

# CURATING CHANGE:

## Design Exhibitions and Critical Discourse

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# Abstract

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Exhibition curators play a pivotal role in defining the parameters of both discourse and practice within the discipline, however design researchers have yet to adequately investigate this political agency. Currently, design exhibitions largely reinforce dominant industry paradigms, rather than being a site for critically re-imagining design in relation to the contemporary world. This study asks the question: 'Can the design curator play a more active role in generating an engaged critical discourse within the discipline, by adopting 'performative and dialogical' curatorial models currently being developed in the field of art'?

This qualitative study investigates three local exhibitions, one drawn from the field of design, *Sydney Design Week 2004*, with a particular focus on *Contemporary Silver: Made in Italy*, held at the Powerhouse Museum. From the field of art, *Asian Traffic* (2004), held at Gallery 4A and curated by Binghui Huangfu, and *The Wonder Inn* (2001), held at Artspace and initiated by Nikos Papastergiadis are also studied.

The results of this research reveal a stark discrepancy between the perceived level of critical engagement in the local curation of art and design, suggesting that within design, knowledge of curatorial agency and of the exhibition as a space in which critical dialogue can be initiated and extended is diminished and out of date. In negotiating the liminal space between art and design, through the convergent vehicle of the exhibition, this study proposes a considered reappraisal of curatorial praxis, and a reformulation of the agenda, methodologies and content of local contemporary design exhibitions.

In particular, the study identifies a range of curatorial strategies used effectively by Papastergiadis and Huangfu to open up the discourse of art, in order to engage the exhibition space in a critical dialogue with contemporary issues of cultural, social and political significance. These strategies offer immense potential for similarly expanding the critical discourse of design.