

Museums: Safeguarding our memories in perpetuity

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Summary The complexity of Hong Kong's socio-political situation reveals the complexity of the role that museums are playing in representing collective memories and collective solidarity. The displays and collections of the institutions reflect the power dynamics amongst curators, funders, and audiences. In this contribution, I use one of the newest museums in Hong Kong, M Plus Museum (M+), as a case study to explore the concept of solidarity and how it is related to the collective memories represented by museums. I first focus on the special project, the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection, and its inaugural exhibition to examine whether it can produce a sense of collective solidarity as a sentiment. Then, based on the interconnection between collective memories, collective solidarity, and museum displays, I investigate the dilemma that M+ faces in relation to the political standpoint of its funders and audiences.

Keywords neutrality, display, collection, activism, contemporary art museum

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Museums are memory institutions, meaning that what the institutions collect and display is connected to the memories of (at least, some of) its audiences. Between 2003 and 2023, Hong Kong witnessed some of the most turbulent socio-political events in its history. Escalating pro-democratic movements against the government's electoral and educational reforms show the widening chasm between the mainland Chinese central government, local government, and the local Hongkongers. From the 2003 protest against the Basic Law Article 23 to the 2012 protest against the inclusion of Moral and National Education into school curriculum and the 2014 Umbrella Movement to the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protest, these demonstrations all defined the changing conditions in which Hongkongers identified themselves and the memories they had about their city. Hong Kong museums as memory institutions can hence become the sites not only to learn about the history of the city's distant past but also to reflect on the values embedded in its contemporary changes.

M Plus Museum (M+) is the newest cultural landmark in Hong Kong. The museum ambitiously brands itself as ‘one of the largest museums of modern and contemporary visual culture in the world’¹ and ‘Asia’s first global museum of contemporary visual culture’.² In a city known more for its art business than its art museums, the M+ curatorial team strives to gather not merely artworks and cultural objects created by internationally renowned artists, designers, and architects. They also make a specific selection of objects about the local visual culture, under a project named the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection. Such an attempt to highlight the uniqueness of the museum and its city with material objects requires a strong understanding of local history, social values, and collective memories. So, instead of simply categorising the objects according to media and disciplines, this collection is labelled as a thematic area with a cornucopia of visual objects produced by local artists and manufacturers, including the iconic neon street signs, plastic table lamps, and Chinese New Year decorations with traditional Chinese characters. These objects are collected to represent various aspects of living in Hong Kong since the end of the Second World War. This collection, in other words, should resonate with the collective memories of local audiences. This aim is even more manifested by the curatorial practice and exhibits of the museum’s inaugural exhibition *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond*. As suggested by the exhibition title, the M+ curators are trying to use the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection to interpret Hongkongers’ contemporary collective memories.

Based on this collection and the museum’s first exhibition, in this contribution I explore the interconnection of museum displays and collections with the collective memories of local audiences and the resultant sense of collective solidarity that the museum might have generated from its programme. I want to examine how collective solidarity can be a sentiment built with material objects and based on collective memories. This will also reveal how the meaning of collective solidarity is dependent on the context in which a community is situated. My questions include:

- What were the collective memories that the curators tried to represent with the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection and the *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond* exhibition?
- To what extent could this curatorial practice build up a sense of collective solidarity as a sentiment amongst the local audiences?
- From whose perspective does M+ as a government-funded institution form such a collection based on these sentiments and memories?

This last question is critical because, if M+'s *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection is supposed to represent the shared experiences and values of Hong Kong audiences, it is expected to collect visual cultural objects about major events of the city, like the pro-democratic movements. However, the objects related to these movements, in which more than a million of Hongkongers (Hong Kong's population is about seven million) participated, are absent. Does this absence reflect the limitation of the museum to represent the collective memories about local culture, create the sentiment about local identity, and build up a sense of collective solidarity amongst the local audience? Does it show the hierarchy of power and authority in deciding what collective memories the local audiences should have about their own city? I will attempt to answer these questions also with reference to the debate over Ai Weiwei's works in M+'s Sigg Collection.

A neutral museum

When M+ opened in 2021, the largest social movements in 2019 and 2020, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, were just fading as the city struggled through the Covid-19 pandemic. In the *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond* exhibition's video tour, the narrator said:

This exhibition tells the story of Hong Kong visual culture through works of art, architecture, design, film and television, animation, and more. Divided into four chapters, the show reveals the continuities between past and present by highlighting works that reflect distinct identities for Hong Kong. The exhibition reflects on the city's historically open, dynamic culture and responses to unique challenges.³

The movement and the pandemic, as well as the 2014 Umbrella Movement, were certainly significant challenges for the city. But none of the curatorial notes and objects have referred to any of these events.

M+ has been regarded as one of the most ambitious art and cultural projects launched in the international museum scene since the plan of its building was announced in 2003. In 2019, I interviewed a curator of the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection about the reasons and goal of making this collection, which was supposedly tightly bound to the local socio-cultural issues. She defined the collection as a special project of the museum to look at how the three disciplines –

visual art, architecture, and design and moving images – established the distinctive visual culture of Hong Kong, and how collections could indicate the role of the museum in Hong Kong.

During the pandemic and the activist movements, lots of images, videos, and artworks were created by Hongkongers to articulate their opinions towards and their experiences of the events. For instance, the Umbrella Movement, a pro-democratic activist movement participated by tens of thousands of citizens, has witnessed a proliferation of visual symbols and cultural objects. When the demonstrators occupied the central area of the city and brought it to a virtual standstill for 79 days, umbrellas emerged as a symbol of solidarity to protect the demonstrators from the tear gas used by the police. The demonstrators created and designed many objects with reference to this symbol, including an Umbrella Man sculpture. I interviewed Kacey Wong, the founder of ‘Umbrella Movement Art Preservation’, a Facebook page that digitally recorded the creative works done by the demonstrators, also in 2019. He remarked on the conceptual empowerment of the sculpture and the umbrella symbol:

It’s about caring for others, even if they are your enemies. So, there is a super, super grand ideology. He [the Umbrella Man sculpture] was set up to explain all this complex philosophy. The work already spoke for itself. There is a lot of talking trying to explain what the spirit of the Umbrella Movement is [and] the artwork already says a lot. It’s like the Statue of Liberty or the recent Lady of Liberty of Hong Kong ... That’s the power of art.⁴

If the Umbrella Movement demonstrators had embedded such core social values in the objects they made, these objects seemed to fit into the M+ collection, particularly the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection, perfectly. However, it is not only that no collecting strategy or plan has been implemented, but the plans for acquiring Umbrella Movement objects have also actually drifted further and further away from M+’s door over the years since 2014.

During the movement, Charlotte Frost, the visiting assistant professor at the School of Creative Media in City University of Hong Kong, said, ‘Now we are in the midst of a self-organised creative call and response – suddenly anyone can be an artist, curator, critic, archivist ... And what’s more the work they are creating is all about Hong Kong’.⁵ Less than a month after the movement ended in December 2014, Lars Nittve, the M+ founding director, said that the museum was actively building its collection including Hong Kong art, and stressed the importance of



Figure 1 The photographs of the Umbrella Man sculpture documented by Kacey Wong in ‘Umbrella Movement Art Preservation’

freedom of collecting for gaining public trust.⁶ In 2016, Tina Pang, who was the curator of *Hong Kong Visual Culture*, claimed that as the movement’s objects represented the political awakening of an entire generation of young people, the museum had a plan to acquire some from the movement, regardless of the arguments about whether a government-funded institution would collect objects with anti-government messages or not.⁷

This decision about including the objects into the collection was, however, reverted in 2018. M+ told Agence France-Presse that the museum evaluated the recent past carefully and decided not to acquire any Umbrella Movement works. Oscar Ho, the associate professor of Practice in Cultural Management at Chinese University Hong Kong, who has actively lectured about Umbrella Movement art locally and internationally, sighed, ‘It’s like the whole world is interested except the institutions of Hong Kong’.⁸ This rejection of the activist movement objects opposes the concept of the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection in documenting local visual culture. It not only hinders the usefulness of museum collection for providing a comprehensive historic view of the city’s visual cultural development but also manifests the difficulty (if not impossibility) for public or sponsored institutions, like M+, to independently collect objects for their local audiences.

M+'s Hong Kong Visual Culture collection and exhibition

Without any objects related to the social movements happening in 2014 or 2019, the curatorial approach of the *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond* exhibition was thus obviously depicting the other side of the picture about contemporary Hong Kong visual culture history. This inaugural exhibition of the museum, running from October 2021 to July 2023, was the only exhibition on the ground floor of the museum and the only exhibition next to the main entrance. So, when I visited this museum for the first time in October 2022, this was easily the first exhibition that I chose to see.

As someone who was born in the 1990s and grew up during the transition of the city from the British colonial rule to the communist Chinese governance, I found that some parts of the exhibition recalled some of my own memories of the socio-cultural incidents that happened in the city. The first object that I encountered was the door with calligraphic graffiti by the 'King of Kowloon' Tsang Tsou Choi. In the video tour given by the curators of this exhibition, Pang described the curatorial notion behind this piece:

We always knew that we wanted to start the exhibition with this work, partly to give a really strong indication of our location 'here' in Kowloon. But then, secondly, because his work was so much for the public, he really wrote his calligraphy only on public surfaces – on utility housings, on pillar boxes, and so on – and it was intended for everyone to enjoy and for everyone to read.⁹

Although I lived on the Hong Kong Island and allegedly Tsang created his works solely on the Kowloon side of the city (as he was the 'legitimate owner' of Kowloon only), I did remember how often I would see his works on the pillars and walls around the streets in Kowloon when I visited my family living in that part of the city. His works were essentially one of the most iconic and memorable visual materials that I could see in the streets of Kowloon.

The next topic discussed by the curators was the relationship between the growing population and decreasing number of living spaces. The objects, such as Kacey Wong's *Paddling Home* and the special commissioned work of Gary Chang, a local designer who reproduced his home and showed design solutions to living in small spaces, captured Hong Kong's claustrophobic urban living environment due to the scarce land resource. I was able to reflect on such living experiences in the city as Pang iterated in her introduction about Chang's work as 'an ingenious design solution to living in small spaces today that is applicable not just to Hong



Figure 2 The door with the calligraphic graffiti by Tsang Tsou Choi in the *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond* exhibition

Kong, but to everywhere else in the world now. So, what we also loved about this project was that it's such a Hong Kong story'.¹⁰ While I am not sure about her assumption of the applicability or the necessity of using this kind of design solution in other urban cities, it was indeed necessary for many Hong Kong residents to use their living space efficiently. (Despite the disruptions caused by the 2019 protests and the pandemic, Hong Kong's residential property market was still ranked as the second most expensive in the world.) The shot of the view towards the Eastern Island Corridor through Chang's window further remarks on whose memory the exhibit is trying to refer to. The Corridor is known to be one of the most used and congested thoroughways with thousands of local commuters every day. Reinforcing this interconnection between the collection, the exhibition narrative, and the local audience's memories in the video tour, Pang also repeatedly used sentences like 'this is probably a larger shower than any of us in Hong Kong would normally have', and 'We felt that this was such an important thing to show public audiences, to really inspire them for how you can live better in your own small space'¹¹ when she talks about Chang's design concept.

In the section 'Places', a similar interconnection between the exhibits and the local collective memories is established by recounting the local living experiences through the interpretation of different urban design and architectural works. Shirley Surya, Curator of Design and Architecture, highlighted the significance of the public housing estate model of Tseung Kwan O and the conceptual building models that show the creative potential Hong Kong's dense urban conditions could intrigue. She associates the meaning of these objects to the local collective memories of the overcrowded living spaces and interprets these local living experiences as a kind of shared challenge. Chanel Kong, Associate Curator of *Moving Images*, rekindled the collective memories of Hong Kong everyday culture and life through the exhibit *Channel Surfing, 1970s–2000s* and the installation *Where Do We Look Now?*. The two exhibits showcased TV and film clips that local audiences might have watched when they slouched on their sofa at home after dinner in the evening. Underlining the montage of the film clips from the mass media, Kong commented, 'We're also trying to really generate how cinema has been such an important part of visual culture in Hong Kong, but also really [it's] about rewatching these stories to think about how they've also become our own stories as well'.¹² As many of these films are locally produced Cantonese films, it is not difficult to understand that what she means by 'our own stories' are the stories and memories of the common Hong Kong residents, who are the key audiences of Cantonese films.

Collective memories, collective solidarity, and museums

The curators of the *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond* exhibition did make an attempt to demonstrate how the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection is formed in relation to the collective memories and shared experiences of the local audience. Yet, from my perspective as part of the audience, there seemed to be some fundamental pieces missing from the exhibition, such as the creative objects during the pro-democratic movements in 2014 as well as those banners and sculptures created to commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre every year.

As aforementioned, M+ has its aim of being 'a global museum', with its targeted audience to be international travellers from around the world who are interested in both Western and Asian modern and contemporary art. On its website, the museum outlines the structure of its collection:

The M+ Collection is an interdisciplinary and transnational compendium of twentieth- and twenty-first-century visual culture, encompassing the disciplines of design and architecture, moving image, and visual art, and the thematic area of Hong Kong visual culture.¹³

The media of the objects in the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection are not different from the other disciplines the museum specified. Technically all the objects in this collection can also be categorised as and shown alongside the other non-Hong Kong objects. So, why did the museum decide to distinguish these locally created objects from the others? About this collection, the museum describes, 'The thematic area of Hong Kong Visual Culture brings together material from across disciplines, acknowledging M+'s home city as a framework for interpretation'. Although this description does not specify for whom the interpretation is made, the use of the term 'home city' is interesting. It is because, rather than using 'Hong Kong', 'home city' projects a sense of belonging, an intention to create a sentiment about and an understanding of the locality. It implies that the museum not only recognises the uniqueness of Hong Kong but is also capable of representing it through the visual culture collection.

However, reconsidering my experiences in M+, the title of the exhibition is *Hong Kong: Here and Beyond*, but most of the exhibits are related to the living experiences of people in Hong Kong from the mid-twentieth century to the end of the century. Of course, social topics, such as insufficient living spaces and public housing design, are still very much relevant to the contemporary audience. I did expect more exhibits and a larger part of the narrative to be about the city's present rather than the past, which is more relevant to my parents' or grandparents' generations. When I completed my visit of the exhibition, I found myself wondering the following questions:

What is the current visual culture of Hong Kong?

What do local artists, designers, and creative professionals discuss through their works today?

How do the city's current affairs and social issues inspire them to create?

After spending almost two hours in the exhibition, I found no answers to these questions. The absence of objects from the social movements suggests a discrepancy between the collective memories of Hongkongers and the sentiment that M+ curators tried to create through its collection. If this collection is supposed to define and narrate the visual culture history of Hong Kong, the sense of solid-

arity it requires to fulfil this role seems to be impeded by this distance between Hongkongers who have experienced the social movements and the museum's collection.

Still, does the museum want to generate this sense of solidarity or do they just want to create a sense of belonging rather than that of solidarity? The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word *solidarity* as 'agreement between and support for the members of a group, especially a political group'.¹⁴ Pertinent to my discussion above, M+ as a memory institution utilises the material objects that recall collective memories and produce sentiments towards Hong Kong everyday life, but without a political dimension. There seems to be an interconnection between recalling collective memories and facilitating collective solidarity with museum audiences at play there. To understand whether this interconnection is indeed present in the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection and its display, we need to understand how collective memories and collective solidarities are connected in the context of museums.

Anthropologist Sharon MacDonald identifies the memory preoccupation in Europe and the surge of advocacy for the commemoration of the past and the preservation of collective memory. She explains this memory phenomenon by attributing it to the *memory complex*, a shorthand for 'the memory-heritage-identity complex'. This complex can be regarded 'as an assemblage of practices, affects and physical things, which include such parts as memorial services, nostalgia and historical artefacts'. Museum collection is thus one of the potential forms, which plays a part in structuring and maintaining this complex.¹⁵ Viewing a collection of the past in a museum produces a contemporary cultural memory of objects that are gathered based on the social memory of the past, and this memory may attribute or contribute to the identity of the viewer. She highlights different types of memory related to this phenomenon. Although both *cultural memory* and *social memory* are used to describe a form of remembering that is shared amongst social groups, she clarifies that they do not necessarily imply the memory is held by everyone in the group. She takes these two terms as 'accounts or representations of the past that make some kind of claim to being shared'. What divides between these two memory types is that *culture memory* is 'more specifically to indicate memory whose primary form of transmission is through cultural media, such as texts, film and television, and museums and exhibitions, rather than through direct person-to-person transmission'. Cultural memory can have higher durability over time or be more capable to 'travel' across space.¹⁶ Rather than just being the collectors of the present-day social memories, museums are the makers of future cultural memories with material collections and displays.

In addition to the distinctions amongst different memory types, MacDonald quotes the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and links the concept of memory with that of solidarity through the idea of sharing and remembering amongst social groups. Halbwachs's book *La Memoire Collective* pioneered the study of memory in relation to solidarity by underlining the importance of the shared memories of various social groups. He suggested that social groups scaffold the frameworks for remembering and create senses of collective solidarity. The act of remembrance and its subsequently generated senses of collective solidarity would, at least partly, give rise to the social entities that individuals might adopt in collective commemoration.¹⁷ Laurajane Smith also discussed the act of collective commemoration and its connection with solidarity along with her concept of authorised heritage discourse. While she discloses the political control behind the evaluation of heritage, she underscores how industrial museums respond to that by using solidarity. The museums render the meaning and relevance of a proclamation of a class identity in the past to the present-day audiences 'through the critical work of social commentary that many respondents undertook – in short, reacting emotionally, but using that to think and reflect'.¹⁸

Benedict Anderson, political historian, delves further into the political importance and power of museums in facilitating and determining collective memories and solidarity. Regarding museums as one of the three institutions of power that the authority restrains and inculcates nationalistic ideas into their subjects, he emphasises museums' role in shaping the legitimacy and characteristics of the identity of the subjects as a community with a representation of their community history.¹⁹ In other words, it is the function of museums to provide materials for the community to grow a sense of collective solidarity. Through museum displays and collections, the members of a community with the same identity can agree with and support each other's ideas about their ancestral past and its relevance to their present life. However, if the community members disagree with the representations, those displays and collections can become nothing more than the points to trigger the members to consider who are in power to control the narratives produced by a museum and projected on the representations of their identity.

Thinking about the absences

Referring back to M+, the absence of objects from the social movements was not the only instance that the museum had to engage in local politics. The debate about the neutrality of M+ and the freedom of display and collecting continued

with the controversial mainland Chinese activist artist Ai Weiwei in 2021. After Hong Kong national security law came into effect in 2020, for the preparation of its opening in November, a local pro-Beijing politician Eunice Yung Hoi-yan started questioning the suitability and legality of displaying the work *Tian'anmen* from Ai Weiwei's *Study of Perspective* photographic series. Known for being a dissent artist in China, Ai's works often advocate to challenge political authorities and institutions in power, including the Chinese government. *Tian'anmen* was one of the many works that photographed the moments when he flipped his middle finger to iconic cultural sites and political landmarks. From the prominent modern and contemporary Chinese collection donated by the Swiss art collector Uli Sigg, this photograph was an early work of the series along with the ones against White House, Bundeshaus Bern, and *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre. As *Tian'anmen* might symbolise a dissident view against the central Chinese government authority, Yung suggested that displaying such an object might contravene the national security law by spreading hatred against the home country.

In response to this issue, Suhanya Raffel, the director of M+, said that there would be 'no problem' to display Ai's works and stressed during the first press tour of the museum in March 2021:

We have always had a robust curator-led approach to everything we do and that is underpinned by research and academic rigour. Like any global museum, it is our role to present art in a relevant and appropriate manner and stimulate debate, knowledge, and pleasure. A city can only be a welcoming arts hub if it offers an open environment for artists and for different views.²⁰

Meanwhile, the Chief Executive of the city Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor underscored that the government would be 'extra cautious' about this kind of artwork, although she considered a line should be drawn between the freedom of cultural and artistic creation and the subversive expressions against the national security law. However, under this political backdrop, the museum ended up stopping themselves from displaying Ai's works and removing solely the image of *Tian'anmen* rather than all the images of the photographic series from its online catalogue.

This absence of Ai's work from display offers some insights about the absence of the objects of the social movements. The difficulty for M+ to offer collective solidarity with the local audience lays in its close and complex ties with governmental sponsors.

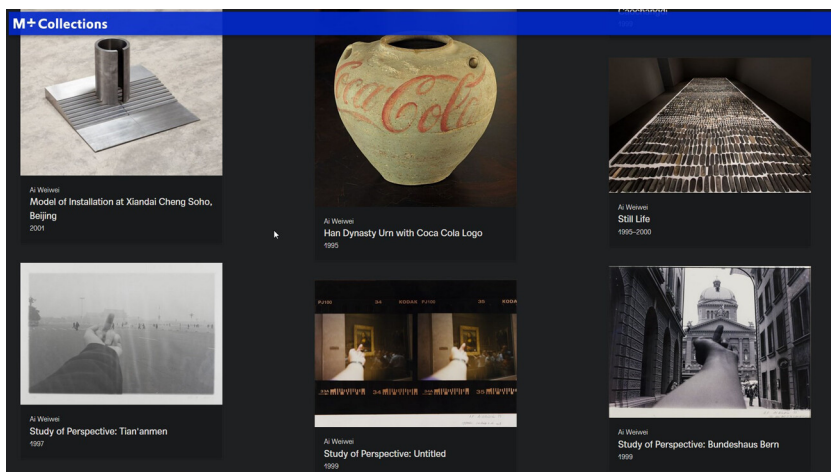


Figure 3 The M+ online catalogue with an image of *Tian'anmen* before the museum opened in November 2021

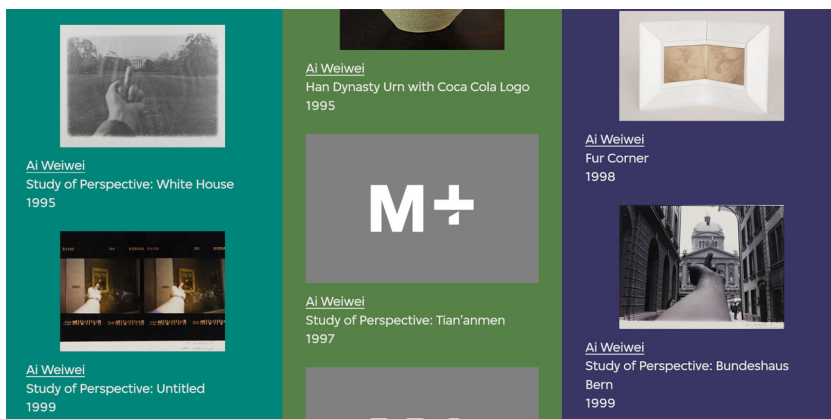


Figure 4 The current M+ online catalogue, which does not provide an image of *Tian'anmen*

If M+ is supposed to be an institution whose ideas about local history and identity the authorities can control, as Anderson suggested, the absence of a political dimension of Hong Kong's visual cultural history from the *Hong Kong Visual Culture* collection and its exhibition can, on one hand, make it difficult to grow a sense of collective solidarity amongst the local audiences who have experienced the

movements. On the other hand, the obvious absence of the political dimension of Hong Kong visual culture in the collection and exhibition also implies the acknowledgement of the curatorial team of the control over political discussions in the city, a situation that the local audiences can easily identify with as well. What this dilemma spotlights is the question of whose collective solidarity a museum can or should care about.

Notes

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- 16 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 14.
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About the contributor

Trained as a social art historian at University College London and University of Amsterdam, Hoyee Tse is interested in the meaning-making of art and cultural objects and the politics of cultural representation. She earned a postgraduate degree with distinction at UCL Institute of Education with her dissertation focusing on contemporary museum collecting practices. She was the 2022 Design Trust Curatorial Fellow at the Royal College of Art and the 2023 Young Researcher Fellow of the Creative Impact Research Centre Europe at u-institut. She is currently a doctoral student in Transcultural Arts and Sociology at London Metropolitan University with the Vice Chancellor’s Scholarship.

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