

# A Comparison Between The William Morris Gallery and Their Collaboration With Artist Jeremy Deller, and The John Soane Museum and Their Collaboration With Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist; How Spaces Enriched With Historical Reference Relate To The Contemporary Through Collaboration

By Rebecca Edwards

Contemporary art galleries today - be they small, independant offerings such as SPACE in Hackney or Cell Projects in Cambridge Heath, or major institutions such as the Tate Galleries or The Institute of Contemporary Art - aim to enlighten the viewer with offerings of “experience”<sup>1</sup>; experience of the art itself, it's juxtapositions, contexts and meanings which we might call interpretation, and of the space in which the art is displayed.

Historical museums such as the National Portrait Gallery or, The National Gallery on the other hand, operate in a different way. Their role is to encourage the viewer to maintain “a sense of wonder” in a “major place of convocation.”<sup>2</sup> Here, a literal gathering place for the historical, laced with memories, cultures and nationality provide a platform for the viewer from which they can view the past with conviction when faced with the present.

This comparative review aims to look at the point of collaboration between historical museums and contemporary exhibitions - how this affects the existing layout of the spaces; their collections, room sizes and flow of space for visitors and the historical works or artefacts of the museums, as well as public reaction to the collusion and the way the contemporary is viewed within the historical.

In the case of The William Morris Gallery, curator Anna Mason gives a re-staging (albeit smaller) of Jeremy Deller's contribution for the British Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. *English Magic* at The William Morris Gallery ran from the 18th January until the 30th March 2014 and this particular venue was the first of three cities to host the re-staging.<sup>3</sup>

Fourteen years earlier *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow* was the first in a series of contemporary art exhibitions at Sir John Soane's Museum and ran from 10th December 1999 until 25th March 2000 and was curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist in conjunction with Cerith Wyn Evans. Unlike *English Magic*, *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow* was a group show inclusive of many artists and architects alike. Participating artists were Lucius Burckhardt, Yung Ho Chang, Katharina Fritsch, Tom Gidley, Gilbert & George, Douglas Gordon, Joseph Grigely, Richard Hamilton, Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron, Koo Jeong-A, Isaac Julien, Anish Kapoor, Rem Koolhaas, Christina Mackie, Bruce Mau, Steve McQueen, The Museum of Jurassic Technology, Nanomuseum, Cedric Price, Liisa Roberts, Rosemarie Trockel, Richard Wentworth, Cerith Wyn Evans and nvisible Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Serota, 2000. *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art (Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures)*. Edition. Thames & Hudson Ltd, pg 10

<sup>2</sup> Kynaston McShine, 1999. *The Museum As Muse: Artists Reflect*. Edition. Museum of Modern Art, pg 56

<sup>3</sup> It might be important to note that in each new space for re-staging Deller instilled a new aesthetic to the placement of works, working directly with the differing logistics of each space. *English Magic* could then be said to be a site-specific exhibition whereby the place for exhibiting conducts new meanings and offers a fresh insight into the concepts and themes.

It is important to note that the point of comparison for the two institutions is problematic for many different reasons - the spacing between each of the exhibitions is vast<sup>4</sup>; the context of each exhibition varies dramatically from an international offering in The Venice Biennale to an exhibition arranged to coincide with another exhibition<sup>5</sup> happening around the same time in the same city; the number of artists, collectives and architects at Sir John Soane amounted to twenty-four compared to a solo show at The William Morris; the curation of *English Magic* was a re-staging of a much larger exhibition while in *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow*, the majority of the artists made new work in relation to Sir John Soane and hence were able to choose the location in which their work would be displayed, relinquishing the control of part of the curation down to individual choice of placement.

With this in mind, the point of comparison becomes easier - a comparison which is not about the politics or happenings of the time, (although this might, in part, become relevant later), or about the logistics of each exhibition - the different budgets and modes of choosing artists, as well as installation details and shipping are irrelevant. Nor is the comparison about the architectural floor plans of the galleries; their physicalities of space and dimensions are undeniably varied.

This comparison will look at the experience of viewing contemporary art within a setting made initially for the historical. Here, a sense of discovery when viewing a particular piece in a particular room at a particular moment is important, but is this an effective way of collating narratives through different periods? Should history and the contemporary be juxtaposed and if they are, how successfully does this operate in relaying information about a particular concept back to the viewing public?

As well as the aspect of viewing art within certain contexts, it will be important to compare the history of the buildings in conjunction with the relationships of both Sir John Soane and William Morris with the museums that hold their names. Does this type of collaboration, as Nicholas Serota put it, “generate a condition in which visitors can experience... rather than finding themselves on a conveyor belt of history.”?<sup>6</sup>

## The William Morris Gallery

The William Morris Gallery is located in Walthamstow, East London and is set in Lloyd’s Park (named after the occupant Edward Lloyd, who lived in the house after Morris from 1856). The Water House<sup>7</sup>, as it was previously known, is a Grade II listed building and has many features of domestic Georgian architecture dating back to 1744<sup>8</sup>. This can be seen on the exterior of the building with a Corinthian-style porch, “its fluted columns and elaborately carved capitals executed in timber, with rosettes used as decorative motifs on the canopy soffit.”<sup>9</sup> The original windows on the front elevation have architraves which, together with the semi circular bays, give symmetry to the façade of the building. It could be said

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<sup>4</sup> In 14 years there has been the emergence of new technology, new methods of making work, new curatorial strategies and not to mention to inclusion of the turn of the new millenium.

<sup>5</sup> Soane exhibition at the Royal Academy in Autumn 2000

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Serota, 2000. *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art (Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures)*. Edition. Thames & Hudson Ltd, pg 55

<sup>7</sup> Richard Tames, 1999. *William Morris, 1834-1896 (Lifelines)*. Edition. Shire Publications, pg 6

<sup>8</sup> The date was found etched into a brick on the upper East side of the building.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wmgallery.org.uk/about>

that Morris took inspiration from this style of architecture prevalent at the time when designing patterns and furniture.

The gallery is housed in William Morris's childhood residence where he lived from the age of fourteen until he was twenty-two. In this time, Morris attended the nearby Marlborough College where he became influenced by the works of the Pre-Raphaelites and where he started his journey into literature and design - Morris wrote some of his earliest poetry seated in the tall window on the main staircase, made of Spanish Sweet Chestnut and dating back to 1750. In 1856, Morris was accepted into Oxford University as a member of Exeter College and, shortly after, the house was given over to Lloyd who made vast improvements and renovations to the existing architecture - notably two bays at the front of the house - in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The arrival of the railway at this time meant that the area surrounding central London became busier and more accessible for living, visiting and holidaying. This in turn meant rapid development for Walthamstow, which Morris had previously remarked on as being "a terribly cocknified place choked up by the jerry-builder."<sup>10</sup>

In 1899 Lloyd's son Frank decided to devote the house and its gardens to Walthamstow council who have owned the property until today.

In 1935, Frank Brangwyn, who was part of the Royal Academy, donated a substantial amount of his collection to the house in order to create a gallery to commemorate Morris. The opening of the gallery was delayed by the effects of World War II and subsequently opened on 21st October 1950 by Clement Attlee, the Labour MP For Walthamstow at the time.

## Sir John Soane Museum

The Sir John Soane Museum is located in central London at number 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields. Unlike the Morris family who opted for "bourgeois style comfort"<sup>11</sup> on the outskirts of London in an existing property, Sir John Soane wanted his house to be a home for his smaller family but also a "showcase for his abilities."<sup>12</sup> The location for this venture was chosen with great care; Soane wanted to be in the heart of London, close to his peers but also a short walk from influential and important buildings such as Somerset House, the Royal Academy and his office at the Bank of England. Number 12 was between government and commerce; an equal distance between the City and Westminster.

In the summer of 1792, Soane bought the lease for £2100<sup>13</sup> and, soon after, the demolition of the previous property made way for Soane's design for his new home. As well as number 12, Soane also took over numbers 13 and 14 in around the year of 1812. Unlike the grand, romantic, architecture of the Morris Gallery, Soane was less interested in making superfluous statements with his designs. In his tenth lecture at the Royal Academy School, Soane asks,

"Why should we not unite the variety of Figure, the wild affects, the bold combinations of cultivated Art, with all the regularity displayed in Ancient Architecture?"<sup>14</sup> Soane aimed for functionality over a decorative aesthetic, where the building was explanatory in terms of its layout and features. He followed

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Tames, 1999. *William Morris, 1834-1896 (Lifelines)*. Edition. Shire Publications, pg 4

<sup>11</sup> Richard Tames, 1999. *William Morris, 1834-1896 (Lifelines)*. Edition. Shire Publications, pg 5

<sup>12</sup> Gillian Darley, 2000. *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic*. Edition. Yale University Press, pg 97

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Stroud, 1984. *Sir John Soane: Architect*. 1st Ed. Edition. Olympic Marketing Corp, pg 64

<sup>14</sup> Thomas. B. Hess, 1966. *Art News Annual XXXII: The Grand Eccentrics*. Edition. The Macmillan Company, New York, pg

his peers in the late eighteenth century who favoured the “improvised freshness” of Gothic design over the demands of Neo-Classic idealism. Like the Morris’, Soane resided in an existing property, however his changes to both the interior and exterior result in Lincoln’s Inn Fields being the archetypal Soane design, while the Morris Gallery remained simply a place of residence.

It might be important to mention that Soane’s close proximity to the City allowed him to be within reach of his major commissions which were built around 1790; these included Buckingham House, Pall Mall and Wimpole Hall, suggesting the need and success of Soane living in Central London.

## The Artists and Their Relationship With Morris and Soane

For both *English Magic* and *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow*, the artist(s) involved both took inspiration from the work and life of William Morris and Sir John Soane.

In the case of Jeremy Deller, William Morris plays an important part in the role of ideas around socialism and capitalism, and is also the central figure in a mural titled *We Sit Starving Amidst Our Gold* (2014). The title itself is taken from *The Socialist Ideal: Art*, written by Morris in 1891, and relates to Deller’s earlier work surrounding ideas about manifestos, protests and the class war. One can see how Deller’s work has progressed and taken various tangents but the comments made on popular culture at specific times in history remain the same - such as the recent exhibition *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* which, like *English Magic*, is another travelling exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

The mural depicts a giant caricature of Morris standing in the Venetian water, getting ready to hurl Roman Abramovich’s huge yacht away from the promenade in an act of rage. He appears God-like. This is a reference to the incident in 2011 when Abramovich moored his boat alongside the Giardini which left visitors to the park unable to access the promenade leading to a part of the Biennale. Executed by Stuart Sam Hughes, the wall painting is a fictional depiction of Morris returning from the dead to relive his famous statement: ‘I do not want art for a few any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.’ In Deller’s work, the question ‘what if?’ is posed, bringing together historical people and current events in a fictional scenario or a “journalistic... documentary fashion.”<sup>16</sup>

Due to the significance of the work of Morris for Deller - a poster of Morris’ quote above was made in 2010 in collaboration with Scott King for *Save The Arts*, a campaign against the cuts of public funding against the creative industries - it seems fitting that the start of the travelling exhibition began at The William Morris Gallery; as Martin Oldham reiterates, “the gallery provides an appropriate venue to begin the UK tour of *English Magic*.”<sup>17</sup>

A certain re-activation of the space and its collection can be seen in the way Deller poses as an intervenor within the public spaces of the gallery; works are not only seen in the segregated White Cube room of the gallery<sup>18</sup>, but also integrated into the space at the top of the stairs - viewers here have to come into contact with Deller before they can see the statutory rooms dedicated to Morris’s life and work. A fluidity is

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<sup>15</sup> Taking place in Manchester Art Gallery, Nottingham Castle Museum, Mead Gallery in Coventry and Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle until October 2014.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp1SAVPAorU&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp1SAVPAorU&feature=player_embedded). Accessed on 10 May 2014

<sup>17</sup> Martin Oldham, *Political Art*, <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/political-arts/>. Accessed on 2 March 2014

<sup>18</sup> A separate room designated to collaborations with artists, initiated during the refurbishment of the gallery in 2010.

created whereby the seventeenth century and the twenty-first century become amalgamated to form similar ideas, modes of formality and presentation.

In a recent interview, Deller stated that “a good museum is where you become free as you float through time and space, almost in a state of intoxication... and you start to see things differently.”<sup>19</sup> This clearly plays out in the curatorial aspects of *English Magic* which will be discussed in greater detail later. The word ‘magic’ in the title of the exhibition refers to the quote above and enhances Deller’s views of the functions of an art gallery by insisting on the “magic of deception and the magic of wonder.”<sup>20</sup>

Drawings produced in collaborations with ex-soldier prisoners sit opposite a room of works by Frank Brangwyn, currently themed around his contribution to the Venice Biennale. Brangwyn was a friend of Morris and for a short period worked as an apprentice in Morris’s workshop where he enlarged patterns and traced Morris’s drawings. He shared the belief that art should be available and accessible to all and so upon hearing about the plans to establish a gallery in Walthamstow, he donated a large part of his personal art collection for local people so that they could “enjoy and remember Morris.”<sup>21</sup> This act of kindness relates to the Socialist ideal of generosity that both Morris and Brangwyn shared, and that we can see in *English Magic* by Deller.

Campaign banners for imagined demonstrations stand proud above the Spanish Sweet Chestnut staircase which overlooks the entrance to the gallery, making instant connections to the exhibition with detritus of fictional protests and it’s relevance to Morris and *English Magic* for the visiting public. Neolithic hand-axes seem to form part of the permanent collection, prescribed with an invented history and future by Deller. They are positioned at eye level in the White Cube space leading off from the entrance and protrude the wall slightly leaving pastel coloured spray paint to appear underneath - a hint at a simple narrative between past and present material.

The collaborations with various individuals gives Deller the invisible title of enabler, rather than maker, and puts him at the forefront of being an agent of the works where “[they] carry the hint of an idea; all the rest is manufacturing”<sup>22</sup>; be it by collaborating artists such as Ed Hall, Scott King and Sarah Tynan, or a selected public such as the Melodians Steel Orchestra or prisoners at HMP Everthorpe and HMP Shotts.

For Hans Ulrich Obrist and the artists involved in *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow*, the ideas surrounding and within the house of Sir John Soane became a prerequisite, or rule in the making or choosing of work. The exhibition was very particular in it’s choice of artists - most were RA graduates with varying degrees of success and experience - but also particular in the placement of works. Obrist instilled power into the artists, much like Deller who handed agency over to his collaborators, by allowing them to choose where the works were positioned and in which room they saw fitting; this, in turn, enabled a greater intimacy with the collection objects, where the artists developed more in depth relationships to their surroundings and Soane’s individual collection pieces. This is similar to the way in which Deller created bridges to the gaps between his work and the museum’s collection. However, Deller’s work didn’t primarily focus on taking direct influence from the collection; more of a holistic approach was taken which used Morris as an instigator, a fictional character rather than a physical aspect of the concept.

Many of the works in *Retrace Your Steps* were new commissions and the artists adopted a more immediate interaction with the museum towards gaining inspiration. This can be seen in Tom Gidley’s *Soane’s Bones* (1999), a short film made in the vicinity of the Museum and using the museum as a

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<sup>19</sup>Chris Dercon, 2013. *Jeremy Deller: English Magic*. Edition. The British Council Visual Arts Publications, pg 83

<sup>20</sup> A quote from Deller talking about the exhibition in a video recorded and played at the William Morris Gallery (2014)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.wmgallery.org.uk/collection/frank-brangwyn-an-introduction>. Accessed on 22 March 2014

<sup>22</sup>Harold Rosenberg, 1983. *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations*. Edition. University Of Chicago Press, pg 8

performative stage. This made links between art as a live performance, audience interaction with the process of making, and the idea of art as being a storytelling act - inclusive of nostalgia, memory and a sense of the deceased being brought back to life - a theme also seen in Deller's *We sit starving amidst our gold* (2014).

Another artist whose work directly links to the Soane Museum - "in keeping with the spirit of the collection"<sup>23</sup> and it's potential past inhabitants - is Richard Wentworth, who "casually" left a half-finished cup of coffee and a newspaper on a table. The viewer is subjugated to a sense of the supernatural which brings with it a perception of inhabitation and highlights the domesticity of the museum. The open pages of the newspaper report the 1995 Kobe earthquake; perhaps a link to the fragility of the house, the construction that the house undertook at the end of the eighteenth century and the architect himself - many of whom, like Soane, would have had to rebuild Kobe after the earthquake struck.

The nature of the Sir John Soane museum as a "series of tomb-chambers where a multitude of art objects were being piled up to serve the... survival of Soanes alchemic architectural invention"<sup>24</sup> could have become problematic for Obrist. He states that his "curatorial projects have never been based on the idea of filling space, but rather have derived from the desire to define a necessity and then to use the space according to this necessity."<sup>25</sup> For *Retrace Your Steps*, the necessity was to create a coherence between the 'eccentric' collection of Soane and a more contemporary epoch, here based on the idea of collecting and forming narratives with existing art, architecture and design.

This readily available and instantaneous inspiration of the Sir John Soane Museum contrasts to Deller's *English Magic*. Deller has often stated that Morris has been, and still is, a heavy influence in his early and future work. It is here we see the importance of a concept cultivated in history with the artists, and not just the immediacy of the tendency of exhibitions.

## Placement of Works

The placement of the works within both exhibitions is of paramount importance and relates directly to the concepts of both curators and artists alike.

In the case of *English Magic*, Deller instills a reactionary collusion between differing paths; past and present, real and imaged as well as fact and fiction. Although the original exhibition at the fifty-fifth Venice Biennale covered many square feet, the re-enactment at the William Morris gallery shows, more subtly and in much smaller scale, the connections between English society of past and present - be this the politics, notions of class culture or folklore with its cultural and political history. Like Morris, who aimed for "restoration of creative labour... in each profession,"<sup>26</sup> Deller shows his commitment to the life of Morris by including collaborations throughout with archaeologists, musicians, bird sanctuaries, prisoners and

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<sup>23</sup> Julia Cassim, *Vast private collection housed in London's 'unofficial attic'*, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2000/03/26/arts/vast-private-collection-housed-in-londons-unofficial-attic/#.U3eg6oVl8cg>. Accessed on 19 March 2014

<sup>24</sup>Thomas. B. Hess, 1966. *Art News Annual XXXII: The Grand Eccentrics*. Edition. The Macmillan Company, New York, pg 105

<sup>25</sup>Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Hans Ulrich obrist is Interviewed by Judy Freya sibayan*, <http://www.ctrlp-artjournal.org/>. Accessed on 13 April 2014

<sup>26</sup>Richard Tames, 1999. *William Morris, 1834-1896 (Lifelines)*. Edition. Shire Publications, pg 20

painters; hence acting as more of a facilitator than artist. This inclusion of collaborators was essential for Deller to highlight the importance of the public within art. A difficult task ensues when inviting external collaborators and shows Deller in agreement with Morris within which “no master should be too proud to do its hardest work.”<sup>27</sup>

James Putnam gives artists the title of ‘free agents’, imbuing them with a certain power and enabling them to “offer fresh insights beyond academic interpretations and take initiatives with groupings and juxtapositions that no museum curator would normally be allowed to consider. This... exists because artists are not constrained by any formal museological precepts and have the freedom to deconstruct the self-conscious, enforced neutrality of conventional museum displays.”<sup>28</sup> I would argue that, in Deller’s case, Putnam’s title of ‘free agents’ is true; Deller shows his responsibility to the aesthetics by creating innovative and sensory environments. However, artists who exhibit in historical museums *are* constrained by precepts but for Deller and Obrist this was not a problem; the works needed to be integrated into each space in order to fulfill their concepts and form a valid narrative.

The artist is still held responsible for his actions whether the work is made by his hand or a collaborator’s - “every one of [an artwork’s] features is the result of a decision by the artist”<sup>29</sup> - and in Deller’s case, the exhibition acts more of a public intervention and reaction to current and historical economic, political and socio-political affairs as deemed appropriate by Deller.

An attempt at highlighting public interaction is subtle within the context of the William Morris gallery and whilst prevailing to be a solo show at all venues, the viewer is acutely aware of an act of collaboration on all parts through the infinitesimal gestures initiated by Deller et al.

While Putnam states an argument which enlightens, and arguably favours, the artist over the curator, for Deller the objective was clear; to create an insightful and thought provoking demonstration of his Biennale offering and to provide “a secular temple, a show around mysticism and the power of objects.”<sup>30</sup> The interplay of objects, past and present, within the exhibition allows new resonances to take hold due to the very nature of the public museum being, as Deller states, a secular temple.

As well as forming relationships with selected groups of people, Deller wanted to adhere to Morris once again by giving something back to the general public; not something of intellectual significance, but something with a tactile quality, a ‘hands on’ experience; art for all. This manifested itself in a workshop where any member of the visiting public could create their own woodblock print of *We Sit Starving Amidst Our Gold*, a subtle yet striking relation to the examples of Russian pyramid and Ponzi scheme memorabilia which lined the adjacent wall. Rich oligarchs are used as metaphors for today’s economic crisis in Deller’s work.

Sergei Mavrodi initiated the largest Ponzi scheme, titled MMM, in 1990. The scheme was successful for the rich and brought US\$50 million to the company but left investors penniless. The MMM group took money from the trusting public, who were in effect ‘owned’ by their investments and investors; a parallel of motives occurs here where Deller gives a reproduction of a piece of art back to the public, thus questioning the value of art and the idea of authorship and ownership which are prevalent topics in discussion today.

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<sup>27</sup>Richard Tames, 1999. *William Morris, 1834-1896 (Lifelines)*. Edition. Shire Publications, pg 20

<sup>28</sup>James Putnam, 2009. *Art & Artifact: The Museum as Medium (Second Edition)*. Second Edition Edition. Thames & Hudson, pg 136

<sup>29</sup>Gombrich, ‘Introduction: On Art and Artists’, in *The Story of Art*, 16th edn (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), pg 32.

<sup>30</sup>Martin Oldham, *Political Art*, <http://badhistoryblog.wordpress.com/>. Accessed on 2 March 2014



In *Retrace Your Steps* - unlike *English Magic* where the viewer encounters the works without any written guidance - upon entering the Sir John Soane Museum the viewers were given a map of the house which was “not unlike a treasure hunt”<sup>31</sup> and which included numbers indicating each artwork.

In both cases the space for the exhibitions is unlike larger institutions, which often favour the use of the White Cube model for display as well as Salon hangs, and instead the Soane Museum instinctively adopts the form of domesticity. This is due to the museums’ previous functions as domestic environments - homes to the architect and artist - and so the layout and dynamics of the space are instilled with an unusual atmosphere, a resurgence of aesthetics, cleverly designed, to honour the livelihood of the previous tenants. This is more apparent in the case of the Soane Museum where furniture, original features and lighting have been kept much the same as when Soane inhabited the space; dried thistles lay on surfaces which give a subtle hint that the viewer must not touch.

Due to the mass of objects in each room of the museum, the works lie in much closer proximity to the collection objects than in *English Magic*, instigating a much more apparent comparison between old and new, history and the contemporary. This works well in giving relationships between object and art and, in return, these narratives are perhaps more clear to the viewer than in *English Magic*.

In a review, Adrian Searle states, “Richard Hamilton's reconstruction of Duchamp's Oculist Witness, an open ellipse of mirror silver on a sheet of transparent glass, is aligned in front of the open mouth of a frightening Roman god from Soane's collection.”<sup>32</sup> For a viewer, connections and narratives are ready-made from the placement of individual works such as Douglas Gordon's *Fragile hands collapse under pressure (study for a self-portrait)* (1999) which seemed to disappear amidst objects from Soane's eccentricities as a collector. The space develops a shift in the representation of real objects from bygone days, and interventions made by artists, thus it is in constant flux between a biography of itself and an imagined story of ideas instigated by artists - an autobiographical attempt to address Soane and his past. In effect, the materiality of the objects becomes less apparent as the space becomes an imagined tomb of past and present, constantly shifting where all objects, either animate or inanimate, “assume an anthropomorphic quality.”<sup>33</sup>

The complicated interplay of light in *Retrace Your Steps* was a direct consequence of working with a building which was not designed for the showing of art, unlike *English Magic* where large windows in each room gave ample lighting for the works displayed. The Sir John Soane Museum reveals “various superimposed and merging states of light constructed by Soane... visitors encounter direct, indirect, reflected, broken, dispersed or refracted light”<sup>34</sup> depending on where they are situated. Some of the artists devised ways of incorporating the issue of light into their work, making comparative links to the museum and Soane's architectural ideas, such as Richard Hamilton whose poster penetrates several layers of glass and space. This use and play of existing architectural elements creates a bridging of boundaries between

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<sup>31</sup>Dale McFarland, *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow*, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/retrace\\_your\\_steps\\_remember\\_tomorrow/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/retrace_your_steps_remember_tomorrow/). Accessed on March 22 2014

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Searle, *The House That Turns Time on It's Head*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/dec/18/books.guardianreview5>. Accessed on 1 March 2014

<sup>33</sup>Bridget Elliott and Jennifer Kennedy, *Haunting the Artist's House: Sir John Soane's Museum and Isaac Julien's Vagabondia*, [http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/house\\_text\\_museum/elliott\\_kennedy.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/house_text_museum/elliott_kennedy.htm). Accessed on 13 May 2014

<sup>34</sup>Nero Magazine, *A quasi-scientific presentation of seminal exhibitions from the past, through primary evidence such as original texts, images, clippings, scans, transcriptions*, <http://www.neromagazine.it/magazine/index.php?c=articolo&idart=1093&idnum=&pics=0>. Accessed on 28 April 2014



Soane and the artists - the work could be read as semi site-specific - but also between the public whose attention will be shifted from subtle nuances of intervention to the architectural mind of Soane himself.

In both *English Magic* and *Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow* there is a coherence shown in the way the art objects collide with those from the collection. The narratives and dialogues between the objects are initiated by physical juxtaposition firstly, and then by a larger commentary on the purpose of the works; their placement, materiality and meaning.

For Obrist this collaboration is more aesthetically straightforward; art objects 'disappear' in amongst collection objects, while for Deller the works on display are to be treated as a timeline of English society of sorts; a linear path is formulated in which the art works are kept distinctly separate from the collection but with subtle nuances which place installations of works opposite the collection.

The successfulness of the portrayal of each concept lies not with the curator or artist, but with the public who might interpret the exhibitions with their predispositions about historical galleries and historical works. As with all exhibitions, the viewing public will instinctively make associations to the works in context to what they have been exposed to previously. Both Deller and Obrist allow this to work in their favour by emulating displays used previously in each gallery, thus creating coherence and unity to exhibitions which could easily have been distracting and conflicting. Artists today tend to focus more on "the relations that [their] work will create among [their] public and on the invention of models of sociability"<sup>35</sup> rather than creating a passive object that one hopes will connect with viewers.

The works in both exhibitions lead to a re-activation of the space, reinvigorating the historical with contemporary methods of production, and where "each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum."<sup>36</sup> The relationships formed in the exhibitions lead to questions about the current state of the world, its political tendencies and economic climate as well as questions surrounding the collaborations between art, artist, curator and public. The exhibitions highlighted in this comparative text are only two of many examples which require us to reinvestigate the past in order to form an understanding of the future and, ultimately, our present.

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<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, 1998. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses Du Reel Edition. Les Presse Du Reel, France. pg 28

<sup>36</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, 1998. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses Du Reel Edition. Les Presse Du Reel, France. pg 22

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