

## Editorial

Lucy Thornett and Greer Crawley

We are pleased to introduce this special double issue, which focuses attention on how the scenographic operates within exhibitions. Our interest in the topic has been developing for some time, beginning with a symposium we co-convened with Dr Kathrine Sandys and the V&A Museum in 2018 for the UK Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Scenography Working Group. The symposium included presentations from a number of practitioners and theorists working across the disciplinary contexts of exhibition and performance design – in fact, interest in the topic was such that we shortened the length of all presentations in order to accommodate more presenters. Since then, though some scholarly work has begun to emerge in this area (Dechelle 2018; Mehzoud 2019), we have felt that a more extensive examination of the scenographic in exhibition design was long overdue. In our call for papers for this special double issue, we asked why performance design as a practice has currency within exhibition contexts, and how this intersection of design disciplines might posit a productive and generative lens for thinking and practice.

As editors, we wanted to bring together a diverse group of contributors to reflect on the scenographic and theatrical strategies and frames adopted to stage narratives and experience. We are delighted that we are able to feature articles by an international group of contributors. They bring a range of perspectives from the historical and cultural to art criticism, design and curatorial practice or a combination of these. The contributors' different perspectives interconnect to create a multi-dimensional discourse around the staging of exhibitions. Their arguments and observations elucidate how scenographic and theatrical methodologies are being used in creating what Pamela Bianchi has described as 'the exhibition imaginary'.

There are some emergent themes in how the assembled articles articulate a set of scenographic strategies within contexts of exhibition and display. Among these is the notion of staging as a technique of display that amplifies or heightens, and in doing so draws attention to the very conditions of display. Rather than attempting to render exhibition environments and displays invisible or minimal in order to focus attention on the artefacts being displayed, this technique instead harnesses the power of exaggeration to highlight the situation of the exhibition itself. Related to this is the idea of scenography as a practice that is intentionally concerned with the *inauthentic*. Scenography produces fictive, imagined worlds, renders other places in the here and now, and highlights its own construction and artifice. The notion of the scenographic as inauthentic and superficial has had some purchase within an architectural context. Yet the act of simulation can also offer a critical perspective, as Thea Brejzek argues (2011, 4). Rachel Hann (2019) builds on Brejzek's identification of scenography's *otherness* (2011, 5) (2011, 5), arguing that scenography demarcates space as other than everyday (Hann 2019). In this strategy, fictive, illusory, excessive environments become devices for defamiliarization.

Another common thread in the articles within this special double issue is the sense that scenography plays a key role in shaping the temporal unfolding of space in exhibitions – what a number of contributors have referred to as spatial dramaturgy. Though all spatial and visitor experience design disciplines undoubtedly involve considerations of wayfinding

and circulation, scenography brings a distinct approach to these concerns. When scenography is at play in the guiding of audiences through a space, it is not merely about moving from one space to another, but of creating the spatial conditions to make a performance of this movement – a staging of action rather than designing spaces for quotidian movement. This is achieved by, for instance, an amplification of the crossing of thresholds, akin to entrances, exits and reveals on the stage. Thus scenography is a practice of generating the conditions for the performance of visitors by crafting a heightened encounter with the spaces of exhibitions. The contributors in this special issue underscore this, outlining the ways in which scenography should be understood as a relational strategy of orchestrating the performance of visitors and spaces within exhibitions.

Pamela Bianchi traces the historical emergence of scenographic exhibitions, proposing that contemporary exhibitions enact hybrid strategies of display and design in order to create spatial drama. She discusses the shift from exhibitions as object-centred displays to an emphasis on relational experiences, and links this to the development of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006). In her conception of spatial dramaturgy, she highlights both the activation of the visitor within the exhibition as a social situation, and the performance of space itself.

In Jasper Delbecke's article, the theatrical installations of Thomas Bellinck stage the very act of exhibiting. Bellinck's work presents an exhibition *as* theatre, emphasising the conventional devices of display such as glass cases, plinths, frames and labels. Delbecke argues that Bellinck harnesses scenography to turn 'the infrastructure and apparatus of an exhibition into a critical tool to question the politics of representation'. Despite potential misgivings about the emptiness of spectacle, Delbecke's article shows how the heightening and exaggerating of staging techniques can actually constitute a critical strategy.

In the context of immersive installation art, Ken Wilder suggests we understand "staging" as a "'bracketing" of the represented world that reveals its fictionality through self-disclosure'. Through a discussion of the total installations of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, and of Mike Nelson's *Mirror Infill*, Wilder claims that, contrary to understandings of immersive installations as independent from their contexts, this "bracketing" actually works to compel visitors to confront and critique the institutional context of the museum in which they encounter the work.

Ashley Paine discusses the perceived inauthenticity of architectural reconstructions. In his analysis of the reconstruction of Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel, he describes the Meiji-mura open-air architecture museum in which it is located as a staged, illusory, "other" space. Paine suggests that the artifice of the staging of the reconstruction highlights the scenographic properties inherent in Wright's original design.

Similarly, Nandini Kalita in her article contends that dioramas in tribal museums in India, in uncritically attempting to achieve verisimilitude, ultimately enact othering tactics. In doing so, these dioramas craft an encounter in which the spectator must 'negotiate the complex relationship between reality, illusion and perception.' Kalita proposes that dioramas, through their obvious constructed nature, raise questions about the representation of others, and concludes that these tribal museums must engage collaboratively with

indigenous people and empower these communities to participate in the construction of their own representation.

Viveka Kjellmer outlines the use of scent within a multisensory documentary style exhibition. While the mockumentary style of *Aquanauts – The Expedition* hinges on a fictional scenario, Kjellmer argues that the use of scents lend real, bodily presence to the exhibited sculptures. In this exhibition, scent affects visitors physically, and combines with other scenographic elements (e.g. light, sound, moving imagery, objects) to create an affective atmosphere.

Rodrigo Tisi's visual essay outlines *Santiago: Arrival City*, an exhibition exploring migration and displacement in Chile. The exhibition employed participatory displays in order to produce an encounter between 'performing objects and visitors'. Examples include simulated airport arrival and departure gates that created a heightened threshold through which to enter the space; and dance classes for visitors, conducted by Afro-descendant artists based in Santiago, which brought the space to life with the movement of visitors.

Scenographic exhibitions as embodied, multi-sensory experiences is a thread that runs through all of the assembled articles in one way or another. The multi layered methodologies to which the authors refer are composed of strategies of embodiment, mediation, reanimation, immersion and activation that create affective, sensorial, phenomenal experiences through scenographic and theatrical apparatuses and assemblages. However, it must be acknowledged that over the last two years, exhibitions had to transition to become entirely virtual experiences online. New virtual and hybrid forms of exhibition scenography are still emerging. Despite these new possibilities, it is apparent from the articles in this issue that materiality and spatiality remain abiding concerns within the scenography of exhibitions. In fact, materiality continues to be a central consideration in spite of a shift in emphasis from objects to experience. Finally, the contributions to the issue demonstrate that scenographic strategies of exhibition design are capable of expanding possible meanings by complicating interpretations and in doing so, bringing a critical lens to bear on visitor experiences.

We would like to thank all the contributors to this special double issue for the diverse range of perspectives they bring to bear on the scenographic within exhibitions. We would also like to thank the peer reviewers who provided a wealth of thoughtful and constructive advice to the authors and editors. We are grateful to Jane Collins and Thea Brejzek for giving us the space and encouragement to explore ideas about the staging of exhibitions through our call for papers and editorship of this special issue. Finally, special thanks must go to Nick Tatchell for handling the submission and editorial processes and keeping us on track with deadlines and our responsibilities.

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