familiar domestic objects. Keyte's article-based PhD contributes to research on design and sustainable consumption by examining how and why we keep domestic possessions. Her creative methods for collecting the stories of everyday objects help identify the potential for design to challenge consumption practices.