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Project Curator

RSVP Contemporary Artists at The Foundling

Overview of how the Artists Approached their Commission

Each artist has been commissioned to make new work for RSVP.

For **Sandra Flower** and **Sarah Sabin** working with historic interiors and museum objects has long been part of their individual practice.

Sandra Flower has taken an element of the foundlings' lives which was both theirs and not really theirs at all: the names that were given to them by the institution when they entered. She emphasises the idea of rote and repetition that is associated with old notions of class teaching and the formulaic style of handwriting which, while elegant, can wipe out individual expression. She also makes direct links with interior or product design and aspiration for children's futures across the centuries. The work slips quietly into place under the dado of the first floor Foyer, a witty take on graffiti but also a sensitive and echoing roll call.

Sarah Sabin responded to the magnificent seventeenth century elm refectory table in the Committee Room which was in everyday use in the Hospital during the eighteenth century. She has put putative power in the hands of children whose own small committee table and chairs have been abandoned and she also shows that the children have put together an arsenal for protection. Her work has been described as "reverse archaeology" where she has created tangible evidence for an imagined history or story. What event has just taken place? Have the children gone out to plot their expedition further or have they been interrupted before they could complete their protective kits?

Both artists have brought in to the museum "conventional" materials: wallpaper, china mugs, furniture and clothing but subvert the norm by leaving a powerful impression of children, their vulnerability and their continuing dependence.

Lorraine Douglas and **Alex Pearl** have brought an element of performance into the whole. Each reminds us that Georg Frederic Handel played a vital role as patron to the Hospital bequeathing a copy of the score of the Messiah and composing a Foundling Hospital Anthem.

Lorraine Douglas chose to intervene in the room in which elements from the Gerald Coke Handel Collection are displayed. An out-moded telephone has appeared. With so many overlapping fashions at play in The Foundling it is tricky to use the term “out-moded”. This item was of course unheard of in Handel’s day and is of rather clumsy technology today. Were it to ring, it would shatter the calm contemplation but, even silent, it cannot help but disturb and attract the attentive visitor. Subtly, insidiously, cleverly it involves us in the installation bringing in sound and words by implication. Lorraine Douglas also uses materials that deliberately and provocatively recall other eras, those that stand between ours and Handel’s, and which had entirely other values. She creates ambivalence for us to deal with.

Alex Pearl has created his own opera, based on the Foundling Hospital Anthem, and this is re-played in The Picture Gallery. The travails in producing the work are now part of its history. The monitor is watched over by large scale portraits of previous governors and, in riposte, Alex has filmed some of today’s Trustees by means of a mischievous remote-controlled camera. In each case, new technology has been hitched to something rather more subversive in the service of an opera or formal portrait. The opera is performed by lolly sticks and the tiny cameras whizzed about the Trustees at ground level. Alex observed what he felt was an absence of children within The Foundling, except in school groups in the education room or by implication in saccharine Victorian portraits. He has re-introduced the anarchic cheerfulness of childhood and reminds us that a museum can only give us a partial record, preserving just that which is tangible.

Each of these artists has brought their own atmosphere of scene-setting into a place that is redolent with history and narratives. By modest, even sly, means they demand our attention and make us both players and observers. Other artists, Zory in particular, actively ask for our participation.

Zory and **David Kefford** have directly or obliquely made reference to the tokens, left by mothers with their babies, either as mementoes or a means of future identification. They were therefore believed to be a symbol of uniqueness, a link to something precious however simple their material.

Zory has always worked with the message of separation and loss of country or identity. She chose to site her work in the Coram's Children gallery where, in an entirely contemporary setting, the story of The Foundling and the Coram Family foundation is told. It resolutely keeps the story of childhood vulnerability current, as does Zory's installation. It is a work that invites and urges participation. The use of materials that are very simple or intimate, such as hair and safety pins, and the notion of leaving symbols as expressions of hope or prayer is both culturally widespread and ancient. The work fits into the emotional space of the gallery but reaches way beyond its confines or those of London or Britain. The work is defiant in the way in which it has to be negotiated, dealt with - or completely avoided and the subject ignored.

David Kefford has produced a series of drawings which are grouped together in a rather hidden space known internally as the Corporate Reception Foyer. This is a grand name for an awkward site but one that is self-contained, discrete and therefore entirely appropriate for the drawings which gain further in impact from being concentrated and intimate. Others from the series place emphasis on their lack of bombast through being displayed in other parts of the building alongside more rhetorical and historically charged work. In a range of mixed materials, using the most immediate kind of mark making, David stresses the private, physical, sensual nature of drawing and also, by extension, of the nature of relations between human beings.

The use of tokens as either explicit or implicit reference by each artist is simply a starting point for their very different explorations of much more universal ideas of closeness and its painful opposite. These are also themes explored by Emily Russell and Kristian de la Riva.

Emily Russell and Kristian De La Riva are partners who also work together as artists. So are Anna Townley and Lawrence Bradby and each partnership deals with boundaries although in ways which are markedly different.

Emily Russell and Kristian De La Riva have responded to the commission by continuing to use the basic syntax of their previous work which is images of their own bodies, especially their heads in animated dialogue. For RSVP, the heads which are usually seen in close proximity, facing each other head on, are now forcibly separated and call out to each other in anguish, panic and anger. This work has been confined, adding to the isolation in the piece, in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery on the lower ground floor where we are led to it

by the cries that they both emit. A parallel graphic work is displayed just before the entrance to the Coram's Children gallery and takes its imagery from a range of sources, some sensual and some derived from prison tattoos, emphasising identity and physical and emotional boundaries.

Townley & Bradley have taken the boundaries beyond the personal and into the geographic. They are interested in the way that the former Foundling Hospital influenced the development of Bloomsbury, leading to a remarkable concentration in the area of hospitals and research institutes concerned with child health and welfare. The research before the exhibition began was an intrinsic part of their contribution to **RSVP**. They have been carrying out a detailed and subjective survey of the contemporary urban setting of The Foundling. The method for doing this has been a series of walks starting from the museum. Each walk has adopted a different set of rules. These rules, governing for example how often one turns left or right, generate a walk with a clear aim but an unknown destination.

Some of this material will be discarded over time, much will be incorporated into records of their walks and instructions are made available in the form of an artists' broadsheet for visitors to follow or modify. One guided walk will also take place during **RSVP**.

Both these artist partnerships take drawing, the earliest form of visual communication, and make it perform complex arabesques in both the most personal sphere and in the very public arena of urban planned investigation. Neither takes us far from the central focus of the Foundling but describes it more fully in each case.

The importance of specific research to Townley & Bradley's practice is central to many of the artists in RSVP but especially Nicola Naismith.

Nicola Naismith has used the apprenticeship system as the starting point for her research. The Hospital both sought to save lives and to turn children into useful citizens:

"And if it ever be in your Power, make a grateful Acknowledgement to the Hospital for the Benefits you have received".⁴

Apprenticeships began when a child reached the age of ten and this aspect of The Foundling Hospital's care is investigated in Nicola's work shown in the Coram's Children gallery and Handel Room. She has focused on the trade of

tailoring and the significance of that trade is apparent in several paintings by William Hogarth, including the first scene of *The Rake's Progress* where we see Tom Rakewell being fitted for a suit, the first of his extravagances.

Her concentration on children when they passed from the sphere of *The Foundling* and joined the respectable working class reflects many of the themes that Nicola Naismith has developed in recent projects. It also engages the viewer politically, appraising process and the links between traditional and recent technologies.

Simon Liddiment and **Tom Cox-Bisham** also approach the nature of technology and production.

Simon Liddiment brings a new element of satire into *The Foundling*, a building in which the spirit of the great satirist William Hogarth presides. Two heads infiltrate the display of portrait paintings on the Staircase. They are the bastardised descendants of the caricatures in ***The March of the Guards to Finchley*** by Hogarth in the Foundling's Collection.

These "collectables" are identical portrayals of bosuns from a series of British trades, *Men of the Sea*. Many foundling boys will have later gone to sea but no narrative content is intended here. Simon Liddiment directs our attention instead to the banality of repetition and the changes in perception that it can bring about. Within the context of a museum, with its major collections of art and social history, these self-consciously historicising objets d'art, familiar from a recent past, do raise questions of value which the artist certainly does not seek to answer on our behalf.

Tom Cox-Bisham is interested in the way in which one art form can take its vocabulary from others. He takes two important parts of *The Foundling's* history and makes a new concoction.

First is the rococo ceiling of the Court Room which is the building's architectural glory. It was a gift and therefore very effective self-advertisement from the plasterer William Wilton. To the children, the most important part of their day must have been their food; meals, we are told, were plain, simple and repeated weekly. Sweets and puddings only appeared on special occasions but now provide the second element for the new commission for **RSVP**.

Tom Cox-Bisham has created two architectural follies using blancmange moulds. He plays on the history of those artists and craftsmen commissioned to make fantastical table decorations from precious metals or ice or foodstuffs since the Renaissance. This strikes a different note as banquets and palatial structures sit ill at ease within a foundling hospital. The sensitive capturing of an image in a box of light reminds us of the transitory elements of the building's occupants and history.

Both artists disturb the normal reading of the museum and its treasures by their humorous yet very knowing subversions. We are nudged into looking at familiar elements anew.

The final artists, **Matt Cook** and **Rob Smith**, are those whose works first and last confront the visitor to RSVP and both offer an entirely new way of looking at the museum and the way we all pass through it. On leaving, Townley & Bradby's provide an artists' broadsheet to accompany the visitor in the area that surrounds The Foundling.

Matt Cook has installed a kinetic and sonic work down the main Staircase well. Like Alex Pearl he has brought an element of play back into the museum and has employed sounds found in the archives, or created them himself to evoke the past and present. It functions, too, as a crazy chandelier in the context of the rather plain and utilitarian style of the staircase in a semi-public area. A tumble of noise and movement, designed to attract and entertain children, it defies many of the ideals that the founders espoused. It also brings a level of insouciant electronic sophistication that its playfulness belies.

With technical tour de force and elegant simplicity, Rob Smith records the passage of time and visitors to the museum through a camera placed in the Staircase Hall. The images are then relayed on a screen in the Café, a place which can be visited without ever setting foot in the museum. Siting the work there sets up a tension and a mystery for the unadventurous customer and both resolution and invitation for the visitor to the whole of **RSVP**.

The Foundling is a building that has a life seven days a week, 24 hours a day, even when the staff has gone home. Aspects of an entire day of the museum, presences and absences, are recorded in Rob Smith's commission. It gives us a picture of the building that swerves away from the collections and history to some of the quotidian realities and the role which any of us who visits plays, however fleetingly. It functions as a rather nihilistic version of what

a museum does – recording, from an inevitably fixed position, as much as it can within its given limits and helping us look at constantly changing points of view.

Each artist in **RSVP** has carefully and distinctively chosen an aspect of The Foundling to examine from inside out and re-present to us. The balance and generosity of spread in the responses is entirely due to the thoughtfulness of the artists. Through their sensitivity, these individuals have come together to create a group exhibition that, we feel, is coherent while giving each of them a significant platform. I wish to express my thanks and admiration to the artists who took that responsibility themselves. I would also like to thank the staff of The Foundling and to Commissions East for their generous invitations to us all.

The final and most important invitation is from all of us to the visitors and the readers of **RSVP**.

1 Hogarth, quoted Gillian Pugh, *London's Forgotten Children*, Tempus, 2007, p 73

2 Brownlow's Memoranda, quoted *ibid*, p 74

3 *Warning Shots!*, Royal Armouries, Leeds, 2000

4 The Foundling Hospital's "Instructions to Apprentices", quoted in *The Foundling Museum, illustrated guide*, 2004, p 39