Exhibition Design
+
Contemporary Encounters

A project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Interior Design)

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# Exhibition Design

## Contemporary Encounters

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### Declaration

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Johanna Kelly

16.08.2012
INTRODUCTION

This document outlines the development over the last four years of research into exhibition design and contemporary encounters. The research is practice-based, exploring both my role as Exhibition Designer at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the exhibition design techniques that affect the experience of art in an institutional setting.

The NGV operates as case study of an institutional gallery that can then be reflected upon more broadly in the future, while also providing the setting for this situated practice. Here, contextual parameters are reflected in design, where the values, responsibilities and expectations of any civic building exist to meet regulatory standards and codes. These are represented in the prescribed lighting, signage and architectural dimensions legally required for public spaces.

These parameters form the foundation for a concentrated investigation into exhibition design where standard policy and procedure mechanisms also prescribe and affect ways art is displayed.

This research examines these ‘standard mechanisms’, identifying how they can produce enmeshed viewing habits or ‘habituation’ and design techniques that might shift this. Such convention can also produce homogenised experiences in exhibitions, irrespective of artistic content. When an audience repeatedly visits spaces that are treated visually and spatially similarly and with predictable elements, habituation and this homogeneity can occur.

The primary concern of habituation and homogeneity in this research pertains to the contemporary encounter and where opportunities might lie for design to promote manifold engagement with art in an institutional context.

The term ‘contemporary encounters’ refers to the lived experience, of engaging with art in a gallery context today. Reflecting the spirit of Alexander Dorner’s concept of “The living museum [that] holds our past and present together, not by imposing the past upon the present, but by showing its relation to the present” and the strategies that embrace this through design.

This text is organised around the research process. It begins with a break down of the research undertaken: introducing the context, defining the research techniques and outcomes (institutional context as both situated design practice and as impacting on expectation and experience) and outcomes related to this (constrained scope for practice, habituation and homogenised audience experiences, design techniques and strategies employed). An outline of the exhibitions featured through professional practice, why they have been selected and what they offered through practice-based research. A summary of the research methods involved in these investigations including the ethics approval process, interviews, literature and project reviews and examination of existing techniques and standards in exhibition design. This is followed by three analyses of the exhibitions featured: designed in the situated practice, outlining how techniques and theories being investigated were realised in recent exhibition designs at the NGV; the challenges that arose, the potential for manifold engagement and affects on contemporary encounters and culminating in a critical reflection on the impact of this on the exhibition, experience within and development of an ongoing professional design practice. Finally a conclusion: summarising the development of the Masters throughout the duration of the research, including the impact of this on the situated practice; how institutional design parameters were challenged and the effects of this; how this informed consequent design; and lastly, how all of this opened up strategies to investigate engaging experiences for the viewer that are manifold in this institutional context.

The term ‘manifold engagements’ refers to an encounter directly attributable to the art, where exhibition design fosters diverse prospects for experience and varying levels of interaction and participation for visitors in the gallery. This offers an alternative to those experiences simply emerging as a result of institutional influences, imbued as they can be with established social values and expectations.

By identifying ‘standard engagements’ such as duration of experience, interaction with didactic materials and verbal or physical experiences, strategies to tease out what constitutes these experiences highlights how they might be shifted or expanded upon.

This is critical in defining a focus for this stream of research, providing the framework for specific investigations and a central point to return to as research expanded and contracted over the course of this Masters.

Moreover, this research aims to open up enquiry and dialogue on the existing techniques in the institution, resisting efforts to resolve queries and instead directing research towards investigative discussion and debate in the field. Such discussion encourages a collaborative approach to exploring new strategies, fostering support across internal gallery departments involved in creating exhibitions for further design development with in the institution.

Through this situated practice, research includes: designing exhibitions, conducting observational and reflective appraisals of exhibitions; and interviews with others in the field. This research presents informed perspectives for exhibition design practice within an institutional context. Investigating contemporary exhibition design practice concentrating on art display and audience engagement in the institution (locally and globally), techniques and strategies are researched and worked up to activate gallery space as medium through design. The research investigates contributions to exhibition design techniques that can be implemented to offer engaging experiences for the viewer that are manifold in this institutional context.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Buildings

The physical context of this practice operates across both sites of the NGV. Originally designed by Sir Roy Grounds in 1968 then renovated by Mario Bellini and reopened in 2000, the NGV International building on St Kilda Rd is heritage listed, meaning any design work must not have a lasting impact on the existing architecture. Most of the permanent interior gallery spaces here are designed for specific styles of art, employing fixed permanent infrastructure, finishes and lighting options.

The second site, NGV Australia, is at Federation Square and functions as part of the larger civic complex. Designed by LAB architects, stipulations in the lease of this building outline protected architectural frameworks and design recommendations to ensure the integrity of the original design is maintained. Ultimately these guidelines define the parameters for design possibilities within these spaces.

The interiors of both sites reflect the values, responsibilities and expectations of such an institution. Designed to meet regulatory standards and codes while adhering to community expectations of world-class facilities, this results in an essentially (Western) homogenised aesthetic of prescribed dimensions for public spaces, such as broad accessibility, brightly lit spaces and statutory signage. Common design standards emerge as culturally informed and expose institutional hierarchies and conventions affecting display. These standards also reflect conservation requirements that fundamentally drive a lot of ‘standard display infrastructure’ design. Connecting the pragmatics of practice with the
institutional parameters at play is required of my practice as an exhibition designer.

More specifically, in the case of the NGV there is an impetus for the design to deliver new and different experiences, for in stark contrast to other major galleries around the world, the NGV visitor is most likely to be a local. A common concern for many large public art galleries in Australia, Tony Elwood (then director of QAG/GoMA) suggests, it’s about:...the aesthetic is already traditionally acknowledged, since authorities such as museums and cultural institutions have the power to determine which objects we view as art, and how.

Exhibition Design

Focusing on exhibitions that I was designing, from concept through collaboration, development, design, construction and installation, this research opened up exploration of design theories and enquires addressed through practice and employed previously untested design strategies in the gallery spaces. This process is documented in more detail later, but throughout the research, outcomes of this developing practice were reflected upon, as were opportunities that emerged through engagement. Audience interaction in the gallery space was examined through site-specific tracking observations (outlined in the research methods below).

An attempt to present various working methods in this design practice supported focusing on one exhibition a year. This process of investigation spanned an average of 15 months per exhibition and provided a clear overview of the different influences impacting the design practice through diverse working processes such as: working in collaboration (with a curator or collector designer, living artist, conservation, lighting, etc.), with different gallery spaces (existing architecture and display infrastructure), varying mediums of artwork and interrelated display mechanisms, so that a demonstrated working knowledge of practice could be clearly underscored.

The exhibitions in focus were primarily shaped by institutional parameters and design conditions such as budget, external collaboration, input and approval, content and how applicable techniques of interest were in this context. The exhibitions: Drape: Classical Mode to Contemporary Dress, Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire and Harrell Fletcher: The sound we make...exhibited a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilising agencies.

Fine art exhibitions, commonly held in stately public buildings are often considered places to enjoy the experiences proffered by art, providing opportunity for contemplation, appreciation of cultural contributions and access to vast knowledge repositories. This might suggest that along with being considered crucial to the development and betterment of society, society in turn may view these as sacred places, not open to dialogue or debate, but as presenting a closed story to be appreciated and admired passively.

As Claire Bishop points out, how*

As a civic institution, the building and activity within signify the fundamental obligation to community as a socially acknowledged provider of broad public education, cultural experience and leisure destination.

A Situated Practice

The boundaries for this situated practice are informed by the guidelines of the institutional context at the NGV. Common institutional concerns include the intention to collect and display an encyclopaedic art collection and to safely display these works in respect to international standards of conservation and preservation.

The design department at the NGV supports this. It includes the exhibition design team of twelve (junior, assistant, middle and senior designers) and a graphic design department of four. Both teams work under a design manager who oversees everything, managing the team, internal and external expectations and ensures design delivery meets the high quality required by the institution.

The exhibition design team work individually and collaboratively on all aspects of the interior design (signage, front of house), façades and exhibitions across all sites of the NGV. A list of the exhibitions I designed solely or in collaboration during the 2009 - 2012 period of research follows: NGVI - Rosalie Gascoigne, Time Catcher: Kids Corner Gallery, Tjukurrtjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art, Dalí: Liquid Desire and Harrell Fletcher: The sound we make together (Melbourne) were examined before during and after the design process. This uncovered the way institution specific constraints such as fixed architecture, restrictive conservation requirements, briefs and loan agreements, house styles, fixed budgets and so on, tend to impose limitations on potential for manifold engagement by restricting the scope for design. Such restrictions can result in repetitive physical and visual experiences, homogenised experiences and habituation.

Investigating these concerns a series of design strategies emerged as pivotal in developing the research and consequently, the design practice. These lay in the primary concern of my practice and the motivation behind this research to investigate and expand upon opportunities for manifold engagement:

- Inspire varied perspectives and encourage visitors to take time with the works (duration), by designing inspiring, exciting, memorable, meaningful and influential experiences with the art.
- Present ideas in art through exhibition design, bringing the spirit of the art to the fore by referring to the art as first port of call for design/display inspiration and examining different techniques that might encourage the themes in art to become more transparent through design.
- Transform spectators into participants by moderating habitual viewing, designing social as well as individual spaces, to trigger thinking through design (active rather than passive).
- Consider how audiences activate space, promoting discussion to further critical engagement and exposure to new ways of connecting with the art. Taking audience expectation into consideration, looking at how prior experiences might prepare audiences entering exhibitions and investigating the shift in experience through design between exhibition spaces and public spaces.

Histologically, art galleries and art museums have been heralded as both educational and taming the masses, as art exhibitions played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilising agencies.

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Research Methods

Along with the objectives outlined above, additional methods were employed to further comprehensive research development. Interviews were carried out with peers and colleagues and transcribed with a view to developing an appreciation of contemporary issues relating to art exhibitions and expanding understanding for contemporary encounters. Simultaneously opening up a dialogue on contemporary exhibition design practice, this informed new avenues for research while providing alternative perspectives on current practice and the intersecting roles prevalent in the process of designing exhibitions. Interviewees included artists: Harrell Fletcher and Tai Snaith; senior curators: Rachel Kent (MCA) and Alex Baker (Contemporary Art, NGV); and directors: Tony Ellwood (gallery director, QAG/GOMA), Juliana Engberg (artistic director, ACCA) and Simon Knott (director, BKK architects).

Seminal, informative and inspiring literary works were read and literature reviews were conducted. These focused on critical points in this research: architecture and institutional context, institutional critique, audience and meaning making to build up a working comprehension of existing work in the field and influential formative predecessors who established the practice as it stands today, thus placing this Masters research contextually for myself.

A series of photographic essays were undertaken as examinations of the existing techniques and standards in exhibition design in large public art galleries nationally and internationally. Highlighting existing standard practice and contemporary encounters in conventional institutional exhibition design, the aim with these was to pinpoint specific techniques with a view to understanding areas for manifold engagements. Artist run initiatives and commercial gallery case studies were also conducted but considered less applicable to the intent of this research given the limited or negligible input of exhibition designer(s) so were not included. Written reports on exhibitions also contributed to a critical reflection on practice in the field, refining key points on the design decisions and aesthetic standards that contribute to homogenised experiences, habituation or opportunities for manifold engagement.

Ethics approval was required by the University to conduct selected research methods (eg. interviews) and was useful in determining the scope of research. This included examining the limitations for conducting research that might be carried out in highly classified areas. Defining boundaries that would simultaneously allow investigations to take place and then potentially be made public involved negotiation and understanding between RMIT University and the NGV. As agreed to in a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions, operation within these parameters produced research methods sensitive to boundaries and respectful of existing reputations.

An awareness of ethical guidelines also influenced a responsible research practice and methodology surrounding the involvement of the general public. This occurred during observational studies, conducting interviews and public presentations at the RMIT Graduate Research Conferences and various talks presented to the general public (Pecha Kucha, Sydney Biennial 2010; IDEA Interior Spaces in Other Places symposium 2010; presentation to graduating students at Melbourne Girls College 2011; ongoing Education Programs at NGV, Work In Progress seminars at NGV 2012 and so on).

Developing an investigative method focusing on process and protocol rather than the personalities involved in this context offered both a transparency in practice and a working methodology applicable in other contexts in the future.

Finally, the approval obtained from the NGV also allowed site-specific observations. Mapping visitor behaviour where the situated exhibition design practice tested specific techniques and documenting interaction using a 'Tracking & Observation studies' records sheet, the results offered pragmatic responsive data. This data could then be used to discuss examples of visitor behaviour in the gallery in relation to design and substantiated the reasoning behind the development of new design techniques.
THREE EXHIBITION DESIGNS
Drape:
Classical Mode to Contemporary Dress
02 December 2009 - 27 June 2010
DESIGN 1

Drape:
Classical Mode to Contemporary Dress

This exhibition was located in the permanent fashion and textiles gallery on the second floor of the National Gallery of Victoria, International on St Kilda Rd. Primarily displaying garments from the NGV collection, the exhibition also featured sculpture, painting, decorative arts and photography. Also collaborating on the design was exhibition designer for the NGV, Katherine Horseman. As the title implies, the artworks referenced classical depictions and modern interpretations of drape in fashion. The curatorial intent was inspired by the female goddess portrayed as a classical figure of beauty, draped in robes, statuesque and striking. Thus the driving conceptual design intent invoked this premise, drawing on notion of column as classical element and referencing movements in time and place.

Exhibition Design Selection

This exhibition was chosen as study of how institution specific constraints including fixed architecture, restrictive conservation requirements and small budgets tend to impose limitations on potential for manifold engagement by restricting scope for design. Such restrictions can result in repetitive physical and visual experiences, thus this offers up the chance to explore design techniques that might mitigate that, and/or provide opportunities for manifold engagement.

Occasionally, despite these design concerns, other collaborators or contributors to the exhibition design process are primarily concerned in keeping house styles fixed and the design input as minimal as possible. In this exhibition however, a lack of design brief and consequent flexibility for exploration within conventional house standards meant that negotiation and innovative design development was viable. Identifying such parameters for practice in this instance therefore indicated that this could be a useful exhibition to include in this research.

This gallery is an example of one of those permanent interior gallery spaces designed for a specific style of art at NGVI as outlined in the introduction. Bound by spatial restrictions of prescribed function it offers a fixed floor plan, static glass display cases for textiles (lining the perimeter walls of the gallery with bases raised off the floor) and permanent lighting systems.

The driving design motivation for my exhibition design proposal was for the design concept to reflect themes represented in the artworks and to transform spectators into participants, thereby potentially reducing habitual experiences and thus expanding on potential for manifold engagement.

Institutional Parameters, Expectations and Existing Conditions

In this exhibition, conservation requirements determined that the textiles be secured inside the climate controlled cases and displayed on mannequins to sufficiently support and protect the works. Adhering to this system provides the best opportunity of preservation during exhibition for collection security and future display. Factors that contribute to this expectation include: limiting deterioration through climate control (reducing humidity, maintaining consistent temperature), preventing human touch (consequent transference of dirt), keeping art damaging insects as far away as possible and maintaining appropriate light levels (a mandatory 50 lux in this instance of textiles, but variable depending on materials of different art works).

Conservation requirements also inform specific design components, for example all elements inside the cases need to be painted and off-gassed according to the requisite time schedule, with limited approved adhesives. The design scope is also expected to maintain the house style for formatting and signage, like the title-wall in the corridor, didactics in the gallery and at least one label per artwork (all usually formatted to house style). Still, the exhibition is expected to have a different 'feel' to the previous one in same space and to encourage future patronage through the provision of a satisfied experience (and consequently limit opportunity for complaint).
1 – Disruption to habituation and expectation

The primary design concern lay in exploring ways to foster diverse opportunities for engagement with the works experientially, manifest through time, recognition and resonance.

Along with the practice, researching through design - theories, strategies and concepts established by academics, writers, designers, architects, curators, gallery directors and artists were simultaneously studied, thereby informing the design practice and techniques considered during this exhibition design process.

Challenging the issue of visitor expectation through a design process that activates recognition and resonance, researchers Markusen and Krogh developed a theory based on frame shifting. Where the frame is defined as “the cultural background knowledge and beliefs that people unconsciously draw upon when using language and thinking and acting in the world”. And frame shifting as “referring to the semantic reorganization that occurs “…when incoming information deviates from that predicted by the contextually evoked frame”;

stimulating a jolting activity that rallies against habitual viewing.

This concept is supported by ‘embodied interaction’, with respect for existing socio-cultural aspects and Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s blending theory as conceptual framework for ‘cultural frame shifting’ where …user imagination and active sense-making are a central concept in achieving aesthetic experiences’ and following that pragmatic thinking that “aesthetic experiences… form the basis of forthcoming and more sophisticated experiences.”

This design embraced these principles and addressed the idea of ‘activated spectatorship’ as described by author Claire Bishop and applied by artist designer El Lissitzky who practised “an approach to exhibition design that sought to problematize the role of spectator, to create ‘by means of design’ an active participation rather than a passive viewing.”

This was initiated by creating awareness of the physical self in the exhibition space through a series of transformative concertina screens.

Alternate views offered by the concertina and enhanced by two contrasting colours attempted to initiate frame shifting while reflecting notions of the classical through referencing the traditional architectural column. The concertina screens could be read as a series of small columns or section of one large one. The intended effect was to combat static viewing, so that when approached from one direction, the dominant colour would appear as a soft butter yellow and from the other, a dove grey. This visual transition, triggered through movement by the viewer, offers alternatives to how one might choose to view the works while ideally, simultaneously triggering consciousness through recognition of embodied action and spatiality. Duration and the recognition of one’s own body in the gallery context may offer further opportunity for manifold engagement when considered through author Hans Ulrich Obrist’s interpretation that “it is only as bodies in space that we are capable of grasping time.”

Design motivation, strategies and development

The motivation, strategies and development for each of these exhibitions focuses on those outlined earlier under the Exhibition Design section. The primary objective was to expand opportunities for manifold engagement by moderating habitual viewing, activating participation, designing social as well as individual spaces, meaningful, memorable experiences and promoting discussion to further critical engagement and exposure to new ways of connecting with the art.

As established, house styles can limit opportunity for experimentation in developing techniques that might mitigate existing issues impacting visitor experience, and consequently, prospects for manifold engagement in contemporary encounters. Ultimately, adhering to the expectations of the institution (textiles in cases, house styles for graphics) inadvertently creates the same ‘feel’ to all exhibitions (repetitive experiences) and thus a tension is erected within institutional desires and expectations.

All exhibitionary procedures – labels, didactics, advertising, catalogues, hanging systems, media in their modernist sense, lighting, wall colours, security devices, posters, handouts etc. – combine as aspects of the exhibition’s active redefinition. They emphasize, de-emphasize and re-emphasize threaded narratives with purposes – fictions of persuasion, docudramas of influence. All are contributive to the ways in which art is more or less understood.

Results

Display cases can have a tendency to distance the tactile context of the works, clinically reiterating the precious nature of that considered ‘high art’ and compounding institutional expectations. Brian O’Doherty puts it simply - “To insert art into gallery or case puts the art in quotation marks”.

Emphasis was placed on connections in the narrative of content through design, reinforcing the themes of exhibition while the colour palette generated a subtle, sympathetic background for works, expressing tonal inspirations from the garments on display and notions of marble colonnades invoked by the classical Grecian theme. The exterior signage reflected the interior design language of the small gallery within, spatially and visually introducing a dialogue with the rest of the gallery.
The techniques explored in this second strategy address limiting the visual impact of visible institutional infrastructure. If expanding on manifold engagement with art in institutions is considered part of the focus of this research, then explorations into limiting external impacts (that is, anything other than the actual art) might also be considered.

To minimise the prominent functional ceiling grid housing internal lighting tracks, a flat black band was painted around the top of the cases, this served to both disguise them and detract attention by deflecting to works below. To minimise the effects of the bountiful natural light bouncing through permanently open doors, dark colours were again employed, diminishing the prominence of floors, ceilings, case frames and exterior walls - muting refraction throughout the space and fostering strong visual contrast for enhanced clarity. Both of these techniques were designed to limit the visual disruption of fittings and services, lending to a blurring of elements outside cases and encouraging contemporary encounters to primarily focus on the art.

Further investigation into directing attention towards the art involved restructuring visual hierarchies. Labels in the fashion and textiles gallery at the NGV can be difficult to read due to prerequisite dark lighting conditions. Formerly located either horizontally on the case base or vertically as frosted vinyl adhered to the front of the glass case, complaints regarding legibility abounded. Thus while trying to shift the gaze towards art and ensuring the labels conformed to house styles, a strategy for improved visibility and an ergonomic, unobtrusive label system was devised. This design evolved to employ larger print text in contrasting colours (maintaining formatting standards) and angling the labels towards the eye. Placed at a new height (approx. 700mm from finished floor level), the labels sat atop miniature concertina stands, maintaining harmony through design using colour and style. This aimed to include this didactic information to be read as part of an overall aesthetic of the space, rather than in conjunction with the art itself.

Sustainably created from the off-cuts of the cardboard screen concertinas, these label stands were placed towards the front of the cases, encouraging engagement with the art directly while offering text-based information at a secondary level of encounter.
3 – Encourage focus on art through focus on visibility of artwork

Along with the labels, there have also been concerns in the past with the limited lighting capabilities necessary in the fashion and textiles gallery. Constraining clear visibility of objects, previous exhibitions sometimes had shadows cast on objects while the underside was left in darkness, concealing much of the work.

This issue with visibility could be seen as contributing to diminishing potential for manifold engagements in that the art itself is not presented in an accessible way. Furthermore, attempting to engage with the work under these circumstances may result in a frustrating experience. This research investigated whether under such constraints, design can be utilised to mediate, encouraging the primary focus of visitors to remain with the art. Finally, if visitors are offered an opportunity to see these intricate details, they may change their posture, leaning in or over to more closely inspect the work. This enhances the potential to trigger active participation through shifts in the physical positioning of the body, fostering changes in expectation and experience.

Thus a technique to ensure adequate lighting was developed, to improve visibility of the entire object displayed and allow close inspection despite fixed overhead lighting conditions (internal ceiling track only). These restrictions lead this design research process to consider light as part of the temporary display infrastructure.

New concepts were developed to incorporate lighting internally and from below to tackle these issues. An almost opaque sheet of 6mm acrylic was recessed to sit flush with the top of the pedestal, strengthened by internal bracing, and a thorough testing period of collaboration between the design, lighting and conservation departments followed. This ensured best art-handling practices, protecting the works from the heat generated by this new system via an independent ventilation system for each pedestal and timer settings for the lights.

Drape: Classical Mode to Contemporary Dress
National Gallery of Victoria International

Photo: National Gallery of Victoria Photographic Services
A strong motivator in this practice based research lay in the capacity to promote a responsive design practice. Working in a design team that has been operating in an institutional context for more than twenty years means the practice often relies on established working systems to streamline the design process and minimise disruptive dialogues that can sometimes surface without fixed rules.

House styles for colour (at the NGV particular paint colours have been selected to remain in certain galleries), pedal and case designs, formatting labels and signage and more, all contribute to an aesthetic cohesion across two expansive sites. Moreover, limited design budgets can result in fixed wall locations and egress points for different exhibitions spanning many years when temporary changes can become too costly. All of this also compounds those homogenised spaces. spanning many years when temporary changes can become too costly. All of this also compounds those homogenised experiences outlined earlier and ultimately, these guidelines have the capacity to develop in to immutable parameters, limiting prospects for manifold engagements.

A responsive design practice might also operate on the basis of contemporary encounters rather than prevailing assumptions about how the design is actually functioning and more specifically, affecting engagement in existing exhibition spaces.

One particular point of interest for developing these studies lay in the eM0nt project (July 2008 - January 2010). Researchers Adeline Saudou and Chandrasekhar Ramakrishnan conducted a museological anthropological study at the Kunst museum St Gallen through a process of observation

**Summary**

Despite the constraints outlined, it was possible to test exhibition design strategies that expanded potential opportunities for manifold engagement in this exhibition. By moderating habitual viewing, potentially activating participation through disruption to the usual traffic flow, the design techniques underscored the primacy of this interaction as contributing to experiences with art in the gallery, as evident in audience discussion and movement.

The meandering concertina softened the rectilinear confines of recessed wall cases and offered breakout spaces for feature works. This altered the habitual experience while lending itself to a rare (in this gallery), staged placement of mannequins. This enhanced depth of field (advantageous in shallow cases) and shifted rhythmic viewing (below). This configuration also reflected the scene of the ball depicted in Gisel Beaton’s photograph. Exhibited centrally in the space and adjacent to a similarly themed case, a sense of the grand and lavish settings such costumes were once worn in enhanced the historical context present, offering another perspective from which to engage with the works.

The prominent services of the permanent infrastructure inside the gallery were successfully disguised by the dark colours. However, because this is a recurring design concern, it means that almost all exhibitions in this space employ this technique. Such repetition in design is one of the principal concerns of habituation and homogenised experiences in this design practice and research, and thus, future practice might look to an alternative solution to the issue.

Summary

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This exhibition received the least amount of front of house complaints regarding legibility in recent history for a textiles exhibition. The lighting technique proved successful from the perspective that the two Minton statues and ancient Grecian vase were sufficiently lit inside the display case. This meant details on objects were fully visible to viewers observed peering through the case, a physical action that may also be seen as triggering active participation through movement.

Further development of this lighting technique might see a warmer light source used to better compliment existing lighting conditions and reduce the visible contrast between the two.

And although the new technique trialled for labels proved successful in reducing complaints regarding legibility, the objects themselves may have been considered as visually intrusive in the cases given size and comparative scale to works. Thus, despite being visually closer in design continuity, whether or not they shifted the visual hierarchy is debatable.

Most importantly though, a positive reception when testing new strategies increases opportunity for constructive development in future practice. In establishing a precedent in the situated practice whereby shifting parameters in the institutional context can have good outcomes, foundations are formed to further explore new techniques in the future.

During the observational process the ‘Tracking & Observation studies’ records sheet that had been based on an existing template, was refined and re-designed. This was in response to the initial data gathered lacking the necessary specificity to be analysed and translated into potential strategies offering expansion or clarity for the design practice. The outcome was a clearer focus on accurately recording visitor interactions specifically with design during contemporary encounters. Once adapted, these results of these site-specific observations proved significant, firstly to inform future design practice but secondly and crucially in the institutional context, this gathered data legitimised and gave weight to future design decisions based on this research.

Finally, the cooperation of those involved in the design process greatly progressed exploration and expansion on engagement and encounter within the exhibition. Significantly influencing future design development, permission to conduct observations of the contemporary encounter determined clear points upon which to reflect on substantial practical data that directly reflected responses to the techniques trialled.
Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire

13 June 2009 - 04 October 2009

standard mechanisms
entrenched viewing habits
standard engagements
homogenised experiences
Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire

This sixth blockbuster exhibition in the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces series was the first comprehensive retrospective of Salvador Dalí in Australia. Located in the less architecturally restrictive temporary galleries on the ground floor of the National Gallery of Victoria International on St Kilda Rd, it displayed more than 200 works including painting, drawing, watercolour, etchings, sculpture, fashion, jewellery, cinema and photography. This design was developed in collaboration with design manager Daryl West-Moore.

Exhibition Design Selection

These three gallery spaces known internally as the temporary exhibition spaces are, predictably, primarily employed for the gallery’s largest temporary or touring exhibitions. Consequently there is usually more scope for flexibility in the exhibition design. Again though, this exhibition was elected to investigate how institution specific constraints tend to impose limitations on potential for manifold engagement. In this instance such constraints encompassed: a conservative design brief, restrictive conservation requirements and international loans with rigid loan agreements. These loan agreements mean negotiations for design approval expanded to include a much larger number of people and subsequent implications arose from ‘designing by committee’. The financial implications of the blockbuster factor meant more pressure than usual on design to contribute to increasing exposure and thus patronage. This also impacted the expanded design expectations to include exhibition specific directory signage, marketing/branding cohesion and a space for children.

In line with this research and the overarching design ethos behind it, the driving design motivation for this exhibition was for the design concept to reflect themes represented in the artworks. By emphasising form and content by utilising those from artworks as templates for design elements (eg. label substrates) and as impetus for material choices (eg. luxurious themes reflected in the fabrics) the strategy lay in transforming spectators into participants, drawing out potential for manifold engagement by promoting recognition and resonance. In addition was the approach to create immersive contemporary encounters offering a ‘memorable experience’, guiding visitors to and through the exhibition visually supported this, favouring comfort and legibility with minimal imposition on art and providing alternative options to engage with information, while catering to diverse audiences.

The multi-sensory design strategies explored surrealist themes, simultaneously embracing and reflecting the playful nature of Salvador Dalí, while plays on light, texture and scale aimed to reduce museum fatigue and foster respite from external input or institutional factors at play. Visitors were inspired to many exciting visual experiences with the tactile, while the curatorial decision to chronologically order the art guided visitors through the narrative of the artist’s oeuvre, providing background and precedents to contribute towards erudite encounters with the art.

The spatial design – points of egress and floor plan, were guided by the number and scale of artworks in the checklist (along with relevant themed groupings), the curatorial desire for chronological display, the expected high volume of traffic and loan agreement stipulations, (particularly for multi-media and 3D works).

In this exhibition, the lenders requested white walls and no surreal elements in the design. This was due to concerns with the exhibition (of the same works) immediately prior in the UK, which employed surreal themes in the design that the lenders worried may have detracted from the experience of the artwork and ergo wished to avoid repeating.

Often, it is expectations reflecting conservation requirements that have the most impact in a loan agreement on an exhibition. In this instance those requirements were that all artwork was to be secured at an international standard, ie. jewellery secured in locked safety cases, particularly small paintings (to be locked in safety cases), unglazed works protected by plinths and barriers and so on. Much like the guidelines for practice at the NGV, this provides the best opportunity of preservation during exhibition for the collection security and safe return to the collector.

Further to this were the specific multimedia requests made for films displayed by copyright holders (scale of screen, minimal noise bleed, low lighting etc.). Such guidelines are generally believed to contribute to a certain level of quality, namely working towards replicating a specific environment and thus experience.
This replication of environment can also be seen in the Occupational Health and Safety conditions and regulations for public spaces. Thus, the architectural design was developed based on a combination of this with expected visitor numbers, which inform the principle number of egress points and room sizes to support smooth traffic flow.

Other conservation requirements included the varying lighting condition requirements for the diverse content mediums. This meant that the lighting level requirements were to be mitigated through design where possible, influencing final groupings of artwork, layout and sequence. Like the Drape exhibition, design components had to be off-gassed according to the requisite time schedule, using limited and approved adhesives and fabric for covering internal panels, while internal case lighting required design input to ensure adequate ventilation.

As outlined earlier, the economic climate of large public art galleries globally, currently relies heavily on the financial success of blockbuster exhibitions. These major exhibitions purported as one off opportunities to view significant works never displayed together before, gathered from diverse collections, and spotlighting individual artists or movements in a way that is unlikely to be seen again in the near future. Their success in drawing large crowds “because of this can sometimes compromise audience satisfaction and it is an important consideration that the design of the exhibition aim to minimise this. Encouraging future patronage through the provision of a satisfied experience, limiting opportunity for complaint, is critical to the institution.

This business model of attracting, generating and maintaining financial viability for the institution through patronage, means the institution relies on a marketing department to promote both experience and the brand of the institution itself as desirable and achievable concepts. This is partially achieved through design by maintaining brand awareness be it specific to the institution, the exhibition, or the experience. With regard to identity, the blockbuster exhibition epitomises the institution: design, display and marketing all exemplify institutional motivations, so the institution usually wants all elements of identifiable qualities to be reflected in a positive light.

Reflecting data that infers exposure to galleries at younger ages encourages patronage in adults, design consideration for children through the creation of specific spaces and activities catering to them also formed part of the informal design brief.

Finally, once again the design was expected to have a different ‘feel’ to the previous one in the same space. The reigning expectation of the institution for a blockbuster exhibition is the imperative that it be identifiable as a unique experience. This is to be realised while maintaining established house styles (formatting text based signage as outlined earlier) and for expenditure not to exceed set budgets. Consequently, the design, construction and installation of exhibitions consistently depends on existing infrastructure and finishes – available resources inform all design decisions.

Results

The high profile of the exhibition increased that desire to create an experience through design in those who sign off on final designs. This meant that the conservative design brief outlined in the loan agreement was essentially in direct conflict with this institutional desire to create a new and unique experience through design. This tension between conservative design brief set by lenders and institutional desire to establish experience through design meant that all design development was negotiated and refined through compromises made by both of these key stakeholders. However it also meant that the institution was more open than usual to an innovative design practice that allowed examination in to contemporary encounters.

Flexibility involving conventional house standards meant broad design development was viable for this exhibition. Fortunately, this internal institutional commitment to endorse design development and experimentation with standards resulted in informed design concepts that contributed support in negotiations with the lenders.

Fundamentally, the financial implications of the blockbuster represented a larger design budget than usual, offering flexibility for those design concepts, layouts and finishes. Nevertheless, financial restrictions for expenditure to not exceed the set budget meant continuing use of existing infrastructure and finishes. Recycling and re-use of modular walls, fabric drapes and cases (designed for reassembly), re-usable carpet tiles, acoustic panelling, drapes (designed for durability), and up-cycled upholstery for furniture meant minimised wastage and informed subsequent design decisions.

Design decisions reflective of this, along with restrictive design briefs and conventional design guidelines (generally believed to contribute to a certain level of quality), work towards a reproduction of specific environments and thus experiences which can contribute to habituation and also result in museum fatigue. The underlying design motivation to reduce the impact of this further supported the inspiration towards developing those unique experiences through design described earlier.

Design motivation, strategies and development

The motivation, strategies and development involved in designing this exhibition were driven by the nature of the blockbuster exhibition. Rigid loan agreements highlighted a need for negotiation through the successful communication of design concepts and principles, while institutional expectations reinforced the objectives of this research to promote manifold engagement and consequently create meaningful and memorable experiences for the audience.

1 – Developing design cohesion through identity: expanding on content narrative through exhibition specific branding

An institutional emphasis on encouraging patronage and engagement through recognition was developed to expand on this research through a design technique that might expand on diverse levels of engagement for contemporary encounters. Brand saturation of the exhibition identity across different contexts and periods of time can contribute to extended engagement with the exhibition through duration, location, recognition and resonance. The forming of memorable experiences may theoretically trigger long term thinking in the visitor, thereby opening up opportunity for manifold engagement with art long after actual physical attendance is over.

Instilling a clear identity across geographically and psychologically vast areas involves enlisting a technique to establish a visual identity for the exhibition. Traditional corporate techniques of marketing such as branding through colour, thematically linked disparate components of the audience experience with the exhibition.

This can encompass design within the building, in the publication, internal and external signage and advertising in the media and outdoor public spaces.

An exhibition specific design language developed through a refined material and colour palette so that the exhibition design, graphic design, event design (for the opening and external functions) and all marketing and media collateral contained the same colour red. Design consistency with this defined colour, the ant and rhino motifs and a consistent finishes palette ensured anything related to the exhibition was clearly identifiable as specific to this exhibition, that experience and the visitor.

Essentially in this instance, the intended experience of the exhibition began from initial exposure to advertising, through to external then internal signage, ticketing information at the front desk, actual tickets, directional signage, exhibition specific signage, fit out, finishes inside the exhibition and the children’s area. Through to the publication, a component that can be referred to and engaged with at home and long after the exhibition is over.

Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire

Federation Court at the National Gallery of Victoria International

Photos previous page and left: National Gallery of Victoria Photographic Services

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A physical design example of this cohesion can be seen in the free-standing title wall located near the ticket desk and entry to the exhibition. The wall itself was ‘Dali red’ and featured brushed stainless steel lettering to directly reference the publication, that featured embossed silver lettering on the cover.

Moreover, reflecting on identity and cultural connections impacts meaning making, opening up questions on how the institution might impact on a sense of identity in visitors, which subsequently could be reflected in their response to engaging with both the interior and artwork within. For communities this process can also set up or reinforce expectation.

2 – Developing design cohesion for contemporary encounter: exhibition themed signage

This technique responded to existing issues with way-finding and signage at the NGV. Addressing concerns that visitors make their way through the entire exhibition was an aim developed in response to previous NGV Melbourne Winter Masterpiece exhibitions where complaints arose from visitors who missed the last room of the exhibition.

The way-finding signage strategy sought to guide visitors from gallery entrance, to ticket desk, right through the entire exhibition and then back out into the foyer. Both signage systems employed form, material, texture and colour from the exhibition interior. The concept of an ant trail referred to their prominence in the artworks, a theme featured in two significant works in the exhibition: Retrospective Bust of a Woman (1933) and the infamous film collaboration with Luis Buñuel - Un Chien Andalou (1929).

The placement on the floor of the ant trail and suspended audio symbols appealed to the approach many visitors have when walking in to a space – where the initial response can be to survey the entire space as a whole. Awareness of this behavior was discovered through previous observational studies of visitors in NGV exhibitions.

The technique also combats the prevailing issue of directory signage being missed by visitors because of overcrowding, when details on walls might be more difficult to see. For the ant trail, a consistent path on the floor can be readily visible to anyone. Introduced in the children’s space in the foyer, this trail establishes a simple technique as a unique part of the exhibition experience.

Ensuring audiences experience every gallery in the exhibition, follow a general traffic flow plan (for crowd management) and can easily identify designated audio guide stops, this technique employed visual cues to foster cohesion between art, design and engagement experientially, manifest through time, recognition and resonance.

Discouraging habitual eye level viewing, both forms of signage functioned outside of this horizon line band. The audio guide signage, branded through the Dali red, was suspended from the ceiling while the visual way-finding signage took the form of an ant trail on the floor. Referencing Herbert Bayer’s directional signage experiments in the Bauhaus exhibition at MoMA in the late 1930s, and employing his Field of Vision theory, this method also looks at concepts of shifting viewing planes to trigger participation. Bayer’s “Field of Vision” theory identified the viewer as a pivotal design element in exhibition design. This premise acknowledged a wider field of vision previously assumed in exhibition design offering a broader visual scope to frame works. Subscribing to the notion of branding as effective comprehension tool, the audio guide signage meant that as visitors walked in to each new exhibition space, they could immediately establish the corresponding number to their iPod, choose it and quickly move forward with their art experience.

Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire
Photos left, below and right: National Gallery of Victoria Photographic Services

Above: Herbert Bayer, Diagram Extended Field of Vision, 1935
Left: Design concept for Audio Guide

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3 – Disruption to habituation and expectation through immersive environmental design

This strategy examined the prevalence of museum fatigue in the blockbuster exhibition and the opportunity to explore relationships between design, artistic content and experience to moderate it. By their very nature such exhibitions imply an abundance of weighty and valuable works rarely seen together, the display of which often spans relatively vast distances, with an expectation to engage with each work individually and in a unique way.

To minimise this impact and generate active participation and prospective subsequent memorable experiences, this design works towards activating engagement. The approach employed the senses through scenography, scale, lighting, texture and duration, designing fully immersive spaces where spatial and tactile cues trigger a reflexive engagement (active participation, physical movement) and a process of interpretation with awareness of existing context that directly relates to the artworks displayed.

Claire Bishop describes Ann Hamilton’s “use of sensory perception” as aiming “to reawaken our sensory relationship to the organic physical world through memory and unconscious association”. Concomitant with the techniques described above, this was explored in the space destined to display the jewels. Initially envisaged as an immersive surreal experience that exploited perception and association, the conceptual design emerged from the literal concept of a life-sized, jewellery box.

With walls lined in quilted ruby velvet panels, the jewel box suggests that whatever is housed within is precious, exciting, intimate and off-limits. To elicit a similar responsive engagement, these design elements were scaled up, shrinking the visitor entering and invoking this experientially.

The quilted ruby panels imbedded around the glowing jewel cases provided a paradigm shift in scale where intimacy becomes primary. Moreover, by placing the cases at a lower height than usual, standing visitors are encouraged to bend forward, peering in at these exquisite works. This physical action, triggered through scale and placement, combined with the transference of the visual plane from vertical to horizontal, might also activate a shift in thinking and perception.

Similarly, the sumptuous nature of that space was specifically designed to reflect the extravagant and utopian surreal themes prevalent in both the work exhibited and the artist’s narrative. Contributing to the cohesive design aims outlined earlier, this method expanded to include opulent faux fur lined walls and seating in the cinema screening the film Un Chien Andalou. The dim lighting of the cinema provided a tactile surprise for visitors of all ages, psychologically referencing the disquieting onscreen content.

Effectively communicating these design concepts spatially and visually through scale models and computer generated fly-throughs, convinced those lenders overseas charged with ultimately signing off on design decisions to consider the potential in creating environments stimulating multiple windows of engagement with works through evocative design.

Investigating museum fatigue and how it can be compounded by ocular-centric design resulted in concepts of shifting viewing planes to promote ‘active participation’ and disrupting habituation. Looking into the production of meaning through spatial design and triggering participation through sensory activation in the contemporary encounter also responded to Nicolas Bourriaud’s statement that contemporary works have evolved as ‘a period of time to be lived through’.

The convention of presenting works in a rhythmic uniform display is a primary concern of habitual viewing.

It is now impossible to paint up an exhibition without surveying the space like a health inspector, taking into account the aesthetics of the wall which will inevitably ‘artify’ the work in a way that frequently diffuses its intentions. Most of us now ‘read’ the hanging as we would chew gum – unconsciously and from habit.

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4 – To generate and activate opportunities for manifold engagements through provision for physical comfort and shifts in experience through duration

As previously discussed, one concern in designing a blockbuster exhibition is museum fatigue. Not only exacerbated by the conventional rhythmic eye-level hangs that contribute to habituation, it can also be compounded by the physical discomfort of standing for long periods of time. Thus a lack of adequate seating may impact on the scope for manifold engagement with artworks. Valery Sazonov explains:

...when people visit exhibitions, particularly large exhibitions, they tend to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of works and find it difficult to study and ‘experience’ them in a relaxed way. The exhibits flash past like the countryside seen from the window of an express train. Not infrequently, all that remains after such a visit is a feeling of tiredness and irritation.

To diminish the negative impact of physical discomfort sometimes involved when visiting large exhibitions, while also being mindful to cater for diverse audience needs, the provision of ample and exhibition specific seating was incorporated into the overall exhibition design. This seating provided cues for the audience to consider extending time spent with works of particular individual interest. The seating was designed to both continue the aesthetic cohesion outlined earlier, but more importantly to reference visual and material references. As established both cinemas featured fur lined bench seating, however the centrepiece seating of the Renaissance drawing room really illustrates this.

The spherical floral canopy referenced renowned Dali iconography, while dappled lighting and domestic scale delivered a point of departure for reflection in physical comfort. Invoking domesticity can also been seen as moving towards shifting the experience of the art as seen from within an institution.

5 – To generate and activate opportunities for manifold engagements with diverse audiences: designing for children

The objective of this strategy was to generate active participation in diverse audiences and more specifically, develop museological foundations for those possibly too young to understand the nuances in the exhibition alone. The institution decided to include a dedicated children’s space for this exhibition ‘Dali Kids’, in the foyer of the ground floor in the St Kilda Rd. building. Offering both education and entertainment for younger audiences, it was designed to promote accessibility to themes in the art for later reference in the exhibition.

Ideas and themes from the art in the exhibition were expanded upon in simple, dynamic activities attempting to trigger a more engaging experience for children once inside the exhibition space.

As discussed earlier, the flooring here was the first introduction to the ant trail. Ant embossed carpet tiles prompted the narrative of the exhibition experience and introduced themes through way-finding signage. The two feature entries to this space came in two sizes, ‘adult’ and ‘child’ and employed a rhino motif derived from the Dali/Halsman photograph inside the exhibition. Lined in the signature Dali red these thresholds also doubled as seating.

Respecting the building limitations of untouchable bluestone walls and floor, while finding a material that was suitable for children to be in contact with, a stud wall clad with Echo™ Panel was employed to form the boundaries of the space. Echo™ Panel was a light-weight post consumer recycled and 100% recyclable PET product with no finishing required.

Another method looking towards cultivating manifold engagements for children in the exhibition space was realised in the development of a series of child specific labels. Inviting a line of questioning not often offered to children in the institutional gallery environment (although quickly gaining world-wide momentum), these labels also acted as visual cues, drawing children through the exhibition. Accompanying the selected works considered most relevant or appropriate for children by the education department at the NGV, the labels featured dedicated and more relevant text to younger age groups than the conventional labels and sat at a median children’s eye height level (aged 4–10). These pint-sized labels were designed to be visually appealing to the children, and were formed in the silhouette of the rhino motif first featured in the foyer. Replicated inside the exhibition and referencing an artwork, this contributed to the cohesive narrative, even on a simply aesthetic level.
This exhibition enabled an expansion of previously immutable parameters within the institution from a design perspective. This can be seen in two of the strategies addressed above.

Firstly, the ability to negotiate design stipulations in loan agreements - the effective communication and subsequent consent to move forward with surreal design components despite initial requests not to - was a great advancement for the practice. Establishing a design practice capable of shifting previously fixed parameters at an international institutional level highlights the practical gains of this practice based research.

This is a prime example of how even restrictive briefs can be negotiated through persuasive, thoroughly researched design methods. Although the financial implications of the blockbuster meant more pressure than usual on design, it simultaneously offered up a broader scope for design development and material selection. The rigid display requests in the loan agreement did in fact also provide clear parameters for the design scope, essentially streamlining the design process by determining certain boundaries on the floor plan, just as the institutional expectation to re-use existing infrastructure where possible did.

In relation to questions asked in the research, the immersive exhibition elicited audible reactions in visitors and visibly altered the manner in which visitors were engaging with the works, supporting a transformation from habituation in these instances and thus possibly activating engagement.

Second was the development of visual way-finding signage, the success of which established a practice no longer reliant on text-based signage. This opened up opportunity for manifold engagement long after actual gallery attendance has passed.

Although difficult to quantify, the strategy of branding and design was considered successful internally. If visitor numbers can be considered a reflection of success, this was the second most visited exhibition at the NGV since the gallery opened in 1968. The more specific benefits to this research was how these techniques opened up a dialogue, through internal staff discussions, reflecting on how the institution might impact on a sense of identity in visitors, which could subsequently be reflected in their response to engaging both with the gallery and the artwork displayed within.

Expanded duration and location of exhibition experience could also be considered to have expanded opportunities for manifold engagement in regard to Allan Wallash’s perspective that:

- The art museum visitor’s immediate experience... depends critically upon the building and its setting. Every element -- building, space, decoration affects the visitor. A visit to a museum is an ongoing encounter with a variety of symbolic forms with the visitor’s response to a large extent predetermined by his or her background and education.10

Diversity in patrons, experience and expectation is likely to provide the foundation for each individual’s approach to the art and their capacity for engagement. A repeat visitor (an NGV member or local art enthusiast) will probably engage in a completely different manner to a tourist from a vastly different culture, or a toddler in the gallery for their first time.

On duration, offering added incentive for contemplation, interpretation and the chance to take the time to consider relationships with adjacent works, the simple act of providing seating has the potential to promote manifold engagements during contemporary encounters.

The development of child-specific design consideration raised this concern to one now regarded as critical within the institution. The space in the foyer was enjoyed by thousands of children, including those not visiting the exhibition. The positive response to this space may have been a precursor to the subsequent development of permanent children specific galleries on both sites of the NGV and was heralded as a great success internally. Feedback from front of house indicated that the public were regularly engaging with both this space and the labels and ant trail within the exhibition. In opening up a dialogue between parent or teacher and child in the exhibition space, myriad opportunities for manifold engagements can be considered: offering new perspectives on artistic content through a usually silent avenue in the gallery - the child’s voice, a potentially enhanced feeling of rightfully belonging in the gallery for children and through socializing an otherwise, sometimes clinical space through conversation and interaction. Such practice currently emerges as an institutional parameter of the future but may simultaneously erect expectation and habituation in even the youngest of visitors.

Another valuable component to my Masters research that expanded on a reflective practice was the execution of a comparative re-design project. This saw a second design for the exhibition emerge as theoretical avenue to explore design techniques that weren’t achievable due to fixed institutional parameters and the collaborative design process. This opened up questions regarding practice through negotiation and the development of techniques that might enhance the power of design to expand on manifold engagements for contemporary encounters in any exhibition.

Finally, while the ability to conduct observations was hampered by high volume traffic and the commonly expansive time period spent by individuals in the exhibition, critical reflection was still possible thanks to front of house feedback.
Harrell Fletcher: 
The Sound We Make Together (Melbourne) 
11 November 2010 - 30 January 2011
DESIGN 3

Harrell Fletcher: The Sound We Make Together (Melbourne)

This exhibition was in two of the temporary galleries on level three of NGVA at Federation Square. It was an unusual one for the institution, exploring the role of community, contemporary art practice and what might be displayed in a public art gallery. Harrell Fletcher is internationally renowned for facilitating exhibitions and events based on participation and collaboration, usually with people not involved in making art. The participants of this site-specific endeavour (Arts Project Australia, CERES, Crooked Rib Art, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Grainger Museum, Hell Gallery, Herb Patten, RIiSE and Jeff Sparrow) were chosen to highlight an aspect of contemporary and historical Melbourne that reflected past and present while raising community awareness. Fletcher employed this situated art gallery practice as an opportunity to involve participants in the exhibition making process. Allowing each to select works from the NGV Collection, this offered a potentially unrealised (thus far) perspective on the works, seen in this context as representative of their individual plights, values or artistic tastes.

Exhibition Design Example

This exhibition was chosen to explore how the institution specific constraints of fixed architecture, restrictive budgets and conservation requirements tend to impose limitations on potential for manifold engagement through repetitive physical and visual experiences. In this exhibition this was mitigated through design thanks to a less restrictive than usual design brief and flexibility for exploration within conventional house standards. This flexibility was due to the presence of a living artist, which meant that negotiation and innovative design development was viable for this exhibition. Working in close collaboration with the curator and artist also enhanced the ability to test and shift usually fixed parameters, as living artists are entitled greater scope to do so in this institutional context. The driving design motivation for this exhibition was for the design concept to reflect ideas and themes of community and a DIY spirit as evident in the artworks in the exhibition checklist (this is a list of all artworks displayed in an exhibition). To create social experiences that might offer an experience that is memorable and to lessen institutional presence through the creation of interactive spaces, at a domestic scale and with unconventional finishes.

Techniques to provide alternative options to engage with information and cater to diverse audiences were expanded upon and a desire to guide visitors to and through the exhibition visually again prevailed. In light of previous seating strategies, investigations into another ergonomic, physically comfortable exhibition was also primary to the overarching design thrust.

Institutional Parameters, Expectations and Existing Conditions

The fixed floor-plan was primarily determined by the large scale of the gallery and a small budget that didn’t allow for new walls to be built. This was also the case for maintaining the existing white wall colour, although the curator was definitively in favour of white walls in a contemporary art space, a preference highlighting the dominance of the white cube aesthetic.

A fluid and conceptual design brief set by the curator was a result of the fluid and conceptual exhibition checklist. Disparate content included works from the NGV permanent collection, Fletcher’s personal collection/archive, works created by the artist for the exhibition and ephemera from community groups. This diversity created varying and sometimes conflicting levels of conservation and display expectations.

The prevailing curatorial desire was to separate ephemera from art to ensure clarity and order in that respect. Both curator and artist wanted non-art audiences to be catered for (supported by institutional desires to expand audiences now and in the future) and have the spirit of the art reflected in the design. They also requested that the books and ephemera displayed in the exhibition be available for visitors to interact with.

The institutional expectations revolved around the usual concerns - adherence to time, budget and conservation requirements, however the impact of a fluid and conceptual checklist was essentially in direct conflict with these guidelines and time schedules set by the institution (for example some works were still being made during the design/build/preparation/art installation period).

The Registration Department requested all incoming artefacts be treated as artworks (despite actually being ephemera and not works created by artists) to streamline their processes.
However, this complicated the display and conservation requirements, muddying the waters of usually fixed institutional rules.

The conservation constraints were fairly straightforward - lighting kept to 50 lux due to works on paper and to actively reduce instances that might damage artwork. All Multimedia elements were expected to be of the highest museological quality, i.e. smooth media interface, photo quality imagery etc.

And finally, the established parameters of house styles for formatting signage (title-wall on first wall, didactics in gallery), at least one label per artwork, exhibition to have different ‘feel’ to previous one in same space and encouraging future patronage through provision of satisfied experience (limiting opportunity for complaint) remained as institutional expectations.

**Results**

Separating the ephemera from art essentially defined the final exhibition layout: NGV artworks and artist commissioned works were placed in the first gallery, Fletcher’s previous works including posters, publications and films were placed adjacent to that and separate to this was the space for non-artwork (ephemera from community groups).

The conservation requirements to reduce instances that might damage artwork resulted in prohibiting signage, fragile ‘works’ in cases, plinths for floor based works and tape borders around them.

**Design motivation, strategies and development**

The development of strategies featured in this exhibition design were largely supported by the collaborative process - working with a living artist and the head of the Contemporary Art Department enhanced flexibility for exploration within conventional house standards and the ability to shift usually fixed parameters.

The motivation for design to reflect themes of community and a DIY spirit reinforced the value of social experiences in the institution, favouring interaction, participation and conversation in the gallery to promote opportunities for manifold engagement.

**1 – Disruption to habituation and expectation**

This strategy aimed to foster diverse opportunities for engagement with works experientially, realised through time, socialisation and resonance; embracing the notion of active viewing by creating physically comfortable settings and promoting social activity in the exhibition space. Techniques based on these principles addressed signage, labels, horizon lines, seating, and active participation through manifold opportunities for engagement and activation of multiple senses.

Commencing with the introduction to the exhibition inside the exhibition space, a large-scale title-wall was designed to establish context at entry. Clearly visible from the foyer, this aimed to visually introduce a dialogue with the rest of the gallery and suggest an event or encounter rather than merely defining a location. Intimating notions of encounters ahead, the approach was to stimulate a responsive engagement that might later resonate with visitors, referencing themes in the exhibition through material continuity.

Again, this exhibition looked to define and test boundaries on assumed fixed parameters and a technique addressing label height installation is an example of this. The prevailing label height in large art institutions is globally referred to as eye-level or just below the horizon line. Labels tend to sit approximately 1500mm from the floor and this is reflected in the house style of the NGV. Trialling a new height, labels for this exhibition were installed 1470mm from the floor. A minor deviation to the standard by 8cm, the artist felt that this height was more accommodating because ‘taller people can bend down but shorter people can’t grow and people in wheelchairs can’t stand up.’

Subtle shifting this installation height to a marginally lower one than the rest of the NGVA gallery spaces highlighted the capacity to shift previously assumed fixed parameters. Moreover it may have also enhanced legibility by accommodating more diverse audiences.

A successful external case study of an example representing alternative presentation of didactic information, one not visually interacting with art displayed nor design, are the loaned iPod Touches known as the ‘O’ at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania. Freely available with a wealth of information (including essays on individual works), these devices use GPS tracking to establish visitor location and provide relevant information for those spaces specifically. It could be countered that visitors holding this device are then compelled to look at the small digital screens rather than focusing on the artwork, however this strategy exemplifies a large shift in institutional parameters and arguably this alone is beneficial for broadening the scope of a progressive design practice.

The physical movement required to look down to learn about the work creates a decision-making process triggering active thinking rather than uncritical or passive consumption. Offering options on which works might hold more appeal educationally than others, the reduction of text and visual clutter among the art and an ability to engage with no knowledge other than the experience of the art alone all move towards manifold engagements obtainable in institutional contexts. This example of contemporary encounter in the gallery context highlights how “Digital tools are changing the way that art is bought, sold and simply looked at.”

The desire to emphasise connections in artistic content and narrative with exhibition design influenced certain design decisions involved in creating the exhibition specific seating. Seating was constructed from X-board (a reinforced core flute brown craft paper product), providing domestic scale social spaces while contributing to the overall design aesthetic.
Concepts of comfort, domesticity, community spirit and participation are highlighted as critical to engagement with exhibition content, urging visitors to interact with works and empowering them to engage physically. This provision of home comforts assures audiences that they too can be a part of the community groups they are viewing and learn more about them (through reading materials and watching A/V presentations). Developing concepts of active viewing aurally, physically (through the abundance of varied seating options) and potentially enhancing the capability for content to resonate with visitors by contributing to awareness of the physical self in the exhibition space through behavioural prompts (i.e. to sit down and read, listen or watch).

Architect and designer Frederick Kiesler also concentrated on interactions between people, space and art inside the gallery. Through his practice in the 1920s he developed a cantilevered display mechanism enabling viewers to manually control angles of suspended artworks to improve visibility or ‘varied transparency’ known as the ‘Leger and Trager’ method. Although prohibited by institutional conservation guidelines at the NGV, this method is referenced in the ability of visitors to this exhibition to manoeuvre and interact with the ephemera on these display benches.

Efforts at disruption to habitation and expectation also emerged through the triggering of uncommon physical movement. Combating static viewing by prompting varied physical and sensory interactions, the technique of shifting planes of engagement moved the conventional rhythmic vertical hanging plane to also include the horizontal. Display infrastructure including benches and cases repositioned the gaze and body to interact in different ways: from vertical to horizontal, visual to aural and ultimately from passive viewer to physically engaged participant. Seating was placed at benches designed to encourage visitors to connect with the interactive ephemera including books, magazines and music, by sitting down and spending time with them. A track system designed into the benches secured ephemera, books and audio while still allowing and encouraging interaction.

Similarly, to create a more relaxed, social atmosphere, a space prompting uncommon aural experiences in the gallery was developed, theoretically leading to disruption of habitation and expectation. In Brian O’Doherty’s seminal text Inside The White Cube, Thomas McEvilley introduces an analogy between gallery interior and Egyptian tomb chamber, observing that both were “designed to eliminate awareness of the outside world” possessing “chambers where an illusion of eternal presence was to be protected from the flow of time”. He suggests that galleries purposefully employ architecture that modifies behaviour - “one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love”. Shifting the institutional parameters and unspoken rules of silence in the gallery space to break the revered and sometimes oppressive silence of gallery, intentional noise bleed from competing audio visual multi-media components in nearby spaces was invoked. Possibly also encouraging conversation as a positive rather than disruptive facet amongst visitors, this technique worked toward a more relaxed atmosphere, enhancing potential to prompt varied physical and sensory interactions which other visitors.

Aspiring to minimise the environmental impact of the exhibition build while maintaining the design ethos principles for this exhibition, finishes and details invoked a DIY aesthetic inherent in the art displayed including zines and posters. The tangible, down to earth nature of the community groups involved was designed to be reflected in materials that had to simultaneously fulfil pragmatic requirements, with particular resilience to high volume traffic.

The positive experience with cardboard in the Drape exhibition (financially viable, easily adaptable, fast to install with minimal conservation concerns), suggested that it would be a good design material to pursue for this exhibition. Based on the practical knowledge acquired through this, previous design developments were made in sourcing, manufacturing and installation systems.

To maintain best practice as a responsible designer the sourcing of sustainable design solutions that would be easy to install and de-install, fast enough to adhere to the tight time schedule, safe enough to display in close proximity to art (as per conservation requirements), and affordable enough to stay under budget without compromising on aesthetics, was imperative.

After investigating cardboard options researched initially for the Drape exhibition, the final decision lay in X-Board™. The ultra-high strength-to-weight ratio corrugated honeycomb panel solutions offered a recyclable alternative to the usual materials used in exhibition design at the NGV - toxic MDF: Manufactured wax-free, with zero polyethylene and made from up to 97% post-consumer recycled paper waste, the X-Board™ can be repurposed, thus minimising waste during de-installation.

This material became a key focus for the design and further contributed to aesthetic cohesion for the disparate works in the exhibition. Because individual exhibitions can sometimes become lost in the grand narrative of a large gallery, emphasising identity of individual exhibitions can reduce that, cementing a strong identity that may also contribute to memory, simultaneously exploiting connections in narrative content.

The driving visual and material approach employed consistency, shifting the same colour and texture of the X-Board™ from a vertical structural substrate component (mounted on wall), to a horizontal protective distancing tool (floor plinths), to informative text (signage), the purely aesthetic (cladding of case, marketing material, publication) and the functional and interactive (seating). Moreover, by employing material consistency to shift planes of engagement, interruption to habitation and expectation may combat static or passive viewing.
3 - Encourage focus on art through reduction of visible institutional or architectural infrastructure

Aimed to focus vision on the horizon line and thus away from the cavernous architecture, the design motivation here was to create a very specific visual field. The materiality and design development for this emerged in response to issues of installation, where the walls destined for the artwork (pinned posters) were unable to sustain this method due to materiality and structure. Thus the posters required an alternative substrate that tolerated pinning, providing security while aesthetically still complimenting the works.

In line with the overall design concept, the X-Board™ emerged as a material that worked best under these constraints. To create the visual band, a 1200mm high band of X-Board™ was installed with the centreline at 1550mm running the sixty-metre length of the perimeter walls in the second gallery. Forcing vision to focus on this narrow band highlights the institutional practice of hanging bands, centre lines and eye-height levels, drawing attention to common highlights the institutional practice of hanging bands, centre lines and eye-height levels, drawing attention to common

4 - Analytical and critical reflection on design practice through observation

As established earlier, a strong motivator in this practice based research lay in the capacity to promote a responsive design practice through a comprehensive understanding of how visitors interact with the design techniques employed.

Site-specific observations mapping visitor behaviour in this exhibition allowed investigations in to whether they were interacting with the spatial design, furniture, ephemera and audio-visual works as intended or expected.

Summary

This exhibition enabled many strategies developed over the course of this research to be trialled and investigated through practice, observation and critical reflection. Ultimately the key to this success lay in the convergence of suitable participants. Ability to develop the design lay in the benefits of a team comprised of a living artist who was heavily involved in all aspects of the exhibition; a curator that was the head of the Contemporary Art Department at the time (so able to make decisions without need to defer to superiors); and essentially, a general sense of unified purpose meant that the Hierarchical complications sometimes present in the exhibition design process of this situated practice were greatly diminished.

The curatorial and artistic impetus to deliver the spirit of the art through design and provide manifold opportunities for engaging with the works experientially, manifest through time, recognition and resonance, was successful in supporting contemporary encounters that encourage visitors to participate comfortably in the gallery context.

The separation of ephemera from art that ultimately defined the exhibition layout followed conventional institutional techniques of ensuring a clear definition between art and non-art in gallery spaces. Perhaps the exhibition could have been designed thematically differently so that all of the works pertaining to a community group were displayed together. This may have shifted institutional parameters by blurring the divide between what is and isn’t art, encouraging visitors to really reflect on their existing ideas and expectations on what constitutes art, a primary motive for this exhibition outlined by artist and curator. This has potential to increase emphasis on different modes and representations of ‘art’ displayed and the consequences of that. By deeply engaging visitors through introspection and contemplation, this experience could then be perceived as providing prospects for manifold engagements.

Initially envisaged as an interactive element of the exhibition, the ‘zines were deemed too delicate (and irreplaceable) to be placed on open display. To this end, it was hoped that an interactive multimedia component could be devised whereby flicking through the ‘zines could be done virtually, in a touch screen adjacent to display cases. The Multi Media Department resolved that concept too time consuming and deemed the invitation to work on the project. When it was suggested that design might assist to lessen that workload, management decided that this might not produce a quality of work appropriate for an NGV exhibition. Further design led discussion regarding whether a polished result was necessary to present an inherently DIY unpolished experience was again closed by insistence that a finish reflecting institutional values (i.e. smooth media interface, photo quality imagery etc.) was the only option for any multimedia display in a gallery or exhibition within the institution. Thus three primary institutional parameters proved immovable in this instance: conservation principles, an inability to collaborate and negotiate workloads successfully and finally the ‘rules’ of quality and aesthetics inside exhibitions. This breakdown highlights the desire for the design process to have sufficient time to thoroughly develop new concepts to a point of resolution that leaves no doubt that a particular design device will be successful in an exhibition.

The conservation requirements for prohibitive signage (i.e. do not touch), plinths and tape borders around sculptures created visual barriers that increased the institutional presence, reminding visitors of where they are and what that means to them. This can be considered to bring the hierarchy of the institution to the fore rather than the artwork or themes within. Elimination of visual barriers might shift institutional parameters, favours the experience with art over the protection of art, and with security guards in the gallery, it’s arguable that the works would still be safe. Consequently, this may have developed engaging experiences by lessening unintentional visual disruption between visitor and art. Moreover, these standards contribute to the issues of homogenised aesthetics in gallery spaces.

The exhibition specific seating shifted parameters by employing unconventional modes of seating, relevant to the space and art where traditionally more sparsely placed, austere furniture would sit centrally in wide-open gallery spaces.

Similarly breaking the traditional silence of a gallery suggests both a more comfortable environment to experience the art, enhancing potential for conversation, and consequently providing insights from different perspectives - promoting shared ideas while shifting the authoritarian tone of taciturnity.

Developing concepts of active viewing aurally, physically (through abundant seating options) and the potential in content to resonate with visitors, this contributed to awareness of the physical self in the exhibition space through behavioural prompts, namely to sit down and read, listen or watch.

The title wall made more of a statement than the conventional signage, and parameters were shifted here by not drawing on house standards of size, scale and style. Acting as an introduction to the ideas inherent to the exhibition in physical form, it celebrated the material identified as the critical design cue and established the curatorial ethos that this exhibition may not be like the usual exhibitions in this gallery.

The observational studies reflected no discernible movement in visitors to read the 1470mm high labels, potentially indicating a more ergonomic placement. It could also be proposed that a more physically comfortable experience promotes a more engaging one, as the visitor is better equipped to engage with and focus on the art. However, this works in direct opposition to previous theories espousing physical movement as triggering active engagement.

Moreover, establishing a new standard for label heights merely erects another fixed parameter when the objectives...
of this research lie in expanding opportunities to develop design techniques and consequently shift parameters where appropriate.

Although this trial highlighted the potential to pinpoint and then shift supposedly fixed parameters in the institutional context, clearly beneficial to future practice, ideally such parameters will grow more malleable, so that design might become responsive to specific exhibitions and consistently support manifold engagements for contemporary encounters. In this circumstance it was primarily the presence and direct involvement of a living artist that aided this.

While the track system designed into the benches both successfully secured ephemera for the entire duration of the exhibition (thefting of such components can pose problems in the gallery), observations also revealed visitors engaging as intended.

Capitalising on the DIY style brown craft paper finish of the X-Board™ meant no painting, providing less off-gassing and eliminating chemicals and solvents. This was beneficial to time and budget constraints as well as promoting sustainable practices in the gallery. Such practices can be difficult in the constantly changing visual landscape and desire of institution to provide different look and feel for each exhibition.

Contributing cohesion of design through material consistency drew together the narrative of an otherwise disparate exhibition. Institutional parameters were shifted through the simple deviation from the standard painted wall finish, style and materials for plinths, furniture and signage. Reworking the existing conditions of a white cube aesthetic and the clinical physical characteristics of the gallery to a potentially more ‘approachable’ style may have also interrupted existing expectation. This works towards addressing potential timidity in audiences who might be intimidated by such spaces or wonder whether they belong in the space. These psychological effects can inhibit manifold engagements and even deter unfamiliar audiences from entering a large gallery. In line with this, the cardboard style material may foster a more relaxed attitude to the space, moving it away from rigid institution and towards a space for contemplation, to relax and nurture the sharing of thoughts in a social atmosphere.

The same issues surrounding the initial pinning problems on the existing plasterboard substrate arose with the installation of the X-Board™ band. For conservation reasons, large amounts of adhesives could not be used and fixing into the wall with nails was made difficult by a wall structure comprised of steel rather than timber studs, a discovery made only during installation. As time limitations meant further research into alternative solutions wasn’t possible, the result was copious stapled fixings for each X-Board™ sheet. This left nail gun pockmarks scattered across every panel. Covered with a similar craft paper tape, these marks were still visible, reinforcing the DIY themes this was at least acceptable aesthetically from a design perspective.

The creation of this band did however draw visitors down these rarely-visited corridors, enhancing spatial awareness, engagement and essentially extending the gallery exhibition spaces.

By engaging visitors in this dialogue with space and art through design, rather than pushing a traditional institutional viewing experience, this exhibition design attempted to expand opportunity for visitor comprehension and consequent appreciation of context, art and artist. By establishing a strong visual identity, vivid memories of the spirit of the exhibition may foster an extended duration of reflection, contemplation and thus engagement after the physical experience is over.

Similarly, developing concepts of ‘active viewing’ aura, visually and physically amplified the aptitude of content to resonate with visitors by contributing to awareness of the physical self in the exhibition space. As David Derrie espouses:

‘...performativity is one of the most significant developments in contemporary exhibition design since it reaches beyond the semantics of exhibition display and develops the notion of experience design in the recognition that the body plays a fundamental role in communication and learning. ... the body and its movement through the exhibition is a vital exchange between the content of the show and the private associations of the individual visitor. The exhibition experience becomes an encounter with the moving body, a space of events.’

And this concept lends itself entirely to the notions reflected in the contemporary encounter as defined in this text.

Permission to conduct observations determined a successful point upon which to reflect on actual encounters, gathering direct responses to techniques trialled ultimately influenced future potential within these spaces and alternatives to conventional design methods. The results of these observations found that visitors were sitting down on the seating and physically interacting with the ephemera, reading books, watching the A/V, listening to the audio on provided headsets and physically interacting with each other. The results also highlighted the average duration spent in the exhibition. With the exception of a select few, the average time spent was less than five minutes. This raises complex issues regarding responsive design strategies as it opens the question as to whether this knowledge should impact the design of future exhibitions. Broadening the scope of enquiry as to whether exhibitions should assume that this is a given time frame to work within and pander to, or whether the institution should continue to present exhibitions according to established systems. Far too complex for this research to further explore, but a critical point of reflection for future practice.

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CONCLUSION

This text has reflected on the research conducted through my role of Exhibition Designer and parameters of exhibition design implicated in the experience of art, within the context of the National Gallery of Victoria. The NGV provided a clear example of institutional gallery setting and techniques and strategies were investigated from a perspective that standard, globally recognised design mechanisms produce entrenched viewing habits. These habits are reformatted and these standards can also have a flattening affect resulting in homogenised experiences when aesthetic and spatial standards are designed to reflect regulations, institutional expectations and the architectural dimensions necessary for public spaces.

This in turn affects experience, behaviour and the expectations of visitors with art in the gallery context, sometimes feeding into concerns about homogenised institutional engagement in contemporary encounters. Brian O’Doherty refers to inherent behavioural actions within the white cube “in which the act of looking” is “coached by expectation”. These formalising design techniques culturally code content as art and can be construed as erecting fixed expectations, standardising space, time and consequently limiting prospects for engagement during contemporary encounters with art.

Artist Daniel Buren investigated the institutional context, highlighting that pivotal point of interaction between art and environment by utilising a piece of bread to prove his theory highlighting that pivotal point of interaction between art and environment by utilising a piece of bread to prove his theory of the National Gallery of Victoria. This text has reflected on the research conducted through this role of Exhibition Designer and parameters of exhibition design, ultimately presenting new prospects for manifold engagements for contemporary encounters in the institution. And ultimately, a critical dialogue emerged within the design context of the institution.

The Drape exhibition defined areas for investigation in architecturally restrictive spaces with rigid conservation parameters. This informed new modes of research and development for lighting objects in cases, large format labels and their placement and angles. It also examined how the concept of identity, awareness of self in gallery space and space in relation to each other might impact engagement and encounter within the institution. Observations revealed visitors interacting with the concertina in the intended fashion which opened up potential to consider new techniques that further exploit this method where appropriate. Disrupting the rhythmic viewing inherent to habituation proved effective and may have contributed to expanding on manifold engagement in this exhibition.

Despite the limitations of rigid design brief, international loan agreements, multiple curators and collaborative design process involved in the Salvador Dali exhibition; these nevertheless enabled an expansion and stretching of previously immutable parameters within the institution from a design perspective. A prime example of how thoroughly researched and developed design methods can support engagement and encounter within all of these galleries, allowing the techniques outlined to be developed and investigated. Reshaping the dynamics between designer and those who approve designs greatly progressed exploration and expansion on engagement and encounter within the exhibition. A key factor in this was the pragmatic responsive data uncovered in the observational analysis. These investigations covered many NGV exhibition design issues that those discussed in this text, and provided empirical evidence of visitor behaviour within the institution. The site-specific observations proved vital to future practice, both informing new approaches to design but more specifically, this gathered data legitimised and gave weight to future approval of proposed designs. The institution highly values factual, evidence-based research as a risk management technique. Therefore this observational technique began to act as legitimising force in gaining approval for new strategies developing from long established strategies. This introduced new methods on branding and identity for the exhibition leant cohesion to the experience as a whole. This introduced new methods

allowed exploration into how they might be shifted to promote manifold engagements or minimise the impact of habituation within the constraints of this institutional practice, navigating through established processes.

Consequently, this research opened up the current situated design practice to introduce critical thinking as part of an everyday process. It shifted the practice to one motivated by enquiry, investigation, experimental and analytical thought. Theory has hitherto been discussed as manifested and tangible engagements, using benchmarking rather than previously relied upon assumptions thanks to thorough research and empirical data. The product of this research and observation also became a strategy to counter entrenched expectations of design, where explorative dialogue in to intention, expectation and outcomes may not yet have taken place.

The exhibition designs that were in focus established precise parameters for operation, a reflective design practice, analysis and the generation of practical data through research. This opened up opportunities for more flexibility in the design practice in respect to the context, imbued with hierarchy and institutionalised systems. Based on this, previously fixed rules to existing standards grew malleable and were able to be shifted. This in turn expanded potential for a design practice to develop techniques promoting manifold engagements for contemporary encounters in the institution. And ultimately, a critical dialogue emerged within the design context of the institution.

The success of the visual way-finding trial established a practice no longer reliant on text-based signage that opened up opportunity for future practice to explore new techniques of this ilk. And as outlined earlier, the advances in children specific design, now regarded as critical within the institution, may have contributed to the development of formal children’s galleries on both sites.

The Harrel Fletcher exhibition enabled many design strategies developed over the course of this research to be trialled and investigated. As previously attributed, cooperative, engaging and valuable team members with a communal sense of unified purpose reduced hierarchical decision making issues.

Developing concepts of “active viewing” aurally, visually and physically amplified the capacity for content to resonate with visitors by contributing to awareness of the physical self in the exhibition space. By engaging visitors in a dialogue with art through design, rather than pushing a conventional or homogenised institutional viewing experience, opportunities for visitor comprehension and consistent appreciation of art and artist fostered foundations for manifold engagement in contemporary encounters.

The label placement investigation highlighted the potential to consider the then shift supposedly fixed parameters in the institutional context. This underscored an ability to shift parameters so that design might more organically respond to specific exhibitions, ultimately presenting new prospects for manifold engagements in future practices.

The cooperation of internal and external team members promoting the exploration and expansion on engagement and encounter within all of these galleries, allowing the techniques outlined to be developed and investigated. Reshaping the dynamics between designer and those who approve designs greatly progressed exploration and expansion on engagement and encounter within the exhibition. A key factor in this was the pragmatic responsive data uncovered in the observational analysis. These investigations covered many NGV exhibition design issues that those discussed in this text, and provided empirical evidence of visitor behaviour within the institution. The site-specific observations proved vital to future practice, both informing new approaches to design but more specifically, this gathered data legitimised and gave weight to future approval of proposed designs. The institution highly values factual, evidence-based research as a risk management technique. Therefore this observational technique began to act as legitimising force in gaining approval for new strategies developing from long established strategies. This introduced new methods on branding and identity for the exhibition leant cohesion to the experience as a whole. This introduced new methods

for design consideration towards an all-inclusive design goal, supporting extended engagement with exhibitions through duration, location, recognition and resonance.

The global community established by affordable international travel and the expansive accessibility of the internet, expect an interior now universal to large public art galleries. As a result of this expectation, the current volatile economic climate and dwindling or conservative funding sources there is now a “general hesitancy to use the exhibitions space in less conventional ways”. An effective way to counter these concerns (where appropriate), is to develop techniques that reflect thorough investigation and clear motivation to convince this view that deviation from such standards will still produce a high quality experience. Crucially, in this research it was the willingness within those at the NGV to defer from standard house styles that allowed the techniques outlined to be developed and investigated. This opportunity was instrumental in designing prospects to promote manifold engagement for contemporary encounters.

Finally, this research has developed a professional ability to concentrate on design from the perspective of experience despite internal directives within the institution to prioritise other requisites. This shifted the practice from one reliant on fixed guidelines to one motivated by enquiry, investigation, experimentation and analytical reflection. Overall this research has enabled a mastery of my own practice and an understanding of the potential of exhibition design to produce contemporary encounters and manifold engagements within an institutional context. It has also provided a focused understanding for others of the potential to contribute to viewers’ experiences of art within an institutional context. As such the outcomes of this research also makes a contribution to the exhibition design and the exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria.
1. "Mental space is equally organized by image schematic patterns arising from our repeated perceptual and bodily interactions with material objects and the world at large."


3. Cumulative average from exit surveys performed on site at NGV International and NGV Australia during 2005 through to 2012. Research performed by Sweeney Research (2005 - 2011) and Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2011-12).

4. Tony Elwood interview conducted 10/05/2010 in his Director’s office at Queensland Art Gallery.


7. Based on template created by the Australian Museum, 2009.


11. Ibid, 8.


18. Locally, research indicates that visitors to an art gallery in Australia are more likely to be females, born in Australia or overseas in predominantly English-speaking countries, gainfully employed and possessing graduate diplomas and certificates (49%) or postgraduate degrees (48%) with the highest equalised household income quintile (35%) - The NGV as institutional example, had a total attendance of 1.6 million visitors in 2008-09 and 34% of Victorians (aged over 15) attended art galleries in 2005-06. Research over the last decade, tends to infer that “museum-goers most likely to attend museums on a regular basis were those who came from families which encouraged museum attendance on a regular basis.” This research reflects the endeavours of the NGV to promote family friendly and child specific experiences as part of the wider exhibition program.


20. Retrospective Bust of a Woman, 1933 (some elements reconstructed 1970). Painted porcelain, broad, corn, feathers, paint on paper, beads, ink stand, sand, and two pens 29 x 27 1/4 x 12.5" (73.9 x 69.2 x 32 cm). © 2012 Salvador Dali, Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.


22. Ibid, 28.


33. Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube, 8.

34. Ibid, 10.


37. Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube, 97.

