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Bonbonnieres in the gallery: (re)presenting sugar in a family gallery space

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Abstract

This paper charts an on-going process emerging from a collaborative project between Manchester Art Gallery, and early childhood researchers and practitioners, who are currently working together to develop a new learning space for families. It revolves around the potential of exhibiting a collection of bonbonnieres in this space. These little 18th Century pots, originally filled with sweets or breath mints, are colourful and depict fanciful animals that have an almost cartoon like quality that may resonate with younger children. Yet the contents that once lay inside would have been cut from plantations by the hands of enslaved people. Sugar, in all its sweetness, is intrinsically linked to Britain's colonial history. Sections of a poem by Tina Orito Tamsho-Thomas (<http://revealinghistories.org.uk/smoking-drinking-and-the-british-sweet-tooth/objects/bonbonniere.html>) are emplaced throughout to unambiguously contextualise the bonbonniere as a symbol of enslavement legacy, sugar trade history and British colonialism. Today, excess sugar consumption sits at the heart of the healthy eating agenda, a key priority area for local early years providers. In this paper, textual 'fragments' act as provocations in a series of interdisciplinary conversations that were initiated as a strategy to unsettle the positions of the institution and its curators, educators and practitioners, opening up discursive thinking about the potential of this particular object-space ensemble. By considering these bonbonnieres as 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010) that can affect and be affected within the gallery space (Tolia-Kelly, 2016) we ask questions about how these objects might sit alongside the daily interactions that occur in the space in a way that opens up 'discomfort zones'.

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Keywords

museums and families, de-colonising, early years, art gallery engagement, bonbonnières

Introduction

In order to produce 'dewalling atmospheres' (2016, 1004) in public spaces, Vrastri and Dayal suggest that we must become aware of the

"class and colonial dimensions of many of the taken for granted and innocently functional arrangements operative in Western liberal societies, from the ideal of responsible citizenship/subjecthood to the rules of assessment, etiquette, and advancement, guarding access to our institutions and fields of action, as well as the values promoted in our normative discourses and the desires perpetuated in our 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977, 128–135)." (2016, 1004)

This paper charts an on-going collaborative project between Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), and early childhood researchers and practitioners, currently working together to develop a new learning space for families. Sections of *Bonbonniere* - a poem by Tina Otito Tamsho-Thomas (<http://revealinghistories.org.uk/smoking-drinking-and-the-british-sweet-tooth/objects/bonbonniere.html>) are interwoven throughout the text, in order to unambiguously contextualise the *bonbonniere* as a symbol of enslavement legacy, sugar trade history and British colonialism and to raise awareness of reparations, global equality, racial justice and human rights. Tina is a former Performance Poet-in-Residence for MAG's Bicentenary Anniversary Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and one of the authors on this paper.

The new family learning space, on the ground floor and near the front of the gallery, was planned to open in May 2020 (delayed due to Covid19 pandemic), and aspires to provide a range of services beyond the frequent conflation of childhood and learning in museum and gallery provision (e.g. Hackett et al, 2020; Kirk, 2016). The gallery is interested in inter-sectoral collaboration, and co-production within service development. For example, the project seeks to connect with concerns around education, health, wellbeing, family lives, and new forms of sociality for young children in the city, through partnerships between Children's Centres, nurseries, health visitors, and academics. The family space will host a mixed programme including local health services, Sure Start learning and development programmes alongside curated art works that link to policy-led family initiatives set by Greater Manchester Council, where childhood obesity and tooth decay are priorities (Greater Manchester Council, 2016).

Decision making about the design and activation of the new family space is anchored in regular interprofessional discussions that we, the authors of this paper, have been part of. This group includes two local nurseries and Sure Start centres, health visitors, an artist, a curator and a learning engagement manager. As well as considering what programmes will be run in the space and the needs of the different partners involved, we have been attending to the design of the space and which objects from the collection will be displayed. This paper follows threads of our discussions around one collection of objects in particular, *bonbonnières*, chosen

because of their potential to act as an affective ‘discomfort zone’ that could open up new ways of learning and feeling.

Poem extract (1)

‘I am Bonbonniere, made in my master’s image, veneered, refined, ornate... emblem of Europe’s plundered wealth and power.’

These little 18th Century pots (see Figures 1-3), originally filled with sweets or breath mints, could be described as quaint, playful or cute. Many in the collection are colourful and depict fanciful animals with an almost cartoon like quality that may resonate with younger children. Yet the contents that once lay inside would have been cut from plantations by the hands of enslaved people. Sugar, in all its sweetness, is intrinsically linked to Britain’s colonial history, a luxury product precisely because its production involves back-breaking work.

Poem extract (2)

‘...from my exquisite minted mouth I wretched Europe’s bitter anthem and sweetened the stench of blood-drenched world hypocrisy.’

In recent times, high sugar processed diets are more likely to be associated with lower income households. In the current context, sugar has become the focus of health initiatives e.g. Greater Manchester’s aim to half children’s sugar intake through the Change4life campaign (Greater Manchester Health and Social Partnership, 2019). Thus, the bonbonnières can be considered “bittersweet” (Abbott, 2010) objects that might create a space that acknowledges colonisation alongside the presumed innocence of childhood and the ‘suitability’ of this knowledge. At this stage, it is unclear how connections with enslavement, the sugar trade, childhood obesity, tooth decay and Bonbonniere’s may be reconciled in the family space.

Montage-as-process

As the bonbonnières began to draw our attention, and inspired by this SI call, we extended our discussions to include curators from the gallery who had information to share about the objects and their history and freelance advisors and artists who work to engage audiences with these objects. Talking and meeting via zoom, in the midst of the Covid19 crisis, these discussions have contributed to the writing of this paper, and the people involved are acknowledged as a coda. In the weeks in which we were finalising the paper, the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killing of George Floyd were just beginning, and as the paper was written, the slave-trader Edward Colston’s statue was toppled and heaved into the waters of the Bristol dock. Following this, over 30,000 people participated in Manchester’s BLM protest (June 20, 2020) as global slave trade legacies erupted with and through local histories in the making. These events, reverberating from an object that is affectively tied to global meshworks of shipping, consumption, slavery, also participate in this writing.

In a methodology of montage inspired by Walter Benjamin (Dillon, 2004) of fragmented images and thoughts (collected, imagined, plundered and juxtaposed), we hope to keep the space of possibility open in terms of what the bonbonnières might ‘do’ as objects housed in the family space. As part of her research for this paper, Tina visited the British Library and she noted these words accompanying the ‘Our Treasures’ Exhibition : ‘We aim to use these collections to advance

knowledge about colonialism and slavery and in doing so contribute to the elimination of their racist legacy in the world'. This raised questions for us of how the bonbonnières could be used in the new family learning space to raise awareness and activate change around sugar and healthy eating, at the same time as honouring these intentions.

Poem extract (3) 'Parasites feeding off the land, African heritage, African land.'

In the second section of the paper we place textual fragments (historical and fictional) that relate to the bonbonnières next to and in conversation with textual fragments that relate to the contemporary sugar epidemic and local healthy eating policy campaigns that respond to this. This 'conversation' offers (in Benjamin's terms) a "dialectic of past and present" (Dillon, 2010) in and around individual fragments as they encounter each other. Our aim in this paper is to open ourselves to the event of bonbonnières through what Massumi (2017, 79) might call a process of "continuity and rupture". We try to put the bonbonnières into play with notions of the gallery space for art appreciation, art-making, and pleasure, that are so often underpinned by narratives of the innocent and apolitical child. Alongside this we also sense ruptures of colonial history and legacies inscribed in museum and gallery exhibits. Keeping these tensions in play we feel our way into the complexity of MAG's new agenda, as they work to continually open up the gallery to Sure Start, health visiting teams and the Change4life and healthy eating agendas.

By considering these bonbonnières as "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010) that can affect and be affected within the gallery space (Tolia-Kelly, 2016), we raise questions about how an object placed in a family learning gallery might sit alongside the daily interactions that occur in the space in a way that opens up 'discomfort zones'. The paper explores the liveliness of objects in relation to histories and museum atmospheres. Inspired by Blaise (2016), we experiment with performative writing that "acknowledges that thought and meaning are sporadic, discursive, material and impossible to pin down." (2016, 618). In the final part of the paper, we pick up on her use of storytelling and provocation as a way to help both ourselves and readers to make 'sense for themselves' (2016, 618) of what these encounters with bonbonnières might offer.

Poem extract (4) '... made their ill-gotten gains from... misery, cruelty... gluttony and greed.'

These stories do not provide answers on how to display bonbonnières 'correctly' but consider how the historical, social, physical and political can co-exist within an object as a multiplicity of stories.

Lively objects and history-as-process

The toppling of Colston's statue touches the life-force of the bonbonnières as exhibited imperial objects and the affective atmospheres that they produce as museum exhibits. This event touched both us and the bonbonnières in complex, unresolved and contradictory ways. We hear that the statue has just been fished out of the water and will be kept with the daubs of paint, dents and the trawler rope that was attached to its feet in order to haul it out. We hear that it will be kept safe and then displayed in one of the city museums as a testament to the making of history. The momentous ripples of this event are of a considerable magnitude, but we are

cautious about this as a definitive point: heeding Benjamin, we are reminded that we do not make history so much as act in it (Korsgarrd, 2018, 183). As Arendt says “History is a story which has many beginnings and no endings” (Arendt, 1994, 320). The affective capacity of this statute to incite, provoke, oppress and enrage was already resonating through both its slave legacies, and conversations with Black activists in Bristol for many years. The killing of George Floyd has surfaced this more transparently, so that the statue’s upcoming petrification in a Bristol museum will transform it into a different kind of memorial to the ongoing struggles against, and resistances to that which the statue itself represents and celebrates.

Folded into its bronze materiality is; virus and protests; history and politics; philanthropy and oppression. In 2018, Tina was commissioned as Spoken Word Performance Poet for Bristol’s African Diaspora Festival and invited by the Mayor to participate in a university organised symposium about the statue’s future. Hearing first-hand accounts of its psychological impact - particularly on African Caribbean communities - their voices silenced for decades, was as enlightening as visiting a predominantly Black area. Most streets, schools and other Colston named public buildings are a daily reminder of ongoing inequality, racial injustice and institutional oppression. The negative effects of ‘living’ history are equally important as concerns about oppressive statues.

The statue paradoxically suspends austerity, shame, exhilaration, exploitation, allyship, racism, and collective resistance in tension with one another. How can this subversive life force be kept alive? The Colston ‘statue’ (etymology – to stare, stand) could perhaps be exhibited as lying, staring but no longer standing. In its new de-territorialized state it could be understood to resist what Patel and Binter describe as “the exhibitionary focus on empire [to]... maintain European paradigms, and prevent discomfort, instead of decentering [it]” (cited in Giblin, Ramos & Grout, 2019: 484). As we think about the bonbonnières we want to keep this dynamic vision of Colston’s statue, together with the potential such objects might have to disrupt the paradigms that are typically at play in relation to, for example history, legacy, race, community and childhood.

A (dis)comforting welcome

The overall aim of our inter-professional and cross-disciplinary collaboration is to create a new and more welcoming learning space for families with young children in the art gallery. What Katy McCall (MAG’s family learning manager) hopes to achieve is a safe and evolving space that is resourceful, non-prescriptive, open-ended, physical, co-operative, social and trusting (McCall et al, 2020). Culturally appropriate knowledge and expertise will be necessary to give ‘silenced external voices, access, power, visibility and voice in narratives of empire.’ (Giblin et al. 2019: 483). Manchester’s African Caribbean community has a wealth of professional historians, academics, community artists/educators, family organisations and health/well-being practitioners: knowledges that must be valued, involved and made visible.

What does it mean, then, to welcome people, to host? What does it feel like to be a ‘stranger’ or be hosted somewhere? Being hospitable might involve producing “a space in which the affective and material practice of *my* crossing is made possible.” (Zembylas, 2020, 43). This perhaps is akin to what our group is aiming for; a space where *crossing* felt more possible or comfortable for more people. A space

where the feeling of being a stranger or being hosted could be reframed. We wondered then, how to

“construct spaces without walls, *deprivileged* atmospheres that have entry requirements which are transparent and as low as possible, offer freedom of movement, and sanctuary for all manner of vulnerabilities” (Vastri and Dayell, 2016, 1003)

At the same time, we recognise that we occupy a privileged position, and the museum itself is a repository of privilege; an environment that feels comfortable to some at the exclusion of others. In our initial discussions about creating a space that is hospitable, we also recognised that a space is never neutral; romantic notions about childhood and innocence are discourses that bind family values in ways that perpetuate classed and anti-black exclusions. As Zembylas articulates ‘Treating hospitality as a process and product of affectivity and materiality does not mean we need to romanticize it as a space in which comfort will be bounded.’ (original emphasis, 2020, 43).

Barad (2019) urges us to think more critically about hospitality, proposing that “ongoing violence...condenses around questions of hospitality”. Barad gives us the example of the Marshall Islands, described as ‘playing host’ to 65 nuclear tests by the US over an 11-year period during the mid 20th century. Hospitality then, can be “a mechanism for invasion”; in a colonial relationship there is little difference between playing host and being under siege. It is important to critically ask, “What are the conditions or possibilities of hosting? What constitutes an ethical and just relation of hospitality?” By holding a space for relations of tension to surface, moments of discomfort might allow us to engage with new ways of being together in a shared space. While we do not claim that we can create spaces that resolve these questions of power, we are attempting to resist hegemonic apolitical truths (for example, about families and children), in order to open up the possibility for generating multiple, situated and explicitly political stories. Housing the *bonbonnieres* in the family space offers us an opportunity to analytically and experimentally (dis)comfort the institution and our position in it, to create “a welcome disjuncture - one that does not make the usual sense and where difference can be made together” (Blaser and Cadena, 2018, 8).

However, it is not the act of placing the *bonbonnieres* in the space that can accomplish this, but rather what they could allow to take place, if we take up their call for us to respond. This calls for the kind of response-ability that Beausoleil advocates “where to be responsible is to remain receptive and responsive within the encounter, despite the challenges it might present to our worldview and implication of our role within it” (2015, 2).

This kind of responsiveness is also something we think needs cultivating through relationships, over time, and through a commitment to collective actions. The writing of this paper is one of many beginnings in the process of fabricating the family learning space at MAG. Collective action should not assume single narratives but work to remain open to difference.

“the deployment of discomfort towards seeking highly contextualized, contingent, and specific knowledge of similarities and differences with others over time can work to create an environment of decolonizing solidarity... one must strive for highly specific and contextualized understanding of

differences, engagement with difference over time, and cultivation of a relationship with difference based on discomfort and contingency." (Boudreau Morris, 2017, 459)

In housing the bonbonnières as ambiguous objects that (dis)comfort, we are interested in how they might play a part in the affective atmospheres of the family learning space. Thinking about the atmosphere of the museum reminds us that we need to pay attention to the felt sensations of entering a space (Ahmed, 2014), sensations that exceed the bodies that produce them. In other words, atmospheres of welcome and feelings of crossing are never completely under human control and are difficult to predict.

In discussing experiences of visiting museums through a postcolonial lens, Tolia-Kelly (2016) regards museums as sites where feelings about others as 'others' materialize in a particular geometry of power relations rather than a 'neutral' site of display (also Minott, 2019). Atmosphere is never neutral or universal. As Ahmed (2014) writes

"we may walk into the room and 'feel the atmosphere', but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point."

Slippery as they are, then, questions of affective atmosphere and hospitality are central to creating a welcoming space in the gallery for families and young children.

Hard Peas and Slippery Objects

Objects, like atmospheres, are slippery too - even though they are more obviously touchable than an atmosphere - they play a part in creating atmospheres. An active part of the daily encounters within the space, such objects can be regarded as having "Thing-power...the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects..." (Bennett, 2010, xvi). The bonbonnières, and the inability to present them through one linear definition, are a tangible example of how a material thing "might be more likely to escape definition and consistency, baffle and provoke, as well as incite curiosity and intrigue" (Holmes et al, 2020, 15). A member of the zoom discussion we had with curators and community partners suggested that the history, as well as their lacquered hard surface, made them work like the hard pea under the many mattresses in Hans Christian Andersen's story – making itself uncomfortably felt. Some dictionary definitions of bonbonniere avoids reference to enslavement or sugar trade history:

'A small fancy box or dish for bon bons'. Merriam Webster.

As primary sources of information, dictionaries can promote 'hidden histories' causing (mis)education in history teaching and learning which, through collaborative arts/education processes, the figure of the bonbonniere could effectively challenge.

Poem extract (5) 'I am Bonbonniere, possessed by prosperous, profiteering predatory pirates...'

Here we recall Arendt and Benjamin's interest in surfacing "pearls" (Korsgaard, 2018), as objects that contain fragmented pasts; rather than exemplifying history, they offer us "a stubborn subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable" (Burman, 2008, 72). We think of the hard and resistant material qualities of the bonbonnières as also contributing to the notion of "the museum as meshwork of multiple past-present-future entanglements and encounters" (Hackett et al, 2020, 16). Through these multiple encounters the bonbonnières have the capacity to "animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." (Bennett, 2010, 6). The objects themselves have a certain liveliness that we can care for and respond to. Harris and HolmanJones (2019) trace the threads between valuing life, both human and nonhuman, beyond the "functional or use-value analysis", arguing for the "sacredness of all life – whether we recognise it as life or not" (9). Because "objects have an agency that may not yet be recognisable to humans" (17) they may be able to teach us about humility and care; they may help us to shift

"our attention from our anthropocentric obsessions just long enough to make us love ourselves as and always in relation to others once more." (Harris and HolmanJones, 2019, 1)

Fragments

In the following section we have gathered fragmentary pieces of writing that cohere into 6 short collected sections (including some are our own speculative fictions – in italics). They should be read in suspension alongside each other: they offer us splinters that remind us that they need to be kept in play as the family gallery opens, and the bonbonnières take up residence in this space.

Childhood innocence and apolitical children

Millei and Kallio (2018) argue that early childhood spaces can never be apolitical. As Nxumalo and ross (2019) point out, anti-blackness is at the heart of the trope of childhood innocence, underpinning normative framings of early childhood education within settler colonialism. They advise us to "consider salvation and deficit discourses alongside the prevailing economic privilege and whiteness" (503).

As long as childhood innocence is treated as the defining feature of being a child, some young people will be considered more 'childlike' than others. Frequently, the state of innocent play-not-work is available only to affluent white children, whilst children in the global south labour and suffer to ensure the ongoing comfort and privilege of this exclusive childhood (e.g. Gallagher, 2019). The bonbonnières and their sugary contents, for example, both depended on child labour and suffering.

"The very absence of considering children as political agents is a political act in itself and most of the time it remains unacknowledged as such." (Millei and Kallio, 2018, 43).

It is not that play-not-work is an idealised state of childhood and should be universally available to all children. But rather, that we should be open to the



Figure 1

Bonbonniere, 1785-1795, enamel, copper and gilt, made in South Staffordshire, UK, from the Harold Raby bequest at Manchester Art Gallery.

diversity of experiences and lives of young humans, whilst at the same time acknowledging the (frequently racialized) damage and violence enacted through a universalised notion of childhood as a state of apolitical innocence.

Children, museums and coloniality

In her account of visiting the British Museum, Tolia-Kelly (2016) describes the discomfort of viewing one's own culture or experience through a fixed, Western-centric and universalising lens. She argues that 'othering' involves knowledge being fixed or disembodied, removed from the specificity of place and community. Blaise (2016) notes that scientific categorisation and ordering of museum gallery objects, and the categorisation of child development stages have similar historic roots.

"The colonization of most parts of the non-Western world (and lands that came to dominate the West like the United States) and the emergence of the most commonly accepted discourses about children took place in the same historical period and served similar purposes." (Cannella and Viruru, 2004, 3)

Scientific study and categorisation of both the natural and cultural world, and of the developing child stem from an Enlightenment interest in know-ability and mastery of white humans over the rest of the world. This is demonstrated by the



Figure 2

Bonbonniere, 1785-1795, enamel, copper and gilt, made in South Staffordshire, UK, from the Harold Raby bequest at Manchester Art Gallery.

intense governing of childhood (Cannella and Viruru, 2004), and the advocating of notions such as 'quality' or 'development' as universal (Jones et al, 2016). Associated with this is the careful surveillance of mothers in particular, whom as Skeggs points out (1997), have long been viewed as key to providing a civilizing and regulatory influence within the home. This included acting as a stabilising force at 'home' during the crisis and collapse of the British Empire during the 19th century. The hierarchy of cultures described by Tolia-Kelly in relation to imperialism is paralleled in the presentation of culturally specific parenting advice, in which white Western, middle class modes of parenting are presented as natural, preferable or superior (e.g. Nxumalo and Brown, 2020; Cannella and Viruru, 2004).

Bonbonnières: sugar and colonisation

For a turn of five seasons the sugar cane grows, tended by the very young and the very old. It takes a strong body, working through the day and into the night, to cut them down and set them on their way to the crushing mill. Crushed through rollers to extract the juice, it spills down to the boiling house where boiling coppers and cooling tanks allow the crystals to form. Left in the curing house to filter for the turn of another season before parts are cut away revealing the pure white sugar. Tended, cut, crushed and refined by the hands of enslaved people until it is sent across the ocean to linger in the dark of a tiny box, waiting to dissolve in the warmth of a wealthy British mouth.

A bonbonniere is a small ceramic pot, popular in the 18th Century. Decorated with a high number of glazes, they were usually made in Staffordshire as the skills required to make them were similar to those already passed down through the Staffordshire potteries. The particular bonbonnières that we discuss in this paper were gifted to the gallery in 1958. These bonbonnières were sometimes known as

figural and are seen less often as it is suspected that they broke more easily and were perhaps of more interest to butter-fingered children.

The sweets that were once held inside these boxes would have been made from sugar cane cut by enslaved people in the Caribbean on British owned sugar plantations. The trade in sugar was founded on the transport of millions of enslaved people from Africa to labour for the cultivation and refinement of sugar. At that time sugar was an expensive product for the wealthy, but, over time, rising production reversed this, with sugar prices falling and sugar becoming integrated into diets across social class. Tightly controlled through taxation and tariff, sugar is always entangled in what Haraway calls the plantationocene (2015), a system of farming underpinned by shipping, slavery, racism, colonialism, and consumption. Tsing draws our attention to how this system that intensifies yield presages an industrialisation-to-come (Tsing, 2012, 148).

Pedagogies of healthy eating

“The burden of childhood obesity is being felt the hardest in more deprived areas with children growing up in low income households more than twice as likely to be obese than those in higher income households.” (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018)

Broom and Warin (2011) point out that most health outcomes and health risk factors, including obesity, are inversely correlated with social class and affluence. BMI is a problematic tool “narrow and limited in its ability to measure the dynamic complexities of obese bodies” (455), and unable to account for culturally and historically specific understandings of food, fatness and thinness. This homogenising of body types, health and cultural perspectives on fatness can also be traced visually within the UK’s Change4Life campaign, which featured neutral abstracted ‘bodies’ of indiscernible gender, race or size, that required ‘fixing’ through interventions such as diet and exercise (Colls and Evans, 2010, Evans et al, 2011).

The sugar that was once kept precious inside little boxes has now spread out across the dining table. Sugar is in sauces, soups, and cereals. It causes obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Parents must defend their family from the two million pounds of sugar that are sold in the UK each year. Yet sugar sits in tiny boxes, wrapped in gold paper, as if it is still that precious breath mint inside the bonbonniere.

The (doomed) politics of playing host

Derrida tells us it is necessary to create a situation of constant discomfort to guard against ethical complacency. For Derrida (cited in Barad, 2019) there is an impossibility of hospitality; that is, as a host, if you offer unconditional hospitality, you give up sovereignty (and therefore cannot host). Thus, hosting requires sovereignty; hospitality can only operate through choosing and excluding. This reminds us that welcoming children and families into any space is never neutral, it always involves taking some sort of political stance (and even declaring spaces of childhood neutral is a political stance in itself) (Millei and Kallio, 2018).

There is a danger that the bonbonnières might only ever 'exhibit' the sugar trade, which as Patel and Binter point out, "the exhibitionary focus on empire can reinforce stereotypes, such as those of loss and victimhood, and thus maintain European paradigms, and prevent discomfort, instead of decentring them" (cited in Giblin, Ramos & Grout, 2019: 484).

For Derrida, it is necessary to create a situation of constant discomfort to guard against ethical complacency. Derrida claims a text is both translatable and untranslatable at the same time. And it is this tension of two things at once that creates a discomfort (Foran, 2015, 35), "it is precisely to the untranslatable in every other – text, language, culture, person . . ." – that we must be hospitable. This is what makes absolute hospitality impossible, uncomfortable and interminable. Because we can never succeed in welcoming that which exceeds us, our welcoming is thus also always and already a failed mourning: "...always doomed to fail . . .to incorporate, interiorize introject, subjectivize the other in me [...] a mourning that is moreover impossible." (Derrida, 1995: 321, cited in Foran, 2015, 38)

Kaolinite and Enamel

Kaolinite; soft, white earth drawn from underneath the surface. Mixed with water and moulded by deft hands until it resembles, in some form, the body of a frog; a dull outer form without eyes, the dapples of skin or the outlines of limbs. From there each glaze is added and with each glaze a new firing, a new moment where the fabric of this hollow frog might crack. Glaze, and fire, and the frog is green. Glaze and fire and its spots appear. Glaze and fire and the white of its eyes are open. Each firing, a moment of revelation when the kiln is opened and, with bated



Figure 3

Bonbonniere, 1785-1795, enamel, copper and gilt, made in South Staffordshire, UK, from the Harold Raby bequest at Manchester Art Gallery

breath, the frog reemerges, again and again. Once, twice, thrice until the frog has held itself together in heat for twenty rounds of luck.

“The acid is produced by the bacteria when they break down food debris or sugar on the tooth surface. Simple sugars in food are these bacteria’s primary energy source and thus a diet high in simple sugar is a risk factor” (Wikipedia)

“A dynamic process takes place at the surface of the tooth that involves constant demineralization and remineralization of the tooth enamel (the caries balance). Multiple factors affect that dynamic process and can be manipulated in ways that tip the balance toward disease (demineralization) or health (remineralization). These factors include bacteria, sugar, saliva, and fluoride.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014)

Concluding thoughts: the potential of Bonbonnières as a discomfort zone.

In this paper we have shown the bonbonnières as vibrant matter that cannot be pinned down, yet gesture towards a multiplicity of stories. Stories are not neutral, however, and their thing-power is also a question of responsibility: their “efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (Bennett, 2010, 21). In the bonbonniere, we find a juxtaposition of different theories and disciplines; education, theory, art, that seem to offer us the possibility to reconceptualize the everyday happenings within the gallery. The space that holds the bonbonnières, the way that they are presented and the interactions that happen around them play an active part in allowing different stories to emerge in “sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (Bennett, 2010, 9).

Advocating for working across disciplines as a disruptive source, rather than a route to neat and efficient solutions, Holmes and Jones (2013) write, “when a body encounters another body, or an idea another idea, it happens that sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts.” (358). Our collaborative project at MAG has been polyvocal and inter-disciplinary, working across art, education and culture to begin to develop a different kind of offer for early years audiences in a gallery space.

We hope that the bonbonnières have the potential to generate some “institutional critique through disobedience” (Giblin, et al. 2019). Writing of von Zinnenburg Carroll’s project at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Giblin, Ramos & Grout, propose,

“...a way of working with museum collections as an outsider to the institution’, ... [working] with, and at times against, the museum to ... [highlight] the institutional, managerial and curatorial discomfort felt when once silenced external voices are given access, power, visibility and voice in narratives of empire” (2019, 483).

Decomposition and disobedience may enable a move away from fixed resolutions about what a thing is, be that a bonbonniere, a child or a family gallery space.

Instead, our aspiration is to allow a more discursive space to open up, where multiple stories can emerge that move beyond notions of solution or perhaps even of resolution. We note Tuck and Ree's (2012) argument in relation to colonial hauntings; that the choice to resolve is a political act in itself, one that reasserts the innocence of the 'hero' and thus continues a colonial ontology.

What, we wonder, would it mean to (begin the work to) decolonise a family space in MAG on multiple levels, thinking across how objects are displayed, how hospitable atmospheres are constituted and how childhood might be conceived in ways that evade the ghost of white, apolitical innocence? In trying to constitute a space that is hospitable but not resolved, we are trying to work with histories that are not over (Ahmed, 2017) or, as Tuck and Ree put it, a "ghost [that] is alive" (Tuck and Ree, 2013, 647) and cannot be contained.

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