

Artificialia

Bridgette Ashton

ORCID Number: 0009-0004-2494-2470

Output Type: Exhibition

Output Date: 2022-2024

Contents

Project Overview

Research Method

Research Insights

Impact/Dissemination

Project Overview

Artificialia is a practice-led project investigating the visual and conceptual language of mineral collections, with a particular focus on replication, reinterpretation, and historical display strategies. Grounded in sculptural and two-dimensional practices, the project employed diverse materials, including ceramics, cardboard, printmaking, and drawing to adapt and reframe historical artefacts and narratives in contemporary contexts.

Situated at the intersection of contemporary art, museology, and material culture, the project engages with themes of heritage interpretation, authenticity, and display politics. It speaks to audiences across creative, curatorial, and academic sectors, offering reflection on how we define and value artefacts in an era shaped by replication, digital mediation, and speculative histories.

A key inspiration was Victorian mineral dealer John Lavin, whose museum and shop displays in Penzance, particularly his association with faked specimens, informed the project's critique of authenticity and spectacle. Lavin's legacy prompted deeper questions around how collecting is framed both publicly and privately.



The exhibition's sculptural cabinets mimicked traditional geological displays and referenced the architecture of Lavin's Egyptian House (Penzance, Cornwall 1837). On closer inspection, the mineral-like forms were revealed as deliberate fabrications, encouraging critical engagement with the visual codes that confer authority and value in museum contexts.

Ultimately, the project offers an alternative framework for engaging with natural history and collecting practices. It highlights how display methods shape interpretation and how replicas and artistic intervention can offer potent means of reimagining historical narratives. It establishes a model for interdisciplinary practice, connecting material experimentation with historical inquiry.

Ashton, B., (2022) *Artificialia* (photo credit: Paul Mounsey)

Research Method

1. Origins

The project emerged from an interest in the visual language and historical framing of mineral collections, particularly tensions between authenticity and artifice. Conceived and delivered independently, it drew on curatorial and archival research and took shape through the making of sculptural and two-dimensional works using various processes and materials including ceramics, cardboard and printmaking. Outcomes were disseminated via exhibitions, a digital platform, and a publication aimed at both academic and creative audiences.

2. Development Process

The research followed a material-led, practice-based methodology. By combining unlikely materials to emulate natural history displays, it challenged the aesthetics and conventions of scientific presentation. Research into historical collectors, including Philip Rashleigh and J.H. Collins, shaped both conceptual and visual development. Speculative making played a key role, with visual references used freely to explore interpretation over empirical accuracy.



3. Discovery and Knowledge Creation

Knowledge emerged through iterative making, reflection, and visual analysis. Historical diagrams and illustrations served as prompts for sculptural responses that prioritised formal qualities over scientific precision. This approach revealed how visual elements such as form, colour and description inform perceptions of authenticity and authority, and how collections operate performatively to shape knowledge.

4. Ethics and Collaboration

Ethical considerations underpinned the community-engaged aspects of the project. Workshops with young people and blind or partially sighted participants were designed with accessibility and consent in mind. Where collaborators contributed, they were credited and fairly compensated. Activities were shaped by participant feedback to ensure reciprocal, meaningful engagement beyond institutional norms.

Ashton, B., (2022) *Artificialia* (photo credit: Paul Mounsey)

Research Insights

The project yielded key insights into exhibition design, audience engagement, and the adaptability of practice-based research. Central to this was the speculative, material-led approach to reimagining mineral collections and display.

One significant finding was the benefit of flexibility in exhibition strategy. Initially designed for gallery interiors, the work was adapted due to the COVID-19 pandemic for external, “view-from-the-street” displays. This shift expanded engagement, particularly among casual passers-by and non-traditional audiences, and reshaped understandings of accessibility, public space, and the role of context in display practices.

Audience responses further illuminated the work’s impact. Viewers often experienced a moment of realisation, initially perceiving the objects as authentic, only to later recognise their constructed nature. This prompted reflection on museum aesthetics, authenticity, and the assumptions guiding object encounters.



The project also demonstrated the resilience and longevity of practice-based research. Its sculptural and conceptual outcomes continue to inform follow-on exhibitions, publications, and educational initiatives. The integration of historical research, material play, and experimental display offers a replicable model for engaging critically with inherited material cultures.

Importantly, the project evolved within changing conditions. The ability to respond creatively to constraints not only met but expanded the original research aims, underscoring the value of agility, site-responsiveness, and risk-taking in contemporary research practice.

Ashton, B., (2022) *Artificialia* (photo credit: Paul Mounsey)

Impact/Dissemination

The Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths project was disseminated widely through a series of exhibitions, public events, talks, workshops, publications and digital platforms, engaging diverse audiences across academic, curatorial, and public spheres. Early indicators of impact can be evidenced through the project's evolving visibility, cross-sector engagement, and the commissioning of follow-on works.

Initial public engagement began with Plans for Seventy Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths on Presentation Stands (2021), exhibited at the Plymouth Contemporary at KARST Gallery. Developed during the 2020 lockdown, these works explored speculative curating through drawing and redrawing re-imagined sculptural specimens combining ceramics, cardboard, and plywood. This phase demonstrated how enforced isolation prompted new processes of imagining and prototyping display practices.

The core body of work was presented across three venues in 2022: Newlyn Art Gallery, Lostwithiel Museum and Auction House, Redruth. Each site held historic relevance to Cornwall's mining and mineral-collecting heritage. These exhibitions, two of which were viewable from the street due to ongoing COVID-19 precautions, enabled accessibility to wider public audiences, offering a reinterpretation of heritage narratives through speculative display.

The online exhibition, artificialia.digital (2022–present), extended the project's accessibility and reach, serving as a platform for digital engagement and interrogation of the works.



Bridgette Ashton
Artificialia



Bridgette Ashton, B., (2022-present) [Artificialia.digital](https://artificialia.digital)



Impact/Dissemination

Artificialia | Bridgette Ashton

Accompanying the exhibitions was *Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths* (2022), a full colour publication featuring essays by historian and writer, Ben Street and cultural historian, Celeste Olalquiaga. The publication is distributed online and at Cornwall Museum & Art Gallery and Newlyn Art Gallery. A copy is also held in the Arts University Plymouth Artists' Book Archive.

'It is precisely at the slippery junction between reality and fantasy that Bridgette Ashton's *Artificialia* create their own 21st century niche. A mineral fantasia, these objects conflate the imaginary of curio cabinets with the line-up of scientific display to produce a playful community of extraterrestrial sculptures where rock and pedestal compete in eccentricity. In Bridgette's work, the artificial does not imitate but rather repositions the natural, as well as our cultural relationship to nature, by presenting rocks as autonomous objects that stand on their own or, even better, make a sort of stand-up comedy of visual display and hierarchy. For the extravagant podia on which these *Artificialia* stand are themselves as metamorphic as the rocks that crown them, doubling up their fictional character while dismantling the seriousness of early scientific displays.'

- Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Mineral Queendom: A Show of Congenial Geology*, in *Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths* (2022)

Ashton, B. (2022) *Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths* exhibition publication [A5, digital & lithographic printing, elastic loop bound, fold out poster] (photo credit: Bridgette Ashton)



'In Ashton's sculptures, the nature of the pedestal, the way it raises something up off the ground of ordinary life, is the entry point for a complex set of thoughts around what we value and why. Each one of her objects stages a micro-drama between the plinth and the thing it supports. Sometimes the plinth upstages its partner through a sparkling skin of pattern and colour; at others it bends unsteadily, as though not quite up to the job.'

The objects, too, often fail to perform according to the task in hand, lunging away from their bases or bulging unpredictably, like mushrooms. In every case, the pedestal's conventional territory, of isolation and elevation, is an unquiet one. It's a comedy, of sorts, played out in double acts of wildly mismatched materials. Glistening ceramic and matte ply jostle for the upper hand. Cardboard and fake gold leaf share a single space, the dirt-cheap alongside the maybe-not. The contingency of these materials – their sense of being placeholders for something else, like maquettes for imaginary public art – is part of how Ashton's work prods at ideas of value and authenticity.'

- Ben Street, Pedestalled. The World Unknown, in *Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths* (2022)

Ashton, B., (2022) *Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths* exhibition publication [A5, digital & lithographic printing, elastic loop bound, fold out poster] (photo credit: Bridgette Ashton)





Ashton, B. (2023) *Artificialia: Some Fake Minerals and Fancy Plinths* [newspaper poster publication commissioned by Alma Art Projects] (photo credit: Bridgette Ashton)

Further dissemination included:

Talks and events: A public talk on British Mineralogy (2022) with Tom Cotterell, senior curator at the National Museum Wales, contextualised the research within historic and contemporary collecting practices. A podcast interview with Holly Willats (Art Licks) further unpacked ideas of collecting, fakery, and landscape.

Workshops: Tactile ceramic workshops with blind and partially sighted participants from i-Sight Cornwall explored non-visual ways of engaging with collections and materials.

Fieldwork: Artist-led walks to sites such as Wherry Mine and Herodsfoot Mine connected audiences physically and historically with the Cornish mining landscape.

Media: A live BBC Radio Devon & Cornwall interview (Feb 2022) helped bring the project to a wider regional audience.

A follow-up commission by Alma Art Projects (Some Fake Minerals and Fancy Plinths, 2023) signals the project's continued legacy and capacity for adaptation. Across these varied outputs, Artificialia has stimulated reflection on collecting, authenticity, and the construction of historical narratives, contributing meaningfully to conversations within contemporary art, material culture, and museology.

In 2024, by invitation, the work was exhibited at Cornwall Museum & Art Gallery, Truro, aligning with the reopening of its historic Mineral Gallery. Placing Artificialia alongside Philip Rashleigh's 18th-century mineral collection allowed for a nuanced dialogue between empirical collecting and contemporary speculative reinterpretation, highlighting the project's relevance to museum studies, critical heritage discourse, and curatorial practice.

Consequently, Artificialia featured in the Cornwall Museum & Art Gallery publication 'A Year in Transformation' (2025). A print run of 50 were distributed to their key funders/sponsors and a digital copy shared with 450 members of the The Royal Institution of Cornwall and the museum's key stakeholders including Cornwall and Truro Councillors and Officers, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England.



Ashton, B, (2024) *Artificialia*, exhibition at Royal Cornwall Museum (photo credit: Bridgette Ashton)



Artificialia

25 June – 12 October

A cabinet of curiosities that explored mineral collecting through the spectacular over the scientific, Artificialia was an interesting counterpart to the museum's collection in the Mineral Gallery, and comprised a digital exhibition.

The artist behind the exhibition, Bridgette Ashton is a multidisciplinary artist based in Cornwall working in sculpture, ceramics, print and publications.

The design of the Artificialia cabinets alludes to the windows of the Egyptian House in Penzance, where mineral dealer John Lavin ran his shop and museum in the 19th century. Lavin supplied 'show' specimens to important collections, and although was "generally and deservedly respected" (according to his obituary notice), mineral collector Sir Arthur Russell suggested that, "in common with some other dealers... Lavin was not above passing off a certain number of faked specimens".

It was this observation which became a driving force behind Ashton's playful interpretation in Artificialia.

Audience and Reach:

The intended audience for Artificialia: Fake Minerals & Fancy Plinths included artists, creatives, cultural practitioners, curators, and those with an interest in collecting, museology, and material histories. The work was also made accessible to wider public audiences, including local communities, young adults, and blind and partially sighted groups through targeted workshops and outreach activity.

Quantitative and qualitative measures of engagement indicate strong reach across both live and digital platforms:

- Artists and Creative Practitioners Engaged: 14
- Workshop Participants: 233
- Live Audience Attendance: Approximately 2,850, based on estimated footfall across venues including Newlyn Art Gallery (Penzance), Lostwithiel Museum, Auction House Redruth, Royal Cornwall Museum (Truro), the Orchard (Newquay) and KARTST Plymouth.
- Broadcast, Online and Written Audience: Estimated 11,900, using website analytics from artificialia.digital, listener figures from the BBC Radio Devon & Cornwall interview, and Instagram metrics.

This breadth of dissemination demonstrates both depth of engagement and diversity in audience profile, reaching those within specialist fields as well as the general public.

The research reached audiences at local, regional and national levels, and developed some international visibility through online access and publication.

Local and Regional Engagement: Key venues across Cornwall included Newlyn Art Gallery, Lostwithiel Museum, Auction House Redruth, the Orchard (Newquay), and Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro. Local field trips and workshops further embedded the project in place and community.

National Reach: The BBC Radio Devon & Cornwall broadcast extended the project's visibility nationally. The Artificialia publication is held in the Cornwall Museum and Art Gallery and Arts University Plymouth Artists' Book Archive, supporting further academic and curatorial engagement.

International Access: The ongoing digital exhibition (artificialia.digital) makes the work accessible globally. The project has also been featured by DATEAGLE ART, an online platform that reviews and promotes contemporary artists, further extending its reach to international audiences through critical writing and online dissemination.

These combined dissemination routes, physical, digital, printed and broadcast, demonstrate the project's layered approach to audience engagement and the potential for continued visibility and development beyond the original sites of display.



Ashton, B, (2022) *Newlyn Artists Walk* (Photo credit: John Smith)

Recommended Citation:

Ashton, B., (2025). Artificialia. [Practice Research]. (2022-2024). Arts University Plymouth. DOI: 10.66992/GvV04u