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**Exhibition Review:** *Designs for Different Futures*


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*Designs for Different Futures*: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: October 22, 2019–March 8, 2020.

A collaboration by three major art museums, *Designs for Different Futures* was an exceptional and unexpected offering. If one wished to experience a typical blockbuster exhibition featuring famous works of fine art assembled to woo and wow the masses, one would have had to seek elsewhere. Nor should one have expected this exhibition to be an optimistic huckster vehicle nostalgically or ironically reimagining past world's fairs and international expositions. This radical departure from the frequent lineup of rare, valuable, and famous art enabled museum-goers to experience designs (and concepts) they have not encountered prior, while being challenged intellectually and emotionally. Authorship of the works also challenge preconceptions: artists? designers? manufacturers? a collective body? It depends on the piece.

The gasps heard in this exhibition weren't prompted by seeing a Monet in person for the first time. The sounds were provoked by the insights gleaned and the fear instilled when contemplating everything from evading digital recognition in Adam Harvey's *CV Dazzle: Camouflage from Face Detection* (2017), to the bioprinting of custom artificial organs, such as with Agi Haines's *Circumventive Organs* (2013), and *Recyclable and Rehealable Electronic Skin* (2018), designed by Jianliang Xiao and Wei Zhang of the University of Colorado Boulder.

This presentation of *ideas* embodied something different entirely. It was an explicit, visceral, alarming, philosophical, sparingly hopeful, complicated, intersectional think tank that sometimes felt like walking into an erudite, occasionally sardonic—verging on prurient—and fascinating Ripley's Believe It or Not!/science museum/literary peer-reviewed journal happening. Spurred by conversations that began in 2014 about contemporary designers focused on transhistorical issues, the curators and collaborators effectively left the viewer with more questions than answers as well as a more engaged investment in the dystopian posthumanist future metaphorically painted therein.

The exhibition opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and will travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, followed by the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Both the

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1. *Designs for Different Futures* was on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (October 22, 2019–March 8, 2020) and will travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (September 12, 2020–January 3, 2021) and the Art Institute of Chicago (February 6–May 16, 2021).

exhibition and accompanying catalog focus on eleven themes: Bodies, Intimacies, Generations, Materials, Foods, Resources, Informations, Powers, Labors, Cities, and Earths. The organizers note that viewers should expect a different experience at each venue. Due to the length of the schedule and the rate at which technology and design evolves, the curators built in the flexibility to add or delete works. Though the decision to do so and not strictly follow the contents of the catalog might confuse the viewer (and inevitably the reviewer), it theoretically provides each venue with a degree of curatorial autonomy and the ability to leverage place-based strengths.

At the PMA, the works were loosely arranged by the themes mentioned above. The experience of walking through the exhibition spaces triggered flashbacks and conjured a startling future. Displayed in a pastiche of museum styles and referencing popular culture, viewers wondered if they were in a traditional art museum at all (in a good way).

For example, sounds of an android's halting speech in *Conversations with Bina48: Fragments 2, 5, 6, 7* (2014) by Stephanie Dinkins echoed as one walked into a dark-curtained room to view the multimedia work *In Plain Sight* (2018) by Robert Gerard Pietrusko. The experience elicited shivers of anticipation typically felt when entering a haunted house. Leonardo Mariano Gomes's *Neurodildo: A Mind-Controlled Sex Toy with Electrical Stimulus Feedback* (designed 2017, prototype made 2019); *Onyx2 and Pearl2 Couples Set* (c. 2013), manufactured by Amsterdam's Kiiroo; fifty pigments from the Pro Fil'r Soft Matte Longwear Foundation makeup line (2017–present), manufactured by Robyn “Rihanna”



IMAGE 1. Installation view of *Designs for Different Futures*, featuring *Conversations with Bina48: Fragments 2, 5, 6, 7* (four-channel color video with audio) (2014) by Stephanie Dinkins; *Bina48*; courtesy Terasem Movement Foundation; photograph by Joseph Hu; courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2019.

Fenty's Fenty Beauty; and other objects arranged in a white antiseptic display case felt reminiscent of specimens displayed in a natural science museum. The catch? These aren't "oddities"; these are real products challenging the status quo relative to everything from sex to makeup.

Spotlights punctuated the dimly lit space, illuminating works such as the alluringly beautiful, alien creature-like glass death masks of *Vespers III* (2016) by Neri Oxman and the MIT Mediated Matter Group (printed by Stratasys), as well as the mesmerizing ballet slippers covered in crystallized human sweat, *Perspire* (2018) by Alice Potts. These objects pose as futuristic and elegant anthropological artifacts, while the objects from Mary Maggic's *Estro-fem!* (2016–17) and Mango Chijo Tree and the Jayder's video *Housewives Making Drugs* (2017) (a mock television cooking class that teaches transgender audiences how to make estrogen at home) slyly winked at the memory of encountering Julia Child's kitchen as presented by the National American History Museum.

In several instances, the exhibition experience felt as if the viewer was on a school field trip. One such example includes a section exploring the theme Food, which seemed more akin to a science fair or a hands-on discovery museum. Perhaps this clever approach made the concepts more accessible. However, the content for the exhibition overall was best absorbed by a mature audience and, even more pointedly, with close peers. Explaining the importance of Grindr and the humanity of its application—as told through the piece *Intimate Strangers* (2016) by Andrés Jaque of the Office for Political Innovation (Offpolinn), based in Madrid and New York City—to your cisgender, conservative grandmother in the middle of a crowded gallery might be an exercise in patience and diplomacy for some.



IMAGE 2. *Perspire* (2018) by Alice Potts; Human sweat (proprietary crystallization technique), ballet shoes; photograph by Joseph Hu; courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2019.

Not that these installation techniques and curatorial choices were obvious, or a bait-and-switch tactic. More so, they were referential touchstones—vaguely reminiscent, strangely familiar vignettes—adding to the sense that our future is made from past choices, individual and collective experiences, and by those who have denied the futures of others. The idea of “semiotic ghosts” is eloquently explored in the catalog essay “Defuturing the Image of the Future” by Andrew Blauvelt. He wonders, “What would it mean to defuture the future of cultural modernity and Western civilization?” For, he argues, “the future is already colonized by past and present.”

*Designs for Different Futures* presents “what” will be in the future while confronting “whose” future is served. In the catalog, a transcript of a panel discussion titled “Accessible Worlds” (associated with the theme Bodies) illustrates the importance of point of view. The participants question the wisdom of thinking about disability medically and as external, rather than from the point of view of lived experience.

In the exhibition, several designs empathically addressed the question of “How does it feel?” in the context of how a design functions. With its flexible, breathable, and more fashionable approach, *UNYQ 3D-Printed Scoliosis Wearable* (2018) by UNYQ (Charlotte, NC) and Studio Bitonti (New York City) addresses the physical, sociological, and psychological needs of the wearer. Teenage girls, who are most likely to wear a corrective brace for scoliosis, don’t want to be seen as “other” and apart from their peer group. *Seated Design: Sleeves and Shirt* (2016) by Lucy Jones, and *Essential Suite for Wheelchairs* (2018) by Lucy Jones and Joonas Kyösti for their Brooklyn-based company Ffora, also point to empathetic design. These works consider fashion design for wheelchair users relative to sleeves made to better accommodate specific motions and positions as well as answering basic questions like what to do with a cup or a purse. Socioeconomics and access to healthcare inform *Stance* (2016), by Leslie Speer, Anthony Ta, Brendan Ngo, and Darren Manuel of Maryland’s Simple Limb Initiative, in which a prosthetic leg is able to adapt to the growth of the user by employing modular parts.

Viewers were guided through the exhibition themes by the repetition of the one-word themes along the top of the wall, high above the exhibition floor. Instead of long introductory panels, short statements related to each theme were sporadically placed and read like experimental poetry and flash fiction with eccentric, sinuous, graphic arrangements. Object labels were tried and true, didactic texts solidly instructing the viewer. The amount of information, as well as tone and content overall, effectively encouraged the viewer to focus on *experiencing* the exhibition itself. It was refreshing to see and hear people interacting with the works, rather than being packed elbow to elbow along with the typical headphone-wearing “museum zombie” shuffling from piece to piece listening to someone tell them what to think.

Those wanting to delve further into the exhibition’s content and the curatorial process should look to the catalog. While exhibition catalogs often serve as historical souvenirs chronicling what viewers saw and what the didactic labels said word for word, the catalog accompanying *Designs for Different Futures* documents the theoretical underpinnings that were foundational for the makers, curators, and collaborators. The dense, multidisciplinary, intersectional investigations, written with a lexicon of advanced theory and expertise, read



IMAGE 3. Installation view of *Designs for Different Futures*, featuring *Seated Design: Sleeves and Shirt* (2016) by Lucy Jones, *TiLite Wheelchair for FFORA Attachment System* (2019) by Numotion, *Wheelchair Wheels for FFORA Attachment System* (2019) by Sinergy, Inc.; photograph by Juan Arce; courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2019.

like a textbook (complete with glossary). Most musings satiate those readers hungry to expand their thinking about the future and whose intellectual urges seek the rich nexus found in connections between design, sociology, philosophy (particularly ethics), psychology, biology, and engineering.

Some topics that were explored, such as the environment, climate change, and access to resources, are at the fore of global conversations. Others are relatively new. One of the most challenging concepts was found in the section Intimacies and was specifically discussed in the catalog essays, “Can we fall in love with robots?” by Emma Yann Zhang and “The Future of Love? From the Past (Steve Bannon) to the Future (Sex Robots)” by Srećko Horvat. Authors and makers alike ponder the legal, philosophic, psychological, and ethical ramifications of humans behaving socially (and sexually) with computers (and robots). Questions relative to free will, control, empathy, and consciousness are a few of the profound and perplexing issues explored.

Additionally, the catalog informs the reader about the methodology behind the project’s development. The introduction’s interview format intends to provide transparency to the curatorial process (or a lamentation of coordinating the exhibition, collaborating, and honing concepts), and give due credit (an egalitarian view dispelling the antiquated idea that an exhibition is the mouthpiece of a single authoritarian curator perpetuating an individual artist as a cult of personality.) It illustrates that an exhibition is a collaboration supported by many.

The PMA provided a full menu of programs via a “Futures Therapy Lab” for “all ages” because “thinking about possible futures is both exhilarating and anxiety-making.” The Lab offered people space to work it out through “reflection, discussion, and art making.” Even though the PMA provided a polite disclaimer at the exhibition’s entrance, the Futures Therapy Lab presented an excellent opportunity for parents who brought children to the exhibition, and who then had to explain the importance of sex toy design, intimate relationships with robots, surgical trays displaying realistic internal organs, and, perhaps, the story behind the costumes designed by Ane Crabtree that are used in the television series *A Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–present).

It was unclear whether the Futures Therapy Room was facilitated by licensed art therapists or whether the name was just misguided marketing-speak for “Kids’ Activity Room.” Alternatively, the exhibition’s gift shop, which was adjacent to the Futures Therapy Lab (and provided the only avenue to exit), offered more therapeutic shopping, if necessary. Cynicism regarding the well-meaning but cringe-worthy name of the programming space and its promotion as a place for “all ages” aside, the exhibition, catalog, and associated programming were well worth experiencing and supporting. Moreover, the exhibition benefited from multiple visits when at all possible. The number of themes and their associated weightiness could be overwhelmingly dense. In addition, sometimes differentiating between an object manufactured for current use versus a prototype created to speculate on its future manufacture burdened the viewer. But perhaps invoking confusion and anxiety was the curators’ objective.

*Designs for Different Futures* deserves high praise. The institutions and their financial partners should be lauded for standing behind the thought leaders involved in the project.

Too often, administrators of large public institutions shy away from presenting topics to the general public that may spark debate or controversy, or challenge certain political or religious canons. The curators should be celebrated for 1) their persuasive powers with institutional administrations; 2) their commitment to collaboration and inclusion; and 3) their challenging of museumgoers, who often seek out experiences that congratulate and reinforce established connoisseurship. The scholars and activists should be thanked for their dedication to multidisciplinary approaches, new research, and upholding the importance of ethical debates. And lastly, the makers whose works are featured should receive gratitude for allowing viewers to seriously contemplate the future (for good and for bad), and urging acts today that may potentially affect a more positive, inclusive, healthy, and sustainable future. ■

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