CAITLIN YARDLEY ***RHYTHM WITHOUT END***
An interview by Athanasía Aarniosuo for Design Museum Helsinki

Known for her research and installations in museums, artist Caitlin Yardley questions the way we look at museums and the objects they display. In her upcoming exhibition *Rhythm Without End* at Helsinki's Design Museum, Yardley considers the movement and influence of design objects, using ideas of circulation, rhythm and repetition to explore how they might simultaneously inhabit our world and be a lens from which to view it.

AA: Your installation *Rhythm Without End* has been developed in response to and will be shown alongside the Design Museum's permanent collections. Is there a particular reason why you feel so drawn to Finnish design and the Design Museum collection specifically?

CY: Many of my projects working with collections and archives have found their beginnings in a single object and my pursuit of that object's origins and connections. Often, that object leads me outside of the collection it is housed within and begins to link to wider narratives and associations. These outside journeys then become a useful lens through which to look back on the original object and form a new understanding of it and its position within the archive, collection, or institution that houses it.

My work has been involved with Finnish design for a number of years now. While this exhibition draws on an object designed by Aino Aalto at its centre, I initially came to Finnish design through her husband Alvar Aalto and his iconic Stool 60. I followed this object from initially encountering it in the photo archives of the Freud Museum in London. Identifying the stool in an early photograph of Anna Freud's consultation room, I then collaborated with curators at the museum to locate it in the attic and reinstate it in the museum display. Later, I developed a project titled *Mobile Composition* on the art collection that moved through Maison Louis Carré, a house designed by Alvar Aalto for a Paris art dealer. This sustained focus on Aalto eventually led to this project with the Design Museum, alongside their interest in an artist thinking about design, but with the opportunity to move on somewhat. It was my initial intention to look outward from Finland – using the international component of the collection to consider design objects more generally. However, I found the collection to have a far greater Finnish focus than I had expected, which makes sense! Finland has a significant design history, and the collection primarily reflects this prolific output in its holdings. This also reflects the nature and reality of how many museum collections are shaped – via donations and bequests, with fewer acquisitions. I have always been fascinated with the practices of biography, documentary and museology and the ideas of 'completeness' and 'objectivity' that we associate with them.

I immersed myself in the image archive and collection and spent time considering how the objects enter, exist and move through the world. The objects I was looking at were mainly Finnish in origin, but my focus was on their wider international dialogue. One of circulation and continual movement.

The exhibition expands on this idea of the circular as a formal and figurative concept, which became evident across disciplines and was encountered, in its multiplicity, within the holdings of the Museum. Spheres, cylinders, discs and rings. Objects revolving, spinning; made through rotation, formed on wheels, rolled or turned. Shapes that radiate and spiral.

AA: How do you consider the social aspect of collections in your work? Some people and narratives are not included in the collection scope and policies of museums and other institutions.

CY: The specificity of collections often mirrors the inequalities of their time and cultural context. The way they are presented today may attempt to hide or ignore these limitations – but omissions, absences, gaps, and less visible narratives are increasingly being subjected to critical review. Archives are different in that they usually consist of both objects and ephemera in a less edited form – so there is often a less cautious paper trail and it is possible to unfold and reveal agendas and intentions in a less speculative way.

I find the idea of negative space really useful as a visual and conceptual way of thinking about history and absence through my work. Also, the use of fragmentation and repetition can make space for multiple subjectivities.

We know that history is often presented and organised in singular, linear, or fixed ways, and this is made evident through the endless use of limiting museological tools like the timeline, as well as the seductive theatre of display. It is important to underline what the institutional archive or collection actually is. It is essentially a container, and its volume and contents are often difficult to define beyond what is made visible. This is where museum policy that promotes open access to independent research or actively initiates artist intervention and response is valuable.

AA: Collections tell us a lot about who we are and what we value as individuals, society and as a generation. By researching and rephrasing collections, are you trying to twist the narrative?

CY: I don't believe there is ever a singular narrative. It is in aiming to pin down and fix a clear narrative that we obscure our vision and we return to limiting ideas of biography, memorial, legacy and the fetishised object. History should be continually redressed and revised, as we seek new understanding and increasingly wider perspectives.

I often try to employ peripheral vision when working with a collection or archive. I really like the idea of looking at something while simultaneously acknowledging its connection to something else. That something else – that connection – is perhaps not always a real or obvious connect; it is sometimes made simply because I am seeing or thinking about both things at once. This often leads me somewhere unexpected and new. As a working methodology, it also acknowledges that research is often partial and fragmented – but embraces that reality as something that can be used.

AA: Culture teaches us how to relate with objects. Can rearranging the objects create new relationships between the viewer, the artist, and the objects?

CY: Thinking about the object also as a fragment is helpful. It can then be used to speak directly to its origins and context or taken outside this and re-contextualised. There is a flatness to the convening of fragments that helps to retain a focus on the assembled nature of history. I explore this in the installation through the wall piece *An Index of Infinite Rotation.* I try to work with media and processes in my practice that speak to this idea of assemblage and forced collision and hope that it provokes an engagement with history and ideas in a very particular way. For example, some of my recent work draws on crazy quilting, a historical technique of fragmented quilting that I used to create surfaces that repeat the format and scale of a now-dispersed collection of paintings. I see a relationship between quilting and painting, as both are concerned with the arrangement of material and surface, which can be used to assemble, reconvene, and engage with history. They share pictorial and compositional problems and generally a sense of domestic scale. Similarly, I also work with video editing for its connection to a process of collage.

AA: Do you believe that your work could transform the meaning of objects? Is that important to you?

CY: I hope my work speaks to ideas of meaning being always slippery and contingent. I am also aware of the limitations of my own research skills and inability to at times overcome my own subjectivity – but I think the work reveals that too. I am not a historian, and am trying to subject the art object and research process to the same ideas of assemblage as those found in the collection or archive.

I move about in terms of the medium I work in but come from beginnings in painting, which influences my approach. I am consistently drawn to surface, perception, and arrangement. Arrangement is increasingly central as the proximity and distance between things is where absence and gaps are located – the negative space. I see negative space as a highly generative space and it is a consistent presence in my work. It is my intention to use this space to suggest a new way of thinking about the meaning of whatever it is I am looking at; sometimes, this might transform the object – but that only occurs if the viewer comes with me on the journey.

AA: Do you personally have a passion for collecting things?

CY: I am certainly a collector, but I am also very interested in the collections of others. I am deeply interested in the objects and materials we gather that come to furnish our lives. They connect the personal and local with much wider social histories and narratives. There is also something really compelling for me in the repetition of a single object – for example, I own twelve Aalto Savoy Vases. They become almost sinister when you start to notice them recurring around a space.

AA: This idea of repetition is also investigated in *Rhythm Without End*, through your focus on Aino Aalto's *Bölgeblick* glass plate from 1932. What motivated you to work with this specific design object?

Coming from a long history of working with representations of women, I had been longing to find ways to work more directly with Aino and her legacy, after years of focus on her husband. Within the wider museum collection, although circularity became evident everywhere in various ways, *Bölgeblick* emerged as a clear, graphic representation of my research logic. It is a circular glass design influenced by the concentric ripples that form on still water when disturbed. Produced in a centrifuge, the plate's design also echoes its making and the way liquid glass behaves when subjected to high-speed revolution and gravitational force. The spinning causes the glass to fill the mould from its centre outward.

It also speaks to ideas of absence and negative space – being no longer in commercial production. To work with it directly, I first had to locate it physically. Some early examples were sent to me by a collector in Finland, and some from New York, in their original boxes with price labels indicating they were once sold through the MOMA gift shop – possibly alongside the 1984 exhibition named for her husband, *Alvar Aalto: Furniture and Glass*. Although arriving earlier in the process of making this exhibition, my exhibition title, *Rhythm Without End,* also came via MOMA, in reference to a small gouache painting by Robert Delaunay (1935) from their collection that features concentric discs in a vertical rhythm. I see and use these incidental alignments as generative within my practice, allowing them to redirect the research and reveal how seemingly distant objects can begin to inform one another when held in proximity.

Using the *Bölgeblick* plates I acquired, I produced a series of photograms – a cameraless photographic method that produces a unique print through direct contact between the object and photographic paper. In contrast to the speed and motion associated with the plate's industrial production, photograms are made in a still, dark environment. Light passes through the transparent object, and through subsequent submersion and agitation of photo chemicals, a negative echo of the original form develops. Through this process, the object is momentarily dissolved and reconstituted as a shadow or image of itself. Installed within a four-metre-long vitrine mirroring the dimensions of my own studio table, the work also reflects on the generative instability inherent within the artistic research process itself.

I am fascinated with the relationship between the art and design object. These objects come from different intentions of making and have different relationships to circulation. *Rhythm Without End* attempts to look at one through the other.