

# Museum Exhibition Design: Histories and Futures

Brighton University (September 1–11, 2020)

Organized by Claire Wintle, Kate Guy, and Hajra Williams  
(Online Conference Review)

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*Museum Exhibition Design: Histories and Futures* conference, hosted by the Centre for Design History at the University of Brighton, stayed close to the promise of its title. Organized by Claire Wintle, Kate Guy, and Hajra Williams, the “nearly carbon-neutral” conference ran online from September 1 to September 11, 2020, hosting 58 papers and more than 14 panels across 18 countries. These papers, which spanned timely (or perhaps overdue) themes, including decolonizing, race, and crisis, flowed from past to present to future. In several cases, they challenged Western linear notions of time completely.

The first keynote address achieved this by hitting two different ends of the temporal spectrum. Professor of Museum Studies Suzanne MacLeod (University of Leicester) delivered her keynote “Museums and Design for Creative Lives” (based on her recently published book), which proposed alternative futures for exhibition design. Fully loaded with active terms like *cultural democracy*, *self-determination*, and *countervailing institutions*, MacLeod encouraged the audience to consider the museum as a producer of social space and called for a shift beyond the “conventional forms of the museum experience.” Her example of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, illustrated a collaborative reimagining of the lives and futures of people in the communities it inhabits. In the current climate, where museum staff are forced (self-initiated or otherwise) to reconsider a museum’s positioning in shifting to the virtual realm, the repatriation of stolen objects, and its relevance for its communities, MacLeod’s analysis breathed life into the discussion.

While MacLeod focused on alternative futures, the second keynote, by Professor of Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies Andrea Witcomb (Deakin University), emphasized the treatment of the past in the context of Melbourne, Victoria. Witcombe interrogated the past and present binary in Australian museums and exhibitions, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are often positioned as part of the past. At the same time, white settler Australians are located in the present and thus the future.<sup>1</sup>

1 Witcomb’s presentation was titled “From Representing the ‘Other’ to Representing Collective Selves and their Engagement with ‘Others’: Exhibition Design and the Poetics of ‘Voice.’”

Witcomb argues that this positioning continues the colonial violence of dispossession in Australia and that museums are part of the problem and solution. Witcomb shared the First Peoples exhibition at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Melbourne Museum as a way forward. This exhibition situates First Nations' peoples in the present day and privileges their perspective through first-person voice.<sup>2</sup> This was achieved through cocuration by the Yulendj Group of Elders, community representatives from across Victoria, and Museum Victoria staff. In line with MacLeod's sentiments, Witcomb called for a collaborative reimagining of exhibition making.

Other papers demonstrated that Witcomb's call to action is already in motion. This was most evident in speakers' emphasis on positionality and the privileging of voices traditionally left out in institutions. In the presentation "'ARE PASIFIKA': The Display of Pacific Collections, Old and New, in Aotearoa New Zealand," artist Nina Oberg Humphries demonstrated the significance of bringing a Pasifika voice and perspective into the Canterbury Museum.<sup>3</sup> The 'ARE PASIFIKA' project offered Pasifika peoples living in Ōtautahi a space to share expressions of identity, strengthen community networks, and share knowledge and stories. Oberg Humphries's descriptions of the Pasifika objects in terms of *Va* (the relationships between them) and *Mana* (the power held within them) were powerful in showing the importance of language—and the limitations of English—in describing different ways of knowing. Her articulation of these objects' timeless nature demonstrates what happens when objects are framed in specific, often Western ways: "There is no past and present. They live in the in-between, which is the *va*." In bringing the Pasifika perspective, knowledge, and understanding of the objects held by Canterbury Museum, Oberg Humphries demonstrates how much is lost in the privileging of Western collecting practices.

In the presentation "The Crit as Methodology: Re-staging the 1973 'Instant Malaysia' Exhibition as Intervention," Kelvin Chuah (University College London) shared the methodological process of his doctoral research. His presentation (the most inventive of the video formats in its mini-documentary style) explicated narrative temporalities offering "room to historicise, narrate and contextualize the show" as he explored the *Instant Malaysia* exhibition through the "dual lenses" of 1973 and 2017. By creating a "memory theatre" (an exhibition displaying the archival images of the original exhibition) and inviting others to critique, Chuah demonstrated the significance of positionality and interrogating one's assumptions. Jona Pehl (Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft) [University of Technology and Economics] made this emphasis on positionality similarly evident in her presentation "Visual Reflexivity: Exhibition Graphic Design as Critical Practice," which showed a nuanced understanding of time as she

2 *Yulendj* is a Kulin word for knowledge, which describes the deep cultural and historical knowledge the Yulendj group brought to the exhibition. <https://museums victoria.com.au/bunjilaka/whats-on/first-peoples/> (September 1, 2020).

3 The paper "'ARE PASIFIKA': the display of Pacific collections, old and new, in Aotearoa New Zealand" was by Nina Oberg Humphries (University of Canterbury, New Zealand), Lisa McDonald (Glasgow School of Art), and Hamish Anderson (Canterbury Museum, New Zealand).

explored temporalities of story time, discourse time, and narrative time in exhibitions. Both Chuah's and Pehl's careful consideration of the temporal aspects of exhibition making clarified the significance of making clear the different perspectives of time (Western, non-Western, Indigenous) in cultural production.

While researchers and curators' positionality brings an important tone to exhibition-making practices, other researchers focused on reinserting voices traditionally left out of institutions. In the paper "Exhibition Making in Crisis: Professional Identity and Radical Design after the Second World War," Claire Wintle (University of Brighton) considered labor in exhibition design beyond curatorial roles and offered an important shift from focusing on the individual to collective modes of production by highlighting the work of technicians, display workers, and cleaners. This approach was made more explicit by Jacklyn Lacey (American Museum of Natural History) in her presentation "Putting Joseph Towles' Name in the Credit Line: Institutional Racism at the American Museum of Natural History." Lacey illustrated the unrecognized work of Joseph Towles in the creation of the Hall of Man in Africa (now the Hall of African Peoples), where instead accreditation was solely attributed to his partner, Oxford-trained social anthropologist Colin Turnbull. In doing so, Lacey explored the institutional racism of the institution she works in today.

The "nearly carbon-neutral" conference (NCNC) included all the typical elements of a conference—keynote addresses, panels, Q&As, abstracts, a noticeboard, publications rack, and contacts list—without flights, hotels, registration fees, or physical contact. The freedom to watch presentations when and where people liked was commented on by many—as was the ability to attend multiple tracks. The Q&A forums fostered a sense of community with engagement from speakers and the audience alike. With these gifts also came the realization that conferences—no matter how free or accessible—take time and energy. Reducing Zoom fatigue in online conferences by considering alternative and dynamic formats will be an ongoing challenge.

Global pandemic aside, the conference was far from business as usual. Organizers took on board pressing societal concerns, most evidently the Black Lives Matter movement. Although a lack of diversity in the presenters indicates how much work there is to do, a commitment to addressing these issues head-on, through several papers, in deeply critical ways, was clear. The conference's great gift—arguably better than any conference lanyard, souvenir cup, or university monogrammed notebooks—is found in the multiple papers and resources that remain on the website after the conference ended. This speaks to the organizers' and presenters' generosity and their desire to share knowledge beyond disciplinary and institutional lines.