

Can an exhibition be a story?

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Hello. I've been working in the museum sector for almost 8 years, most recently as Head of Design & Digital Media and Interim Director of Exhibitions & Programmes at the National Maritime Museum

Somewhat unusually, I came to the museum sector via Disney, having produced Virtual Magic Kingdom, a multiplayer online game based on - and linked to - the physical parks. Actions in the game unlocked experiences in the park, and vice versa.

Can an exhibition be a story?

- “The narrative vehicle of the museum is particularly powerful because of its multi-dimensionality... The museum represents a fully embodied experience of objects and media in a three-dimensional space, unfolding in a potentially free-flowing temporal experience.”

Museum Making: Narrative, architecture, exhibitions

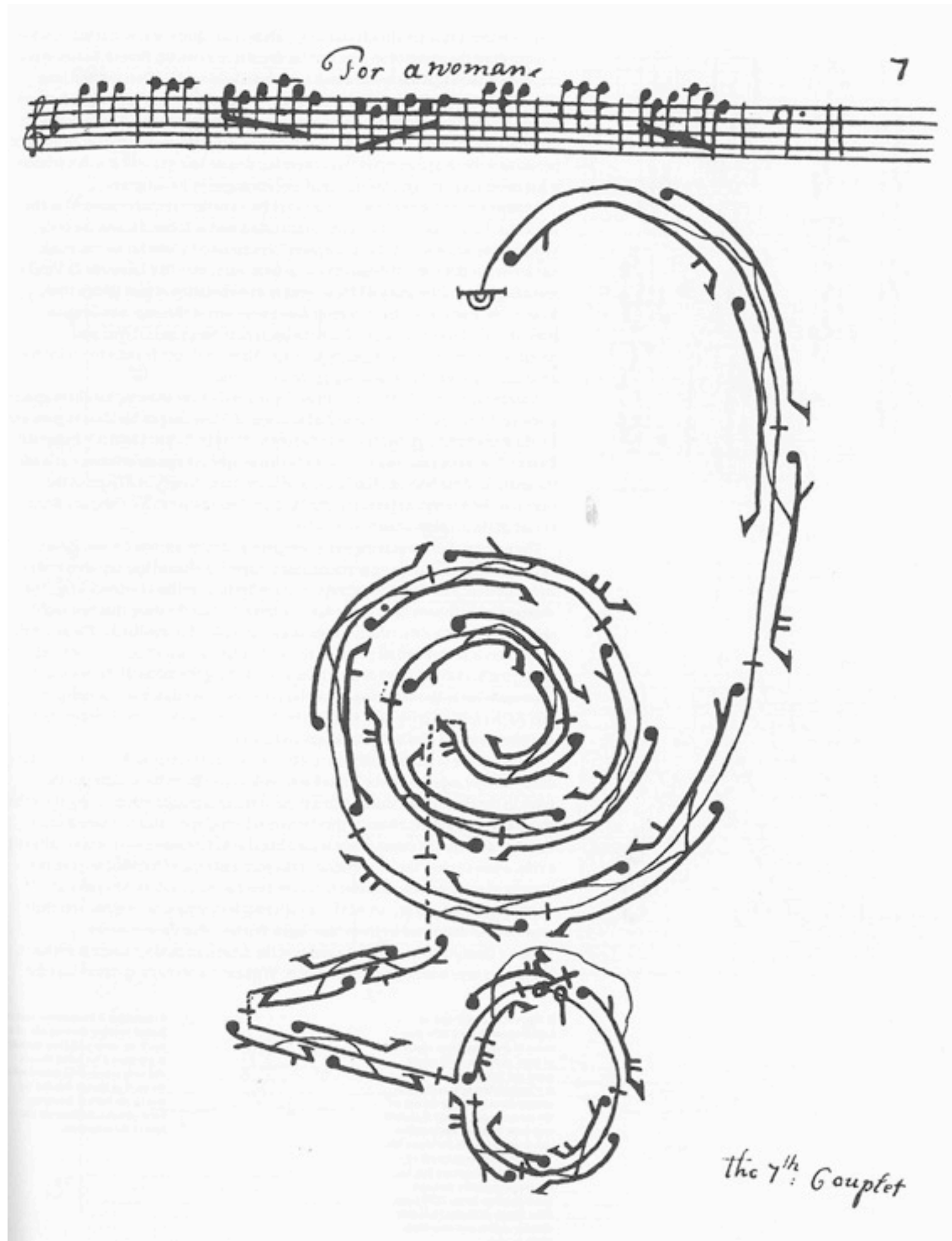
- “Cinemas aren’t good enough for cinema anymore, but museums are.”

Peter Greenaway

Can an exhibition be a story? There are great claims made for narrative in museums, whether that’s people’s stories bringing individual objects to life or storytelling in exhibitions.

Museums have the potential to go further than books and film, to **tell stories in both time *and* space**. Museum Making is a new volume of essays exploring just that promise.

But I think there are very big problems with storytelling in museums. Three issues stand out for me...



Non-linear paths

Dance notation by Kemmum Tomlinson
(18th century)

Firstly, exhibitions are **non-linear experiences**, often because they're installed in historic buildings and need to work around the quirks of the available space, but even more so because of how people choose to experience them. Even if exhibits could be presented sequentially, visitors would dip in and out, circle back. It's much more of a dance.

And that's a challenge to conventional storytelling, where first one thing happens and then another.



Imagineer John Hench:

“You do not throw people into the fifth scene, where they cannot make sense of what is happening. You begin with the first scene and move through.”

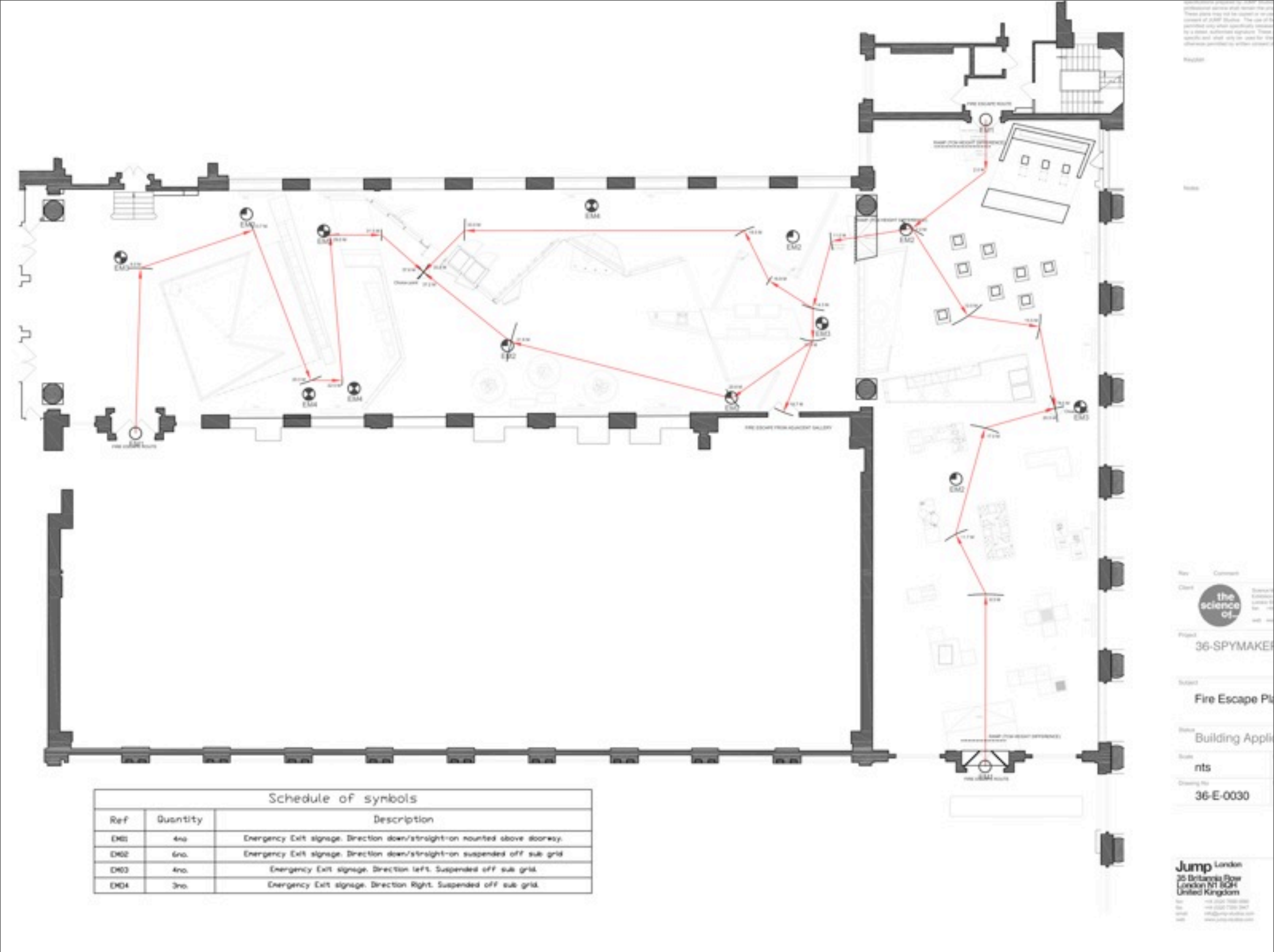
Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The architecture of reassurance

The Disney parks are another narrative environment. By contrast, they've been **carefully architected for the controlled delivery of a story**. Disneyland works over time to tell a story that unfolds in three-dimensional space, from train to street to castle. As Imagineer John Hench has said, “You do not throw people into the fifth scene...”

Crowd flow and directional pull were crucial to Walt Disney's vision of a well-ordered and harmonious park. The castle is the park's most prominent 'wienie', Disney's own term for the thing that architects and urban planners use to attract and then disperse people in a variety of directions. Each ride was designed as if it was a film, with establishing shots and jump cuts. Vehicles swivel as they move forward, putting the **passenger in the position of a moving camera** that looks first in one direction and then another.



Exhibition designers talk about the use of ‘wienies’, or attractors, and often produce studies of freeze capacity, expected dwell times...



...and precise visitor flows but this is almost never realised in visitor behaviour.

I'm not suggesting that museum exhibitions should function like Disney rides but the fact that they don't makes storytelling more challenging.



Standing up to read a book

Nuo, Babes at the Museum,
babesatthemuseum.com

When I visit exhibitions I'm always struck by the behaviour of people in the space, and just how uncomfortable they look, particularly towards the end of a show - slouched, leaning, fatigued. Or just accelerating towards the exit.

In most cases, graphic elements are the primary expression of an exhibition's content: providing basic information in support of an object or the main content messages, and carrying the storyline. But standing up isn't a great way to read a book. Reading words on walls is uncomfortable and so will always be limited.

THE BANK
FIVE DAY
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BAD LOGO - What about
S.F.G or S. Friedman
Gallery
↓ (sounds more corporate)

Stephen Friedman Gallery

25 - 28
Old Burlington Street
London W1X 1LB
Tel +44 171 494 1434
Fax +44 171 494 1431
e-mail: fr@bfcon.co.uk

press release

Kerry Stewart

3 December 1998 - 23 January 1999
Preview Wednesday 2 December 1998 6-8pm

Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by British artist Kerry Stewart.

Known for her offbeat portrayals of characters from the realms of everyday life and of fantasy, Stewart's life-size figures evoke connections with childhood, which are at once appealing and disconcerting. However damaged and defenceless her figures may be, they are always stiffened by a curious spirit of obstinacy.

Stewart's work shows a consistent preoccupation with human isolation which is often suffused with humour. Whether exuberant or forlorn, phantoms or outcasts, her figures stir buried memories in a naive yet complex way implying that the legacy of childhood impinges on adult life at every turn.

Alien or familiar, Stewart's figures are disturbing and oddly funny. Eyes meet us with blank stares in *Ghost and Manager*, whilst *This Girl Bends* suggests a terrible eagerness to comply. In this show a snowbound car with its headlights shining references memories of acute entrapment. Inspired by footage of the followers of cult murderer Charles Manson, a girl follows crouches, listening, on a driveway at night.

Born near Glasgow, Kerry Stewart lives and works in London. She has taken part in numerous group and one-person exhibitions in this country and abroad, such as *Material Culture* at the Hayward Gallery, *Belladonna* at the ICA and the British Council touring exhibition *Pictura Britannica* last year. From 9 January until 20 April 1999 Stewart will participate in a group show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art entitled *Looking at Ourselves: Works by Women artists from the Logan Collection*.

Forthcoming exhibition: Lucky DeBellevue and Alexander Ross, 28 January - 27 February 1999.

Gallery hours are: Tuesday to Friday 10am - 6pm and Saturday 11am - 5pm

For further details please contact Patricia Kohl on: +44 171 494 1434

'at once appealing and
disconcerting' - your press releases
always use these opposites eg:
"This work is black and white" or
"This work is both serious and
frivolous" This techniques just
means you have nothing to say about
the work.

but choice and wit - 'red' is a
bit nice - GOOD! - a person for
work.

but NICE - GOOD!
This last sentence is completely
meaningless - CONGRATULATIONS!

WHAT IS? Stewart's
work, Stewart's
"preoccupation"
or "human
isolation".
- be more
specific

I haven't
seen this
piece of work
but this sounds
ridiculous.

Yeah,
right - we've
all read 'The
Beginners Guide
to Freud' - try
and sound more
brainy

Here we go again - "naïve yet complex"
- black BUT white.

Overuse of opposites as a method of
description - Meaningless and clichéd
Well done!

International Art English

"The internationalized art world
relies on a unique language...

This language has everything to do
with English, but it is emphatically
not English.. But what really
matters for this language—what
ultimately makes it a language—is
the pointed distance from English
that it has always cultivated."

...How did we end up writing in a
way that sounds like inexpertly
translated French?"

Alix Rule and David Levine, [http://
canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international art english](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english)

The final barrier that I've observed is the text itself. Most exhibition text is written - or at least drafted - by curators, who are essentially **academics with objects in their custody**. And these curators have usually already written their book or exhibition catalogue before they even consider the exhibition itself. Their imagined exhibition is therefore a **blown-up version of their book**.

Recently there was a very funny, but almost entirely serious, paper by academics Alix Rule and David Levine. They analysed 13 years of e-flux press announcements and compared it to the British National Corpus. They found a unique language, International Art English: "An artist's work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces—though often it doesn't do these things so much as it serves to, functions to, or seems to (or might seem to) do these things. IAE rebukes English for its lack of nouns: *Visual* becomes *visuality*, *global* becomes *globality*, *potential* becomes *potentiality*, *experience* becomes... *experientiability*."

And so on...

However...

Despite my pessimism, the two exhibitions I've had the freest hand in commissioning tried to be stories, at least on one level.



The Science Of Spying, Science Museum, London, 2007

The Science of Spying was an issue-based exhibition for 8-12 year olds, which we designed with an emphasis on social and interactive experiences. The serious content messages of the exhibition were about both spying and surveillance but it was presented as a dystopian spy roleplay where children were trained up and then sent undercover in a corporation that produced ethically-questionable surveillance technologies.



The Science Of Spying, Science Museum, London, 2007

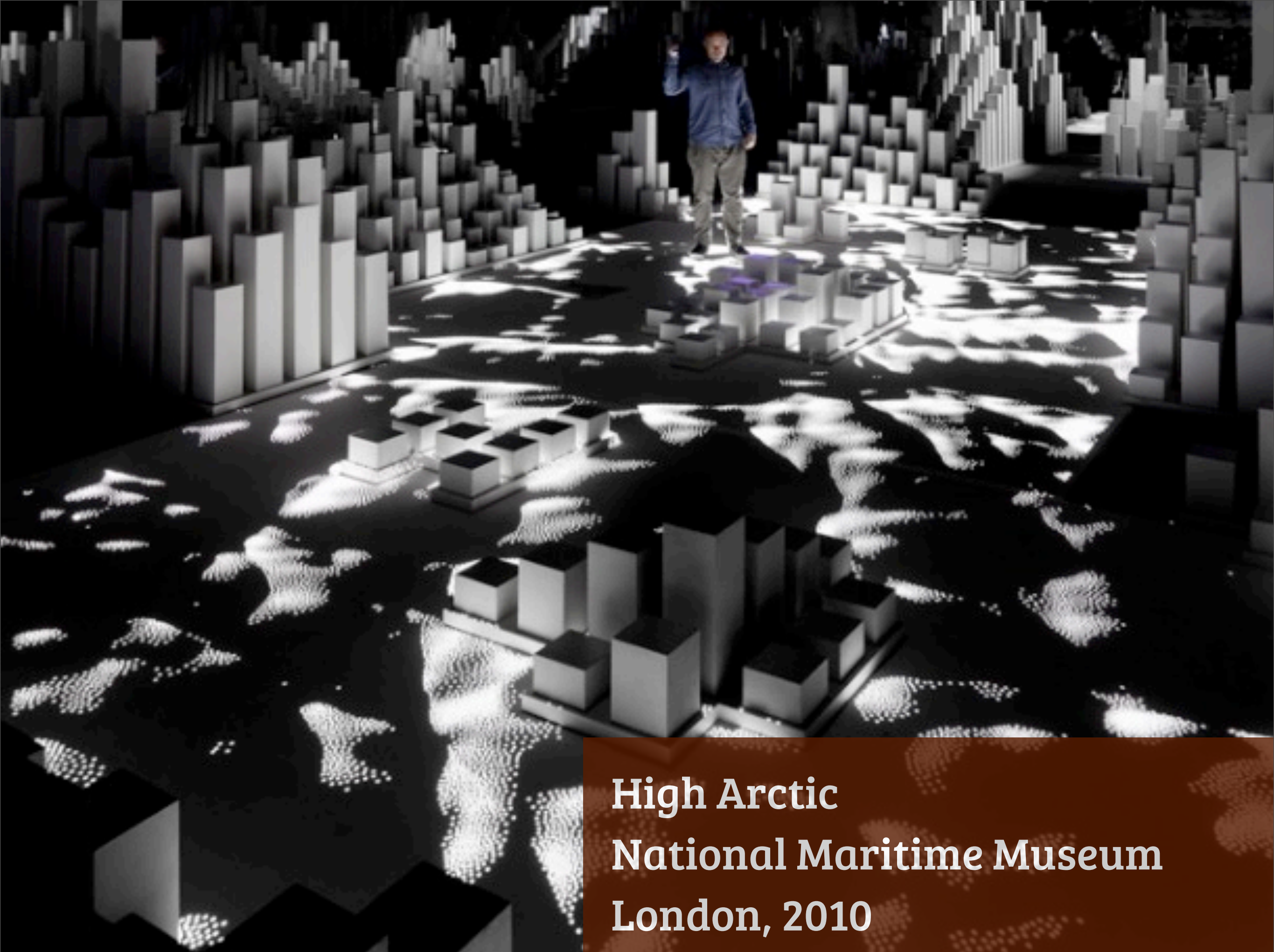
To infiltrate the corporation, OSTECK, the children needed to pass a brain or body scanner.

A person is walking through a doorway. A blue outline is superimposed on the person, representing a gait recognition system. The background is a gradient of orange and pink.

The Science Of Spying, Science Museum, London, 2007

Video by Ross Phillips

To exit, they had to evade a human gait recognition system.



High Arctic National Maritime Museum London, 2010

High Arctic was an interactive sound and light installation at the National Maritime Museum, created by United Visual Artists in response to a real-life expedition to the Arctic with Cape Farewell.

I invited United Visual Artists to ‘take our visitors on an enthralling and interactive journey to the Arctic, to convey the ocean’s scale, beauty and vulnerability in an era of global climate change.’

It was important to me that even this innovative installation was grounded in research so I established a collaboration with climate change charity Cape Farewell to host UVA on their 2010 expedition to the Svalbard archipelago. The context of a sailing expedition afforded a uniquely maritime treatment of the climate change subject and UVA’s interactions with the scientists and other artists on board the Nordelicht helped to shape the creative vision for the installation.



Installation and video by UVA

On their return, UVA imagined a future without the frozen Arctic and created a monument to it, an 'epic poem told in fragments'.



The storytelling team for High Arctic emerged naturally out of the Cape Farewell expedition to the Svalbard archipelago. Artist Matt Clark recruited his expedition fellows, poet Nick Drake and sound artist Max Eastley. This collaboration was essential to the success of the exhibition. Until Nick Drake was brought into the project, UVA had been struggling to interpret the Museum's requirement for content messages in the installation. Those of you familiar with their work will know that they normally produce abstract and refined sound and light sculptures. We wanted both interaction and content-based learning outcomes.



Comic illustrations by
Laurence Campbell and Dylan Teague

We assembled the story team for SOS in a much more deliberate way. Again, it was provoked by a challenge within the project itself - how to tie 20 interactive exhibits into a coherent story. The story team included:

- Science researchers and a former MI6 agent, Harry Ferguson, to ensure everything we did was **credible**
- Experimental theatre company, Shunt: sense of drama and induct visitor into a **roleplay**
- Science fiction writer, Cory Doctorow: Cory facilitated the development of a ‘**shared world**’ for the exhibition. Some fictional parameters but everyone else free to innovate. This approach was invaluable given the size and diversity of the team: over 50 creatives, including architects, graphic designers, interaction designers, modelmakers, AV producers, artists and build contractors.
- Finally, we included a copyeditor with experience in advertising, Chas Walton
- As you can see here, our excellent graphic designers, Multistorey, also recruited comic artists Laurence Campbell and Dylan Teague to bring narrative into the exhibition graphics.

Design fiction

Stuart Candy:

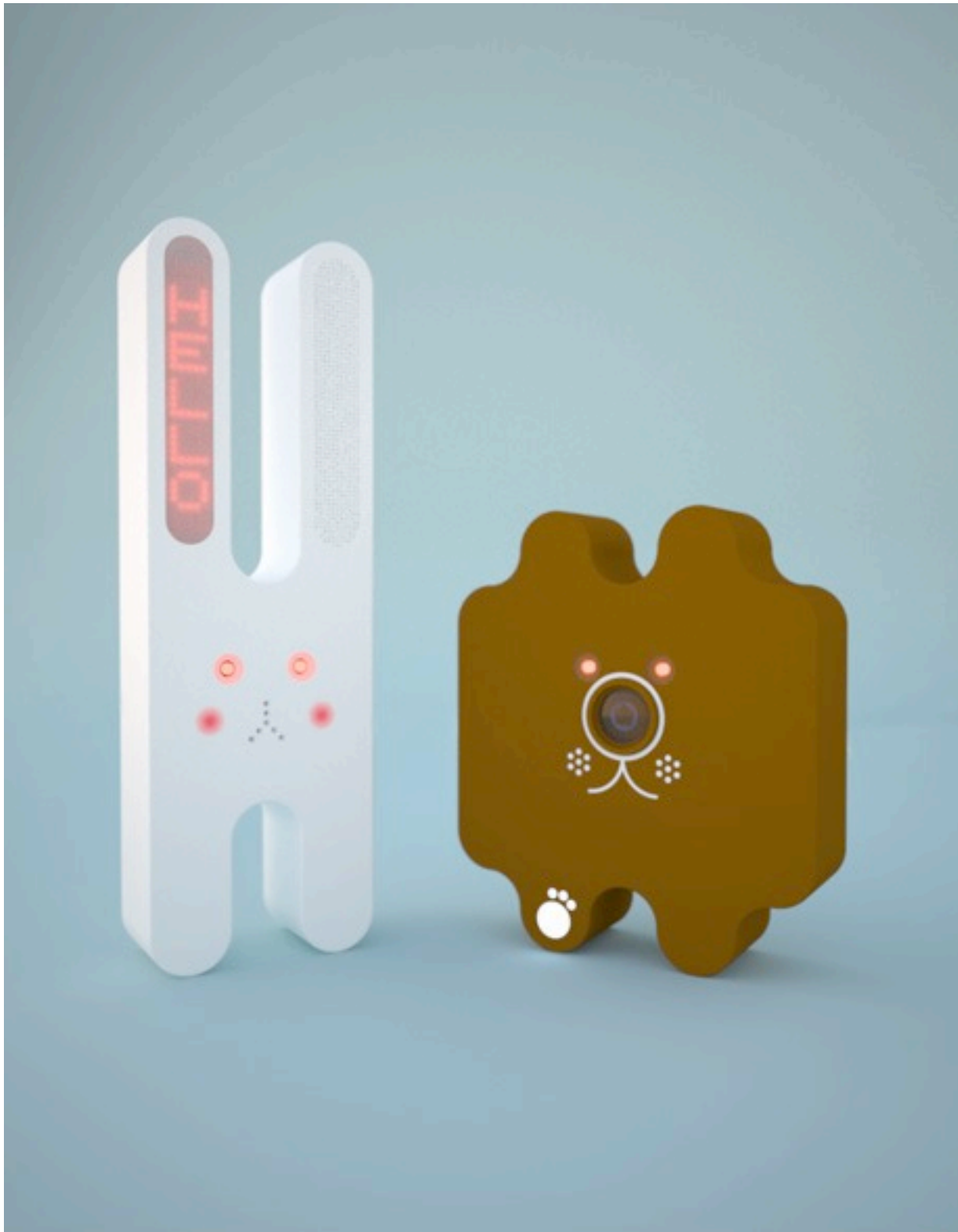
“It merges the elastic creativity of science fiction with everyday matter of fact reality.

Furthermore, in using current media conventions as a way to express ideas about the future, design fiction is able to twist reality and trick us into accepting the fantastic as possibility.”

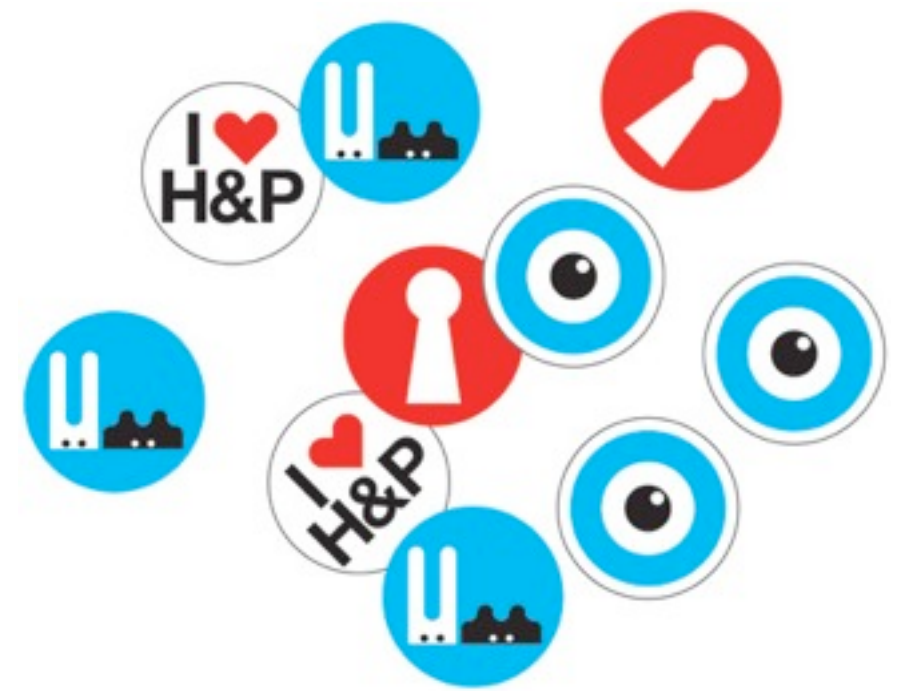


Dunne & Raby

We also assembled a group of artists to design new speculative objects for the exhibition to provoke children to think about the social, cultural and political impact of technology on spying on everyday life. Here's a dog wearing a surveillance muzzle, designed by Dunne & Raby.



Onkar Kular

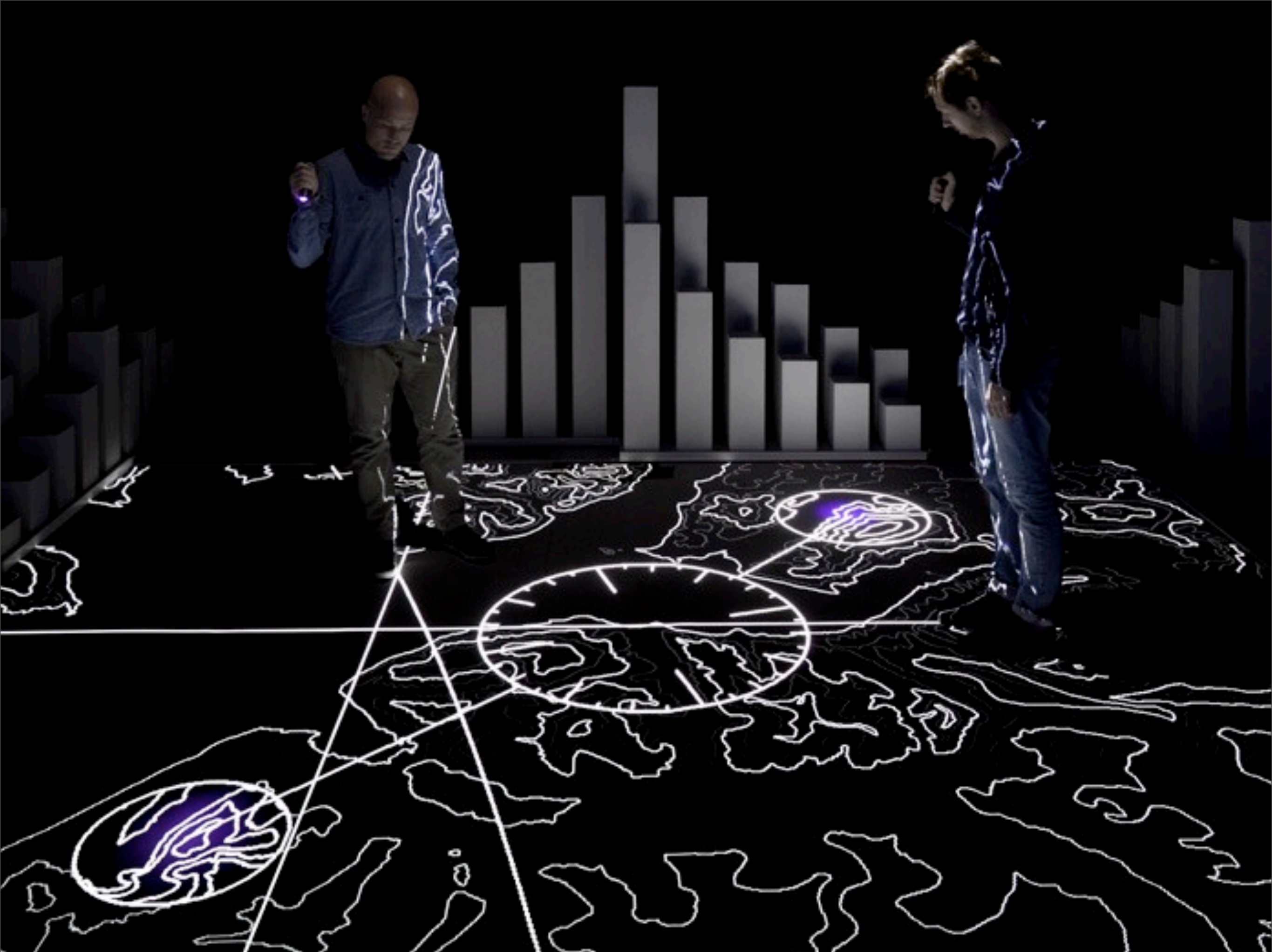


And surveillance-enabled toys for children, Harri & Parker, designed by Onkar Kular.

“A means of creating empathetic links between the subjects and audiences of museum displays; and as a glue which plugs temporal, geographical and cultural gaps within the museum.”

– Museum Making: Narrative, architecture, exhibitions

So, what did story bring to each of these experiences?



In High Arctic, the story created atmosphere and invited visitors to connect to the installation - and issues - on a more emotional level. All visitors were handed a torch at the entrance, which was an obvious cue to take part in an experience. There was a genuinely layered interpretative approach in High Arctic. Some visitors could choose to simply interact with each of the UV-reactive pools (toddlers), others would sit on a weathered bench and listen to the poem play out.

Particularly important given climate change fatigue.



Klima X, National Museum of Science, Technology and Medicine, Oslo, Norway

This is an approach inspired by my work with Shunt on The Science of Spying but the best example I've seen elsewhere is Klima X, at the National Museum of Science, Technology and Medicine, Oslo, Norway. Before entering the gallery, visitors claimed and put on distinctive wellingtons in preparation for a flooded first room.



The Science Of Spying, Science Museum, London, 2007

In the Science of Spying, the story was a provocation to 'plus' every exhibit. The expression Plus it! was regularly used by Walt Disney to inspire his teams to make an idea even better, even when they thought they'd already nailed it.

For example, we needed to introduce some seating in one of the zones. The architects incorporated the seats in the overall design as scattered keys for an oversize computer. The interaction designers made them into musical toys - if you sat or lay across them, they played sounds, light and vibrated. In a further plussing, the sounds were actually a message in morse code.

"A wonderful, important book . . . I'd recommend **LITTLE BROTHER** over pretty much any book I've read this year."

NEIL GAIMAN,
author of **SANDMAN** and **THE GRAVEYARD BOOK**

LITTLE BROTHER

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



CORY DOCTOROW

"A rousing tale of techno-geek rebellion."

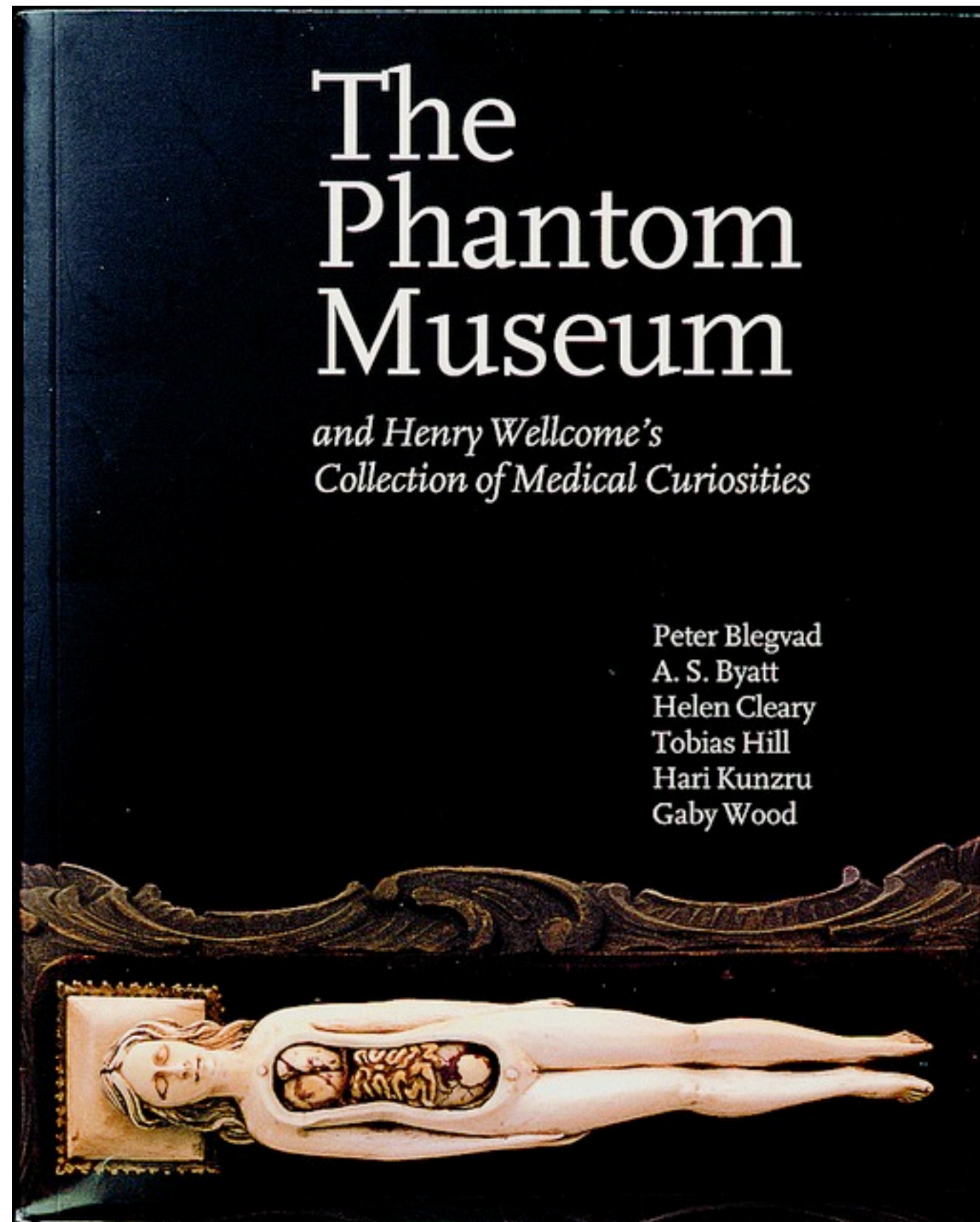
SCOTT WESTERFELD,
author of **UGLIES**, **PRETTIES**, and **SPECIALS**



So story is a great device within exhibition design. But do exhibitions succeed as stories told in time and space? Not often.

Because visitors don't visit every exhibit, you either need a lot of redundancy in the delivery of the story, or it needs to be an entirely optional layer, rather than central to the experience.

And I think that's why for both The Science of Spying and High Arctic, books followed... Cory Doctorow, Little Brother and Nick Drake, The Farewell Glacier.



My favourite example of museum storytelling is The Wellcome Collection's The Phantom Museum, an anthology of stories, true and imagined, inspired by objects from Henry Wellcome's collection. Each story starts with one object.



The Last Judgement, Apocalypse, Tate Britain

My conclusion - for the moment - is that the best use of story in museums is for the deep interpretation of one object. The best example of this that I've seen is The Last Judgement in Apocalypse at Tate. A sound and light show to accompany John Martin's three great apocalyptic paintings. The presentation lasted for 10 minutes and took place every half hour. Projection to animate the paintings.

Museums can do in-depth re-examinations of individual works already hanging at a museum. At the initiative of its director, Nicholas Penny, the National Gallery in London has already inaugurated a whole series of 'objects in focus' shows. Story is a great way to reinvigorate these objects, through a range of media.

“Narrative environments appeal to the visitor’s intellect through their body and, vice versa, through their body to their thoughts. In other words, the physical space is designed to tell the story through a variety of sensory means: spatial dimensions and sightlines, volumes and rhythms, forms, colour, light, materials, sound etc., while the content is communicated more directly through written and spoken words, and still and moving images.”

Tricia Austin,

**Course Director, MA Creative Practice for Narrative Environments
Central St Martins**

All of the embodied richness of a physical display, concentrated on a single object.

Thanks!

foe@foeromeo.org

<http://foeromeo.org>