# You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966–1970

**Victoria and Albert Museum, London**

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Catalogue

**You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966–1970**

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The social, cultural, and political trends of oppositional discourses that acquired global momentum in the late 1960s occupy a special place in the popular imagination—and collective memory—of the baby boomer generation. How then to represent the rich cultural legacy of rebellion against various mainstream ideologies in a way that can weigh up the expectations of a largely nostalgic audience, while avoiding clichéd self-mythologizing of the period? The categorization of historical periods into discrete, quantified blocks of time is always a problematic task. History never starts or ends as neatly as a good story might have the reader believe, but the exhibition *You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966–1970*, which opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London this past fall, fuels a popular desire for the period “brand.”

The 1960s are presented as five short, energetic years of youth culture, identity politics, consumerism, technology, and idealistic rebellion that have had an indelible impact upon the way we live now. The opening of the exhibition marks the fiftieth anniversary of 1966, a year that saw the release of the Beatles’ *Revolver* and the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* albums, as well as being the first and only time that England’s soccer team won the World Cup, beating West Germany four to two with Bobby Moore as captain. The familiar tropes of swinging London, sexual liberation, psychedelia, hippies, counterculture clubs, and Woodstock are all here, while 1970, perhaps a little too conveniently, marks the cutoff point: a grim reckoning of political and economic difficulties that saw optimistic attitudes replaced by a sluggish cynicism. Co-curators Victoria Broakes and Geoffrey Marsh were also responsible for the blockbuster *David Bowie Is . . .* in 2013, the fastest-selling exhibition in the V&A’s history, which is still touring internationally. Here they present a relatively traditional—as opposed to revisionist—version of events, which takes the audience on an unequivocally nostalgic journey back in time.

The title of the exhibition derives from the 1968 Beatles song “Revolution,” a tentative political statement by writer John Lennon that is arguably at odds with the explosive nature of the show. In the extensive catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, the curators recognize the difficulty in encompassing a subject “so sprawling yet surprisingly interconnected” (12) within one exhibition. Yet they have made a serious attempt to do just that. With over 350 exhibits, encompassing fashion, music, photography, film, literature, advertisements, graphics, and design, *You Say You Want a Revolution?* is a dizzyingly immersive object-, sound-, and image-scape. It begins relatively quietly, with a rare first edition of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), wherein the author imagined a fictional island—a paradoxical “no place”—in which society is egalitarian and there is a communal concern for the greater good. This seminal text animates the rest of the exhibition, which is far noisier in its efforts to show the complexity and creativity of the era by tracing a shared utopian impulse that, despite its prevalence throughout history, the curators contend was particularly ingrained in the 1960s’ psyche.

The exhibition is organized chronologically into six distinct yet overlapping sections, and each room presents a separate “revolution” by focusing on the familiar spaces and places where this counterculture thrived: Carnaby Street and the King’s Road; London’s UFO Club; the 1967 Montreal Expo and 1970 World’s Fair; the May 1968 student riots in Paris; the 1969 Woodstock festival; the Isle of Wight Festival of Music and the first Glastonbury Fayre in 1970; and alternative communities living on the United States’



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Installation image from *You Say You Want a Revolution?* Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum.

West Coast. Mirrors line the walls of the exhibition space, and unconventional angles provide nooks and crannies to be explored, while the displays are crammed floor to ceiling with a huge and eclectic array of exhibits. The sheer scope of objects is mind-blowing and encompasses John Lennon's lime-green Sgt. Pepper outfit, fashion designs for Twiggy, psychedelic posters, letters written home from Vietnam by American soldiers, early advertisements for Barclaycard, Jimi Hendrix's jacket and guitar, posters calling for equality on gay rights, the space suit worn by astronaut William Anders, and the first-ever computer mouse, designed by Douglas Engelbart. The result is a highly theatrical experience presumably designed to make the audience *feel* as if they have traveled back in time, while hopefully prompting them to critically reflect on the period.

This multisensory experience is facilitated by impressive sound technology from Sennheiser. Audio headsets provided for each visitor trace movement throughout the exhibition space and change the soundtrack accordingly. The recording is compiled from the late John Peel's record collection, and his voice guides viewers through the sounds of the decade, which include the post-apocalyptic drill of machine-gun fire, chanting crowds, TV static, and bombers overhead. This chaotic, fragmented collage of sound and image is intended to carry the narrative of the exhibition—to capture, as (then) director Martin Roth notes, the "innovation and spirit of the time" (8)—presumably while mimicking the dizzying pace of change in the five years that it covers. Visual and auditory fatigue, however, quickly sets in.

Despite the exhibition's chronological focus, the cornucopia of sights and sounds, not to mention the huge crowds jostling to see the exhibits, seems designed to create a state of *hyperesthesia* in the viewer. This is a term employed by David Howes, professor of anthropology and co-director of the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University, Montreal, to describe the way in which consumer capitalism increasingly attempts to engage as many of the human senses as possible to distract/seduce the shopper and enhance the likelihood of the "Buy me!" message being registered and acted upon.[1] A similar sensual logic seems to be in play within the exhibition space, but to different effect. Unsurprisingly, by multiplying the sensory channels through which the spirit of revolution is communicated, the exhibition loses it focus and potentially succeeds in



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bewildering—rather than enlightening—the audience about the developments of the period and the lessons that might be learned from them. Quiet contemplation and critical reflection seem a tall order amid all the noise. But there is a broader point to be made too. The political resonance of style as a creative response to hegemonic structures of power in mainstream industrialized societies is often problematic. At the same time that art, music, or fashion might mobilize resistance to the mainstream, the meaning behind such cultural practices risks becoming rapidly depoliticized if the original message is eclipsed by the overriding aesthetics of the medium that carries it.

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**Elizabeth Kutesko**

Elizabeth Kutesko is a researcher, writer, and lecturer in dress history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

1 David Howes, "HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York: Berg, 2005), 281–303.



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