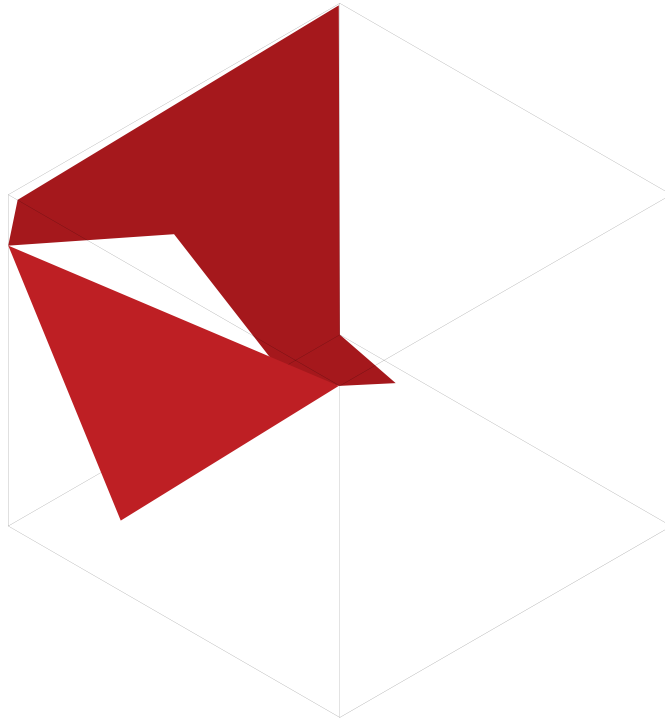


# Studies in Material Thinking



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**Material Thinking of Display**

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**Editorial:**  
**Rethinking the Curatorial Project**

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**Gary Sangster & Gay McDonald**

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Many of the contributors to SMT's special issue 'Material Thinking of Display' were invited to present at the *in.site* research group's symposium *Inside Out: The Dynamics of New Museum Architecture on Display* held at UNSW Art & Design in November, 2013. As with this special issue, the motivation for the symposium was to provide a platform for leading curators, architects, exhibition designers and academics in Australia to consider the impact of radical changes in recent art museum architecture on the presentation and interpretation of contemporary art.

Within the already sizeable body of literature on this topic Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (1997) is rightly identified as a key catalyst in radically re-imagining the language of art museum architecture. Almost two decades on, the Guggenheim Bilbao, with its vast shimmering waves of titanium, and gothically proportioned interiors continues to magnetize local and global tourists to the Basque region. In an era of tightening corporate and governmental funding, the rapid growth of such 'destination' art museum architecture by star architects like Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid and others testifies to the view amongst museum boards around the world that architecture now can and should play a critically important role in a museum's financial viability.

But at what cost? Critiques abound, a point reflected by those symposium speakers invited to address this theme. Some of the debate centres on whether the so-called 'Bilbao Effect' is repeatable. Or whether the vast resources needed to secure a 'brand name architect' will bring about the promised returns. Design solutions of this kind have also been called into question for competing with the art and offering relatively inflexible spaces for the display of increasingly divergent forms of cultural production. Is the only alternative a quietly elegant 'receptacle' such as, for example, Renzo Piano's *Beyeler Foundation*, that reputedly enhances rather than competes with the art? What should take priority? Income generation or the provision of adaptable exhibition spaces for curators to showcase divergent art forms now and into the future?

With so much interest in this topic and set against the numerous art museums and redevelopments in Australia in the last decade the *in.site* team thought it timely to organize a forum for those professionals directly engaged in designing and/or working within the sphere of the art museum to debate some of the issues raised above. An overarching theme of the symposium was to shed light on the relationships between recent art museum architecture, curatorial practice, exhibition design and their impact on the viewer's experience of art on display. All speakers inevitably touched on this topic, but it was perhaps taken up most powerfully by the international keynote speaker of the symposium, Ralph Rugoff, Director of the Hayward Gallery (London), who made a case in favour of the art museum or gallery as receptacle:

For me as an exhibition maker, the most important thing I want from architecture is not a spectacular exterior or materials inside, but its adaptability. I don't want architecture to find a solution. I want it to provide the opportunity to come up with solutions. (Unpublished transcription of Rugoff's Keynote Address for *Inside Out: The Dynamics of New Museum Architecture on Display*.)

Rugoff also rightly reminded symposium participants of the importance of design and installation in animating the art, the space and the viewer's experience:



As a curator I am constantly learning and relearning that I cannot take the presentation of art for granted, that the design of an installation can really make or break a show. A good exhibition design begins with getting a sense of art's extreme sensitivities to its surroundings. An installation plan that looks great on paper needs to be rethought once you actually start to install the work in the gallery, when you move works into different rooms, sequence object differently, modify their lighting, you do this once, you do it twice, until hopefully, you eventually find a solution where all the works feel fully present, where they seem to be talking to each other in interesting ways, to animate the spaces they occupy, and they take on a sense of being alive rather than looking at stuffed trophies. (Ibid.)

The debate regarding the ongoing popularity of the white cube mode of display was another key topic of the symposium. Research and recent interviews with architects and museum practitioners completed in Australia, the US, Denmark and the UK in the lead up to the symposium, indicated the emergence of alternate modes of display. But somewhat surprisingly given its wholesale critique by Brian O'Doherty and others, our preliminary research affirmed the ongoing vitality of the 'white cube' amongst some of those interviewed as the most appropriate and most flexible space available for the display of art. As one art museum director noted in passing: 'You could do a lot worse.'

The session *Architecture of learning* drew attention to the specific demands of art museums or galleries located within university settings. Speakers were invited to consider whether for example, there is a responsibility for university art museums to be more experimental than their state or regional counterparts. Or is their principal role as laboratories for the development of future curatorial professionals working within regional and state galleries as well as a growing number of alternate cultural sites (biennales, art fairs, artist run initiatives).

In deciding on the brief for any new build or redevelopment, architects, museum boards and art museum professionals inevitably grapple with managing current needs against future uses of a building. In the final session devoted to the future of the art museum speakers considered the complex task of how cultural institutions should be built or redeveloped to accommodate existing collections and/or the rapid evolution of new media and changing audience needs.

This edition of SMT, 'Material Thinking of Display', extends significantly on the ideas presented and robustly discussed during the symposium. The contributing authors to this special issue include university museum directors and curators, exhibition designers, architects and professors of curatorial studies. The authors apply professional knowledge and insight into their field through an analysis of case studies, and in most examples, but not all, they are directly connected to the production of space, the design of content, and the interpretation of artifacts designed to connect with and animate audience engagement.

One of the key conclusions that can be drawn from these papers, is that art practice and to a large extent curatorial practice are framed as independent projects, both focusing on the research and work of the artist as the independent source of meaning. By contrast, the display of art is typically construed as a collaborative project where existing space, resources, histories, and critical intelligences are deployed and applied to the production of meaning within a reflexively constraining and elaborating physical environment. While it is widely recognized that curators and, frequently, artists engage in the selection, research *and* display of art, it is perhaps not yet fully recognized within the field of museum studies how extensively exhibition designers and architects contribute to, realize, or even produce a curatorial vision. Contributors to 'Material Thinking of Display' address these ideas from a range of different vantage points.

Erica Green and Felicity Fenner, for example, draw attention to the constraints and opportunities of the missions of their university gallery programs. Green focuses on the parameters of programming within the context of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, which she directs at the University of South Australia. Green discusses various projects including exhibitions by Narelle Jubelin and Jeffrey Smart, as well as a number of thematic group exhibitions, in which the gallery space recedes in order to foreground the qualities and



nature of the work. Her conclusions are that contemporary installation requires flexible and dynamic space to ensure the work is represented in a way that both engages the audience and amplifies the inherent meaning in the work.

Flexibility of space is a consistent refrain amongst architects, designers, and curators. This flexibility serves both audience and marketing needs, as well as artistic demands in terms of the nature and form of the artworks on exhibition. Sometimes a project may require a studio experience, at other times it may seek an experience of mediated display, of augmented archive, in which the work/exhibition conveys something beyond the impulse and meaning of the work. In more recent examples of what might be considered artist or museum-driven public art, the constraints of the museum space are sometimes abandoned altogether in favor of pursuing or producing public interventions or interactions, in which non-museum audiences are invited to witness and/or participate in the making or realization of the work.

Felicity Fenner takes this apposite and intriguing position in looking at how university art museums can use their resources as a platform for extending an art program beyond the gallery walls. Her text focuses on *Flash Run*, a segment of a larger initiative titled *Running the City* which was designed to enliven the city through a 'guerrilla' ensemble of runners, taking off in a coordinated fashion at a set time. Fenner cites various theorists, such as Guy Debord, Homi Bhabha, and Nicholas Bourriaud to position the event as one that seeks the elusive site between spaces (interstices), to reimagine one's place or position within the city, and to ineluctably include a passive audience, the city's occupants, in the work itself. The idea suggested here by Fenner is that, through such staged events, the cultural institution and, in turn, participants can reach out into and infiltrate the city in ways that animate the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the urban fabric that are not normally exercised within the framework of a self-consciously regulated city space.

Damien Lentini, Tara McDowell, and Lizzie Muller, who also work within the university setting, occupy positions as critical analysts and participant-observers, theorizing about the source of meaning that emerges from the character of institutions, as well as reflecting on the relationship of those institutions to audiences/participants.

Lizzie Muller, in reviewing the curatorial position of MONA (Hobart), posits a potentially disruptive role for media art within the discursive and exhibitionary practices of that museum. Her argument suggests that contemporary exhibition practice may be leaning towards the recursive, in which the emergent 'post-disciplinary' processes of cultural production mirrors the pre-disciplinary sense of wonder inherent in the *Wunderkammer*. Muller applies this insight to the field of media art to argue that the vast variety of technology deployed in making media art renders it as undisciplined or unclassifiable, except within the field of the technological—hence its designation within the sphere of the art museum as 'media art'. Muller suggests that the confusion surrounding its designation/classification has marginalized media art within many museum collections. Muller sees the MONA methodology of the post-disciplinary museum, or perhaps a de-classifying museum, as a potentially revelatory site for providing a more intelligible and nuanced reading of the mutable field of media art.

Within the context of a veritable explosion of museum development and construction over the past 30 years, Damien Lentini presents a case study of the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (The Baltic) in Gateshead, UK. The purpose of his paper is to examine the idea of the 'aspirational art centre and the postindustrial city' and to assess whether developments of this kind are indeed sustainable and/or desirable paradigms for contemporary art centres in a currently austere economic climate. Lentini argues that The Baltic is one of many art centres designed to both resuscitate and reuse derelict buildings; and also to reinvigorate a decaying urban environment with a strong sense of community. He suggests that The Baltic operates as a 'centrifugal' agency, drawing audiences and communities that may otherwise not venture to a museum. In this way The Baltic is not just serving existing public needs, but creating newly attenuated culture seekers, who identify with the site as much as the experiences it may present. The 'aspirational' in Lentini's terms are made up of cultural leaders, commercial developers, and city custodians, who form an alliance to reinforce urban experience with a sustained sense of community life and cultural engagement.



In her paper *Space as Support: On Curating, Education, and Architecture*, Tara McDowell provides a series of short excursions through her encounters with art, museums, and education. McDowell commences with a discussion of a remarkable work by Maria Nordman, who, in 1979, emptied the Berkeley Art Museum of all other material artifacts to leave the bare ground of the space and fabric of the museum as the newly minted artwork. McDowell goes on to discuss notions of site/non-site, the 'paracuratorial' and her personal experience of *The Unlearning Workshop* at the self-consciously decentered *Tbilisi Triennial* of 2012. These discussion points build towards the idea of a potential disruption to the extant authority of the museum. Her conclusion is speculative. She argues that the space, rather than the form of the building, is critical to art encounters, and that the encounters are concatenated with the role of time. Through the amalgam of space and time within an exhibition framework the potential is for audiences to become participants rather than observers.

Lindsay Clare and Kerry Clare, Susan Freeman and Adrian Spinks are practitioner specialists in the field of architecture and exhibition design. Writing as the architects of the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane, Lindsay Clare and Kerry Clare raise key questions about the form of public buildings that respond to the demands of the architectural brief. They posit two pragmatic baselines in the case of GOMA. In this instance, they recognize that the building must effectively facilitate the connection of audience to art, and also that the building must respond to those demanding conditions required to preserve and display artworks. However, they argue that something more critical is at the heart of the contemporary development and formation of art museum space. Their paper echoes the idea of a cultural centre or civic resource such as GOMA created to articulate a strong identity, one that both identifies the community or region but also marks out its uniqueness. They persuasively argue that pursuing a cohesive sense of 'authenticity, connectedness, individuality and meaning' produces that identity. Their architectural solution for GOMA is locality-specific in that it is informed by historic and vernacular building types as well as the geophysical properties of the local environment. In doing so, they argue, GOMA responds to the challenges of stimulating identification, relevance, and meaning for visitors by tapping into historically-relevant environmental solutions and community resonance.

While the pivotal role of artists and curators in the display and the development of critical discourse surrounding any given project is well recognized and discussed, less attention has been given to the role of exhibition designers in extending that discourse. The papers by Freeman and Spinks highlight the role of the exhibition designer in constructing meaning through the conceptualization and realization of the material interface and tangible space that immerses the viewer entering a museum exhibition.

Susan Freeman's work in the field of exhibition design demonstrates the impact that display can have on the construction of meaning, and further suggests the extended impact design has on curatorial efficacy. As an exhibition designer, Freeman is well positioned to raise and respond to several key aspects of the museum's focus on the nature of art and its connection to audiences. The issues she considers relevant include the new material forms of art in the twenty-first century; the increased demand amongst visitors for more engagement with art; the prominence in galleries of programs and events designed to attract visitors; the rise of artists working in collaboration with the art museum; and the museum as an entertainment package. Freeman also examines *Yiwarra Kuju—Stories from the Canning Stock Route* as a case study in exhibition design. *Yiwarra Kuju* was designed as a travelling exhibition with extensive control over the display environment, in order to guard against the artworks and artifacts from being misread or eclipsed by a limited exhibition space or a potentially flawed exhibition installation by a host venue. Freeman describes how she as the designer sought to control and augment the viewing environment and to immerse the audience in an experience of the work that was both highly constructed, using curvilinear walls, for example, for indigenous content and rectilinear walls for European content, and also distraction free.

In his contribution to this issue, MONA exhibition designer Adrian Spinks provides readers with a fascinating account of the challenges associated with displaying large- and small-scale artworks and antiquities within MONA's highly-volatile architectural spaces. Spinks' text



reflects the centrality of collaboration and accommodation required in the development of a complex institution such as MONA, a museum privately funded by David Walsh. As Spinks makes clear, while Walsh's vision underpins the entire enterprise, that vision has evolved during the design, development and construction of the museum and continues to change as the collection and site expands. Spinks' paper also underscores just how central the role of exhibition design can be in realizing this vision in terms of architecture, curatorial practice, collection development and audience engagement. Spinks explores the role of lighting as a theatrical device, in both the galleries and the display cases. Light and dark are dynamically modulated throughout the museum to heighten the sense of drama enveloping the work. He also proposes that another key strategy that helps to make MONA such a compelling site to encounter art is the use of a non-chronologically linear system of display. Here traditional taxonomies of art history or constructions of art theory are dispensed with. Instead, the primary logic of display is juxtaposition of visual forms, used as a way of making sense of form and meaning. Spinks argues that the vision of MONA is to serve the arts, but to do so in a way that serves the community. And the exhibition designer's role in realizing this vision is to meet and rationalize these diverse expectations, in a dynamic and respectful manner.

The development of museums and their pivotal roles of archiving and interpreting contemporary art is a dynamic process and no single set of solutions provides an adequate model for museum form, a point underscored by the range of approaches presented in this special issue. The contributions to 'Material Thinking of Display' make apparent that the interplay between contemporary art and art museum architecture has become an increasingly visible and self-conscious facet of public discourse. While their historic and primary purposes may have been to fulfill cultural and aesthetic functions, they now play expanding critical roles in social, political, and economic systems that support them. These papers also shed light on a number of emerging areas of inquiry. Key among them is the increasingly collaborative or mutually dependent roles of artists, curators, exhibition designers and architects in the development or redevelopment of a site. Also of importance is the prominent role the design of architecture and exhibitions has in making exhibition spaces more habitable for the display of new art and more effective in articulating the content of the work for viewers. The opportunity to present these discussions by different professionals engaged in making exhibitions and exhibitions spaces, as well as producing meaning through the material experiences constructed by the exhibitions, provides a valuable stage in furthering understanding and managing the impact of the rapidly expanding field of contemporary art and museum exhibitions.



**Editors' Note**

This issue of *Studies in Material Thinking* developed from the symposium *Inside Out: The Dynamics of New Museum Architecture on Display*, conducted in 2013 by *in.site*, a research group at UNSW Art & Design, engaged in contemporary curatorial and education research. The directors of *in.site*, Dr Jay Johnston, Dr Gay McDonald, Gary Sangster and Dr Kim Snepvangers, organized the symposium in association with Mark Willett, Director, McConnell, Smith & Johnson Architects and Susan Freeman, Director, Freeman Ryan Design. The speakers were:

Ralph Rugoff, Director, Hayward Gallery (London);  
Dr. Michael Brand, Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney);  
Lindsay Clare and Kerry Clare, Clare Design;  
Nicole Durling, Curator, MONA (Hobart);  
Juliana Engberg, Artistic Director, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and 19th Biennale of Sydney;  
Felicity Fenner, Director, Galleries UNSW (Sydney);  
Richard Francis Jones, Design Director, Francis-Jones Morehen Thorp (Sydney);  
Susan Freeman, Director, Freeman Ryan Design (Sydney);  
Erica Green, Director, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia (Adelaide);  
Sam Marshall, Architect Marshall (Sydney);  
Dr. Tara McDowell, Associate Professor & Director of Curatorial Practice, Monash University (Melbourne);  
Michael O'Sullivan, Design Manager, Gallery of Modern Art (Brisbane);  
James Pearce, Director of Architecture, Fender Katsalidis (Melbourne);  
Suhanya Raffel, Director of Collections, Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney);  
Adrian Spinks, Senior Exhibition Manager, MONA (Hobart).

The symposium provided an initial forum for international and local speakers to debate the impact that architecturally significant art museums have on curatorial agendas, exhibition projects and audience engagement.





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Gary Sangster has international experience as an art educator, curator, writer, and museum director in Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the USA. He was Curator at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and Director of the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore (an innovative museum dedicated to collaboration and intervention with civic, cultural, and educational institutions across Baltimore); Executive Director of Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Executive Director of Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco (a West coast leading artist in residence program); Director of Artspace, Sydney; and Dean of the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University, in Boston. He has contributed to international projects and programs at the Istanbul Biennale, Cairo Biennale, and the Sydney Biennale, and organised major collaborative and touring projects with the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio Museum of Art in Harlem, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the National Art Gallery of New Zealand. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Curatorial Studies at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

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Dr. Gay McDonald is a Senior Lecturer at UNSW | Art & Design. Her current research centres on the construction and uptake of international exhibitions circulated within the arena of international relations. McDonald is currently working on a manuscript with Dr. Laura Fisher that maps how, since 1994, key curators have showcased Australian art internationally. She has published in a range of publications including the *Journal of Australian Studies*, *Artlink*, *Design Issues*, *Journal of Design History* and *The Conversation*.

