Futurescaping the Museum – Curating an open exchange about museum futures (with a focus on the Victoria and Albert Museum’s major V&A East development)

Keywords: Design Culture; Cultural Heritage; Digital Cultural Heritage; Museology

1. Catalyst Information

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2. Conversation Description

This Conversation session will curate an open exchange about museum futures by exploring design as both a form of cultural heritage and as a catalyst for socio-cultural agency. The confluence of this subject is extremely timely and relevant given the Victoria and Albert Museum’s transformative vision and influential, catalysing role in the impending Olympic Park redevelopment. As part of London’s single most significant cultural infrastructure project since the establishment of “Albertopolis” back in the 1850s, the museum is approaching “V&A East” as a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity to redesign the museum in response to the digital, democratic age. In this session, an invited panel of catalysts will initiate exploratory dialogue about the topic of museum futures through a set of different lenses: i.e. data, materiality, communication systems and curatorial design. The following prompts will be used to activate interactions through discussion involving participating
delegates:

*In what ways can curatorial programming, exhibition-making and mediated forms of museum communication respond to the systems literacies associated with digital transformation?*

*How can the relevance, sustainability and socio-cultural value of museums be ensured — and propagated — into a postdigital future?*

This Conversation aims to foster a generous, open dialogue between stakeholders (including design academics and researchers, design practitioners and museum professionals) by serving as a public platform that will provide an incredible opportunity to bring the larger research and development project that the V&A is embarking upon through VARI (the V&A Research Institute) into contact with the collective knowledge of the international design research community. By foregrounding the conceptual basis of “futurescaping” – as distinct from “future-proofing” – the museum, the session affords the chance to trouble museological conventions and orthodoxies, to ask: *What are the new dynamics of cultural innovation and knowledge creation that museum institutions can embody to promote and empower public participation, co-authorship and citizenship?* In contrast to a “problem-solving” approach, these provocations will challenge a reconsideration of how museums have done things in the past and turn attention instead towards the future, to speculate upon what kind of role(s) cultural institutions should play looking ahead to the postdigital era.

### 3. Organizing research question

This Conversation seeks to identify and articulate some of the major issues involved in rethinking the role of the museum, its programme and collection, and how its activities function within a shifting cultural landscape. The guiding research question we are posing relates to the catalyzing role of cultural institutions in the postdigital era. Subsidiary questions and prompts that we will pose to motivate interactive discussion with our audience are:

*What are the new dynamics of cultural innovation and knowledge creation that museum institutions can/should embody to promote and empower public participation, co-authorship and citizenship?*

*In what ways can curatorial programming, exhibition-making and mediated forms of museum communication respond to digital transformation and the systems literacies associated with this?*

*How can the relevance, sustainability and socio-cultural value of museums be ensured — and propagated — into the future?*
4. Set-up of your session

This Conversation session has been designed to function optimally within a ~90mins time frame with an audience of between 20-40 participants. To initiate the conversation session, each catalyst will offer a brief contextual introduction to the particular “lens” they are representing (~15 minutes in total). Each of these four “lenses” will be used to draw out a range of perspectives from participants through encouraging open discussion guided by a series of prompts that will be used as a basis for exploration and debate. In order to facilitate a dynamic form of interactive exchange, we propose to divide the room into four “stations” that participants will be encouraged to move between on a rotating basis (~ every 15mins; ~60mins in total), thereby maintaining the energy of the discussion and encouraging a mixture of expert and alternative perspectives to be shared through various co-design activities. This activity-based phase will be followed by a summative discussion (~15 mins) in which the panel of catalysts will share insights collected from the session.

5. Type of space and equipment required

To support this activity, we will ideally require a room that can be easily sub-divided into discrete “stations”, each comprised of a “round table” (tables & stools) with whiteboard, flip-over or access to a pin-up wall. A standard data projector set-up would also be useful for focusing attention onto main introductory and concluding presentations.

6. Dissemination strategy

As a post-conference dissemination outcome, we aim to produce a concluding “briefing document” (PDF digital publication) in which we will take steps to account for the outcomes of the conversations as well as represent the contribution made by participants to the exploration of the topic through a combination of summary reporting (from the perspective of each catalyst) as well as extending an invitation to participants to submit reflective observations in the form of a “digest”. Further, we hope that the effort to collect and compile this documentary record will stimulate continuing interest in pursuing this subject with the prospect of it serving as a springboard for a “portfolio” feature or related special issue of Curator: The Museum Journal (Wiley-Blackwell).

7. References

25–6: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n06/haldfoster/afterDtheDwhiteDcube

About the Catalysts:

Dr Vince Dziekan is Director of Programme, Graduate Research in Design at Monash University. His research focuses on the impact of digital technologies on curatorial design and the implications of virtuality on exhibition-based practices. This interdisciplinary investigation is articulated in his book, Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum (Intellect, 2012). He is curator-at-large of MWX – the exhibition initiative of Museums and the Web, and associate editor of Curator: The Museum Journal. Earlier this year he was a visiting scholar at the V&A as part of an Australia Council-supported research residency. He is currently working on new publication projects with Bloomsbury and Routledge in the areas of new media art, museum media and communications.

Dr Marta Ajmar heads the V&A/RCA History of Design Postgraduate Programme at the Victoria and Albert Museum and is Deputy Director of the V&A Research Institute (VARI). She combines academic work with exhibition curation and has published on many aspects of design and materiality of the early modern period. One of her current research projects focuses on the interaction between design, embodied skill and knowledge creation in historical context and contemporary practice and on activating participant
collaboration between different knowledge-makers. She has been the recipient of research awards from the Getty Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, the Leverhulme Trust and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

**George Oates** is a designer and friend to museums, libraries and archives. She created the Flickr Commons back in 2008, and has revolved around the sector ever since, at the Internet archive, as a research associate at the Smithsonian, and as art director at stamen Design. In 2014, she started her own design firm called Good, Form & Spectacle, centered on design in service to cultural heritage.

**Professor Teal Triggs** is Associate Dean, School of Communication, Royal College of Art, London. As a graphic design historian, critic and educator her research focuses primarily on graphic design history, self-publishing and feminism. Teal is co-editor with Leslie Atzmon of the forthcoming anthology *The Graphic Design Reader* (Bloomsbury). Her previous publications include the children’s book *The School of Art* (Wide Eyed Editions) and *Fanzines* (Thames & Hudson). She is also Editor-in-Chief of the academic journals: *Communication Design* (Bloomsbury/ico-D), co-editor of *Visual Communication* (Sage) and Associate Editor, Reviews , for *Design Issues* (MIT Press). Teal is a Fellow of the International Society of Typographic Designers and the Royal Society of Arts.