

Visitor Voices Between the Discursive and the Immersive

Helen Charman

In December 2015, the Stedelijk Museum and the Louisiana Museum of Art convened a conference entitled “Between the Discursive and the Immersive – Research in 21st Century Art Museums.” Taking the Design Museum, London, as a case study, my Pecha Kucha explored how the museum’s public programs might be understood to create a discursive mode of visitor engagement, constituted through the interplay of visitor and institutional voices. This discursive mode can be encapsulated by the notion of a museum doing its thinking in public. Thinking in public provides a propositional space for critical engagement and reflexivity, and positions the museum as a forum for public engagement with design and its wider contexts. However, as suggested by the conference title and by a variety of other papers given over the two days, the museum also invites visitors to engage immersively with content, in particular through the curatorial strategies in the exhibition environment.

The conference was rich in critical reflections on display and curatorial strategies from the perspectives of museum professionals. Given its theme, representations of visitor voices were less prominent, so I would like to use this opportunity to give space to explore the character of visitor engagement with design in the exhibition context using *in vivo* quotes from visitors, and taking the notions of the discursive and the immersive as sensitizing concepts. In so doing, I draw on data from a work of small-scale, qualitative visitor research undertaken in 2009–10 at the Design Museum, based on visitor responses to two design exhibitions: *Designs of the Year*, the museum’s annual flagship survey show, and *From Fashion and Back*, a monographic exhibition on Hussein Chalayan.

The notion of there being a “between” in the conference title sets up a dichotomy linking the terms discursive and immersive. We might understand the discursive mode as gesturing towards cognitive intellectual understanding, objectively ascribed to the faculty of mind/knowledge; and by way of complementarity, the immersive mode as affective cognitive understanding, concerned with the more subjective character of knowing, and ascribed to the faculties of

feeling/emotion.¹ Such an objective view of knowledge is rooted in Western culture. Its intellectual lineage stems from the Platonic elevation of Reason (particularly mathematical reason) over sensory understanding and the arts, neither of which were recognized as constituting knowledge. Descartes continued the rationalist vein, conceiving of the mind as “thinking substance,” thereby furthering a conceptual separation between the intellectual and the affective.² The notion of the immersive can prove problematic if considered from the perspective of critical engagement with content: critical discourses of art and visual culture relate concepts of immersion to spectacle, to ideologically interested ways of making invisible the means by which meaning is produced.

But we know from our own experiences of the world that intellectual and affective faculties work commensurately as modes of cognition. Both are concerned with ways of knowing and understanding, however differently their emphases are placed. This is particularly pertinent when the environment to be explored is that of the design exhibition and the aesthetics of material culture. Aesthetics in this context is less about taste and more about an emotional engagement with the works on display and the display environment itself, “primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensorial body and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings.”³ Such “affective forces” are generated through the physical, spatial, sensory environment of the exhibition.

Exhibition Overviews

The two exhibitions demonstrated distinct curatorial approaches, which might be loosely defined as discursive in *Designs of the Year*, curated in 2009–10 by Nina Due, former Head of Exhibitions at the Design Museum, and immersive in *From Fashion and Back*, 2009, curated by Donna Loveday, former Head of Curatorial at the museum.

Designs of the Year is the museum’s annual flagship exhibition. Curated to offer visitors a series of individuated exhibits, broadly arranged by theme, it sets out a comprehensive and diverse collection of approximately seventy-five of the world’s most forward-looking designs, nominated for inclusion by industry experts drawn from professional and academic backgrounds. Content spans the main design disciplines—architecture, fashion, furniture, graphics, interactive, product, and transport—and highlights the key issues today’s designers are addressing (although sometimes the everyday, humble masterpieces can be overlooked in favor of the more headline, attention-grabbing designs). Curator Gemma Curtin articulates the heterogeneity of content in nominations for the most recent *Designs of the Year*, including work from both emerging practices and well-established ones:



Fig. 1 Installation image *Designs of the Year 2009* (Graphics category) Credit: Luke Hayes.

Some question preconceptions about the role of design, others offer pragmatic solutions to consumer needs. In their range they express a diversity of intent and reveal the vital role of design as a problem-solver, a predictor of future developments and a cultural force.⁴

The rationale for nomination given by each of the industry experts is included alongside an image of the work in a pocket-size book that is a key source of interpretation material—copies tend to sell out year on year. Recent iterations of the show announce each exhibit with a neat, interpretative one-liner that encapsulates the impact of the work: the emphasis is on what these designs do, on design as a tool for change—cultural, political, environmental, social. A panel of expert judges decides on category winners, from which one final winning award is selected. The awards aspect of the exhibition is billed as recognizing the important achievements in design over the past twelve months, as well as bringing lesser-known design triumphs to the fore and signaling significant trends and innovation in design. Public participation is invited through a “People’s Choice” vote and a blog for visitors to express their views. In 2009–10 (the year of the data referenced in this paper), the overall winner was Shepherd Fairey’s *Barack Obama* poster (the “Progress” version, fig. 1). The 2015 winner was *Human Organs-on-Chips*, designed by Donald Ingber and Dan Dongeon Huh at Harvard University’s Wyss Institute; a small, transparent block of silicon, not unlike a Fox’s Glacier Mint, that simulates the biological processes inside human organs and harbingers the end of animal testing and vast improvements in personalized medicine. *Designs of the Year* is unapologetically discursive and propositional: the nominations are story-led, framed by the nominator’s rationale for their choice; visitors are invited to join the conversation by placing their own votes and by leaving hand written responses to a series of short and incisive questions, creating space for conversation between visitors and the displays (fig. 2). The 2015 exhibition includes “Inside the Designs,” a mobile app on the new Microsoft Lumia device with which visitors access more information on each of the category winners, through photography, quotes, and interviews with the jury, offer their own opinion on what makes a Design of the Year, and see how their opinion sits alongside other visitors’ input through a multiple choice voting app. It is an exhibition, which invites criticality through making judgments and forming and expressing opinions. It is very chatty. If you are in a discursive frame of mind, this is the one for you (installation shots, figs. 3–7).

Hussein Chalayan: From Fashion and Back (January 22–May 17, 2009), by contrast, invited an immersive mode of engagement, perhaps more readily located in the language of installation art—theatrical, performative—than in traditional design exhibition formats. A monographic exhibition and the first comprehensive presentation of Chalayan’s work in the United Kingdom, spanning fifteen years of experimental projects, the presentation considered the fashion designer’s creative approach through exploring personal inspirations and professional themes, such as cultural identity, displacement, and migration. Presenting



Fig. 2 Installation image *Designs of the Year 2009* (Products category) Credit: Luke Hayes.



Fig. 3 Installation image Marloes Ten Bohmer’s ‘Rotational Moulded Shoe’ (2009). *Designs of the Year 2009*.

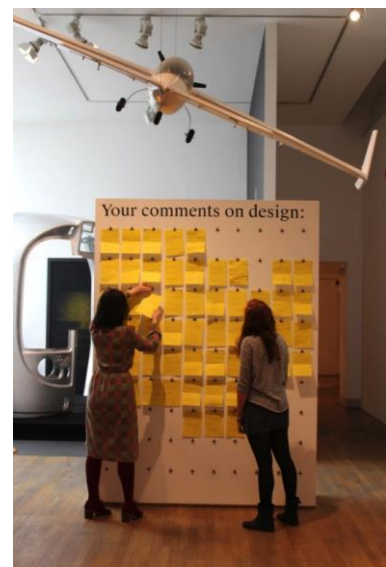


Fig. 4 Visitor Comment Wall. *Designs of the Year 2014/15*. Credit: Author’s own.

fashion as a site of conceptual exploration, and motivated by ideas and disciplines not readily associated with fashion, Chalayan's pioneering work was presented with an emphasis on its cross-disciplinary character, in which architecture, design, philosophy, anthropology, science, innovative use of materials, and progressive attitudes to new technology all featured (figs. 8, 9).

A caveat to any exploration of visitor modes of engagement in the exhibition context must be an acknowledgement of the dominance of the act of looking. Writing in the field of visual culture, Mieke Bal explores the power of display in relation to the act of viewing and generating knowledge, to create a critical awareness of the curatorial and institutional tools through which knowledge is constructed. Her theory of expository agency offers a model for understanding how visitors experience the museum exhibition through looking as an act, which is neither neutral nor passive, but is constructed across differentiated power relations.⁵ Bal describes looking as a threefold process of interaction between the viewer/visitor, the artwork, and the gallery context. It is a process that involves the viewer in a relationship of power and dominance. Drawing on work by French linguist Émile Benveniste, Bal identifies three actors involved in the act of looking at art: the first person doing the “speaking” (characterized as the “expository agency” of the exhibition, the curatorial), the second person being those who are spoken to (the visitor), and the third person being the subject under discussion (the artwork). The notion of the expository agency of the exhibition with respect to the interpretation and display practices of curating includes “constative language use, visual pointing (display in the narrow sense), alleging examples, laying out arguments on the basis of narratives, mapping and laying bare.”⁶

Crucial to the notion of expository agency is its operation as a naturalized and universal process, which produces seemingly self-evident truths or narratives about exhibits. That is, the partiality and selectivity of curatorial decisions concerning installation display and interpretation are rendered invisible, so as to produce particular modes of looking at art, modes which are described as pure, contemplative, and aesthetic—while in reality being constructed through curatorial and institutional decisions and informed by the visitor's own knowledge and personal context. Bal's theory of expository agency calls attention to how the exhibition environment actively constructs and positions the visitor to enable meaning-making strategies and generate understanding or felt responses. The notion of “expository agency” can be articulated both discursively—through the layering of interpretation in text and digital formats and in public program activities that further amplify and enrich exhibition content, such as talks, tours, and exhibition resources targeted at different types of visitors (family trails or tool kits, for example)—and immersively, through installation-based environments where visitor engagement happens at the level of feeling and emotion, in response to spatial and sensory stimuli. The following accounts by visitors of responses to design in the case study

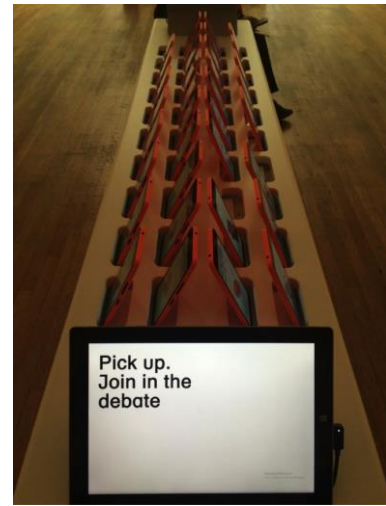


Fig. 5 *Microsoft Luma 'Inside the Designs' multimedia resource. Credit: Charlotte Shurman.*



Fig. 6 *Key themes Designs of the Year 2015. Credit: Mirren Rosie.*



Fig. 7 *Installation shot Designs of the Year 2015. Credit: Mirren Rosie.*

exhibitions reveal the ebb and flow of critical engagement, as visitors are seen both to step back from display content and to critique or comment on curatorial strategies, while at other times to become so subjectively immersed with content that all critical distance is elided and the personal, emotionally driven response takes over.

Table 1: Visitor Description

Name	Brief demographic information
Bill	Automotive design student (MA), a museum member, visits frequently, on average four times a year.
Karina	Full-time mother, former background in computing, on a career break to raise her family, first-time visitor to the museum.
Danielle	Art and Design teacher, on a career break to raise her family, has visited the museum previously but not as regular a visitor as Bill. Comes to the family workshops. Visits the museum on average twice yearly.
Rose	Full-time mother, former background in charitable fundraising and fashion buying, strong interest in fashion and product design, first-time visitor.
Marnie	Fashion design student (MA), a museum member and regular visitor.

In exploring how notions of the discursive and the immersive characterize visitors' experiences in the design exhibition, I reference qualitative data from a two-hour, in-depth and collective conversation with five of our museum visitors: Bill, Karina, Marnie, Rose, and Danielle. All five had visited both exhibitions twice and had volunteered to participate in the research (table 1). As far as possible, I present the data *in vivo*, to evoke a sense of their voices, with quotes accompanied by commentary, referencing visual, discursive, and immersive modes of engagement as appropriate.

It's like a little film, you capture different images through it. (Rose, From Fashion and Back)

Rose's comment on *From Fashion and Back* emphasizes the dynamic and visual dimensions of her experience, expressed through the notion of taking snapshots throughout the visit. This emphasis recurred throughout the discussion, and proved to be powerful and significant both as a mode of engagement in, and recollection of participants' visits. Experiences in the exhibitions were variously described as "filmic" or as "set pieces" from theater, or as a series of *mise-en-scène*, in which every component is deliberately organized for visual effect. Notably, in discussions concerning how participants read design and the value attributed to visual interpretation



Fig. 8 Installation image *From Fashion and Back* 'Inertia' (2009). Credit: Luke Hayes

material in enabling meaning-making across both exhibitions, a pronounced aversion was manifest to extensive textual descriptions about exhibits:

I found the written information too blocky. Designers don't read. (Bill)

Try to get the story across without having lots of writing. Use images, film footage. That's when I understood what you were getting at. You can go backwards and forwards between the film footage and the work and that didn't need any writing. (Marnie)

The reality was, I enjoyed not having loads of text. (Rose)

In setting out their preferred approaches to interpretative media and content, participants placed great emphasis on visual material relating to the process of design. This included examples of designers' inspiration (sketchbooks and mood boards), the availability of different materials as part of exhibition content (such as fabric swatches), and footage or still images of manufacturing and production techniques, and of the designs in their real-world context.

The supporting information was really good. I needed to see someone actually riding the bike to understand the relevance. (Marnie, Designs of the Year)

You could see how the shoes were made, which is what really interested me a lot. (Danielle, Designs of the Year)

After I saw the catwalk shows, I understood more about his use of technology. I then saw the actual clothes, and it made me understand the technology of the fabric. The clothes came alive. (Rose, From Fashion and Back)

Looking at the table top, I wanted to know, how was it manufactured to be so thin? (Bill, Designs of the Year)

Participants proposed the most effective form of interpretation material to be visual “snapshots” of elements of the design process, across and between which they could make connections and create a fuller and more personal understanding of the work—an interpretative approach that can be summarized as “show – don't tell.” Significantly, participants repeatedly grounded their talk about interpretative material in a desire for further insight into the design process. Based on this small visitor sample, it appears that the more knowledgeable the visitor is about design (in reference to Bill and Marnie, both studying design at postgraduate level), the greater the interest in information about the design process and real-world context. Understanding the design process entails both insight into the physical processes of production, and also insight into the effort—be it intellectual or creative—of working with the design brief. Hence, Bill, reflecting on both the case study exhibitions:

Learning how much effort goes into producing these items I think is key to understanding them. (Bill)

At the outset of the research group, Bill, in conversation with Karina, had differentiated between a mode of looking which is an end in itself and a mode of looking which is in order to



Fig. 9 Installation image From Fashion and Back 'Panoramic' (2009). Credit: Luke Hayes.

learn (in Bill's case, in relation to questions of process and function):

He's more interested in the factual side of seeing design rather than just looking at something for the sake of it. (Karina, introducing Bill)

I was so taken by the mannequins, by the film footage, by the theatrical setting... The exhibition took over. (Karina, From Fashion and Back)

Karina's comment on *From Fashion and Back* is striking for its language of immersion, as if her own sense of individual identity became subsumed within the exhibition. This idea of intimacy with the work was underlined by Bill, reflecting on the importance of visual forms of interpretation in affording understanding:

It's letting the work and the person "be" in such a way where someone doesn't have to think too much but an exchange of information has happened. (Bill)

For Bill, engagement with exhibition content should be effortless, recalling Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow, a term Marnie used to describe her exhibition experience:

You just flow through. Whether you like the work or not, it just flows. (Marnie, From Fashion and Back)

The concept of "flow" is a common experiential state, described as a state of mind that is "spontaneous, almost automatic, like the flow of a strong current."⁷ In this state, learning and satisfaction are optimized—but potentially at the expense of that critical awareness of curatorial strategies for knowledge production which Bal advocates. In an article by Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (the latter a doctoral student in education) on long-term learning in museums, the authors argue that museums need to stimulate intrinsic motivation in order to help their audiences learn.⁸ The immersive mode of engagement can achieve this effectively. While interest and curiosity may first attract a museum visitor to an exhibit, the interaction with the exhibit has to be intrinsically rewarding to engage the visitor enough for positive emotional or intellectual changes to occur. If a museum exhibition induces the "flow" experience, the experience will be intrinsically rewarding, and consequently will grow in sensory, intellectual, and emotional complexity. The authors conclude with an appeal for more museums to take an experimental approach to their exhibitions. Certainly, Marnie's exhibition experience in *From Fashion and Back* proved to be predominantly affective—at one point, the beauty of the exhibition moving her to tears:

I couldn't believe that fashion could make this beautiful spectacle. I cried, I had my face up to the glass. (Marnie, From Fashion and Back)

Even Bill, whose primary motivation for visiting exhibitions was emphatically described as the purpose of factual learning, found himself drawn into the exhibits imaginatively and experientially, commenting in relation to the Marloes ten Bohmer rotational injection shoe molds, seen in the 2009 *Designs of the Year* exhibition, how he understood this work better because he "could imagine putting their feet in them." Human-centered design pivots on empathic thinking, and

design exhibitions would do well to foster this response in visitors, presenting design objects not as a series of autonomous exhibits, but instead as richly and critically contextualized, while enabling visitors to make personal connections.

Design needs context, it needs personal relevance, even if it's just being able to imagine how it works. (Marnie)

The degree to which an imaginative, emotional, or affective engagement was described also garnered surprise that design could impact on the visitor in this way:

The day that I came here, I was absolutely blown away. I was just on a total high. I couldn't believe it. I was just on cloud nine. (Rose)

Writing in the field of visitor studies, Pekarik describes how “the museum... offers opportunities for engagement in multiple ways, with the capacity to be intense and powerful.”⁹ The immersive mode offers the potential for such intense, powerful engagement, enabling visitors to experience design affectively, through feelings and emotions. When personal connections can be made between exhibits and the lives of visitors, the impact can be deep and powerful, as Karina discovered something as seemingly separate from day-to-day life as haute couture fashion could dovetail with her own life history:

I didn't expect to make a connection between what I thought would be high-end fashion and the real world, my world. This moves me. (Karina)

The connection Karina made with a particular exhibit in *From Fashion and Back* was a happy collision of personal histories, and purely coincidental. But Marnie's observation that design needs context and personal relevance suggests that curatorial strategies for meaning-making would do well to reference design's rootedness in the everyday, the mass-produced, and the ubiquitous—to broaden the possibilities for personal connections—while commensurately presenting content in such a way as to generate new knowledge and understanding, for example, by providing broader contexts, such as sociopolitical, or deeper disciplinary understanding, as from a manufacturing or design history perspective.¹⁰

The centrality of personal context is widely acknowledged within theories of learning, for example, Falk and Dierking's notion of contextual learning,¹¹ Hooper-Greenhill on hermeneutic approaches to museum education,¹² and Lave and Wenger on situated learning.¹³ Visitors interpret museum exhibits from their own perspective and in relation to their own personal context, comprising the rich tapestry of personal experiences, attitudes, and knowledge, which together influence understanding. It is a discursive, dialogic process in which meaning is made through the interplay of personal context with the expository agency of the exhibition, as manifest through curatorial decisions on content, interpretation, and exhibition design, all framed by the institutional context of the exhibition site. Of particular relevance to this analysis is the extent to which personal context shapes meaning-making, explored in museum

education with reference to the hermeneutic philosophy of Dilthey and Gadamer. For Dilthey, constructing understanding is a dialogic process of piecing together the detail with the whole:

*The whole of a work must be understood from the individual words and their combinations, and yet the full comprehension of the detail presupposes the understanding of the whole.*¹⁴

Gadamer applies this approach to interpreting experience in general; the dialogue between detail and the whole is never-ending. It is a circular process in which new and enriched understandings arise from new sources of knowledge, an endless discursive process:

*The discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished: it is in fact an infinite process.*¹⁵

Hooper-Greenhill asserts that personal context underpins the dynamic nature of the “hermeneutic circle,” encompassing attributes such as prior knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values:

*For hermeneutic philosophers, meaning-making is shaped by the inevitability of prior knowledge; the effect of tradition, the past as it works in the present; the prejudices and biases that are part of being human; and the capacity to interrogate the past.*¹⁶

The capacity to relate the past to the present proved a fertile feature of the hermeneutic approach to meaning-making for Karina as she experienced *After Words*. An installation in *From Fashion and Back, After Words* (Autumn/Winter 2000) was originally a performance piece, presented in the exhibition as a static installation accompanied by a film of the live performance. The installation was designed to evoke a modernist living room, comprising elegant, fabric-covered armchairs and a simple coffee table made of concentric circles of wood. Slowly, as the film progressed, each of the objects in the room was revealed to be dual purpose. Models entered the room and began to clothe themselves: the chair covers became outer garments, the chair frames folded to become suitcases, and the circular coffee table cascaded into a skirt, with the central ring being the waistband and the ever-increasing concentric circles falling below as interlinked horizontal panels. The interpretation booklet offered the following explanation of the piece:

*After Words was inspired by the plight of the refugee and the horror of having to leave one's home suddenly in times of war. Chalayan took his inspiration from observing how Turkish Cypriots, including members of his own family, were subjected to ethnic cleansing in Cyprus prior to 1974 when the country was divided. The collection explored the idea of how, when confronted by such an ordeal, people want to hide their possessions or carry them on departure.*¹⁷

In the group discussion, Karina recounted a tale from her family history. Her mother, a Polish Jew growing up in the aftermath of the Second World War, had left Poland as a child under the guardianship of a family friend to pursue a new life in England. Arriving with only the coat on her back, it transpired that her guardian had sewn several of the

child's other clothes into the lining of her coat—the garment had, in effect, become a suitcase. This personal and cultural history meant that *After Words* exerted a potent and sustained personal interest and engagement for Karina. She described how she initially explored the work by studying and puzzling over its various components, until she arrived at a moment of recognition that changed her mode of engagement with the work. This was the moment of realization as to why all the models wore flat shoes (a detail unnoticed by the other participants), in reference to sure-footedness in the event of fleeing home. With this insight, the individual parts of *After Words* coalesced and the overarching theme of the piece became evident. Through contributing the personal and the cultural to her meaning-making process, she moved from a mode of engagement that was primarily one of intellectual cognition, concerned with piecing together the parts of a puzzle, to a mode of engagement that was predominantly affective. In this affective mode, personal memories evoked a deeply-felt emotional response to the piece, in which she expressed a sense of validation as her cultural history was evoked. Describing how her experience of viewing a particular work drew upon aspects of prior personal and cultural knowledge, the extent to which meaning-making intimately inflected with notions of the self was expressed. Her personal and cultural history imbued *After Words* with a depth of meaning unavailable to other research participants, resonant not only personally, but also with the curatorial description of the work based on Chalayan's intention, as stated in the exhibition leaflet. Dilthey's emphasis on the importance of understanding detail in presupposing the meaning of the whole of a work was illustrated by Karina's moment of realization.

Mercer and Paris's theory of three kinds of object-self relations in the museum context further refines the role of personal context in effecting learning.¹⁸ The theory attempts to account for works that sustain visitor interactions and, as such, engender learning arising from a deep and prolonged engagement with exhibits. The first is identity confirmation, in which the visitor's personal knowledge or experience is validated, for example, by seeing a painting which is familiar, appreciated, and consistent with aesthetic tastes, or by evoking an event in personal history, as described above. The second is identity-disconfirming, as the object calls into question deeply held beliefs, knowledge, or feelings, which provokes a sustained engagement through its troubling and unsettling effect. The third type of object-self relation is that which extends a visitor's sense of personal identity, not only in the present, but also as it relates to past selves and possible future selves, as with Rose's rush of enthusiasm to explore further study. It is difficult to readily describe the kind of learning that such a response produces: it is perhaps best described by Paris as part of the process of gaining self-knowledge:

Museum educators recognize that this form of learning is more like a personal characteristic or disposition than demonstrated knowledge, but it is enduring, emotional and powerful.¹⁹

Karina's experience in *After Words* called her personal and cultural history to the forefront of her experience at the museum. It also provided a sense of validation through recognizing aspects of this history as a shared experience, thereby positioning her as part of another interpretive community besides that of the discussion group. The notion of an interpretive community is formulated by Hooper-Greenhill and Fish, with an emphasis on members' shared meaning-making strategies.²⁰

The interplay of discursive engagement between visitor, curatorial approach, and the work itself, coupled with the immersive, affective dimension as a mode of engagement, clearly created meaningful and compelling exhibition experiences for these visitors. While all critical contributory factors to meaning-making, Bal's notion of the "expository agency" of the exhibition is borne out most evidently through visitor reflections on the central role of exhibition design—as the material manifestation of curatorial decisions—in constructing responses and generating meaning.²¹ Marnie's account of the exhibition design in *From Fashion and Back* captures the variety of display languages used in this exhibition. Her experience of a diverse range of spatial and sensorial environments complements and extends the exhibits, cohering to elicit an overall celebratory and affectively-engaged response:

The museum's done brilliantly—there's written information, there's visual information, you might have a film, you might have the product in front of you, things are hanging from the ceiling, things are hanging on the walls, things are right in front of you... you're walking around a big space, you're walking around a small space, it's light, it's dark. (Marnie, From Fashion and Back)

Karina's reaction to the exhibition design attributes its active agency in shaping her journey through the exhibition:

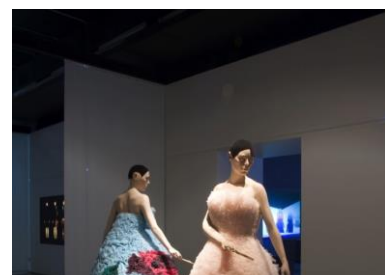
I love the way they used confined places, the way you suddenly found yourself drawn to an area. The use of light was very good, sometimes you'd find yourself in a light area, then suddenly it's very dark. (Karina, From Fashion and Back)

Similarly, for Danielle and Bill, the exhibition design actively sustained and provoked their ongoing interest, experienced as a journey into the unknown and unexpected:

That was the thing about that exhibition—you were looking at one of the figures and out of the corner of your eye you could see down the corridor and see what you were going to come up to and some of the imagery was really dramatic, really stunning and interesting. (Danielle, From Fashion and Back)

All the little signals kept me interested even though I didn't really know what was going on. (Bill, From Fashion and Back)

It is notable how the exhibition design enabled Bill, whom we have seen earlier to set store in factual, intellectually cognitive engagement with exhibitions, to feel comfortable with "not knowing" as an aspect of his exhibition experience.



The sense of theater and drama evoked in participants by the exhibition design in *From Fashion and Back* was also described in relation to the use of mannequins throughout. These mannequins were commissioned and designed for the exhibition. They were not the type of mannequins seen in shops, but instead evoked an individuated, life-size woman, further individuated through their design as engaged in various activities throughout the exhibition, including in one room painting the circular walls of the space from white to black (fig. 9), as if frozen in the act of preparing for the exhibition, or debunking the white cube. In another, sitting on a swing drinking tea; in a third, brandishing a pair of scissors as if to continue pattern cutting the very garment being worn (fig. 10); and in a fourth, as if watching one of the video exhibits. These mannequins elicited a phenomenological response from participants, who on coming literally “face-to-face” with them, found them to exert a powerful influence, with Bill and Rose respectively describing how “there’s this mannequin right in the center, staring at you, and it draws you in,” and how “the mannequins sort of absorbed you into the work... it was very sensual as well.”

Within the parameters of this small and in-depth qualitative study exploring the character of visitors’ engagement with design in the exhibition context, visitor accounts of their experiences show them moving fluidly from being critically engaged and reflective—what we might recognize as the discursive mode—to equally enjoying a subjectively and affectively engaged mode in which emotional responses came to the fore and critical distance is elided.

In this study, the impact of exhibition design as a way of shaping visitor experience and generating understanding emerges as the most significant aspect of meaning-making in the exhibition context. Exhibition design as a meaning-making strategy sits at the core of Bal’s triangulated theory of the expository agency of the exhibition. In *From Fashion and Back*, a carefully nuanced curatorial strategy enabled the relationship between the design and staging of the mannequins to bring the artifice of the exhibition design to the fore, while at the same time contributing to an overall immersive or absorbing experience for the visitor. The exhibition design was experienced by visitors as much as a part of the exhibition content as the garments themselves: criticality was not precluded, but rather worked in complement. For example, just as participants had sought further insights into the design process as part of exhibition interpretation in relation to *Designs of the Year*, so were they also keen to learn more about the backstory of the exhibition and of Chalayan’s design process.

I’d like to hear the voice of the curator a little more on the challenges of making this exhibition... a little insight on what went on behind closed doors to actually come up with this beautiful exhibit. It’s part of the exhibit. (Marnie, From Fashion and Back)

I would have been interested to see the patterns for the dresses, perhaps even more than the finished articles in a way—because process is so interesting,

even if it's just a snapshot overview. (Bill, From Fashion and Back)

Curatorial strategies that balance moments for immersive engagement with those for discursive reflection can be seen to create an intensely rewarding exhibition experience. Visitors are able to move between the immersive and discursive modes of engagement. In this small-scale study, the affective and sensorial character of the immersive mode does not appear to preclude an informed critical understanding of the exhibition as a site for knowledge construction arising from curatorial decision-making. The exhibition can be both understood as a staged text while also enjoyed at the level of emotional absorption. Although this study is too small in scope to draw any substantive implications for curatorial practice in design, the sophistication of the visitors' engagement is evidenced as they describe themselves variously to move visually, discursively, and immersively across content, building meaningful engagement across the "in-betweenness" of the discursive and the immersive.

Dr. Helen Charman is Director of Learning and Research at the Design Museum, London, where she has worked since 2007. A cultural professional with twenty-five years of experience in museum and gallery education, her previous roles include Head of Learning and Access at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Senior Curator: Education, Tate Modern; and Education Officer, Cultural Co-operation and Arts Development Officer, London Borough of Harrow. She is a trustee of Engage, the national association for gallery education, and sits on the Education Advisory Board of the Creative Education Trust and on the Steering Group for the Cultural Learning Alliance. She holds MA degrees from Oxford University (English Literature) and University of London (History of Art) and a Doctorate in Museum Education (University of London). She currently teaches on the Institute of Education's MA Museum and Gallery Education, the Southbank Centre/Kings College MA Education in Arts and Cultural Settings, and the Design Museum/Kingston University's MA Curating Contemporary Design, and supervises Collaborative Doctoral Awards. Alongside cultural learning, she also has a keen interest in development education and has worked on several projects overseas, including in Sri Lanka and Lithuania. Human-centered design makes her ticker tick quicker.

-
1. Reid, L.A., *Ways of Understanding and Education* (London: Institute of Education, 1986).
 2. Jones, G., Cardinal, D. and Hayward, J., *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: Hodder, 2005).
 3. Highmore, B. *The Design Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009).
 4. Curtin, G. "Designs of the year 2015", *Bird & Bird*, (London: Two Birds, 2015).
 5. Bal, M., *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, (London: Routledge, 1996).
 6. *Ibid*, 8.
 7. Csikszentmihalyi, M., *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper & Row, 1996).

8. Csikszentmihalyi, M., and Hermanson, K., "Intrinsic motivation in museums: What makes visitors want to learn?," *Museum News* 74, no. 3(1995): 34–37.
9. Pekarik, "From Knowing to Not Knowing: Moving Beyond 'Outcomes,'" *Curator* 53, no. 1 (January 2010): 105–115.
10. For those interested in further considering the particularity of curating and displaying design in the museum context, the recently published Bloomsbury text, "Design Objects and the Museum," brings together leading design historians, curators, educators, and archivists to consider the place of contemporary design (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
11. Falk, J.H., "Situated Identities and the Museum Visitor Experience," Visitor Studies Group Audience Segmentation Conference, January 29, 2010.
12. Hooper-Greenhill, E., *The Educational Role of the Museum*, (London: Routledge, 1999).
Hooper-Greenhill, E., *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance: Museum Meanings* (London: Routledge 2007).
13. Lave, J. and Wenger, E., *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
14. Dilthey, W., *The Development of Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
15. Gadamer, H-G., *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).
16. Hooper-Greenhill, E., *Museums and Their Visitors*, (London: Routledge, 1994).
17. Rama x Chalayan Fashion Design Booklet, 2014:
<http://portfolios.scad.edu/gallery/28145213/Rama-x-Chalayan-Fashion-Design-Print-Booklet-2014>
18. Paris, S. G., and M. J. Mercer, "Finding self in objects: Identity exploration in museums," in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, eds. G. Leinhardt, K. Crowley, and K. Knutson (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).
19. Paris, S.G., in Genoways, H., *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).
20. Fish, S.E., *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).