Beyond the "White Cube": exploring contemporary museum exhibition design | Natalie Carfora, 2022

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The Fellow would like to thank the following MOD. staff for their support of her Fellowship:

- Dr Kristin Alford, Director

- Dr Lisa Bailey, Senior Exhibitions Manager

- Claudia von der Borch, Exhibitions Coordinator

Host Organisations

The Fellow wishes to acknowledge the generosity of the following individuals who helped to organise her visits, additionally sharing their time and expertise during the Fellowship:

- Amal Al Bastaki, on behalf of the Museum of the Future, Dubai

- Ben Gammon, on behalf of Ben Gammon Consulting, London

- Natasha Greenhalg, on behalf of Nxt Museum, Amsterdam

- Natalie Kane, on behalf of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

- Lieke Ketelaars, on behalf of Kossman De Jong, Amsterdam

- Maren Kreuger, on behalf of the Jewish Museum, Berlin

- Holly Stott, on behalf of the Science Museum, London

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- Arianne van der Veen, on behalf of Het Nieuwe Instituut. Rotterdam

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- Paul Bowers, Chief Operating Officer (interim), Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries

- Seb Chan, Chief Executive Officer, ACMI

- Beth Hines, Head of Strategic Partnerships, Sydney Living Museums

- Lucie Paterson, Head of Experience, Product and Digital, ACMI

- David Perkins, Experience Design Manager, State Library Victoria

- Dr Keir Winesmith, Head of Digital, National Gallery of Australia

Executive Summary

Background

Over recent decades, museums have experienced a shift in purpose. They are no longer viewed as places for the upper classes where treasures are stored. Instead, today museums and art galleries often consider themselves places for their communities as they endeavour to provide more engaging, participatory, and accessible experiences for more people.

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Figure 1. The Energy Show, installation view, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. Photo: Natalie Carfora

With these changes come shifts in exhibition design practices. Exhibitions are less frequently "white cubes" filled with art or objects and now often incorporate interactive experiences to engage their visitors. As museums and art galleries attempt to keep up with the digital possibilities available to us in our daily lives, it is interesting to consider the ways that exhibitions can do more, while also providing experiences that are accessible to anyone who enters through the doors.

For this reason, the Fellow investigated the way that museums and art galleries are designing exhibitions in the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through the following research questions:

- What do exhibition experiences consist of?
- How do museums make use of digital technologies?
- What methods are considered to ensure accessibility?

The Fellow visited staff and galleries at the following institutions over a four-week period in October and November 2022.

- Ben Gammon Consulting, London, UK
- Science Museum, London, UK
- Wellcome Collection, London, UK
- Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK
- Futurium, Berlin, Germany
- Judisches Museum, Berlin, Germany
- Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- Kossman De Jong, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Nxt Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Museum of the Future, Dubai, UAE

These were supplemented with visits to the following institutions:

- Museum of London, London, UK

- National Gallery, London, UK

- Postal Museum, London, UK

- Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden, Germany

- Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany

- Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany

- Micropia, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

At the time of writing this report, the Fellow is employed as an Exhibitions Coordinator at MOD. and holds a Master of Cultural Heritage from Deakin University, as well as qualifications in history, anthropology, and languages.

Fellowship learnings

Learnings from this Fellowship focus around exhibition practice and the way that museums and art galleries in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UAE are creating exhibitions.

These learnings include:

- Different elements that can be considered in exhibition design and the ways these may shape visitor experience

- The important things to consider in creating digital and analogue interactives

- Methods of providing accessible resources and the work that staff do to support this

The Fellow was able to explore these areas through interviews, visits, and observations at museums and art galleries across four countries, providing a broad overview of the current trends and issues in international exhibition design.

Personal, professional, and sectoral impact

The Fellow is deeply grateful for this experience and looks forward to utilising the skills and knowledge learned over the course of the Fellowship. After her return, the Fellow feels more confident in herself, her abilities, and her knowledge. She has already begun to implement her learnings into her work.

The Fellow looks forward to continuing to share her experience and initiating discussions about international best practice in exhibition making and what we can learn to ensure we are providing the most engaging and accessible exhibition experiences possible.
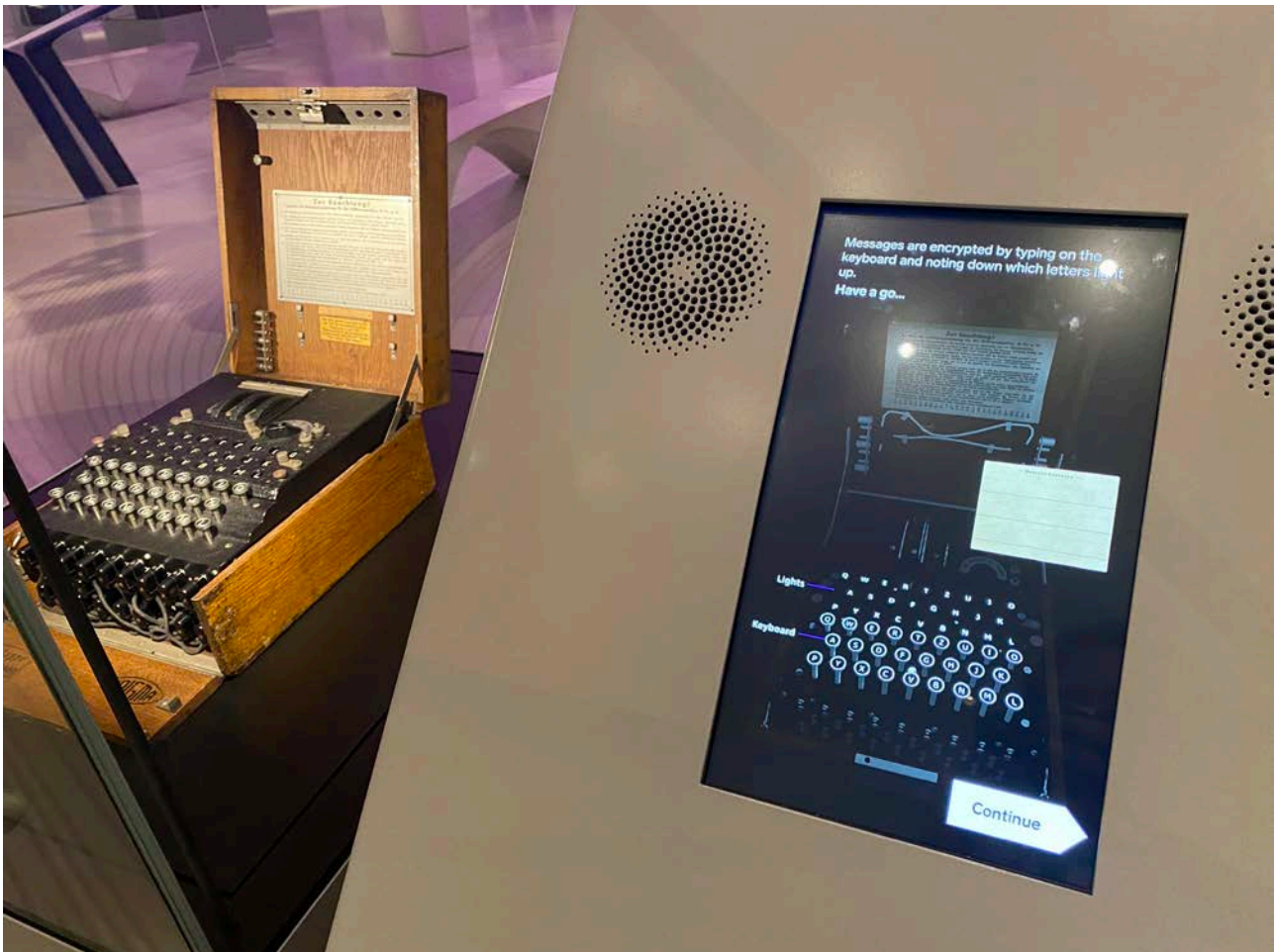
Figure 2. Installation view, Science Museum, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Considerations and recommendations

The Fellow has been able to recommend the following considerations across both exhibition practice and general professional practice in Australia.

- Engagement at first sight

- High-quality interpretation

- Technology is not everything

- Methods of interacting for all

- The importance of accessibility provisions

- Appoint designated roles; see action

The Fellow looks forward to sharing these recommendations through her current networks. She sees the importance of sharing these findings and having these conversations to continue the wave of change that is infiltrating the gallery, library, archive, and museum (GLAM) sector in Australia.

Fellowship background

Fellowship context

The role of museums is changing. Originally a Western construct designed to showcase colonial treasures, and later a tool to educate the uneducated, museums today have a different purpose. With a shift towards "new museology" in the 1970s, museum practice first began to change. This framing of museums and art galleries sits aside from the academia of collections curatorship, and instead encourages GLAM sector professionals to focus on visitor engagement (McCall & Gray 2014, p. 21). In this model, visitors are not expected to passively absorb information, but are invited to actively engage with the institution through participation and interactive experiences (Kidd 2014, p. 1; Anderson 2018, p.87). While this is not true for all museums and art galleries today, there is a notable trend of movement in this direction.

Over the last decade, there has been a substantial shift from exhibitions designed to be "white cube"' with artworks on the wall. This has been driven in part by visitor research, pioneered by Falk and Dierking (1992). This pair have re-visited the topic since their first book, emphasising to sector professionals that visitors do not experience their galleries as blank slates. Instead, they bring their personal, physical, and sociocultural contexts, all of which shape how they engage with exhibitions (Falk and Dierking 2010, p. 26).

This is particularly significant in a time where media and technology have become more firmly woven into audience's lives outside of the museum (Anderson 2018, p. 81). Galleries are becoming hybrid spaces, where the digital and physical co-exist and exhibitions are more often designed with the visitors' needs, desires, and motivations in mind (Dal Falco and Vassos 2017, p. S3975).


Figure 3. Medicine Man, installation view, Wellcome Collection, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Technology has provided new possibilities with which to engage visitors in unexpected and interesting ways. Over the last twenty years, organisations have embraced technologies at different speeds, with science centres leading the charge (Heath and vom Lehn, 2009, p. 266). Despite this, it took a global pandemic for most museums and art galleries to embrace the opportunities that technology can provide for access to and engagement with collections, exhibitions, and programming.

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Ultimately, exhibitions should be created so that all people can visit them, and accessibility is integral here. Physical accessibility is seemingly the easiest method of museums ensuring that they are providing accessible experiences for their audiences. However, there continue to be problems with the way that exhibitions and installations are designed (Voon 2019).

Across each of these areas, Australian institutions have been typically slower to change. There are many reasons why this could be the case for our museums and art galleries: funding, styles of governance, and history of our institutions included. However, we are now poised at a crossroads and have an opportunity to make change. The Fellow hopes that this project and its associated outputs are a small step in that direction.

This Fellowship seeks to understand the way that museums and art galleries in Europe and the Middle East are currently designing exhibitions to create engaging and accessible experiences, in particular through the use of interactives.

This will be explored through the following research questions:

- What do exhibition experiences consist of?
- How do museums make use of digital technologies?
- What methods are considered to ensure accessibility?

Figure 4. Installation view, Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden. Photo: Natalie Carfora
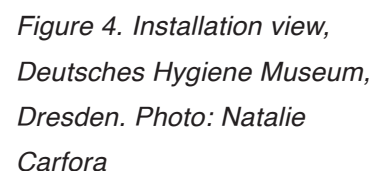
Methodology

The Fellow visited museums and art galleries in the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to identify and investigate approaches to and examples of innovative exhibition design.

The Fellow engaged with institutions through a combination of the following methods:

- Visit museums and art galleries dedicated to a variety of art, science, design, ethnography, and history

- Visit exhibitions that are in pre-existing, renovated, or newly developed museums

- Meetings with key stakeholders working across exhibition design, digital, learning, visitor experience, and accessibility

- Visitor observation

Fellowship period

The research for this Fellowship took place over a four-week period in October and November 2022.

This took the form of meetings with the following institutions:

- Ben Gammon Consulting, London, UK

- Science Museum, London, UK

- Wellcome Collection, London, UK

- Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

- Futurium, Berlin, Germany

- Judisches Museum, Berlin, Germany

- Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

- Kossman De Jong, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Nxt Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Museum of the Future, Dubai, UAE

These meetings were supplemented with visits to the following museums and art galleries, which provided additional contextual understanding:

- Museum of London, London, UK
- National Gallery, London, UK
- Postal Museum, London, UK
- Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden, Germany
- Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany
- Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany
- Micropia, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Fellow biography

At the time of writing this report, the Fellow is Exhibitions Lead at MOD., a future-focused museum of discovery at the University of South Australia. In her role at MOD., she is responsible for the design and production of exhibitions and experiences about art, science, and technology, and the ways that they intersect with society.

The Fellow holds a Master of Cultural Heritage from Deakin University (2017), as well as a Graduate Certificate in Art History (2016), Bachelor of Arts in History and Anthropology, and a Diploma in Language in French (2015) each from the University of Adelaide.

The Fellow has worked and volunteered at arts organisations and cultural institutions across Australia in a range of positions, such as education and front of house, collections management, exhibitions, and digital. She is currently the President of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) Emerging Professionals National Network.

Passionate about audience engagement, in particular through the use of digital technologies, she strives to create exhibitions that provide engaging and accessible visitor experiences.
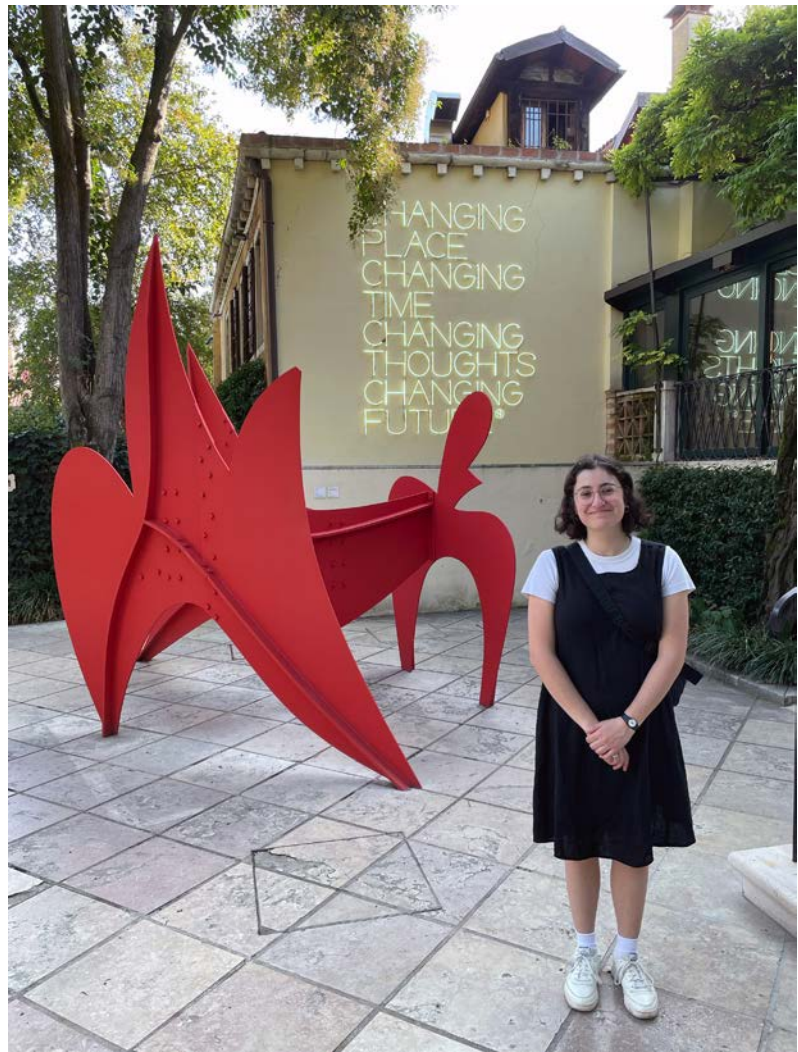
Figure 5. Natalie Carfora at Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Photo: Nicholas Gencarelli

Abbreviations / Acronyms / Definitions

Accessibility – refers to the accessibility of exhibitions with regards to supporting individual physical, learning and sensory requirements.

AMaGA – Australian Museums and Galleries Association

Analogue interactive – refers to an interactive experience within an exhibition that does not use technology to function, such as a drawing interactive.

Art gallery – refers to an institution that collects and/or exhibits artworks.

Blockbuster exhibition – refers to an exhibition that generates a lot of public interest, with an expected high number of visitors and therefore high profit return.

Digital interactive – refers to an interactive experience within an exhibition that uses technology to function, such as a game running on a digital screen.

Exhibition – refers to a curated selection of art, objects, documents, research, or stories to communicate a key message. These can be on permanent display (not changing regularly) or on temporary display (usually changed after a period of up to 12 months).

Gallery – refers to a specific room or space within a museum or art gallery in which there are curated displays.

GLAM sector – Gallery, Library, Archive, and Museum sector

Interpretation – refers to the explanation of an artwork, object, document, research, or idea to a visitor.

Museum – refers to an institution that collects and/or displays objects beyond artworks on a specific topic, i.e. natural history, science, history, etc.

New museology – refers to the discourse around the social and political roles of museums, in particular encouraging communication and interaction.

Onboarding – refers to the way that a visitor is introduced to an exhibition, in particular what happens as they first enter the space.

Visitor experience – refers to the holistic way in which visitors experience an exhibition, considering their thoughts, emotions, reactions, and memories.
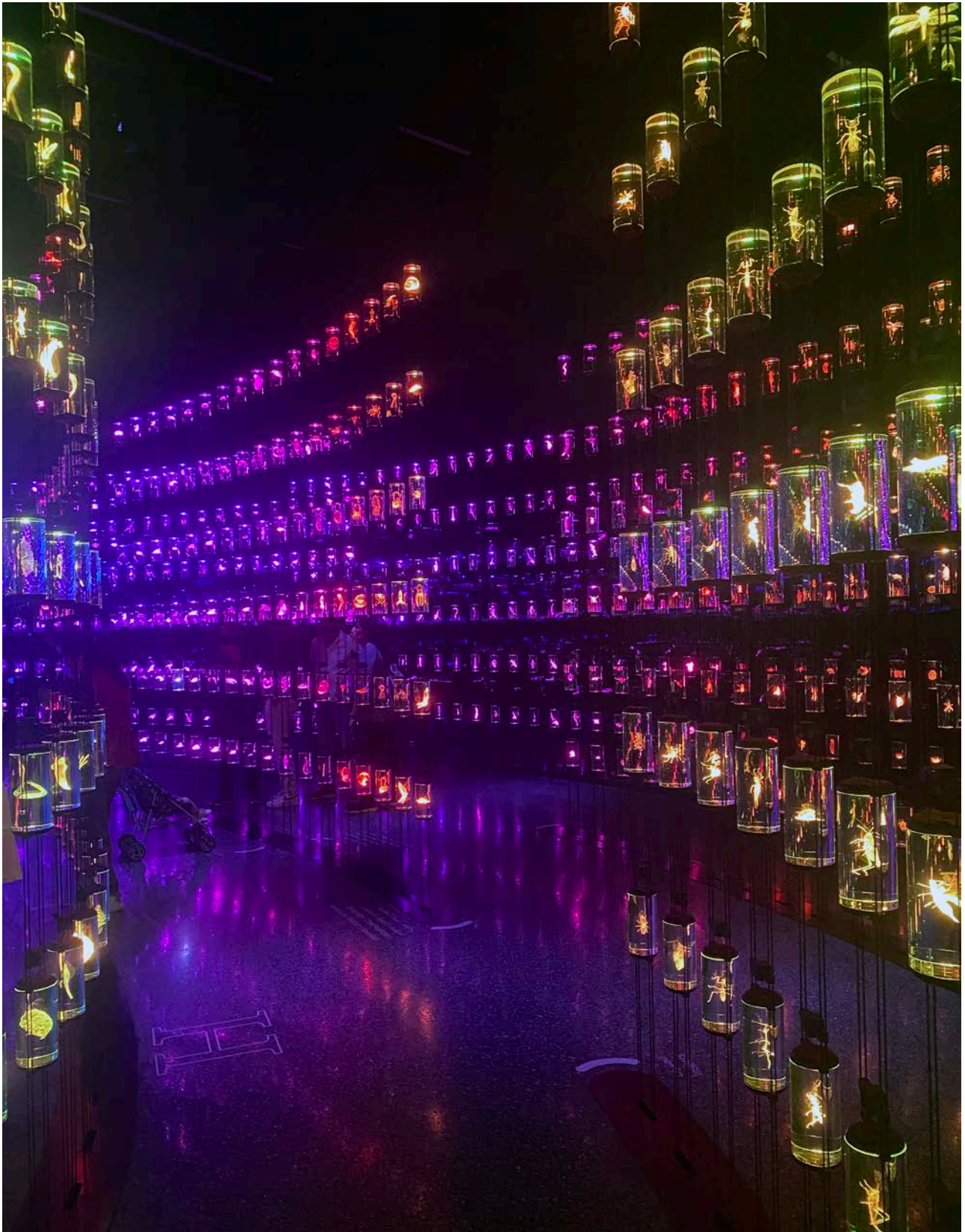
Figure 6. Installation view, Museum of the Future, Dubai. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Fellowship learnings

The Fellow visited twenty museums and art galleries over the course of her research across four countries, in three distinct geographical locations. These visits provided a broad overview to investigate the way that organisations are presenting exhibitions and how they consider and incorporate visitor experience, interactives, and accessibility provisions.

The reality of the way that institutions considered each of these factors changed with each location, but also changed depending on the thematic focus of each site. With each focus came a different strength with regards to exhibition making.

By travelling and visiting this widely, the Fellow was able to garner information about the GLAM sector in a broad sense, as well as the trends and issues that are currently facing museums and art galleries more generally.

What do exhibition experiences consist of?

Ben Gammon, museum consultant, explained it well when he said that good exhibitions should be equally focused on content, audience, and design. This Fellowship sought to investigate the way that museums and art galleries consider content, audience, and design beyond a traditional "white cube" approach and what these exhibitions may consist of.

Over the course of the Fellowship period, it was evident that the approach of each museum or art gallery depended on just that, whether it was a museum or an art gallery presenting the exhibition. Each institution's approach to exhibitions was hugely varied, and the differences grew further depending on exhibition theme and duration. The differences and similarities between these experiences were what the Fellow found most interesting.

Art galleries presented the most traditional exhibitions of all of those visited. There were artworks on the wall or on a plinth, most with a short label. Often these institutions offered an optional audio guide at an additional cost, providing further detail on each artwork on demand.

Figure 7. Installation view, National Gallery, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Some large national institutions, like the National Gallery, London, appeared to focus primarily on "box ticking" tourists, with the bulk of the exhibition design being signage that directed visitors to where they could find Van Gogh or Botticelli's works, for example. The labels in the gallery appeared older, apparently not updated in some time.

Contemporary art galleries of this scale, like the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, were more alternative with their approach. Each gallery hosted a different artist's work, with interpretation taking the form of large sheets of paper with text pinned to each gallery wall. Visitors were welcome to engage but were not supported to delve deeper into the exhibition on display.

This is not to say that all art galleries presented their exhibitions in this way. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, for example, was traditional in its approach to interpretation, but contemporary in its content. Across each of their galleries were standard black labels with information about each artwork. These were accompanied with white labels, which focused on re-interpreting the collection through the lens of the Dutch involvement in the slave trade.

Figure 8. Installation view, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Museums were more likely to present exhibitions that sat outside of a traditional approach. Even if most of these exhibitions were similar in their presentation of artworks and objects on plinths, it was the interpretation that surrounded them that set them apart. Some of the visited museums were more adventurous with their interpretation, presenting not just text. They had also clearly invested in offering an innovative and interesting visitor experience within the exhibition itself, with touch tables and digital screens, audio and video interpretation, and interactive content all on offer. This can be seen in this installation view of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 8).

Individuals interviewed across these institutions indicated that the provision of multiple methods of engaging with exhibitions were key to their design process. This ensures that there are different ways to access information for those who prefer to engage in non-traditional ways.

The Science Fiction: Voyage to the Edge of Imagination exhibition at the Science Museum, London, is a great example of this. The exhibition presented a wide variety of objects and artworks, but these sat within a narrative journey. Visitors explored the galleries, complete with games, videos, and immersive rooms.

Glyn Morgan, curator of the exhibition, explained that there was a desire for the exhibition "to not be a standard text, object, case exhibition." Instead, it was intended to be an immersive adventure with creativity and imagination at its heart. The Science Museum aimed to have one digital interactive in each section, with each interactive addressing content that was also available in one, or sometimes multiple, other formats, such as text or video. In doing so, they were attempting to provide visitors with multiple different ways of accessing exhibition content, providing an entry point for visitors with different learning styles.

This was something that Maren Kreuger, curator of exhibitions at the Judisches Museum, Berlin, also explained was a priority with their recent gallery redevelopment. This exhibition again has a solid foundation of the museum's collection items: artworks, objects, and documents. However, these are augmented with video footage, projection mapping, interactive content, and games. The exhibition team sought to make use of the full diversity of methods available to them to convey information. This diversity of approaches to the subject means that a broader audience will feel welcome in the museum and be able to engage with the exhibition content in the way that they prefer.

How do museums make use of digital technologies?

The Fellow was eager to investigate the ways that interactive elements were incorporated into exhibitions, but in particular the way that museums and art galleries used digital technologies to do this. As with the exhibition interpretation, not all institutions made use of digital technologies to the same extent. Many of the visited sites utilised digital or analogue interactives in some way within an exhibition. This varied greatly, with each institution incorporating their own style of interactive within the space.

The attention given to onboarding, and the technology that supported the most interesting of these experiences, was something that surprised the Fellow. Onboarding was not a significant part of exhibitions at every museum and art gallery, but the most interesting of these experiences relied heavily on technology to introduce the visitor into the world of the exhibition.

This is best seen at the Museum of the Future, Dubai. This onboarding involved the visitor lining up to enter a small room. Here, the digital guide and a human guide from their staff welcome you into the gallery and provide context for your visit: you are now in 2070 and you are about to be

Figure 9. Onboarding, Hallyu! The Korean Wave, V&A Museum, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

transported to a space station to explore work taking place off-Earth. Visitors are ushered into the rocket, a service lift with set dressing. As the lift rises, screens surrounding the visitors display footage of the rocket taking off and the journey to the space station. The doors open, and visitors emerge in place in space.

Chief Executive of the Museum of the Future, Lath Carlson, mentioned that the service lift was not originally part of the plan. Instead, this onboarding experience was integral as a purely logistical way to move visitors from the ground floor up to the fourth floor, where the exhibition experience begins. However, this lucky mistake has resulted in an affective experience. It gives visitors a shared experience to begin their exploration, while also setting the tone for the museum as a whole. Creative Director, Brendan McGettrick, said that this participation is what makes the visit meaningful.

Once inside exhibitions, the most common digital interactive were touch tables or digital screens. These were used widely across museums and art galleries of all types to provide visitors with a

method to interact with the displayed collection more deeply. Similarly, video interview content was hugely popular and used across many museums and art galleries. These videos offer short form interviews, either with artists, academics, or people with lived experience, to address exhibition content. This sort of technology is simple and common, but in the Fellow's observations did not appear to be taken up by a large percentage of visitors.

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The most innovative digital interactives were in exhibitions that appeared to have larger budgets – either because they were permanent fit outs or designed to be "blockbuster" exhibitions. These include interactives like one in Hallyu! The Korean Wave exhibition at the V&A. The V&A K-pop Dance Challenge, created in collaboration with Google Arts and Culture, is an example of one of the best of such interactives. This challenge has visitors learning a K-pop dance in the gallery, which is then recorded and – with permission – added to a projected wall of synchronised dancing visitors. This interactive encourages embodied engagement with the exhibition content, using technology to enable a visitor to understand an element of the exhibition theme more deeply, and then incorporates the visitor themself into the exhibition. This is particularly well thought out as there is something even for the stage shy visitor, who can watch others dance, but also watch the footage projected on the wall beside the station.

On the other end of the scale are analogue interactives. These are of course more lo-fi, but this did not make them less engaging. A good example of one of these was at the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. This was an interactive that required visitors to take a length of coloured string and thread it through several points related to questions about the role of archives in their life (see Figure 10). This was so simple, but so effective. It similarly provides embodied engagement, but also encourages the visitor to critically reflect on their experiences. Again, this was well thought out for those who do not contribute, for whom there is still an opportunity to engage by looking at the ways that past visitors have responded to the prompts.

It was fascinating to consider these elements on a scale of analogue to digital, and from there the level of interaction offered to a visitor at each. The most interactive exhibits were often the most engaging, regardless of whether the institution had made use of technology or not. Both these examples given are clearly interactive, requiring the visitor to engage with their body or their mind.

The amount of interactives within a gallery also left an impact. At the Postal Museum, London, there was a different interactive at almost every turn – both digital and analogue. This has the potential to leave the visitor feeling overwhelmed at the sheer amount of content on offer. This may have been designed intentionally to create a more family-friendly atmosphere, but at times it felt as if the technology was being used for the sake of it, rather than having critically considered the way that visitors may behave in the gallery, or what they may need.
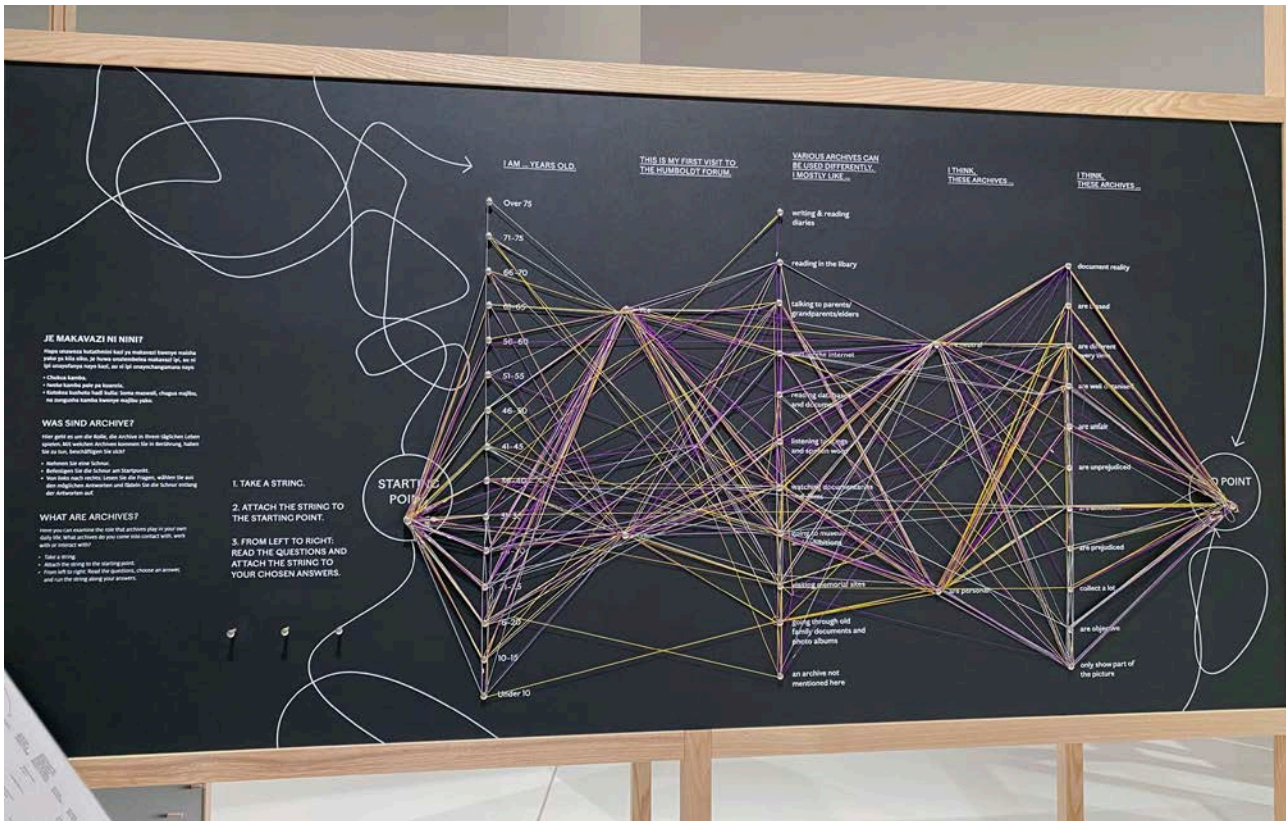
Figure 10. String interactive, Humboldt Forum, Berlin. Photo: Natalie Carfora

This was an issue that Tsur Reshef, senior designer at Amsterdam-based design studio Kossman De Jong, brought up. Tsur said that when he is designing exhibitions, it is important that the technology is integrated into the design, not used as a gimmick. He said that exhibitions should be a showcase of the content, not the technology. This aligns with the Fellow's experience. The best uses of digital interactives being those that felt considered, those that provided embodied experiences, and those that were incorporated into the exhibition itself.

What methods are considered to ensure accessibility?

This research spanned several countries, and across this travel it was interesting to see the way that "best practice" changed depending on each country when it came to accessibility. Best practice varied from place to place, but also varied depending on the type of organisation. Museums in particular provided a significant amount of accessible interpretation, especially those in the UK and Germany.

Every museum that the Fellow visited in the UK provided multiple formats of accessible interpretation. Precisely what was offered was different at each site, but typically included captions on video

content, large print text guides, braille text on select plinths, tactile objects, hearing loops, and British Sign Language (BSL) interpreted video content. These offerings were often in prominent display, meaning that visitors could help themselves to resources that they needed without having to ask.

This is something that was front of mind for the exhibition project teams at the Wellcome Collection, London. Having recently been lauded for what the New York Times posed might be one of the most accessible exhibitions in the world (Marshall 2019), the Fellow was intrigued to talk to the team.

Nelly Okstrom, who was a project manager on the Being Human exhibition redevelopment, reiterated the importance of having accessible resources on open display in the gallery. She admitted that this does cause operational issues with theft or damage, but most importantly it means that no one needs to get permission to access any of the resources. Nelly continued to explain that these hard copies are often preferred by visitors, but digital accessibility resources often make the most sense for the museum. When they are presented digitally, accessible resources can be updated internally by the team, rather than changes being outsourced.

Figure 11. Tactile gallery map, Futurium, Berlin. Photo: Natalie Carfora

In Germany, every museum that the Fellow visited similarly provided multiple formats of accessible interpretation, but not in the same way that they did in London. German museums had tactile tables in each gallery displaying a map of the space, with significant objects and text printed in braille (see Figure 11). Additionally, there were often braille and tactile items on plinths, in addition to captions on video content.

Kathrin Kösters, from the Strategy and Content team at the Futurium, Berlin, explained that accessibility and inclusion were key to the museum's strategy from when they first opened several years ago. The Futurium seeks to answer the question "how do we want to live in the future?" in all of their exhibitions, and Kathrin said that when they say we, they really want that to be everyone. Currently, the museum has a task force made up of staff across each department who work on their accessibility provisions, but they are eager to expand this and ensure that they are including as many people as they can in their exhibitions.

In both the UK and Germany, the art galleries that were visited did not provide any obvious accessible resources. However, in the Netherlands this experience was reversed. The Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum, both art galleries in Amsterdam, provided audio guide options with audio descriptions and sign language for visitors who choose to use either.

Given the prominence with which these resources were available in most institutions, it was obviously missing at those who did not provide it. However, it left the Fellow cognisant of the lack of accessible resources on offer in Australia and the ways that this could be improved.

Figure 12. Installation view, Micropia, Amsterdam. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Personal, professional, and sectoral impact

The George Alexander Foundation Fellowship was both professionally and personally an impactful experience for the Fellow. While in the weeks preceding the trip, she was nervous, the generosity of the GLAM sector, with both their time and expertise, was immediately evident upon arriving. The representatives at each institution were so helpful in organising meetings with colleagues, ensuring a breadth of roles and experience. The Fellow appreciated the opportunity to have frank and interesting conversations.

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The Fellow discovered quickly that she too had expertise and experience that was relevant to the work of these professionals. Ultimately, this was a profoundly empowering experience. This Fellowship has directly contributed to increasing the Fellow's confidence, making her more comfortable talking in a professional context and surer of herself, her experiences, and her ideas when it comes to work. The Fellow looks forward to continuing developing these skills as she begins to disseminate her learnings.

With regards to the Fellow's work in the GLAM sector, this has been such a valuable experience, particularly after two and a half years of being unable to travel for this sort of exposure to cultural experiences. This trip has provided the Fellow with an opportunity to experience some of the work that is taking place overseas, as well as the new approaches that museums and art galleries are taking to exhibition making. This has provided a great source of inspiration for the Fellow's work in Australia.

The Fellow has already begun implementing her learnings from this trip in her current role. This travel for a source of information, inspiration, and encouragement has been vital to this. The Fellowship has coincided with a period of exhibition concept development, and the Fellow has been able to feed in some of her learnings about onboarding, methods of engagement, immersive narrative design, digital technology, and accessibility. The Fellow knows that this research will continue to have an impact on her career moving forwards.

The Fellow is looking forward to disseminating her findings within the sector and encouraging further conversation with regards to innovative exhibition design. Since first applying for this Fellowship in 2020, the initial waves of change have hit Australia. Museums like the recently re-developed Boola Bardip WA Museum in Perth and the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney are the first of the evidence of this. The Fellow hopes that this is indication that there is scope for fertile discussion in museums and art galleries nationally. This fertile discussion will begin on a local level, with presentations and workshops in her current work. She looks forward to having these discussions at a broader level, with conference presentations and the publication of papers in this area both planned for the future.

Ultimately, the Fellow would like to see the implementation of a network of professionals working in this area. This could take the form of a national network through AMaGA but is also something that could be organised on a more local level through AMaGA's South Australian branch. This sort of network would ensure that there is a forum to discuss these ideas, the challenges and successes of exhibition design, and ensure that we continue to aim for international best practice.

Figure 13. Artwork with tactile replica, Judisches Museum, Berlin. Photo: Natalie Carfora

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Recommendations and considerations

Through her travels to a range of institutions working across diverse areas, the Fellow was able to consider exhibition making broadly. The following recommendations have been made to encourage a deep consideration of visitor experience in exhibition spaces, but with additional reference to broader sectoral change.

1. Engagement at first sight

Museums and art galleries should consider the onboarding experience more in the design of their exhibitions. The exhibitions with the most considered onboarding experience – that is to say, more than just a title and some credits – were immediately more engaging and more exciting than those without.

When talking to Amsterdam exhibition design studio Kossman De Jong, Tsur Reshef, senior designer, explained that this part of the exhibition experience can be integral. In the case of the work he did on Micropia, Amsterdam, they were able to use this to situate the visitor into the mindset of the exhibition, providing information about the microbiome and then simulate "zooming in" through a microscope as visitors enter and ascend in the lift.
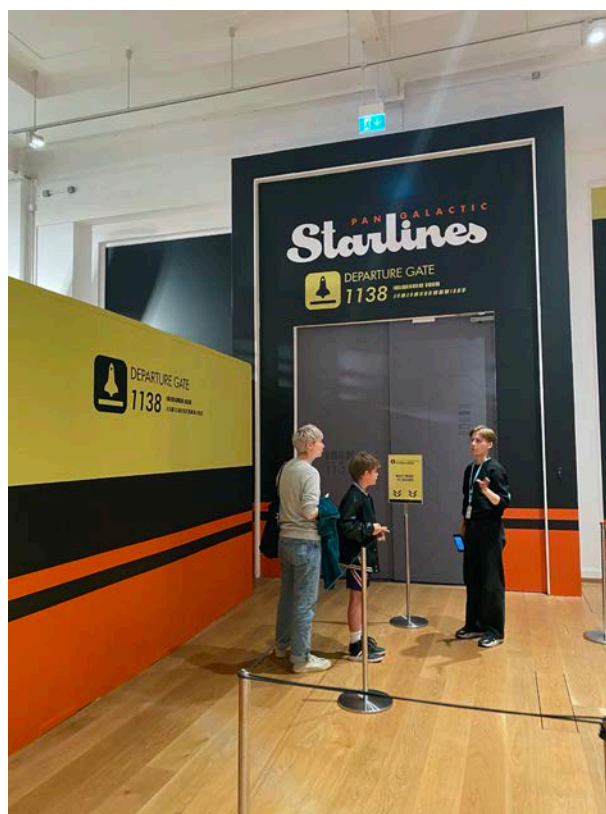

Figure 14. Onboarding, Science Fiction, Science Museum, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Onboarding experiences do not need to be as sophisticated as this, but it is recommended that this initial experience is considered in exhibition design, in particular with regards to the pacing of the exhibition itself. This first sight of an exhibition has the ability to encompass the audience into the exhibition narrative, whether it is a journey back in time, into the future, or into the body itself.

2. High-quality interpretation

Interpretation is the best way to support a visitor's experience in an exhibition. Good interpretation can reward the curious and guide the confused. Bad interpretation can be punishing. Across the course of the Fellowship, there was a stark difference in the level of quality of interpretation offered by different institutions.

Well done interpretation was simply written, but not condescending. This is supported by a point made by Janice Li, a curator at the Wellcome Collection, London, who referred to it as balancing the accessibility without killing the artistry of the writing. Poorly done interpretation, however, was long-winded or wordy. It was poorly lit and displayed in small typeface.

There is a stereotype that art galleries, and in particular contemporary art galleries, do this particularly poorly. This was the Fellow's experience across each country. The non-art galleries generally provided a greater depth of information, written more clearly, and often provided multiple ways of accessing information about each artwork, object, or concept. This is compared to the experience within art galleries, which often would have labels accompanying some, but not all, art works as well as wall panels upon entering some, but not all, galleries.

It was also evident that there was a difference between institutions who had interpretation teams or contracted copywriters and those whose text was written by staff without considering the reader. The latter of which produced text that was overly academic or long winded.

Ultimately, it seems as if this comes down to valuing the skill of writing and not assuming that experts are the best at communicating to a broad public. Training to improve writing and communication skills should be built into the education or professional development for anyone working in this space. The Fellow considers this evidence of the importance of putting visitors first, ensuring that exhibition teams are providing useful, interesting, and accessible information for anyone who enters the gallery.

3. Technology is not everything

While it is important for museums and art galleries to consider incorporating digital experiences into their exhibitions, this is not the be all and end all. Certainly, contemporary visitors often expect to find digital technologies incorporated into exhibitions, but it is important that this technology is used intentionally and not just for technology's sake.

It may be trendy for museums to make use of digital screens and touch tables to provide an opportunity for visitors to engage with the collection items or artworks on display, but how useful are these?

The best example of this sort of technology was seen at the V&A, London. In their permanent galleries there were touch screens to engage more deeply with some works, such as this tapestry (see Figure 15). However, it was not just a screen linked to the exhibition database. Instead, these screens enabled the visitor to select parts of the tapestry for more information or filter the work by topic. This sort of critical engagement with an object or artwork is immediately more valuable, rather

than simply providing access to the collection database, which is ultimately created for internal use, not public consumption.

The thoughtful use of technology was a key learning from this Fellowship. Visitors can look at a screen anywhere, at any time. Museums and art galleries should endeavour to provide more thoughtful experiences with technology, experiences that enable visitors to use their bodies, their minds, or interact with each other.

4. Methods of interacting for all

It is important to include multiple methods of interacting with exhibitions to ensure that visitors with all learning styles and interests can engage with the subject matter. As museums seek to welcome diverse audiences beyond white, educated, middle-class, and middle-aged visitors, this is more important than ever.

Figure 15. Tapestry interactive, V&A Museum, London. Photo: Natalie Carfora

In the Fellow's anecdotal observations, the organisations that provided multiple methods of engagement often resulted in visitors who were more engaged. Without clear scaffolding to a visit, audiences were more likely to be observed taking photos of the artworks or themselves. It seemed that varied interpretation resulted in visitors that were more engaged. This was seen in particular in some of the art galleries that were visited, which sat in stark contrast to some of the museums.

The Fellow recommends that, wherever possible, exhibitions teams should endeavour to include these different methods of engagement. By providing these varied entry points into the exhibition content, we are more likely to capture more people. This does not need to be high-tech and can incorporate a whole range of interactions.

At the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, there were a wide variety of interactives. These ranged from cartoon choose your own adventure games to magnetic garden designs to audio nooks, where you could listen to storytelling related to the exhibits. The scope and budget of these experiences are as varied as the audiences they provide for. It is this care for a diversity of visitors which opens up more entry points to engagement, thereby ensuring that visitors preferences are met.
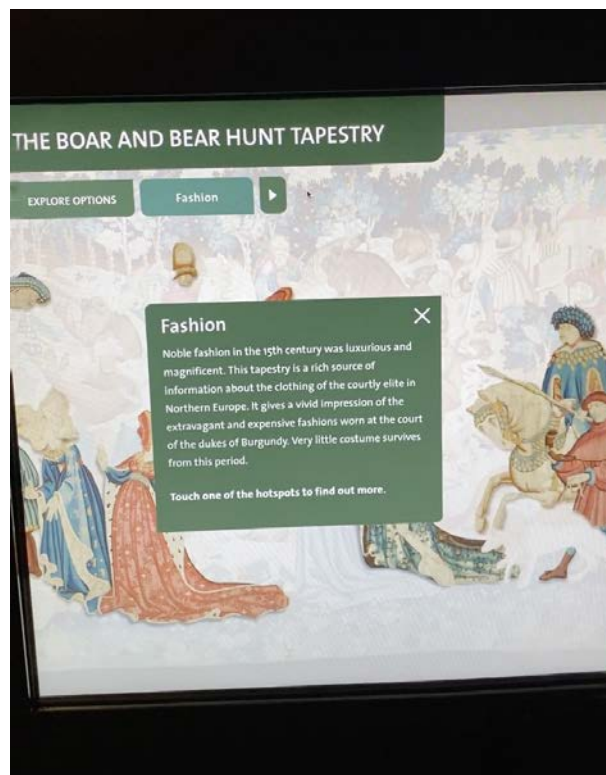
5. The importance of accessibility provisions

Figure 16. Braille and print exhibition resources, Futurium, Berlin. Photo: Natalie Carfora

Museums and art galleries are public spaces, and thereby should be designed to engage with all members of the public. The Fellow recognises that it is hard to be all things for all people, and in fact recommends against this. However, it is important to ensure that, as public spaces, we are doing all we can to provide for all people.

Over the course of the Fellowship, it was evident that accessibility is not a one size fits all approach. For example, the work with accessibility in London and Berlin looked different, but neither was worse than the other. It was clear that doing good work does not need to look like any one thing, there are multiple ways of this work that are culturally dependent.

The Fellow recommends that museums and art galleries build accessibility considerations into all of their exhibition work, considering the way that different people may experience the exhibition and ensuring that they are providing entry points for all of them.

This is not a recommendation that can be done once and finished, rather it is a dynamic project. For this reason, improving accessibility provisions does not need to be everything at once. It can be as simple as taking a few initial steps, then reflecting on what should come next. What is important is that it is something that the organisation is actively addressing

6. Appoint designated roles; see action

It was fascinating to see the difference in action on an issue like accessibility between organisations that had designated staff whose job it was, organisations who had a working group made up of various employees, and organisations for whom it was no one's job.

At the Science Museum, London, Fiona Slater is the recently appointed Head of Access and Equity, a new role created to manage the accessibility and inclusion of the museum's facilities and program. Fiona's time is split between managing new projects and assessing the pre-existing galleries in these areas. This means someone is always thinking about improving the accessibility provisions in the galleries.

This sits in stark contrast with the Nxt Museum, Amsterdam. Co-founder Natasha Greenhalgh explained that for them, opening in 2020, it has been hard work to start up during a pandemic. She believes that accessibility is something that they hope to begin focusing on now they have been operating for a few years.
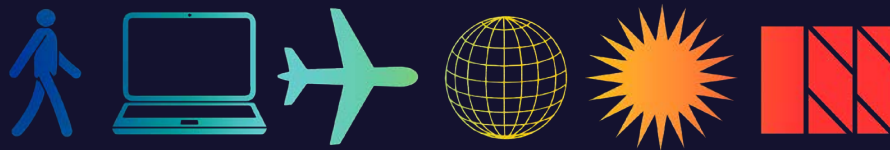
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The Fellow understands that it is not as easy as simply appointing someone to every role, but it demonstrates how clearly overlooked this work can be without someone who intentionally works in this space.

Figure 17. Sticker interactive, Futurium, Berlin. Photo: Natalie Carfora

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