



the  
shape  
OF things

ALINAH AZADEH THE GIFTS

## The Gifts 1–99

(Gifted by the artist, of which 1–30 were her mother's)

1 SIM card 2 Woman's purse 3 Camera 4 Set of house keys 5 Address labels x 12, 'Parvin Azadeh Rieu' 6 Cheque book, unused 7 Tax return + summary of assets in Will 8 Driving license 9 Watch - Maxim, quartz 10 Necklace, blue stone, diamante detail 11 Handkerchief, white cotton 12 Colour swatch - winter colours 13–14 Pair of stilettos, peach snakeskin effect, size 38 15 Letter stamp, 'R.Rieu' 16 Persian cookbook 17 Rice cooker lead 18 Placemat, mother of pearl 19–23 1 x place setting of silver cutlery 24 Bottle opener 25 Wine glass - blue with gold lace effect (broken) 26 Mini-champagne bottle of bubbles 27 Pack of eyes + hooks 28 Finger shield 29 Crochet hook 30 Book: 'Iranian Prince - Reza Pahlavi' (Farsi) 31 Admittance card, Tsunami Memorial Lunch (Highgrove House, 2005) 32 Nightdress, cream cotton 33 Pack of Iranian cigarettes 34 10,000 Rial note 35 Love letters between myself and NF (Paris, Tehran 1992/3) 36 Letter from J.S. (1994) 37 Postcard from F.H. (1995) 38 Soapstone prayer stone (Mashad, Iran) 39 Small Buddha statue 40 Letters from friendships lost in time (I.C., E.W., C.G., C.S.) 41 Postcard from L.M. (1985) 42 Names of six men who I suffered with and for 43 Xmas card from K.G. + letter of forgiveness (2002) 44 Postcard from C.Coquelin (1992, Equevilly) 45 Postcard from V. Laborde (1990, Paris) 46 Letter from L. Sutton (1992, Paris) 47 Letter from my elder brother (1992, Bandar Abbas, Iran) 48 'Evil eye' silver bracelet, Azeri (broken) 49 Silver ring with (missing) moonstone set into two small hands 50 Small, blue fake present, 'Miss World' 51 Miniature Koran 52 W.B. Yeats collected poetry book 53 British passport (expired) 54 Necklace, shellstone, earthy colours 55 Man's (wedding?) ring, silver with black square indents 56 Set of business cards, 'nectar digital' 57 Tub of rabbit skin glue 58 Charcoal pieces in a wooden box 59 Pencil case with drawing and print-making tools 60 Jar of turpentine (empty) 61 Plastic plate (paint palette) 62 Paintbrush 63 Bottle of black ink 64 Jar of linseed oil 65 Roll of sellotape 66 Pack of paper stick-ons (animation) 67 Manual airbrush 68 Zip drive 69 Zip disc, ideas and files, 1997–99 70 Animation peg 71 VHS tape: 'Space within the Real' 72 VHS tape: 'Bill Viola - Selected Works: 1976–81' 73 VHS tape: 'Maya Deren - Experimental Films' 74 Paintbrush (decorating) 75–76 Pair of wedding shoes (Loudwater Farm, 2004) 77 Honeymoon knickers; green linen, peacock pattern (Provence, 2004) 78 Maternity underwear (Santa Monica, 2004) 79 CD: 'Water Birth Hypnotherapy' 80 Bra, black 36c, stretched 81–82 Pair of nursing pads, cotton, used 83–84 Pair of baby shoes, pink leather 85 Birthing clip (Delia's) 86 Information sheet: 'Causes of post-natal depression' 87 Flower remedy in vial: Elm + Olive mixture 88 'Desperate Housewives' DVD box set 89 Maternity dress, hippy-style pattern 90 Babygro 91 Soft rattle toy, 'Eeyore' 92 'Origin Interactive: Crafting Space' postcard 93 Cotton nappy (washed) 94–95 Moses' first walking shoes, size 3H, blue leather 96 Music box for a child's cot mobile 97 Triangular baby mirror 98 Green wrist-band: 'Free Iran' 99 Picture of my mother on beach in Phuket, 25th Dec 2004

# One and another: a handshake with the ancestors

Janis Jefferies

Front cover: *The Gifts*,  
Nos 1–99, 2010

**Objects** 1. A tangible and invisible thing. 2. A person or thing shown as a focus or thought for feelings, thoughts etc. an object of affection. 3. Grammar. A noun, pronoun or noun phrase whose referent is the recipient of the action of a verb. 4. Grammar. A noun, pronoun, or noun phrase that is governed by a preposition.<sup>1</sup>

I was looking for something not so long ago; the only thing I have ever inherited which is a floral patterned, broken cup and saucer from the mantle shelf of my father's mother's clutter dating from the 1950s. I knew it had no particular value except for the fact that its existence reassures me that she once lived. This lowly cup and saucer is present to perception and an analogue of another object; a living being that is not present but remains in memory, partial and unreal. Why was I looking for it? I had intended that it would be my contribution to Alinah Azadeh, *The Gifts*, part of 'the shape of things' exhibition at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery in February 2010. I never found it amongst the many unpacked boxes which have remained tied up since moving house in May. I gave Alinah another object, one which had no particular significance to me at all. I liked Alinah's call for gifts that expressed a letting go of stuff that is '...past its emotional sell-by date for you, i.e. it somehow represents some experience, memory or association you are prepared to lay to rest'.<sup>2</sup> The aim is to have a collection, a physical database of exactly 999 donated objects. Alinah has a special relationship to the number nine.<sup>3</sup> The first 99 are those from her own life – such as her (broken) wedding shoes, her daughter's birthing clip, her son's first babygro, a poetry book from school, and everyday things left by her mother who tragically died in the Asian tsunami of 2004, following the birth of Alinah's first child, Delia, at which she had been present. Alinah wraps and binds her own objects and those that we have donated using a palette of fabrics and recycled sari yarn. For *Mother Tongue* (which will be on show in Bristol) Alinah has used kilim wool from her mother's village in Iran. Accompanied by a silent blessing Alinah provides a closure, a final farewell to the remaining vestiges of not only her mother's life but also to certain chapters of her experience which she wanted to acknowledge as meaningful but in the past. As participants in the project and by analogy our donations allow us to have endings and new beginnings. We can all move on to live on.

<sup>1</sup> The Collins English Dictionary, (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1986 edition) 1061.

<sup>2</sup> The first email call was distributed on 28 September 2009 and the final one on 1 December. I have quoted from the December email.

<sup>3</sup> Alinah has done extensive research on the significance of the number 9 – see Alinah's blog <http://bit.ly/7tbbYe>



Left: *The Gifts, No 159*  
(*Lili's Camera*), 2010

It is often said in colloquial conversation that people who live in a secular-based society lament the fact that they have no rituals, no cultural markers that signify crossing a threshold, passing from one stage of life to another. *The Gifts* operates in this space, not least because the process draws on another cultural heritage that believes in self-disclosure and public displays of grief. How very different to a version of Englishness which keeps its secrets to the grave and skeletons in the cupboards. Alinah was inspired by Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in Modern World*, so I think it is worth quoting an extract here:

The Gifts we give at times of transformation are meant to make visible the giving up we do invisibly. And of course we hope that there will be an exchange that something will come towards us if we abandon our old lives. The tokens we receive at times of change are meant to make visible life's reciprocation. They are not mere compensation for what is lost. But the promise of what lies ahead. They guide us towards new life, assuring our passage away from what is dying.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives on the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 66, and see also Appadurai's influential introduction, 3–63. See also Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

Objects, particularly those that are part of everyday, material culture, are things we carry with us, and it is in this sense that they take on the cultural markers of memory and of time as well as performing the rituals of our everyday. Remember the first security blanket of childhood and the swaddling cloth of birth. Objects can be 'possessed' by the self in many surprising ways. This 'possession' is, according to Susan Stewart, a guarantee of the presence of the absent other. The power bestowed on such objects, implies Stewart, is precisely dependent on the fact that they are a possession, an extension of the self but which also reminds us of the threat of loss.<sup>5</sup> This leads me to propose that objects regarded as personal memorabilia can be addressed in relation to memory, absence, grief, anger and remembrance and are 'supplemented by a narrative discourse' through the language of longing.<sup>6</sup> This supplement further contributes to a surplus of significance with its reference to the past, rites of passage and ceremony in so far as it permits objects to conjure a kind of magic aura and phantasms of fictional histories beyond any objective reality.

Objects, like people, argued Ivan Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai, have life cycles, in the course of which they age and move in and out of economic circuits of exchange and appreciation.<sup>7</sup> When this happens, we learn something different about not only what these things are but about how we value them, and about the changing meanings that we give them over the course of their lives. Objects are never just things in themselves, according to this point of view, and cannot be dissociated from bodies of knowledge and values. Objects tell stories of our relationship to the world; they change context and we change them. They offer a material base; not just in terms of production – hand, industrial or even digital media – but also in relation to how we consume them, long for them and obsessively collect them.



Left: *The Gifts, Nos 1–99 (detail)*, 2010

Even if possessions are principally thought of in modern societies as commodities and, in other more traditional contexts as items for ceremonial exchanges, we can be sure that the imagination is brought into play in both cases, that stories are told. Who tells the story and to whom? Stories are everywhere. As Roland Barthes famously asserted in 1966:

The narratives of the world are numberless [...] All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, the enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing cultural backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

The point is that possessions draw their power from biographical experiences and from the stories told about them. And this power depends on how we listen and pay attention to them in order to understand something of the metaphoric modes of their enunciation and the shifting of *our* own subjectivities within their telling.

Now what happens when we have donated our objects, received our blessings, written down our stories and seen them wrapped up? Can we only identify wrapped shapes, loosely recognised forms? What can we read as samples of accompanying texts about our donations around the gallery walls? I believe we are re-engaging in a process of communicative interaction and a dialogic art practice which began when we responded to Alinah's call and donated our objects. The concept of a dialogical art practice is derived from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view.<sup>9</sup>

*The Gifts* is a kind of conversation between ourselves and the objects we have donated, between the objects and their bindings and blessings and their re-staging in a space shaped itself by a shift in recognising that audiences are now performers engendering human communication different to normal daily life and yet connected to its everydayness. We have also become collaborators in the production of the artwork, *The Gifts*. I would contend that the pragmatic, physical process of collaborative production of *The Gifts* helps generate empathetic insight, interpretations and points of view through the workshops held at the Museum, art centres and schools, that also shaped the collection.

At one and the same time a discursive exchange that acknowledges the non-verbal, the haptic, the experiential and the sensual come into play through the use of textile processes and materials in the artwork's production. Such empathetic insights can be produced along a series of axes. The first occurs in the rapport between Alinah and the ways she works with people in the workshops or by the generosity of her call for donations, especially in those situations in which she works across boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class. The second is that as an artwork, *The Gifts* can be seen as a contemporary arts practice that operates within the social interstices,

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to structural analysis of narrative', trans. Stephen Heath, in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, (London: Vintage, 1994) 251–2.

<sup>9</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' and 'Art and Answerability' in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, translated and notes by Vadim Liapunov, supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Critic Suzi Gablik develops the concept of a 'dialogical' approach to art making in her book *The Re-enchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).



Left above: *The Gifts, No 13*  
(*Stiletto - Mother's*) & *No 75*  
(*Wedding Shoe - Artist's*), 2010

Left below: *Mother Tongue* (2009)

Right below: *The Gifts, No 108*  
(*Door Handle*), 2010

producing a 'specific sociability and encouraging an interhuman intercourse'.<sup>10</sup> Alinah's experience of social media and dialogic electronic art informs *The Gifts* enhancing its interrelationship and connectivity through material improvisations, textile wraps, bindings and silent blessings. These two terms are not metaphors. Interrelationship and connectivity refer to real processes that enable the emergence of dialogic artworks. For Nicolas Bourriaud, relational aesthetics consists of 'judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt'.<sup>11</sup> Building on this theory, Grant Kester proposes a 'dialogical aesthetic'.<sup>12</sup> Dialogical and relational aesthetics expand upon previous formal aesthetic assumptions, which were based upon a conception of what is beautiful or artistically valid. Each aesthetic theory is based on a foundation of certain value systems. Kester, like Bourriaud, proposes an aesthetic theory based on a value system that prizes forms of dialogue and interaction over, or in addition to, the visual quality of physical forms. As a result Kester advances that 'the evaluative framework for these projects is no longer centred on the physical object... it resides in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself'.<sup>13</sup> Kester also emphasises the importance of the provisional status of dialogical art, in which each reciprocal interaction between an artwork and a viewer or what I describe in *The Gifts* as the viewer as a collaborative performer is a step toward 'mutual understanding' rather than toward a fixed meaning. This is what happens when art and life get close and we all have a chance to shake hands with the ancestors through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens and includes other voices.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, (trans. Simon Pleasance and Fiona Woods), *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: les presses du réel, 1998; English edition, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>12</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>14</sup> Suzi Gablik, 'Connective Aesthetics, Art after Individualism', in Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain, New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) 82–83.

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### The Ardabil Carpet – Returning Home

'I was at the V&A yesterday, and visited the Islamic Middle East section now housed in the Jameel Gallery. I was looking for inspiration for the layout of *The Gifts* within the gallery and a link with Rosa's work, which, as I understand it, will be predominantly wall work. I was looking for a personal and conceptual link, a bridge.

I spent some time sketching the large ottoman rug on the wall and remembered an idea I had many years ago when I first starting thinking about wrapping objects and what the ultimate gift between nations was in ancient cultures –The Magic Carpet. The memory came of my brother's and my feet running around the outer border of one of our red, cream and violet Persian silk rugs. We used to pretend we were flying across the globe on all kinds of adventures, for hours on end. I saw a group of women in Islamic dress who were being

toured around the gallery by a guide who was talking of "4914 knots in every 10cms...one of the worlds oldest, finest and largest carpets in the world..". they drew aside and then a light change occurred and I saw it – an enormous rug lying in the centre of the space, within glass walls and under a mirrored canopy. I sat on one of the sofas at one end and gazed down the length of it, taking in its delicate and yet monumental beauty - quite a moment.

The idea of using this as a starting point for a floor design in Bristol, where objects would be hung or placed to create the impression of a huge carpet design came back into focus. The floral borders and a concept and structure inspired by nature took me to Rosa's work and how this could be a connection.

I then went to the far end of the case to get some more information on the origin of the carpet, though something in me felt it even as I approached the text : 'The Ardabil Carpet'. Ardabil was the town closest to my mother's village, Namin, in North-West Iran where she was born. It is said to have very possibly been made for the Sufi shrine turned Mosque in Ardabil, during the Safavid Period. Visiting that place was one of the most resonant moments of my first trip to Iran in 1992. I feel a part of me has come home in this project and anticipating where it will lead me next, like a love affair woven in silk.'

Quoted from Alinah's blog - <http://bit.ly/82A42I>

2 July 2009

Above: *Self in Ottoman rug*, V&A (brushpen), 2009

Below: fabrics palette for *The Gifts 100-999*, aerial view, 2009



## Alinah Azadeh: curriculum vitae

www.alinahazadeh.com

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- 2003–4 '1+1=3', short poetic documentary on British-Iranian female cultural identity. Runner-up, ICA Best Short Film at Halloween Short Film Festival, and then screened internationally.  
 'Tabula Rasa' group show, Croydon skyline screenings and LUX Open, RCA.  
 Artist residency in the Turkish community, East London. Funded by Queensbridge Trust/Immediate Theatre. Created *Hand to Hand*, a video and live art project.  
 'Abandon' group show installation, Substation Project Space, Margate.
- 2005 'The Loom: from Text to Textile', a live art installation at Brighton Basement, ASF Weave (UK) and online. Commissioned by Networked Bodies through New Work Network and Arts Council, England. Collaboration with ASF Weave and Jon Bird (Sussex University).
- 2006 'Mother to Mother' an online artwork investigating the emotional legacies of motherhood. Commissioned by Independent Photography, East Greenwich.
- 2007 'The Loom: from Text to Textile' exhibition and presentation at The Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles, Goldsmiths College, University of London as part of the 'Touch, Textiles and Technology: Collaboration Across Europe' symposium.  
 The Museum of Mental Objects, invited artist, PEER Gallery, London.
- 2008 Origin Interactive: Crafting Space –14 -day, live textile installation at Origin: The London Craft Fair, Somerset House. Commissioned by the Crafts Council. Collaboration with sculptor Willow Winston.  
 Year of artistic research and development funded by Arts Council, England. Supported by the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles, Goldsmiths College, University of London (mentor: Prof Janis Jefferies).
- 2009–10 'The Bibliomancer's Dream' interactive book installations at Royal Festival Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre. Collaboration with sculptor Willow Winston.  
 'The shape of things' selected artist for *The Gifts* at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.  
 Shortlisted artist, The Arts Foundation Award (Textile Art).

THE SHAPE OF THINGS

Right: *The Gifts, No 77*  
(*Honeymoon Knickers*), 2010



## Notes on museum processes and artists' intentions

*In the face of diverse practices by the makers on the ['shape of things'] panel are non-European makers always going to be determined by their ostensible cultural otherness?*<sup>1</sup>

This question was posed by artist Raimi Gbadamosi at the launch of 'the shape of things' on 5 November 2009 with the panel of participating artists, curators and project director chaired by writer Bonnie Greer<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps this was a question that we had been waiting to be asked regarding a project about identity and cultural diversity.

'The shape of things' came from a proposal to develop a contemporary craft programme for Decibel, the Arts Council's initiative to support and raise the profile of black and minority ethnic artists. 'Shape...' director David Kay canvassed artists and met with a range of responses, from concern about being marginalised to frustration at the lack of opportunities.

'The shape of things' then, would be a discursive process, where artist makers could create new work, debate cultural identity, interact with museums and curators, and work within the craft marketplace. In 2008 an open call for artist makers to apply for bursaries was announced and Rosa Nguyen and Alinah Azadeh were selected to work with Bristol.<sup>3</sup>

For a museum curator, working with artists to create new work is a privilege. I see 'shape...' as an opportunity for us, at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, to gain access to cultural and aesthetic dialogues taking place within British artistic and craft practice.

**'Art does not exist, art is you'**  
Situationalist slogan<sup>4</sup>

From Duchamp to Mark Wallinger artists have long been challenging the power of the gallery and the

choices of the museum curator. The supposed neutrality of the institution has been uncovered by a range of site-specific, installation, context-based, participatory and other socially engaged practices, which have intervened in exhibition-making and actively engaged audiences to become involved in the creation of art and meaning. In turn there has been a shift in the role of the curator, and the relationship between artist and curator has developed towards one of collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

Such shifts have informed recent museum curation. Bristol's new Egypt gallery has eschewed the traditional connoisseurial approach to Egyptology. The gallery seeks to demythologize ancient Egypt, examining the lives of everyday people, as well as pharaohs. Curators consulted with audiences and offered them ethical choices about whether or not to view human remains<sup>6</sup>. Museum curators are open to the challenges their art colleagues throw at them: they are also passionate about the collections they work with. Might this shift in museum curating away from the paternalist tradition of defining cultures, be a reply to Raimi's question?

For 'the shape of things' Rosa Nguyen has responded to the Museum collections, almost slipping into a curatorial role to select objects and reinterpret them for her commission. Rosa comes from a French-Vietnamese background and grew up in London in the 1960s during the upheaval of the Vietnam War. The family spoke French and English at home, spending time with a large French family in France each summer, but it was not until much later that Rosa was able to travel to Vietnam and meet her Vietnamese family. Rosa describes herself primarily as a 'Londoner'.

Rosa is a ceramic artist: as a student she experimented with glassblowing but was attracted to the directness and tactility of clay. There is a traceable lineage here, to the sensual 'maker' side of the family in France, who were artists, musicians, dressmakers and cooks. Rosa's ceramic work is closely related to her drawings and she has a long-held interest in the natural world, from the intense observational drawings she made as a student of animal skeletons in the stores at the Natural History Museum, to the heads of bulls and goats she modelled early on in her career. But while the intimacy of the clay gesture is fundamental to the hand-built forms of Rosa's practice, she is also able to incorporate within this a coolly analytical design sensibility. For large-scale installations Rosa commissions pieces from other producers to sit alongside her own ceramics, a practice that juxtaposes self-expression through touch with mass production.

Latterly she has combined organic forms in her work with living and dried plants. For *Petites Terres* at the Maison Patrimoniaire de Barthète in France in 2008, she cultivated plants in the lids of eighteenth-century earthenware jars, making a connection between the fired earth of her ceramics, assembled with the historic wares, and the local living soil, a self-contained natural cycle completed by watering the miniature gardens with the local spring water.

Another component of this concern with organic form is Rosa's interest in the Japanese practice of *Ikebana* or flower arranging. Buddhist in faith, Rosa brings a spiritual element to her explorations of the natural world through the concept of *chi* energy. Rosa's commission for 'the shape of things' is called *Still Living*, a play on still life or *nature morte*, in her mother

tongue, dead nature. One of her ambitions for the commission is to 'bring the collection back to the flow of life'.

We began by exploring Bristol's collection of Qing dynasty (1644–1911) Chinese glass, a dazzling array of opaque tea bowls, vases, 'chrysanthemum' bowls and carved plates in solid yellows, whites, pinks and greens, some of which were made to imitate precious materials such as jade. The glass looks astonishingly modern to a Western eye: Rosa commented that it reminded her of Ettore Sottsass's ceramic and glass work for Memphis design. Her admiration for the Chinese glass inspired a return to glass in Rosa's practice, with her commissioning artists Russell Gritty and Jochen Holtz to fabricate her organically shaped glass forms for her Bristol exhibit.

The Museum's gallery of British ceramics charts the history of pottery production in the UK, especially Bristol, and makes links to Chinese-pioneered porcelain, tracing its influence on European design. Rosa enjoyed the breadth of history presented here and the various shapes of the vessels, especially the curving Baroque and curling, shell-encrusted Rococo forms of sauceboats, sweet dishes and a *bourdaloue* (which on consultation with the Applied Art curator we discovered to be a lady's chamber pot). The ordered display began to inspire a tableau in which Rosa would select a range of sauceboats to represent a 'fleet' floating high up, 'anchored' by lacquered *Phlomis* stems interconnected by Rosa's glass forms reminiscent of garden paraphernalia, small glass bells and vegetable collars.

Rosa was interested in the animals in the Natural History collection. The gathering of once-living specimens into museums has a vexed history: discussions with the Biology curator

revealed the emphasis placed on learning and conservation<sup>7</sup>. With this in mind Rosa selected a group of crossbill bird study skins (*Loxia curvirostra*), used for research rather than in mimetic diorama displays. *Altar* is a meditative arrangement of Rosa's glass pieces with dried plants and bird specimens which recognises mortality as part of life's cycle.

If *Still Living* shifts the boundaries of curatorial decision-making, then so does Alinah Azadeh's commission, *The Gifts*, opening up the selection process to engage with an audience which is also invited to contribute to the work and its meaning. Alinah is a textile and media artist. After art school she travelled to Paris to paint, returning to the UK with a desire to work collectively and with an interest in video and animation.<sup>8</sup>

Sadie Plant's 1998 *Zeros and Ones*<sup>9</sup> was a pivotal text for Alinah. Plant relates the mechanization of thinking inherent in Charles Babbage's invention of the computer, his 'analytical engine' to the Jacquard loom, the machine that automated the work of the weavers. While acknowledging the detrimental effect of the Jacquard loom on the lives of this former artisan class, Plant makes a postmodern link between the multiplicity of the non-hierarchical computer code and the matrix of the textile.

The metaphorical connection between number, language and cloth has been a rich point of departure for Alinah who, in collaboration with the Ann Sutton Foundation and Jon Bird of Sussex University, used the Internet and computer programming to create a fabric woven from digital input taken from contributors around the world in *The Loom: from Text to Textile*<sup>10</sup>.

Alinah is British-Iranian and grew up in Tunbridge Wells with a close relationship to her Iranian mother, a crochet designer. Her mother died in

the Asian tsunami of 2004, following the birth of Alinah's first child, at which she had been present. These grave experiences of the extremes of life, birth and death, have formed the basis of Alinah's work for 'the shape of things'.

Her loss left Alinah with a bequest of domestic objects, letters, chequebooks, keys, for which she had responsibility but little use. Yet it was impossible to discard them. Using yarns she'd been given on a visit to Iran she found herself binding her mother's cutlery: objects that carried memories of the wonderful food her mother had prepared. She began to wonder about the emotional traces of objects and the possibility of exploring this as a therapy and as the germ of an artwork.

"A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."

Roland Barthes<sup>11</sup>

"...my brother pointed out to me that I have set up a project where certain elements are beyond my control, and that must be a challenge I desired." Alinah's blog<sup>12</sup>

For *The Gifts*<sup>13</sup> Alinah invited people to make personal donations accompanied by written descriptions of the meanings the objects once held. Alinah would wrap the gifts in a ritual process of transformation. She was also interested in the process of acquisition in the Museum, and liked the idea of inviting people to bring anything along, deliberately incorporating the randomness that museum procedures and collecting policies are designed to control. In this her aims perhaps echoed artist collective Group Material's 1981 *People's Choice* exhibition, where people were invited to bring items to exhibit at their store-front show in New York, '...a community-based narrative [...] rather than one imposed by distanced experts'.<sup>14</sup> But also, as Alinah acknowledged in her blog,

recalling Barthes's statement about ceding authorial control, a nervy excitement about launching a project 'out there'.

Nevertheless we found that we were still governed by restrictions, for example around the size of the objects donated, and we had to be careful to ensure people fully understood that they were giving them away.<sup>15</sup>

Alinah began *The Gifts* with 99 objects: from her mother, a sim card, a cookbook, but also objects of her own, her Bill Viola video, her honeymoon knickers. Her postcard request for the 900 gifts she hoped to acquire yielded many meaningful donations. But it was largely through personal encounters with Alinah, in workshops held at the Museum and in schools, that the collection took shape. Alinah described the experiences that had led to *The Gifts* in an extraordinarily open and generous way, something she attributes to her Iranian heritage (she has commented that Iranians are prolific bloggers). She then proceeded to teach people how to wrap their objects, using jewel-bright fabrics and yarns.

Alinah's aesthetic came fully into play with the *transformation* of the gifts: through the giving, then the wrapping; and finally through the design of the installation, based on the patterns and colours of traditional Persian carpets. The gifts have been suspended, 'woven' with the collective written narratives of their givers presented as a backdrop to the installation, visible between the hanging objects. This is vital: these accounts record the emotional traces of the gifts.

In exploring the Museum's collections, examining curatorial roles, choices and interpretation, *Still Living* and *The Gifts* seek to dissolve some of the traditional barriers of the institution, in turn posing questions about how museums present and represent culture. I would suggest Bristol Museum is ceasing to define

non-European artists and practices as Other and is beginning to allow itself – the institution of the museum – to be approached in diverse ways.

Julia Carver  
Assistant Curator, Fine Art  
Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery

<sup>1</sup> Alinah replied that 'when I state that I am a British-Iranian I am acknowledging my sources, not underlining my otherness'; see her blog for more on this, [http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists\\_talking/projects/single/518804](http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/518804).

<sup>2</sup> Greer had recently appeared alongside BNP leader Nick Griffin on the BBC's *Question Time*. Griffin's appearance on the show had been the subject of anguished debate over giving a platform to the leader of a far-right political party, and he met with an indignant audience. Griffin bemoaned his treatment by the audience, claiming that cosmopolitan London was no longer representative of British society.

<sup>3</sup> The other artists and venues are: Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin, Touchstones Rochdale; Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita, Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton; and Chien-Wei Chang and Margaret Scott, City Art Gallery, Leicester.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Conceptual Art*, Tony Godfrey (London: Phaidon Press, 1998) 192

<sup>5</sup> See Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2006), Paul O'Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects*, (London: Open Editions, 2007) and Claire Doherty, ed., *Situation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2009) for recently published overviews of post-war shifts in art, curatorial and gallery practices.

<sup>6</sup> The gallery includes a display where visitors can decide whether or not to view images of a mummy being unwrapped during conservation treatment, and a covered display of a mummified body, the *Crouched Burial* where, once again, visitors choose whether or not to view.

<sup>7</sup> Animals at the Museum were not hunted or killed especially for the collections, but historic specimens acquired before

the 1960s were collected before wildlife conservation was recognised as a serious issue and some animals on display are now endangered or extinct.

<sup>8</sup> Alinah made four short films during this transitional period, which in part led her back to visual arts practice.

<sup>9</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> 2005, see [www.alinahazadeh.com/loomproject/](http://www.alinahazadeh.com/loomproject/) for details.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Death of the Author' 1957, published in *Image: Music: Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana: 1977, rpt 1984) 148.

<sup>12</sup> Alinah Azadeh, Blog, [a-n.co.uk/artists\\_talking/projects/single/518804](http://a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/518804), October 2009.

<sup>13</sup> 'The idea and title actually came as a result of doing the Muslim fast of Ramadan in 2003. It came to me in the last week of the fast, which is traditionally known to be a time when one may receive a "gift" (Qadr) for one's life, a kind of spiritual fruit of the soul after such a period of abstinence...the connection between this idea and how to set it within a social and historical context was very much influenced by Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2007)'. From a note from the artist, 4 Jan. 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Ault, 'Three Snapshots from the Eighties: On Group Material' in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill, op. cit., 33, thanks to Frances Loeffler for reminding me of this project in connection with Alinah's work.

<sup>15</sup> Both artists were intrigued by aspects of the Museum's procedures. When working with organic material or objects that are brought into the Museum, such as textiles, curators are required to freeze them in order to kill any pests and prevent infestations that could be harmful to the collections. For 'the shape of things' we have had to coordinate the freezing of Rosa's lacquered branches and all 999 of Alinah's textile-wrapped *The Gifts*.

## The artists



Alinah Azadeh

Alinah would like to thank:

### Givers /groups

Julie Bennett	Backwell School
Mark Curtis	Chloe George
Golden Valley Primary School	
Julie Hill	Lis Jolley
Knowle Park Primary School	
Nick Moore	Peter Overton
The People's Panel	Steve Taylor
Studio Upstairs	Woven, Brighton

...and all those who gave objects, stories and intentions so generously to *The Gifts*.

### Studio /installing assistance

Leo Sedgley	Raphaella Sapir
Willow Winston	Sue Haseltine
Leila Friar	Benoit Bennett
Lyn Harradine	Benoit Bennett
Genevieve Brown	Natalie McGrorty
Casey Steed	Rosie Ashby

*The Gifts* is dedicated to my mother, Parvin Azadeh Rieu (1937–2004) and my family who have given me the most powerful gift of all.



Rosa Nguyen

Photo: Philip Li

Rosa would like to thank:

Julia Carver for her continual enthusiasm, support and patience throughout the whole project and all those involved from the design and conservation team.

Paul O'Neil and Susanne Mooney for their invaluable advice, and generous hospitality.

Jochen Holtz and Russell Gritty for their time, expertise and beautiful glass works.

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Philip Li, Estelle Grandidier, Savannah Theis, and Michelle Ciocoloni for their assistance.

Alinah Azadeh for being in tune.

David Blamey and Kai Blamey for their humor at all hours.  
My father, mother and sister for a constant belief in me.  
My ancestors, who always stay close by.

**The shape of things**

**Alinah Azadeh : The Gifts**  
**Rosa Nguyen : Still Living**

ISBN

Published by **the shape of things** February 2010 on the occasion of the exhibition 'the shape of things: new work by Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen' at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

**The shape of things**

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 Rosa Nguyen

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**The shape of things** provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2011.

**The shape of things** is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and registered in England, No 6534926. Craftspace is the managing agency, David Kay is the Director and a formal steering group comprises stakeholders and specialists able to advise on development and implementation.

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[www.theshapeofthings.org.uk](http://www.theshapeofthings.org.uk)

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The many people and organisations that are part of **the shape of things**

**The exhibition at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery**

Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen for the ambition and creativity inherent in their work and response to realising this exhibition.

The Museum exhibition team for their support and sensitivity in facilitating the artists' commissions.

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**The shape of things programme**

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Our venue partners for their financial commitment and in kind investment of the time of their staff.

**The venues and dates of the shape of things exhibition programme**

Rezia Wahid MBE  
 Crafts Study Centre  
 25 September 2007 to 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen  
 Bristol Museum and Art Gallery  
 6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita  
 Bilston Crafts Gallery, Wolverhampton  
 1 May – 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin  
 Touchstones Rochdale  
 17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by the artists  
 Flow Gallery, London  
 9 September – 6 November 2010

Maggie Scott / Chien-Wei Chang  
 The City Gallery, Leicester  
 2011

## The shape of things: new work by Alinah Azadeh & Rosa Nguyen

'The shape of things' is an initiative taking place over five years providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of 'the shape of things' are in a report to Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts and recommended that an exhibition should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of the Arts Council and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, jeweller Vannetta Seecharran and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works and in the process to consider the role of personal cultural identity in their practice.

The artists presented the new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where discussion took place with invited delegates chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this with further support of the Arts Council encouraged us to move forward. 'The shape of things' is now working nationally with the guidance of

colleagues from organisations with interest in craft including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council and Audiences Central.

Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who coincidentally had been awarded an MBE. Rezia's response to the initial commission was an important influence on the potential of 'the shape of things'. The exhibition took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study Centre and enabled a test of the bursary-exhibition model.

In 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner with curators to create new work for exhibition in public spaces.

Looking at the artefacts in museum collections and recognising that very different cultures have shared in common the fundamental elements of materials, methods of making and exchanged influences with each other through trade and travel, offers a historic perspective on contemporary craft and the complexity of globalisation.

Taking this simple observation further, museum collections are important sources of inspiration for artists. In modern times the association of the crafts with the lifestyle choices we make in what we buy and how we live masks the contribution contemporary artists working with crafts media make to shaping national identity, reflecting the intercultural nature of British society and connecting Britain with global cultures.

'The shape of things' is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised

and enabled by their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

Exhibitions in 2010 present the work of Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery, Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale and in 2011 Maggie Scott and Chien-Wei Chang at The City Gallery Leicester.

Work by all these artists will be available to buy in a group exhibition at Flow Gallery, London in autumn 2010. The participation of a privately run gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and represents the strategic aim to connect the work of artists with collectors.

These exhibitions give curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. By enabling the artist's voice to be heard on issues such as how practice which is informed by identity can engage local communities, 'the shape of things' encourages a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts representative of the society we live in today. Best described in the words of the author and playwright Bonnie Greer who chaired a debate at the launch of 'the shape of things' programme on 5 November 2009: *'This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard ... This initiative, this collection of people is important now ... This is a movement, this is the beginning'*.

David Kay  
Director, 'the shape of things'

**DONATE AN OBJECT**

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

895

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

CONDUCTOR'S BATON (Broken!)

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

My father was quite a well known conductor and contributing one of his favourite batons (broken in action) seems a fitting tribute to him as an artist, a father and a friend. He died in Nov 2004 when I was 20 weeks pregnant with my son Dunge and I miss him every single day...

I agree to transfer ownership of the donated object to the artist Alinah Azadeh, and understand that it will be wrapped and exhibited as part of her exhibition at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery in 2010, and will not be returned. Please tick the box if you agree.

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

HS

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

A DATE TO LOVE MYSELF and allow abundance in

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

Freedom from conditionings, letting blissful love into my new beautiful free life.

**DONATE AN OBJECT**

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

917

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

Helpforheroes: wristband

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

It reminds me of the last cuddle I had with my nephew before he went off to fight in Afghanistan.

I agree to transfer ownership of the donated object to the artist Alinah Azadeh, and understand that it will be wrapped and exhibited as part of her exhibition at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery in 2010, and will not be returned. Please tick the box if you agree.

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

you

**DONATE AN OBJECT**

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

697

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

Cassette: Summers of Love + Days of Dreaming 28th May by Andy

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

This tape is from 1993, a time when I was young, bold and free. I was at Leeds University and had discovered dancing and ecstasy and new friends. For the first time, I could reach out to people and explore without the excruciating inhibitions of my teenage years. The world was dazzling to me; this music reminds me of my wide-eyed, adventuring 20 year-old self, a girl I tend to forget.

I agree to transfer ownership of the donated object to the artist Alinah Azadeh, and understand that it will be wrapped and exhibited as part of her exhibition at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery in 2010, and will not be returned. Please tick the box if you agree.

WRAPPED IN:

still inside me, who

**DONATE AN OBJECT**

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

Cufflinks - A present from Grandma.

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

My grandma gave me these cufflinks one Christmas. I never wore them (I don't like wearing gold). Mabel Danks (my grandma) died just 2 days before my wife discovered she was pregnant with our 1st child. I would love to have told her.

I agree to transfer ownership of the donated object to the artist Alinah Azadeh, and understand that it will be wrapped and exhibited as part of her exhibition at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery in 2010, and will not be returned. Please tick the box if you agree.

For artist use only GIFT NUMBER:  
WRAPPED IN:

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT:

THREE CLAY SNUFFKINS (animals)

WHAT THE OBJECT MEANS TO ME:

These animals were made whilst I was recovering from a psychosis after having my daughter. They are 'kooling animals' that helped me remember my strength. Clay is such an 'earthing' material it's qualities ground me. They are peaceful animals.

I agree to transfer ownership of the donated object to the artist Alinah Azadeh, and understand that it will be wrapped and exhibited as part of her exhibition at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery in 2010, and will not be returned. Please tick the box if you agree.



the  
shape  
of things

ALINAH AZADEH THE GIFTS