

EP 3: Making the Case for Artistic Risk-Taking

Victoria Broackes in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Adrian Ellis: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells - the podcast of the Global Cultural Districts Network produced by AEA Consulting with support from The Binnacle Foundation. I am Adrian Ellis and I'm delighted this week to have as my guest, Vicky Broackes. I followed Vicky's career for many years, both at the Victoria & Albert Museum, where she was responsible for a series of deeply imaginative exhibitions about popular culture and now the Director of the London Design Biennale, which opens on the 1st of June at Somerset House. And so I'm delighted to have an opportunity to talk to Vicky, both about the biennale and about her other extremely interesting professional experiences that led her to the biennale.

So, Vicky thank you for coming and welcome.

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Vicky Broackes: Oh, thank you so much, Adrian. It's lovely to be here.

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Adrian Ellis: So, my first question is really: Through what sort of broad professional trajectory did you arrive as Director of the Design Biennale? And I'm particularly interested because design for me is always – it's not one discipline. It's everything from economics to aesthetics, to engineering, to material science, to sociology, to you name it, it's all in there. So, so there are many routes to the world of design. What was yours?

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Vicky Broackes: Well, first to say, I completely agree and subscribe to the really broad definition of design. And I – that also helps me fit into it, I suppose. But so as a post-grad, I went to the Royal College of Art to do an MA in History of Design, having done philosophy as a BA. And it was after that, that I actually joined the V&A in quite a sort of standard way – I was in the 20th Century Gallery doing exhibitions there. So that was back at the end of the eighties. And it was actually later and after having children, that I joined the Theatre & Performance collections and took the music area forward.

So in a sense I've sort of gone full circle. Started with 20th century design (laughs) and now in the 21st century, I'm back with the London Design Biennale 2021 working at Somerset House.

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Adrian Ellis: So your undergraduate degree was in philosophy.



Vicky Broackes: That's right.

Adrian Ellis: How professionally useful was philosophy? And that's not a judgment on whether it's a good degree or not. I'm just curious to know whether it gave you tools that continued to inform and eliminate your professional life.

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Vicky Broackes: Well, that – that's a very good question. I would say philosophy is – is useful in all kinds of ways that relate to thinking. So, partly I did it because I was interested in that type of thinking and partly having done it, I suppose, I expect to sort of apply aspects of that type of thinking to whatever I'm doing. So I think it's quite hard to give it a kind of direct route into talking about design.

But in – in terms of the exhibitions that I've done and the way I think about things, I think it's been really useful. And specifically how I kind of achieved that crossover because actually it was a question (laughs) – it was a question for the Royal College of Art when I applied to them as to how it fitted in. But I did my thesis in my third year at university on John Ruskin. And the sort of crossover from philosophy of art to design thinking and so on, started with that.

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Adrian Ellis: Fascinating. So, in the V&A, you migrated into the theatre department where you're responsible for curating a whole series of absolutely exceptional exhibitions. Exceptional, not only in their content, but in their approach because they were highly experiential – which is to say that they involved sound, they involved a whole range of effects that are now more standard than they were. I don't know whether they involve taste and smell, but I'm sure you'll tell me if they did. They involved things from popular culture and particularly music. And they also involved all the challenges, I think, of working not just with living artists, but with living artists who were protective both of their legacy informally and their intellectual property probably formally.

And the exhibitions were successful in terms of popular attendance. Our, you know, usual metric of success still, but they were also very well received. Not only are they pioneering, but they are still reverberating and resonating and they're sort of – the implications are still being explored and expanded.

So I want to talk a bit about those. Was it a tough gig persuading the V&A, the Victoria & Albert Museum to take this sort of approach? And they are all around themes from popular culture, as I say, mostly for music. Was that a passion of yours and an interest – a deep interest of yours prior to engaging with the sort of, the curation of the shows?

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Vicky Broackes: So if I just start with that bit first. The answer is a resounding yes. And if – if the V&A had covered music when I joined in 1987 that would have been where I'd have been trying to get to. It – it was an absolute passion and it was a, sort of another area that I considered potentially trying to make a career in but didn't. And so I kind of – I judge it incredibly fortunate that when I rejoined the V&A Theatre Museum as it was then, after I'd had children. I sort of went back. I discovered that they had a great collection relating to music. As in fact had the Princeton drawings collection which had been being collected in since the 1960s.



Vicky Broackes: But that actually nothing really was being done with it. It was being looked at from a design point of view and some very forward-thinking curators had clearly been collecting from the moment that musicians started using visual arts to kind of express their identities and so on. But then it was still being viewed just as in that area. And yeah, that seemed an amazing opportunity to take forward. Happening sort of alongside, I suppose a sort of more general belief that I had that museums were, maybe not doing enough to attract the widest possible audience. And that this was an area in which, you know, every – pretty much everybody has an opinion.

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Adrian Ellis: Tell me about the – whether it was a tough gig bringing on board the V&A as a whole, to put their institutional shoulder behind this sort of approach.

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Vicky Broackes: (laughs) Well, in short, quite a tough gig. I mean, the whole thing was almost a series of, sort of opportunities and accidents – as I suppose things so often are. But in truth, what happened in the first place was that the Theatre Museum where I was working – which was part of the V&A but not at the V&A, it was in Covent Garden, was moving back into the V&A just at the point that we were committed to doing an exhibition about Kylie Minogue. And that was supposed to be happening in Convent garden, where it would have been an appropriate part of the programming. But as it was, we – and I arrived back at the V&A in 2007 with this exhibition. And I don't think the V&A was... kind of knew, (laughs) knew what it was getting into.

Adrian Ellis: It snuck up on them. (laughs)

Vicky Broackes: Yes, yes. (laughs) At the same time. And I remember at the time, I didn't know Mark Jones, the director, well but he liked to be a bit playful, I think, with the media. I was really struck, when not even having had this conversation with him at all, and also suspecting that he probably didn't really know who Kylie was. He kind of went back quite fiercely to a journalist saying, 'Oh, I'm fed up with people telling us museums ought to be sort of telling you things and educating you. They can actually be lots of fun as well.' So he was – he very robustly defended Kylie, and Kylie did actually – it caused a bit of a stir at the time, which is kind of easy to forget. So, you know, now we're away, away from it, but the Guardian ran a poll and there were, you know, a lot of articles for and against what on earth was the V&A doing?

But actually the upshot was that I think 250,000 or so people came to it. It was a free exhibition. So not everything could be judged from that, but that certainly put it in a blockbuster category. Wasn't a huge show. And generally it was very well received. And I think that if that hadn't happened, I think it would have been a really hard sell to get the music related exhibitions off the ground. But because it had happened, it had – you know, it had opened the door somewhat. We followed that just a few years later with an exhibition about The Supremes – that was really more about civil rights. And it was very well received. And then apart from some smaller things in our department, the next big one was Bowie.

And Mark Jones by then was fully on board even though as he did actually say to me, not so long ago, you know, I wasn't sure where I could actually, you know, even sort of knew any of Bowie's music. It's not his scene at all, but he did get it and quite strongly sort of, made it happen.



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Adrian Ellis: Tell me what impact you think that has had on the acceptability of figures from popular culture being explored in museums?

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Vicky Broackes: Whoa, well. I mean, in part it depends on the type of museum. So obviously there are museums where pop music would be a central subject of what they do and they'd carry on doing it. I think what was different in our case is that we at the time was still a museum of art and design, although now art, design and performance. And what we were doing was not looking actually, at the music, but looking at the cultural importance of someone like Bowie. And I do actually, I do always like to say that it's you know, these subjects are not – they're not one subject. They might be in the rock and roll hall of fame say, but they are – they're a sort of portal to opening up whatever that story is.

And I think that, you know, the thing you're trying to do as a curator is: Find out what that story is and then tell it well. And you know, the music is obviously core, but it's not – it would be a different exhibition if it was a story about the music. It's not the story that we were telling in any of these cases at the V&A.

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Adrian Ellis: The same question, but this time about the techniques of display index position that you have used and developed.

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah, so Bowie was a great leap forward. And it was a great leap forward kind of in a number of ways because we had this subject that simply, you know, we knew we couldn't do an exhibition that was like any exhibition we'd never seen, I suppose. I mean, that was quite (laughs) – that was setting the bar quite high. So there were terrifying moments I suppose, but we knew we had to do something different with this. And at the same time the department had generally been making some really good strides forward in terms of introducing performance design, and sort of performance techniques into museum exhibitions.

So there'd been Hollywood Costume, which, you know, had been a great blockbuster and really well designed. There'd been a fabulous Diaghilev And The Ballet Russes where – in fact, you said in your introduction, I think about smell and we've been very keen to introduce smell into that exhibition and had in part, a performance designer designing it. But in the process it went through at the V&A and it got quite sort of strongly diluted. And although it was really excellent, it wasn't quite what we would have liked it to have been from the start.

With Bowie, I think we felt we had more license. Not only license, we actually, you know, we had an obligation which didn't make it so easy with – again, with the systems. But for a number – again of sort of accidental serendipitous reasons, we were able to really go all out for it. And I'd just say that, you know – just to show how maybe one shouldn't give away the fact that some of these things are accidents, but for a time, the Bowie exhibition wasn't going to be in the main exhibition galleries. It was in a different space. And that – that gave us, greater freedom. But when it got moved, it meant the greater freedom went into the sort of 'mainstream program'. So it brought all those things together and right up until the day we opened – and actually slightly beyond, we didn't know if it was going to come good.



Vicky Broackes: Geoff Marsh, the other curator and I were in quite a lot of trouble with quite a lot of people in the museum. It was costing too much. They thought it was too long, it was too big. There were all sorts of problems. About six weeks before we opened, we were asked to cut it in half in terms of objects – which we refuse to do. Geoff had developed a kind of psychosomatic case of to deafness in one ear. Everything was, you know – it was a huge risk and the money that had been spent was really exercising everybody there. And if it hadn't been a success, we would have been in awful lot of trouble, which just goes to show that a lot of these artistic ventures that can be very risky and you don't know, you know – you don't know if you've succeeded and if you haven't, you're – you know, the opposite thing happens.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: So there's a dimension to the risk that I'd love to explore a bit because for most of these exhibitions, you are dealing with commercial artists who – and of course, Bowie has passed away now, but who are alive and more than kicking at the time at which you're conceiving these exhibitions. And you are therefore in a negotiation, presumably, about how you handle the material and one in which your interest is to have some curatorial autonomy.

And I would imagine that their interest is to control their legacy as tightly as they can. I may be oversimplifying, but is there a tension in there? And how do you manage that tension?

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Vicky Broackes: There is a tension. Absolutely. And I think there's more of a tension in the music area than in pretty much any area I can think of. And I mean, certainly from a museum perspective, if you do an exhibition about – I don't know, William Morris or Thomas Heatherwick say, a designer expects to be critiqued by a museum. And that they have sort of grown up, been trained, expecting that to be what will happen. That's not – very definitely not the case if you've grown up to be a great pop musician icon, you've done the opposite. You've probably been kind of obscuring realities since the day you started, or since your agent told you, you ought to. And you're not about to sort of walk in and say, "Oh, I know we've been saying that for the last however many years, but now, you know, now we'd like to sort of tell it as it is."

So there's a – there is a real tension. They have probably, you know – certainly you look at someone like Bowie who had been managing his image pretty immaculately and certainly vigilantly since – well, since his beginnings, but certainly since the early seventies and then to kind of hand over all that hard work as it were and say, 'Oh, just unravel it and, you know, reveal all' would be peculiar. And so that is and can be an issue in exhibitions.

I mean, funnily enough – and this I did, you know, it was one of the big mysteries of the show on Bowie was that, he didn't really do that. I mean, there was one example only that I can remember in the show and in fact, we had no direct dealings with him during it, but we were working with his archive – almost everything in the exhibition came from his archive. But there was one moment where we talked about how many of the people involved in Andy Warhol's theatre production, *Pork*, moved over – were kind of pinch by Bowie and moved over to work with him on a tour the following year.



Vicky Broackes: And we surmised that Bowie had visited that show in the way that he has, you know, was on to every interesting thing wherever he was. He was kind of in there and sort of making – making use of it in a sense, for his own artistic needs. We surmised that he'd been to see *Pork* and that was how he'd got hold of all these people. And we were, you know, just told that he never saw it, didn't really know what it was and didn't know what we were talking about. And that was the only area we thought, well, I'm not sure I actually believe that.

We got fairly free rein, you know, no sort of editing of our text and that sort of thing. Interestingly not the case with Pink Floyd where, you know, the managers were quite involved and in some cases, not particularly helpfully involved in, you know – so you'd cite a jazz reference or something, they'd say, Oh no. They were kind of frightened of perhaps being seen to be, you know, things being more than inspiration. And of course in an artistic sense, that's what you're looking for. But in fact on that occasion, I went back to one of the band members and said, Look, this is ridiculous, what is going on? And a stop was put to it.

We were able to kind of carry unencumbered, but sorry, that's a very long answer to your question. It's – It's a real tension. It's something to be aware of and in my mind, it's something to be overcome because I think you can't stamp your foot and say, "Well, that's outrageous. We've got to have complete freedom here or we're not doing it." You won't get it, it just isn't the way the industry works. So you have to find some way to accommodate that and work with it, which I think, you know, we've been able to do quite successfully.

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Adrian Ellis: I want to move on in a moment to the biennale, but just before I do – and I think this is the territory where, to some extent your approach to the biennale and this legacy of incredible exhibitions at the V&A begin to merge, which is the 'future of the experiential', and the way in which you see these sorts of exhibitions inside and outside of museums developing. This isn't just sort of, you know, the blanket application of technology or something like that. You are still, you know, dealing with objects. But where do you see – exhibitions that have both mass appeal and intellectual credibility and interesting ways of presentation, do you see that trend sort of proceeding apace or do you see the forces of conservatism sort of, you know, blocking those routes? Where's it all going?

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah. Well I wish I knew, Adrian. Where it's all going. I think there are maybe forces of conservatism. There's also forces of pandemic. You know, I think the world has changed in the last 15 months, and it's not quite – it's not clear yet quite how much it's changed or quite how much that sort of, you know, obviously some changes have sort of propelled further into the 21st century that we might otherwise have been. Other things are more, I suppose, philosophical and changing in sort of emphasis. I mean, certainly in terms of technology and objects and you know, just to again, take the example of, of Bowie.

You know, and I remember as we talk to our designers, 59 Productions, again and again, and I was really worried about the technology overtaking the objects and ending up being too, sort of, gimmicky. And the reason for my concern was that I'd seen a lot of quasi sort of, you know – they weren't quite museum shows, but in the area of pop music and so on, using technology that didn't quite succeed.



Vicky Broackes: They never quite got that sort of transportation that they were looking for: To take you into another world, whether it was, you know, Oh, you're at a concert. You know, great applause, that sort of thing, or, you know, we're in a recording studio or even, archive desks and things where you could sort of move things around. It was really clever, quite fun, but it – you were noticing the technology and as a sort of general rule, I kind of think if you're noticing the technology rather than feeling the feeling, it's not quite worked. So there was that. And then I was, well, not wrong. I think we worked hard to make sure it was right.

We, we tried not for imitation. But for sort of evoking experiences and try to (laughs) – going back to sort of where philosophy comes in, you know, what actually you're trying to do here? You know, you're trying to make people feel they're at a concert. You can't do that. Are you trying to get them to have the same feelings they might have in a concert? What are those feelings? Those sorts of things. That was something we worked really hard to do, and then the designers were absolutely brilliant and gave us ways to do it. And it all came together and it worked. So it was the sort of perfect technology for the time, for the subject and so on.

And I think those are really key things because, you don't want to blanketly apply technology to everything. As, I think is, you know, happening a bit more. At the same time, I think experience in exhibitions is now seen to be something that can be much broadened out. You know, it doesn't have to be sort of performance subjects. It could be any subject – can perhaps be enhanced by having a sort of more experiential exposition in the exhibition. So all of those things need to be weighed up. And then, you know, going on to, sort of, where are we now and where are we going?

I think a year ago you were probably going to, you know, more exciting experiential exhibitions that use both technology and objects. We were also of course, seeing, you know, a lot of areas of art now being produced digitally in a more commercial – in commercial spaces and that sort of thing, and those kind of – not competing exactly, but also other ways of seeing art, I suppose.

Now I think we've, you know, additional things which are more environmental concerns where, you know, I think people have really woken up to environmental factors. I think we've got, you know, museums in crisis financially. So the risk and outlay that were put into those exhibitions will be questioned even though I would also say they're also the only ways the museum has made lots of money sort of in the past 15 years. So they certainly ought to be considered. But if you have sort of environments not right to fly people, objects, set, all that sort of thing around the world quite so much. And then another thing is, could you do it all digitally? Could you do more of it digitally? How would that work? And I think all of those things are sort of there. And I don't know, how the cards will fall and what we will see coming up.

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Adrian Ellis: But change is likely. In other words, when you stir all those factors together and they agree both the environmental considerations, but also the considerations of the cost and risks associated with traditional ways of going about larger shows. The possibility that technology may introduce sort of lighter touch if you'd like, virtual variants. It does seem to me that we're in for a – we're in for a period of interesting change, not just museums, but the way in which cultural explorations across a whole range of media are developing over the next few years.



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Vicky Broackes: I completely agree with that. And where – you know, I think where it's sort of interesting and given that we've all lived onscreen online for a year, you know, and we've all attended, I'm sure lots of sort of private views and things like that, that, you know, quite exciting at the beginning. But in the end, perhaps not so, not exactly satisfying but some things working well. How that will play out, I think is, you know, is really interesting.

And I think there's um, I was looking at a new venture the other day. It's called theVOV, and it's the physical – you know, it's trying to humanise the physical and the digital, bring them together. And I'm not quite sure how it will do that, but I think it's an important thing to do. So there's obviously an awful lot going on.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: So you are the Director of the London Design Biennale, I think you joined in 2019. Is that right?

Vicky Broackes: Yes, that's right.

Adrian Ellis: And 2021 is the third biennale and the theme is Resonance. What, from the experience the V&A have you brought to the conceptualisation of the biennale, and tell me a little bit about the way in which resonance is being explored. And I know that you are working with your artistic director, Es Devlin, whose philosophy and approach seems highly congruent with your own experience. So I'm just wondering how you've – how the two of you as it were, have conceived this.

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah, sure. Well, I mean, actually, so I'd worked with Es at the V&A over some years. So that's been really nice and I should say she was in position as Artistic Director at the biennale before I came to be the new director. But as it happens, and as you say, our approaches I think are very congruent.

I mean, probably one of the things that I felt strongly about in museums – what I said actually, was that they didn't open themselves up to the widest possible audience. I also really feel that about the design world. (laughs) So I think what I haven't said is that having been that sort of mainstream V&A to start with and then going back to the Theatre Collections, I found it kind of hugely refreshing to be in the performance world, which it seemed to me – oh, it takes itself seriously in lots of ways, but it seems sort of a bit more fun. Design sometimes can seem to be, you know, it's just talking to a small group of people that are talking to each other and that they're kind of in the know, and if you're not one of them you're not there.

And I, you know, I think that's all wrong and I sort of also feel that lots of people in it, you know, don't think of it like that, don't want it to be like that at all. But so – and again, as a sort of a passion for opening things out, not because they sort of just also be opened out – although doubtless, they should, but because there's lots to be enjoyed.

And I mean, you said in your introduction that the breadth, you know – what is design? Well, almost everything. Almost everything you think of is, is designed you know.



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Adrian Ellis: Everything is designed that wasn't organically created.

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah, exactly. And including, you know, including systems and so on. So I'm interested in design for that very broad perspective and opening it up to everyone.

And I think with Es, she chose the theme of resonance and you know, I think the sort of initial sort of explanation for it was – it was about how everything we do resonates and in a sense, the sort of 'butterfly wing effect across the world' aspect of whatever we do. I think with the pandemic and the lights being shone on social equality and environmental factors, particularly I think resonance has got greater resonance. So, you know, it's also a really nice broad theme and it allows people to – you can make pretty much anything work with it, but it also, it also brings the whole thing together in ways that I hope will be interesting and fun for people to see in June.

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Adrian Ellis: Give me some basics. It's held at Somerset House and it's arranged along national pavilions.

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah. It takes over almost the entirety of Somerset House. And it takes place every two years and it brings together the best of international design and design thinking by countries, cities, and territories. So normally what that means is that we have somewhere in the area of 40 to 50 international pavilions.

Now this year, it's obviously slightly different. I can't tell you, but I'm sure you can imagine – I'm sure the listeners could imagine organising an international biennale during a pandemic is exceptionally challenging. And of course not just challenging for us, challenging for every single one of those countries that we're working with who've had, you know, production issues, money issues, sponsorship issues, travel issues, installation issues. It works at every level. Everything is harder. Then even when you sort of go on show, you've then got interactivity issues, you've got additional costs due to COVID measures and so on. Anyway, we nonetheless, and really hats off to these amazing countries who've who stayed with it. This is the power of the messages and the stories that people want to tell that they really, really, and we really feel it's an important moment to get out there, to show installations around all these subjects and for people, at last, to be able to go out and see them in company, and talk about them and have creative exchange across borders.

So that's, I suppose the main bit, the country, city, and territory pavilions.

But this year we also, additionally, have a bit more of a UK-based series of installations. And that is universities, a couple of brands talking about sustainability and innovation, and work that they're doing in that area.

So we've – for example, we've got Cambridge University, the Natural Material Science School in the Department of Architecture who are bringing new ways of working with wood. For example, we've got Kingston University and so on. So we've got a number of UK-based interesting installations on sustainability and innovation.



Vicky Broackes: And then, we've got a kind of third element, which is an exhibition that we have created ourselves within the biennale which relates to an initiative we ran last year during the pandemic, which was an open call to the world called Design In An Age Of Crisis. Really taking that idea that design thinking is something that everybody can get involved in. Going out to the world and saying, you know, 'What in your world would you like to see changed for the better?'

We issued four briefs in the areas of society, health, environment, and work. And we had hundreds and hundreds of responses from over 50 countries. And that's turned into a sort of huge celebration as a fact that you know, we may all have been locked down, but creative thinking was going on everywhere from the kitchen table to the big architectural firms. We've all got things on our mind. Our lives have changed somewhat. We might now be looking at our local village, or town, or areas of green space that we hadn't really focused on before because we were too busy getting on the tube every morning and going somewhere else.

But these ideas have come back and we're holding an exhibition. And I should say, this is something we worked on with Chatham House who were absolutely amazing. And we, you know, both – we wanted to bring together the worlds of sort of policy and design thinking and see if by bringing those two together, we could get to some interesting outcomes.

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Adrian Ellis: So the application of intelligence to specific problems with that definition and their solutions seems to be the heart of design thinking, and it's sort of infused with a basic optimism if you like, that intelligent application of minds can solve complex – I think they're called wicked social problems.

Vicky Broackes: (laughs)

Adrian Ellis: These gnarly problems that require both technological and political solutions simultaneously. Are you basically an optimist about what design can bring to bear on the great issues of our age?

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Vicky Broackes: Yeah, yeah. That's really interesting. I am an optimist. I'm also – I see great value in the way designers are trained to solve problems which I've often seen in action. And I also see, I see a real strength in sort of widening those conversations. So, you, you know, you get a number of different views in the room, but certainly for that, where, you know, say going back to, you know, working with Chatham house now, you know, they have academics, entrepreneurs, policymakers, all talking about things and that talking can go on and on. And obviously they want to, you know, affect policy – is very interesting. And you know, actually to see it when we were creating these briefs, to actually see you put, you know – if half the room is designers, they are quickly digesting all the issues and making suggestions and, you know, whilst that's not always the way to sort of get things going.

My experience of design has been, it's – you know, it's amazing. That there are amazing possibilities and you always start, I always start by telling designers that I know exactly what I want and this is what it is. (laughs)



Vicky Broackes: And you know, almost always with great designers, you know, they will come back and say, you thought you wanted that, but actually I've got something better and, you know, you think, Oh my goodness, that's fantastic. Sometimes – if it is. And it's really exciting, cause you sort of identified the problem, brought all things in that need to be considered. And if you've got that bit right, and you have a good conversation, great things can come out of that.

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Adrian Ellis: Um, that's fantastic. I feel like I should round this off with a very practical question. So hang on. So you open on the 1st of June, Somerset house, off the Strand in London. Is there anything else we need to know? And if we're spread around the world, what sort of digital access can we expect to this fantastic event?

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Vicky Broackes: Oh great, yes. So we – as you say, open on the 1st of June. If you can get to London, do come. We've got a 400 tree forest designed by Es in the courtyard of Somerset House which will be mind-blowing. And it will be wonderful to see the place teeming with people. If you can't get to Somerset House, our online digital offering will be much more advanced than it's ever been before. And in fact, we have three pavilions who are appearing digitally. They'll be in the space, but they'll also be online as well – all the pavilions. But also our biennale sessions – which is effectively the public program, are being run virtually overall. And I think, you know, I think this will never – it won't change again.

So, I mean, it was inconceivable. What I started that, that all of this stuff would be online. It wasn't the way we operated and we were terribly committed and are very committed to this sort of physical – the need or human need to physically get together and see things and discuss them.

And I absolutely, you know, we talk about, Es, I know Es feels very strongly – we all feel it's really important. But at the same time, I think what we've realised over the last year and the experience with the design and nature of process initiative is that you could be speaking to, you know – if say at most 40,000 people get to Somerset house next month, but you know, hundreds, oh, tens and tens of thousands of people around the world will be interested in what's going on and we can reach them.

And I think that is, you know, that is a great leap forward and something that we need to continue always to consider that our audience can always be, you know, 10 times the size as the physical. The physical is vital, I think it doesn't really work without that there at its centre. But with it there, you could really build on that to a great audience.

So, I hope we will. I hope your people will tune in and see what's going on in London now.

[00:36:04]

Adrian Ellis: I have no doubt that they will. And thank you to you and to Es for making it happen. And I guess I should give a shout out to John Sorrell and Ben Evans for their original conception of this fantastic new part of London's cultural landscape. So Vicky, thank you very much, indeed. That was really interesting.

[00:36:25]

Vicky Broackes: Amazing. Well, thank you so much for inviting me.



[00:36:28]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:36:37]
Adrian Ellis: I'm joined now by Criena Gehrke, CEO of HOTA, Home of the Arts in the Gold Coast in Australia and an active member of GCDN.

Hi Criena, are you recovering from your heroic opening?

[00:36:50]
Criena Gehrke: I am, Adrian. Thank you. Hello. And part of what I did in my recovery was to listen to that fantastic conversation between yourself and Vicky. And I totally loved it. So much of it resonated with me – from discussions about popular culture, the use of technology, the experience that you want people to have, and also this idea of mass appeal.

[00:37:15]
Adrian Ellis: Well, I'm sure some people may briefly be wondering, well, how does this relate back to the world of cultural districts? I think it does pretty clearly because I think that, you know, one of the things that cultural districts are constantly thinking about is the relationship between what goes on in the institutions, in their districts, and the much larger demographic swath that they want to attract and pull to the districts.

And I do think that a lot of what Vicky is talking about, both with respect to those experiential exhibitions that she spearheaded at the V&A and the Design Biennale, which is taking place from the beginning of next month in Somerset House in the central of London are really about that sort of really interesting intersection between exhibitions that are intellectually rich in content, which are addressing fascinating themes – really important themes in many cases and broad, popular appeal, both because of the content and the treatment. So, what did you make of that?

[00:38:19]
Criena Gehrke: I think what I took away from the conversation was probably really, really simple. And it gets back to some of the other conversations we've had around: What do you value? What's your value proposition and then how do you carry that forward? And for me, it really was in those exhibitions, the work at the V&A, the work she's now doing in design, which is: There's nothing wrong with mass appeal with intellectual credibility.

Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. I think that's exactly right. Did you – have you seen any of her exhibitions?

Criena Gehrke: I saw the Bowie exhibition and I loved it.

Adrian Ellis: What did you think of it?

Criena Gehrke: You know, and I think it's interesting cause it's a little bit timeless and universal, isn't it? The way that music or fashion actually provide you with insights into the times, you know – political movements, culture, gender warfare, sexism, revolutions. You know, so I'm always really curious about why people balk against it.



[00:39:26]

Adrian Ellis: Well, I – I think people still don't expect to see popular cultures treated in museums. Bowie resolved some of those issues because it was about a popular theme, it used a lot of technology, had a lot of music in it. It was non-linear. But it was very, very rich in content you know. But popular culture themes still get a sharp, inhalation of breath in museums. And popular culture treated experientially, I think gets sort of double lashings of misgiving. Um, I mean – clearly there are some, there's some topics that aren't amenable to that sort of approach. Unless the artists are working in those sorts of media.

If you're working with oil on canvas, you know, a lot of that stuff can get in the way a bit, because it's somehow not in line with the imputed intentions of the artist. Whereas if you're an artist working in experiential media of one sort or another with sound, and light, and AR and VR, then of course, you know, like, you're going with the artist's intention. And similarly, Bowie saw and liked that exhibition.

You know, you were clearly honouring the artist's intentions. You may have had a critical perspective, but – but you were basically in there with the artist.

[00:40:41]

Criena Gehrke: Vicki spoke so eloquently around the use of technology, particularly in the Bowie exhibition. But that whole thing around COVID has created a digital world, or accelerated that or immersed us more and more in it. And that there's a place for that, but I really loved her talking about the use of technology to transport you to other worlds or another world or universe, and actually it's around feeling and evoking emotion.

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.

Criena Gehrke: So when she spoke about – you can't actually be there at the Bowie concert or talking with him or in the studio, but what that technology or that immersive experience gave you was the emotion of being there or a feeling towards it. And I – that really resonated with me, you know, how do we – how do we respect the object, the exhibition, the stories, and that craving... that human interaction and experience by using technology to enhance it and to be transportive, if that's a word. You know, it was really respectful. I think the other thing that came out of it was – yet again, and it is interesting, don't you think that there is this... whether we've chanced upon it, but this background in philosophy and then how that influences the way that you see the world.

But the other thing that you both spoke about – which I really enjoyed, was chance and risk. You know, the Kylie Minogue exhibition was supposed to be at Covent Garden, and they got transferred to the V&A. So it became something other, but they stood –

Adrian Ellis: The stakes were much higher suddenly.

Criena Gehrke: The stakes were higher and then the Bowie exhibition was at the V&A, but in a smaller space and then got transferred to the major hall. But both times she stuck to her guns. So it was this sense of chance, but then also the risk, and influencing an institution to see things differently.



[00:42:53]

Adrian Ellis: I think that's really interesting. And she also made the comment that cultural institutions are likely to become more risk averse because they're under financial constraints.

She also pointed out other factors that may not make this a sort of straightforward trajectory in the development of exhibitions. But one of them was financial constraints and it's always struck me that if you're a cultural institution – including I think, cultural district, if you have one responsibility, it is to be able to take artistic risks. And then what often happens – and what has happened in cultural organisations a lot in the West, is that they have developed business models that limit their ability to take risk in two ways.

So the first is: The civic agenda often means that you have to take into account very, very strongly broader public opinion. If you're going to be a civic institution, as well as a cultural institution, it is appropriate. And I'm not saying it's bad or good, but I am saying that one trade-off is – it makes you less able to take risks.

But the other one is the financial model, which has, you know, big fixed overhead. And so you can't really take a risk on an exhibition without betting the house because you don't have the reserves to do so. So if this show goes down, you know, it's pretty high risk. And I think that one of the think points about those sorts of exhibitions is they are high risk, because they're quite expensive. They're expensive, but they can make a significant net contribution to revenue if you get them right – which certainly happened in the case of Bowie, which I'm not sure whether it's finished touring, but it toured the world for a long time.

But, as she rightly points out, if you can't afford to make – if you don't have the reserves to make that initial investment, or you're very nervous about those reserves because you're protecting them, then your ability to take those sorts of risks is immediately diminished. And I do think that, you know, I do think there's an interesting issue there, which is – I'm not sure when we're running these institutions, whether we sort of look at the balance sheet and liquidity from the perspective of each time we take a risk are we going to be betting the house? Or are we setting ourselves up in a way in which taking risks is an ongoing responsibility that we can meet? I don't know. You run an institution. Do you think about it that way?

[00:45:17]

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) Um... Yeah. It's a great question, isn't it? Yes, because I have to. I think why I enjoyed the conversation you had so much is that, I went, Oh okay – taking risks, having one of your measures of success as being accessible and attracting the widest audiences, and not seeing popular culture in all its forms, or the hook for an exhibition or a performance or an experience being popular as a dirty word... is fundamentally, I hope the DNA of HOTA. And, and, if you take that calculated risk and you tap into what visitors or your community are attracted to, then it generally works out alright. Like what are we so afraid of? You know, why do we need to be steeped in tradition? Why do we kick back against the notion of risk?

[00:46:21]

Adrian Ellis: I have a simple answer for that. And that is, there is an asymmetry between risk and reward in institutions like cultural institutions. If you take a risk and you succeed, people will sort of remember you and there is some reward. But if you take a risk and you fail, they will remember you forever.



Adrian Ellis: And the repercussions will be severe to your professional advancement. And so the incentive to take – the incentive to take risks is much lower than it is where the reward is clearly articulated.

It may well be, that the future of these sorts of exhibitions doesn't lie within the museum.

[00:47:08]

Criena Gehrke: And that's an exciting future to imagine, isn't it? You know, what would happen if we operated in a world where you blew away the perception or the grounding of 'I'm a museum', or 'I'm a gallery', or 'I'm a performing arts centre', you know, I'm – I'm 'a place where we tell stories and we provide experiences', you know?

And I think that Vicky was really interesting because she's doing that now in terms of design and the biennale. When you think about those themes that she talked about, I think there were – what were they? Environment, health, society, work. You know, and, and design response and design thinking, and this notion of ideas, design, changing the world, policy, philosophy, politics. You know, it's like a mashup of a whole range of things with its bedrock being this idea of design. Or its theme being this idea of design.

And I just wonder whether some of the success of exhibitions – for one of the better term, you know, like the Bowie, the Kylie Minogue, is that they just tell cracking good stories. And I wonder whether a lot of people that go and see those, they don't really see them as an exhibition in its traditional sense.

Adrian Ellis: Right.

Criena Gehrke: They see it as Bowie really, really just rocks and I want to know more about him. And through that, you get that highly curated museum experience because you do get insights into the world in which he lived, his influencers, and influences, the politics of the day, how he became a zeitgeist and represented a whole bunch of things through the decades that were happening, that was beyond himself and his music.

[00:49:11]

Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. So, Vicky also made a very interesting point about design exhibitions and about the way in which that positioned. You know, she made the point – which I think is reasonable, that there is often a certain preciousness to them and that although design is an incredibly sort of rich, and should be popularly accessible topic, it's not always. And it's not always presented as such. The preoccupations with aesthetics dominate.

I thought that her approach was a really interesting one. And that there is as much opportunity in that, that approach and philosophy of exploring design, as there is in the sorts of very popular exhibitions that were part of her legacy at the V&A.

[00:50:00]

Criena Gehrke: I agree. But I think that we should look at what is that mass appeal, because surely we want as many people as possible to engage with those things.

[00:50:10]

Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. Criena, thank you so much for joining me. That was totally fascinating as ever and enjoy your new incarnation, or the new incarnation of HOTA and its expansion. And I'll talk to you soon.



[00:50:25]

Criena Gehrke: Thanks, Adrian. It's always an absolute delight across the ocean and I can't wait until we can actually see each other in person.

[00:50:33]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you, Criena. And thanks also again to Vicky for a fascinating discussion. Thank you for listening to The Three Bells. This is a production of AEA Consulting supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

Show notes and materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed on your podcast listening platform of choice. This is Adrian Ellis, and I look forward to seeing you next time. Bye-bye.

[00:51:04]

THEME MUSIC

