

# *In Conversation with* **Victoria Broackes**

**Joseph Court**

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*Victoria Broackes is Director of the 2021 London Design Biennale. Previously she worked for the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A): as Senior Curator for the Department of Theatre & Performance, and as Head of the London Design Festival (2009–18). At the V&A she co-curated the exhibition 'David Bowie is' (2013) and curated the exhibition 'Pink Floyd: Their Mortal Remains' (2017). She is an Alumni member of the Court of the Royal College of Art and an Assistant of the Goldsmiths' Company.*

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*Fig 1. From the 'Design in an Age of Crisis' gallery. Credit: Ed Reeve 2021.*

**CJLPA:** You have a large 'Design in an Age of Crisis' gallery, which showcases responses to a global call for submissions issued with Chatham House. How did you decide on this theme? And can you give us some examples of design helping minimise or prevent crises?

**Victoria Broackes:** Yes! This is a special exhibition and it came as a direct result of the pandemic. Actually, the London Design Biennale was supposed to take place in September 2020. But when we went into lockdown we became aware of the amazing stories of creativity that were happening behind closed doors, with snorkelling masks being turned into ventilators, and ways of opening doors without touching them, things like that. It seemed, therefore, in line with our mission for this great exhibition to do something different.

We were talking to Chatham House about how it would be interesting to bring together the design profession and people of the sort they talk to more—academics, policy makers, governments, and so on. We came up with four themes: work, society, environment, and health. We created briefs to go out to the world with and see what came back. In fact, we were absolutely inundated with responses, which was exciting, but it changed the direction of the initiative. Initially, I had thought, 'Let's see what these ideas are'. But when they came back from all corners of the world—we had one from Togo—it suggested a story that very much chimed with our thinking: that design thinking is something which everybody can get involved in and contribute to. So the special exhibition is really a celebration of people thinking about things, and getting involved, and putting their ideas forward.

In terms of design minimising or preventing crises: there are loads of examples to see in the exhibition itself. As an example historical starting point, though, you could consider Joseph Bazalgette's sewers, which addressed the cholera problem of the time through good design and are still in use to this day. Another example is the wind-up radio that was designed during the AIDS crisis, literally to drop out of helicopters in remote areas of Africa where no news was getting through because there was no power in the villages. The wind-up radio meant you could bring news to places that had no power.

**CJLPA:** Your Artistic Director Es Devlin has chosen 'Resonance' as this Biennale's theme. Does this tie in with your focus on solving global issues?

**VB:** It very much does. The theme was set before the pandemic, and of course we all feel that many things have changed and become spotlighted during the pandemic or as a result of it. 'Resonance' has been really interesting. I think when Es put it forward as a theme, her focus was on how gestures and actions and designs are not single things, but reverberate outwards and around the world, and also through time. When one thinks of throwing things away, or one just puts them somewhere else—those kinds of issue, or the effect of a butterfly flapping its wings on the other side of the world.

That kind of resonance has come through very powerfully at this time. Our global awareness has been acutely heightened by the basic fact that, if you read the news at all, you are forced to look outwards and become aware of other countries, just as a result of the pandemic, even if you hadn't been before. That's a key, interesting thing to have come out of it. We've been viscerally reminded that we are one world. You could say 'We're not all safe until everyone's safe' until you were blue in the face, but now we know it's true.

**CJLPA:** Cambridge University's Centre for Natural Material Innovation has an installation at the Biennale. Could you tell us about this, and about how you perceive the importance of scientific innovation to design?

**VB:** We're really thrilled that Cambridge is part of this year's Biennale. It is certainly a major part of it, partly because we have fewer international pavilions than we would normally have, for obvious reasons, but also because we have a lot of amazing innovation on our doorstep. We have a number of art schools and universities taking part in the area. The Cambridge installation presents a method of folding wood, and encourages us to think about wood not only as a sustainable material but also as a building material with great strength and practicality. They will be showing that on quite a scale—you can walk through and around the installation—and I think it will be a wonderful showcase for it.

A lot of the international pavilions relate to environment and sustainability. The addition of the Cambridge entry is super. One of the things that this international Biennale does is allow people to experience things that they might read about or see on TV. But there's nothing like an exhibition, because of the physicality. You can move and touch and feel and imprint on your brain what you've seen and sensed. Certainly, I find that some of those things stay with you for years and years, in a way that just reading about them in the news or a book does not.

**CJLPA:** I was going to ask you about that. This question is particularly relevant given COVID, of course. How important do you consider it to see objects in person, as opposed to digitally?

**VB:** I consider it *really* important, and not just because I run a Biennale! Actually, I think we've seen unbelievably amazing things digitally over the last year. We've also seen things that have been a little disappointing. I think the jury is out. We will not know for a bit which ones stick, or which ones we never want to hear of or see again.

In terms of distanced meetings, a big American lawyer I spoke to a few weeks ago said: 'Gone are the days when I travelled 24 hours to attend a meeting. I am never doing that again!' And you just think, 'Well, of course! Why *would* we have all done that?' I should think he was doing it all the time, and that's just bonkers. When it comes to art and culture, and this kind of conceptual design and installation, I think there's no substitute for seeing things, and for seeing things with other people. In terms of what it is to be human, I think we need that.

It may be beyond the scope of this interview, but I'm really interested in where the digital is *attached* to the physical, rather than *in place* of the physical. I was at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) for many years, and have done quite a lot of exhibitions where there has been a digital element. I feel that the digital is brilliant at *enhancing* the physical. But sometimes, for this kind of thing, if it's just it on its own, it doesn't have the same impact, even for people who only see the digital version. The fact that the physical version exists is important.

**CJLPA:** On the topic of design more broadly: how serious a prospect do you think it is that, to some extent, design and similar processes will be automated in the near future?

**VB:** That's really interesting. Considering the automation of parts of the design process: I suppose parts of the process of making things

have been automated for centuries. There may be further to go with elements of that. But overall, I'd say that design, and design training, and creative thinking training, are areas that are less likely to be affected by automated processes. And that's one of the reasons it is so important that we carry on doing them in our schools and universities, because they can't be automated.

**CJLPA: So as with exhibitions, do you have in mind a system where humans are aided by and working with, but not replaced by, AI?**

**VB:** Yes, I do. I'm no expert on that aspect, but I think it's really interesting. We know you can get a computer to compose like Chopin. Perhaps you can get a computer to design like Gropius. But computers haven't got there yet, and one would not assume that that would hit the spot, just as the next Chopin waltz by a computer might not hit the spot either. So it's fascinating. I'm all for creative training, and creative thinking, on how important it is to address all the things that we need to address now in the world, but also on the future of work.

**CJLPA: Staying on digital, but on a less frightening note... Does the Biennale feature digital as well as physical design? Or at least part-digital design?**

**VB:** Yes, it does, in a number of ways.

Firstly, we have some fully digital pavilions. Six of our international pavilions have gone digital because they couldn't get here, or had great challenges to production or travel. That's a first for us. I would pay tribute to them, for how tough it has been to organise an international event this year. That is testament to how important people consider it to be here in person.

Secondly, our whole public programme, which previously would have been viewable in person, is going to be broadcast and streamed digitally, much of it recorded on site. The interesting thing about that is that we used to be concerned about whether 30,000 people were coming to Somerset House or 40,000, but the fact is that, whether it's 30,000 or 40,000, there's a much bigger audience out there that we've become aware of, particularly over the past year. However many thousand people come, we're never going to have all the people who are interested in this conversation. The digital allows us to properly be international, and to have this conversation with a much broader base.

Thirdly, a lot of our physical pavilions are in part digital, with digital components as parts of their displays.

**CJLPA: The Biennale is very international. 33 countries, territories, and cities have pavilions, and 'Design in an Age of Crisis' has 500 projects from over 50 countries. Are there global trends in styles and preoccupations that you can see at the Biennale, or do these vary significantly between designers and countries?**

**VB:** There are global trends. It sounds glib, but it's true that this year climate change, social inequality, migration, and so on, which were already big subjects, have become bigger. They have become focal points for all nations to think about. But there are countries and designers and nations that are focussed on those in terms of the bigger picture, but also use national examples to tell much broader stories.

For example, Venezuela's pavilion this year is focussed on recycling avocado stones into interesting products. On the face of it, it's quite a simple project. You think, 'Oh, I didn't know you could do that with avocado stones.' But actually, behind that is a fascinating story



**Fig 2.** POAD (Pavilion of the African Diaspora). Credit: Ed Reeve 2021.



Fig 3. La Rentrada (Venezuela pavilion). Credit: Ed Reeve 2021.

of Venezuela's dependence on fossil fuels, and how catastrophic that's been for the country's GDP and people. The avocado stone is a metaphor for how using something more core to the place, and more useful, could have brought about a very different outcome. The designer is not proposing that you make things out of avocado stones, just saying that you could, and that you certainly shouldn't have put all your eggs in the fossil fuel basket. So that turns a local story into something we can all connect with.

We also have this again and again in 'Design in an Age of Crisis'. Somebody will be talking in their alleyway or the social housing that they're living in in Asia, but you can read about it and see that it could also be in the outskirts of Birmingham, or anywhere. So there are specific examples that are local but may have national or even global usefulness.

**CJLPA: You have curated several notable exhibitions about musicians, like 'David Bowie is' at the V&A. What made you move to design, and how has your past experience shaped your work on the Biennale?**

**VB:** Music was a great passion, but I actually started at the V&A as a design person. It was luck that I found myself in the theatre and performance collections, where there was a great music collection that hadn't really been used. It had been assembled by brilliant curators who'd

seen how musicians used design to present themselves visually—design and fashion and graphics, these kinds of thing. It had been collected since the 1960s, but it had only been shown in a design context, so it was an opportunity, it seemed to me, to connect something that I was really interested in with something that everybody was really interested in. Design, though, seemed a more closed world. That was a fantastic coming together of interests and the brilliant work of other people. It was a great honour and opportunity to do three big exhibitions at the V&A. It wasn't easy. It's quite a competitive process there, and music seemed to be a good focus for those years. But the V&A covers so many subjects, and people move on.

I think the thing that ties these together is that I am quite passionate about opening up areas of culture to more people. What I mean by that is that I actually think more people are interested than realise they are. You need to make it easy to get a foot in the door. I also feel that design can sometimes be a bit up itself. A lot of people feel that it's a bit highfalutin and maybe not their thing. With something like 'Design in an Age of Crisis', I like the idea that, if you're communicating well through design, you're not looking at the design, you're feeling the feeling, or getting use out of the thing if it works. The thing becomes what it does. So I hope that people will come to this Biennale, and that there will be something interesting for everybody, all the family. It's important stuff that relates to us all. It's not just about design aficionados and imposing creative brains.

**CJLPA: I'm interested in your belief that people find design highfalutin. You can live a life without ever seeing a painting, but you can't avoid design. Does that not make design easier to engage with?**

**VB:** I think it absolutely does. It's not as noxious. Art history is 'keep out'. People might think that a design biennale is going to be about beautiful chairs that cost a fortune. But I'm not interested in that. This type of design is something different. It takes philosophy and ideas, things that people care about, and puts them into a physical space. It's not entertainment exactly, but I want people to come and have a great time. If design's working, it doesn't have to be hard work. It may not always be jolly and happy, but I hope the Biennale will be a great experience, and that everyone will come and see that.

**CJLPA: What is London's role in the history of design? You gave Bazalgette's sewers as a good example. What is distinctive about London's design scene today?**

**VB:** I'd also mention the Great Exhibition out of which the V&A came, the first great world exhibition. It launched a series of world expos, world's fairs, and so on, many in Paris, where people went to see the latest innovations but also travel the world. London has a great history in that sense, but also, in the present, it is a fantastic place for designers and creative people to live, train, and work. It's a very precious thing that I don't think we should take for granted. We are very lucky to have that. But I do think that if we do the right things we can hang on to it.

I was talking to a designer from New York this morning. She said, 'London is the centre of the world for design.' I'm not saying that's absolutely true, but we certainly have a place at the very top table. We need to deserve that, and to keep working hard to make London a great place for creative people.

**CJLPA: Do you think that, if we do, we can pull through the two shocks of Brexit and COVID-19?**

**VB:** I certainly hope so! Otherwise we're in desperate trouble, because it's something we're really good at, and there aren't so many things that we're really good at now. We need to make the most of those things.

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Joseph Court is an Archaeology graduate from Trinity College, Cambridge, who placed first each year and specialised in the ancient Near East. He is interested in the very new as well as the very old: tech law and policy, Wikipedia editing, and film. He is Managing Editor of *CJLPA*.

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