

Exhibiting international collegiality in Wellington

Linda Wigley made new friends at the annual conference of the International Committee for Exhibitions & Exchange held in Wellington.

EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

International Committee for Exhibitions & Exchange (ICEE) is a standing professional committee of the International Council of Museums and its annual meeting for 2008 was held at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. This 'no frills' event was a successful combination of high quality international speakers, innovative exhibition ideas and examples of current research and best practice.

The demanding topics set by the committee raised much discussion from delegates representing museums, arts and science centres and heritage organisations from 14 different countries. This exchange of theoretical and practical ideas was explored through case studies ranging from small-scale community projects to multi-million dollar international touring exhibitions. Innovation was key and speakers highlighted different cultural and even climatic challenges faced by exhibition curators and designers around the world, the various levels of public engagement in the development of exhibition themes and also the extensive collaboration undertaken by many museums to achieve success.

MOTHER OF ALL EXHIBITIONS

The programme opened with the session, 'Opportunities and Challenges in the Multi-Dimensional Museum', a collaborative presentation by the keynote speaker Staffan Selander, Professor of Didactic Science at Stockholm University, and Helene Larsson, Curator of Exhibitions and Learning at the Historical Museum, Stockholm.

This dialogue on the making of the *Mary - the Dream of Woman* exhibition included an analysis of the three

registers for reading an exhibition (expressive; narrative and associative; theoretic) and a frank discussion of the process leading up to the opening of the exhibition and the public response to this potentially contentious theme on the Virgin Mary.

The exhibition team engaged with museum visitors during the eight month planning process, setting up a project office within the exhibition space, advertising the meetings in advance and inviting visitors to engage in discussion on the 'Mary' theme. This inclusive and transparent process, allowed the public to help define the key themes of the exhibition, which evolved into an emotive and contemporary exhibition rather than an historical one.

The exhibition evolved into a multi-sensory production bringing together many artists and technicians in a unique blend of theatrical lighting, specially commissioned music, modern dance, movement and, most importantly, artefacts. These were mostly medieval church sculptures depicting the Virgin Mary, taken out of their religious context and, as in the example of a circular group of seated Mary and Child sculptures which was transformed into a group of whispering women, they served to explore the contemporary concept of woman and child.

NURTURE AND NATURE

The theme, 'Multiplicity of Voices: Co-authorship and Co-Authority in the Exhibition Process', featured presentations on Te Papa's *Mo Tatou*, the Ngai Tahu Whanui exhibition and *The River - Life on the Murray Darling*, a touring exhibition from the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM).

How much water does it take to grow a tee shirt? Or a steak? These were some of the questions posed and answered in the ANMM's collaborative touring exhibition *The River*. This successful cross-state project involved curators from the Australian National Maritime Museum, the four regional museums hosting the exhibition and local people including indigenous groups who told their stories, donated objects and helped with the logistics of moving the exhibition up river.

The session, 'When Nature Calls: Bringing the Outdoors In', showcased the recent touring exhibitions *Nature*



Figure 1: Mark Scala, Chief Curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Lisa Lundström, Tour Production Manager, Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, and Lily Katakouzinou, Commissioning Producer Temporary Exhibitions at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: LINDA WIGLEY

Unleashed: Inside Natural Disasters, which was developed by the Field Museum, Chicago, and *The World Through Animal Eyes*, generated by the National Geographic Society Museum in Washington DC. Both exhibitions exhibited immersive exhibition techniques with extensive use of high quality film, light and sound.

EXHIBITING OURSELVES

The Display of Human Remains was covered in three very different approaches from Canada, the UK and New Zealand. Benoit Légaré discussed the *Body Worlds* touring exhibition at the Montréal Science Centre, which featured 200 specimens and 20 entire bodies and gave a useful insight into this potentially controversial exhibition. Most visitors came to see a freak show and left with an entirely different feeling due to the exhibition's focus on context – the history of anatomy, education and the lack of emotional content. In the run-up to the exhibition opening, an advisory committee was established to manage expected controversy and advise on ethical considerations.

Malcolm Chapman from the Manchester Museum, followed his Museum's mission statement to the letter in 'working with people to provoke debate and reflection'. The recent exhibition *Lindow Man: a bog body mystery* and the project uncovering the Museum's collection of Egyptian mummies generated widespread and ongoing public debate on what is an acceptable way for the Museum to display these human remains. Closer to home, Arapata Hakiwai gave an account of Te Papa's repatriation journey from the 1970s to the present day.

Local exhibition talent featured too. 'The Touring Exhibition Case Study: *Whales – Tohora*', presented by Carol Diebel and Liz Hay, included lively, frank and informative presentations on this major international touring exhibition generated by Te Papa. As well as describing the research and consultative process, the speakers shared the lessons learnt in the three years leading up to the opening. This drew a positive response from overseas delegates, ensuring all New Zealand participants basked in reflected glory.

SHOWING OFF

The session, 'Market Place of Exhibitions and Ideas', provided an all too brief snapshot of touring exhibitions from Australia, Austria, Italy, USA, New Zealand and Sweden, most of which are available for hire. I was particularly impressed with Lisa Lundström's extraordinary *Trailer Project*, which takes contemporary art to new places. This innovative project involves a specially constructed and reasonably priced (NZ \$30,000) trailer, which is touring twenty city squares throughout Sweden. Towed by a car, the trailer folds out to provide a screen and audio-visual contemporary art show. There is a built-in alarm system linked to a mobile phone in case of trouble, but so far the only problem seems to be preventing the audio-visual freezing up - literally!

Te Papa's cutting edge interactive experience *Our Space* and the *Colossal Squid Virtual Experience* showcased the last theme, 'Virtual Experience: Exhibitions, Technology and the Web', and the meeting concluded with Study Tours behind the scenes at Te Papa and Pataka Museum of Arts and Culture.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

This was an exceptional meeting on many levels and I came away enthused by the passion, creativity and innovation of our exhibitions sector in pushing boundaries for both staff and audiences with extraordinary success.

Planning is already well advanced for ICEE's 2009 meeting in Chicago on the theme 'Making the World Smaller: Crossing Boundaries with Exhibitions'. I am rattling my tin in the shopping mall already, saving up for what I expect will be an equally rewarding meeting.

Linda Wigley attended this meeting while she was Director of Whangarei Museum and Heritage Park. This was her first international museum conference. She recently took up her new appointment as Director of the Otago Settlers Museum.