



Summative evaluation of the
Mark Dion Systema Metropolis
contemporary art exhibition

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Contents	Page	
1	Executive summary	3
2	Lessons to learn	4
3	Background	6
4	Methodology	6
5	Findings and recommendations	7
5.1	Visitor profile	7
5.2	Duration of visit	7
5.3	Interest in science and contemporary art	8
5.4	Visitors' opinion of contemporary art exhibitions at NHM	8
5.5	Visitors' prior knowledge of Mark Dion and Linnaeus	9
5.6	Visitors' expectations of the exhibition	10
5.7	Visitors' cognitive responses to the exhibition	11
5.8	Linnaeus's relevance to the exhibition	12
5.9	Visitor enjoyment and inspiration	13
5.10	Most memorable part of the exhibition	13
5.11	Knowledge gained about NHM and its science	14
5.12	Words used to describe the exhibition	15
5.13	Explorations beyond the exhibition space	16
5.14	Attitudinal change as a result of visiting the exhibition	17
5.15	Exhibition tours	18
5.16	Text readability	18
6	Appendices	20
6.1	Appendix 5.1: Summative evaluation questionnaire	20
6.2	Appendix 2: Word list	23

1 Executive Summary

The majority of visitors had not come to the Museum having planned a visit to the *Mark Dion Systema Metropolis* exhibition in advance. External press and marketing was responsible for approximately one quarter of visits.

‘Purposeful visitors’ (i.e. those who had either planned their visit to the exhibition in advance or had decided to visit it during a visit to the Museum) spent far longer in the exhibition space than did strollers (i.e. those visitors who had come across the exhibition and wandered in).

The majority of visitors thought that contemporary art exhibitions at the Natural History Museum were a good idea. Some added a caveat that the exhibition must be relevant or related to the Museum in some way. A minority of visitors did not think of *Mark Dion Systema Metropolis* as a contemporary art exhibition.

More purposeful visitors than strollers had heard of Mark Dion and Linnaeus. Because of this only a few strollers had any expectations of the exhibition.

Visitors’ cognitive responses to the exhibition were largely in line with the exhibition’s generic visitor outcomes, and responses focused on biodiversity, conservation and environmental issues, and the science and natural life around us.

Although the majority of visitors could name Linnaeus as the inventor of taxonomy and/or as being key to the artist’s work, approximately a quarter of visitors (fourteen people) left the exhibition still unsure of who Linnaeus was or of his relevance to the exhibition.

Purposeful visitors tended to be inspired by the exhibition’s display aesthetics, how the exhibition was created, and how the things in it were classified. Strollers were more inspired by the electric car, the tools and instruments used past and present, and by the Olympic 2012 site.

The two most memorable parts of the exhibition were the Linnaeus display (including the herbarium books and the pictures of Linnaeus) and the electric car.

Approximately half of the visitors (more purposeful visitors than strollers) felt that by visiting the exhibition they had learned more about the work of the Museum and its science.

The exhibition was described by visitors as informative, thought provoking, contemporary and unusual. Purposeful visitors also described it as enjoyable, while strollers described it as intriguing.

Half of the strollers and a third of purposeful visitors were unlikely to continue their explorations beyond the exhibition space. The things people were likely to find out more about included the electric car, the Olympic 2012 site, the Museum and its research, biodiversity, how to preserve/press plants, Linnaeus, and Mark Dion and his work.

After visiting the exhibition the majority of visitors did not feel any different about the issues raised in it and were unlikely to change the way they thought or behaved as a result of their visit.

The exhibition tours added positively to the exhibition experience of those visitors who took them.

Most visitors found the text panels ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to read, although a sixth of all visitors interviewed found the text either ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to read.

2 Lessons to learn

Museum signposting should clearly indicate what type exhibition visitors are about to enter. The panel outside of the Mark Dion exhibition did say that it was a contemporary art exhibition, but this could only be read close-up. In addition, the text was frequently obscured by visitors standing in front of it.

Having contemporary art exhibitions at the Natural History Museum is seen as a good idea and acceptable by most visitors. However, care should be taken in the selection of subject matter or theme to ensure that they are relevant to the Museum and link with its culture and/or collections.

Not all visitors will recognise the exhibition as ‘contemporary art’ but hopefully by visiting the exhibition they will begin to understand that contemporary art comes in many guises.

Visitors want a contemporary art exhibition to be informative and thought provoking. They do not mind the exhibition being a bit more unusual compared to the rest of the Museum, or indeed, having their thoughts and opinions challenged, so long as the exhibition is not difficult or frustrating for them to understand. Care should be taken to include strollers when planning the exhibition content as they, without the background knowledge of purposeful visitors, may find visiting the exhibition a more negative experience.

Efforts should be taken to engage the attention of those visitors who stumble into the exhibition without any prior knowledge or preconceived ideas about the subject matter or artists. The exhibition should feel welcoming and accessible to all visitors no matter what their levels of expertise in the subject area, and introductory information panel(s) should give a simple overview of the exhibition, along with information about its underlying theme or ideas.

Text panels and videos are often the main source of information for the majority of visitors, and the information gleaned from these enables them to think about and understand the exhibition’s messages. Providing background material would be useful for visitors who have no prior knowledge about the exhibition, and additional material or depth of content would be useful for those visitors who already have an interest in the theme or artist. Where videos are used sound should be provided, either through the use of headphones or directional speakers.

Information (for example, details of relevant organisations and/or URLs) could be made available on exhibition text panels for visitors to note down. The NHM website could contain an exhibition micro-site that held useful information to help visitors to continue their explorations.

Ensure that the exhibition links clearly together so that visitors are not left feeling that they are visiting two separate exhibitions. If an introductory area is provided, it should tie-in graphically and also by way of display style with the main exhibition space.

In the Mark Dion exhibition very few visitors were observed picking up a copy of the booklet accompanying the exhibition, which provided information and links for those wishing to find out more. Panels could refer to accompanying booklets, and these booklets should be attractively presented nearer to the entrance/exit points so that visitors do not miss them.

Front of House staff should be skilled up with information about the exhibition and the artist in order to be able to answer visitors’ questions and could also hand out the booklets as visitors enter the exhibition space.

Providing regular free short-tours adds value to the visitor experience. Visitors to the Mark Dion exhibition found the tours extremely useful in providing them with a level of knowledge and understanding which they could not have hoped to achieved by going round the exhibition by themselves. Future exhibitions should also seek to include regular free short-tours, and the tour times should be extended, if possible, to include weekdays.

The way in which Mark Dion involved NHM scientist in its fieldwork acted as a reminder to visitors that the Museum is a working scientific environment, employing a large number of specialist staff. This made a real impact on visitors and made them rethink the way they thought of the Museum. The work of Museum scientists is something that future exhibitions could pick up on.

The environmental theme of the Mark Dion had a real impact on some visitors, to the extent that they said they would change their behaviour as a result. For others, although preaching to the converted, it re-iterated the importance of their actions (for example, recycling and trying to cut down on the pollution they caused). When visitors could see the impact of pollution in their local environment (such as the items collected from the River Thames and displayed in the polytunnel) it brought the message home to them. Future exhibitions should seek to have this kind of impact – and more - on visitors.

Adequate and well-located seating (for example, in front of text panels or video screens) may increase dwell time in the exhibition space.

3 Background

The Mark Dion Systema Metropolis exhibition is part of the Natural History Museum's strategy towards engagement with the Arts.

Artist Mark Dion was invited to create an exhibition that takes its point of inspiration from the categorisations and taxonomies of the natural world and man-made objects. The exhibition is a collaboration between the artist and Museum scientists. The work emulates three key areas of the Museum's activities: field work, laboratory and display. The exhibition also marks the tercentenary of the father of modern classification and systematic - Carl Von Linné – Linnaeus, but also ventures into the debates surrounding Systematics and Taxonomy and more contemporary methods for identification and analysis.

The target audience for the exhibition was lone adults, those interested in the arts (with emphasis on the contemporary arts, performing and visual arts), film, art and science aficionados, those interested in environmental and ecology studies, urbanism, and politics on both a national and international level.

The aims of this evaluation were to look at:

- Visitors' expectations from the art/science exhibitions;
- Visitors' cognitive and affective responses to the exhibition (seeing whether the exhibition met the visitor outcomes), in particular the following:
 - Visitors should have an emotional and intellectual interaction with the artist's work and should feel inspired to critically analyse our relationship to nature;
 - Everybody should be able to take some interesting piece of visual, intellectual, emotional experience away with them;
 - Ask questions about references made in the exhibition, especially those that go beyond the scientific and natural world, such as politics, women's rights, etc.

4 Methodology

A questionnaire was developed which incorporated the visitor expectations and cognitive and affective visitor outcomes for the exhibition. The questionnaire was piloted and minor changes were made, after which on-gallery data collection was conducted in the *Mark Dion Systema Metropolis* exhibition space during June and July 2007. Please see Appendix 5.1 (page 18) for the final version of the questionnaire.

Ana Horton, a Museum Studies student, was trained in data collection techniques and then preceded to undertake the majority of the data collection. However, to ensure the quality of the data being collected, Yvonne Harris undertook data collection during the piloting of the questionnaire and then a further day's data collection during July.

Data collection was conducted over five weekdays and three days over two weekends. Fifty-eight independent adult visitors were interviewed, all but one of whom were aged between 18-59. Data was gathered from two types of exhibition visitor: 'purposeful visitors' and 'strollers'. Purposeful visitors were defined as those who had seen the exhibition advertised in the press or on the Tube, had had the exhibition recommended to them, had heard about it whilst they were in the museum, or had a previous interest in contemporary art, the work of Mark Dion or Linnaeus. Strollers were defined as people who had come across the exhibition during their visit and had just wandered in without any prior knowledge about it.

5 Findings and recommendations

5.1 Visitor profile

Overall fifty-eight visitors were interviewed. Of these, thirty were female and twenty-eight were male. Twenty-seven of the visitors were classified as strollers and thirty-one were classified as purposeful visitors. Approximately half of the interviews (25) were conducted on weekdays, while the rest (23) were conducted at the weekend.

Twenty-six of the visitors were aged 25-34, with the next most common age groups being 18-24 (14 visitors) and 45-59 (12 visitors).

Table 1: visitor profile

Age	Male strollers	Female strollers	Male purposeful	Female purposeful	Total
18-24	5	3	2	4	14
25-34	6	8	7	5	26
35-44	1	1	0	3	5
45-59	1	2	5	4	12
60+	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>58</i>

Just over half of the purposeful visitors (n=17) had heard about the exhibition during their visit to the Natural History Museum. The remaining 14 purposeful visitors heard about the exhibition in the following ways:

On the tube (5 visitors)

In the press e.g. Time Out magazine, The Guardian newspaper (5 visitors)

From NHM in some way e.g. poster outside the museum, on website, in member's magazine (3 visitors)

Leaflet at Tate Britain (1 visitor).

5.2 Duration of visit

Two thirds of strollers (19 visitors) spent ten minutes or less in the exhibition, while a quarter (7 visitors) spent five minutes or less in the exhibition. Only two strollers estimated that they spent more than twenty minutes in the exhibition.

Conversely, over three quarters of purposeful visitors (n=25) spent ten minutes or more in the exhibition, with half of all purposeful visitors (n=16) estimating that they were in the exhibition for twenty minutes or more. Three of these visitors estimated that they had spent an hour or more in the exhibition space. This is in spite of five purposeful visitors feeling that their expectations of the exhibition were not met (please refer to section 4.5 for visitors' expectations).

Recommendations

Efforts should be taken to engage the attention of those visitors who stumble into the exhibition without any prior knowledge or preconceived ideas about the subject matter. The exhibition should feel welcoming and accessible to all visitors no matter what their levels of expertise in the subject area, and introductory information panel(s) should give a simple overview of the exhibition, along with information about its underlying theme or ideas. Background reading or video material might also be provided.

Adequate and well-located seating may increase dwell time in the exhibition space.

Museum signposting should clearly indicate what type exhibition visitors are about to enter.

5.3 *Interest in science and contemporary art*

Three quarters of strollers (20/27) and two thirds of purposeful visitors (22/31) rated their interest in science as 4 or 5 out of 5, with 5 being ‘very interested’. However only five visitors (4 strollers, one purposeful) said that one of their reasons for visiting the exhibition was because they were interested in scientific processes.

Table 2: Visitors’ interest in science

Rating	Male strollers	Female strollers	Male purposeful	Female purposeful	Total
1 = very uninterested	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	1	1	2
3	2	5	2	5	14
4	6	3	4	3	16
5 = very interested	5	6	8	7	26

Just under half of the strollers (12/27) rated their interest in contemporary art as 4 or 5 out of 5 (with 5 being ‘very interested’). In contrast, over three quarters of purposeful visitors (26/31) rated their interest in contemporary art as 4 or 5 out of 5. As Table 3 highlights, slightly more female purposeful visitors rated their interest in contemporary art higher than their male counterparts.

Table 3: Visitors’ interest in contemporary art

Rating	Male strollers	Female strollers	Male purposeful	Female purposeful	Total
1 = very uninterested	1	0	0	0	2
2	2	1	1	0	4
3	4	7	5	1	17
4	2	3	2	5	12
5 = very interested	4	3	7	10	24

Overall, strollers tend to rate their interest in science more highly than their interest in contemporary art, whereas purposeful visitors tend to rate their interests in science and contemporary art equally highly.

5.4 *Visitors’ opinion of contemporary art exhibitions at the Natural History Museum*

Over half of all visitors interviewed (n= 33) thought that having contemporary art exhibitions at the NHM was a good/excellent/worthwhile/essential idea.

“It’s very different and brave. Taking a risk is a good and challenging thing to do. It’s expanding the definition of what the Natural History Museum is.” Male purposeful visitor

“It’s good. Culture is part of museums. History and art are as much a part of it (the NHM), It’s nice to mix art and science.” Male stroller

A further nine visitors (mostly strollers) thought that it was a good idea so long as the exhibition was relevant or related to the museum in some way.

“If it works alongside what the Museum stands for, then good.” Female stroller

“Ok especially if it’s related to natural history.” Male purposeful visitor

Only four visitors (all strollers) thought that contemporary art exhibitions had no place in NHM.

“It doesn’t belong here. It’s good to see art but not here.” Male stroller

“Wildlife Photographer of the Year is a lot better than this – this doesn’t fit in as well with what the Museum stands for.” Female stroller

Furthermore, three visitors said that they would *not* have described *Mark Dion Systema Metropolis* as a contemporary art exhibition.

“This is not simply contemporary art – can you define it as such? This is about knowledge.” Male purposeful visitor

“This isn’t art but an experiment ...what is contemporary art?” Male stroller

Table 4: Visitors’ opinions on contemporary art at NHM

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Good/worthwhile idea	15	28	33
Only if it’s relevant	6	3	9
Doesn’t belong at NHM	4	0	4
Indifferent	1	0	1

Recommendations

Having contemporary art exhibitions at the Natural History Museum is seen as a good idea and acceptable by most visitors. However, care should be taken in the selection of subject matter or theme to ensure that they are relevant to the Museum and link with its culture and/or collections.

Not all visitors will recognise the exhibition as ‘contemporary art’ but hopefully by visiting the exhibition they will begin to understand that contemporary art comes in many guises.

5.5 Visitors’ prior knowledge of Mark Dion and Linnaeus

Prior to the exhibition a third of the interviewees (mostly purposeful visitors) had heard of Mark Dion, while half had heard of Linnaeus (a third of the strollers and two thirds of purposeful visitors).

Table 5: Visitors’ prior knowledge of Mark Dion and Linnaeus

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Heard of Mark Dion	2	16	18
Heard of Linnaeus	9	20	29

Recommendations

Not all visitors will be familiar with the subject matter or artists around which the exhibition is based. Providing introductory panels containing background information would be helpful to these visitors. Front of House staff could also be skilled up with information about the exhibition and the artist in order to be able to answer visitors’ questions.

5.6 *Visitors' expectations of the exhibition*

Visitors were asked what they had expected to see, do and find out in the *Mark Dion Systema Metropolis* exhibition.

Nearly all of the strollers (25 visitors) had no expectations. The two who did have expectations thought it would be an art exhibition because of the photographs of Linnaeus that were visible from the entrance. However, three strollers thought they were coming to see a different exhibition to the one they were confronted with: one thought it was the Wildlife Photographer of the Year, while the other two were expecting to find an exhibition about Darwin.

Half of the purposeful visitors felt that their expectations were either 'met' (13 visitors) or 'exceeded' 3 visitors). Only five visitors thought that their expectations had not been met (two had expected more classification and categorisation, two thought the exhibition differed from the artist's usual work, and the other had expected a more traditional approach). The remaining third of purposeful visitors entered the exhibition without any expectations.

Table 6: Visitors' expectations

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	<i>Total</i>
No expectations	25	10	35
Expectations met	2	13	15
Expectations exceeded	0	3	3
Expectations not met	0	5	5

Visitors were also asked whether they knew before they entered that they were about to see a contemporary art exhibition.

Because of their knowledge of the artist and his work, purposeful visitors were far more likely to know that they would be visiting a contemporary art exhibition than were visitors who just strolled into the exhibition (this is despite a large panel outside the entrance to the exhibition advertising it as such).

"More traditional, like the first installation (Linnaeus display)."
Male purposeful visitor, expectations exceeded

"I expected Mark Dion's work in an archive with the basis of an idea – his usual kind of work. The posters advertise it as Mark Dion but really it's a collaboration between Mark Dion and the Natural History Museum scientists. If the advertising said this then peoples' expectations would be different." Male purposeful visitor, expectations met

"It said 'special' outside but I knew it would be something in connection with the Museum. The curious presentation of the photos drew me in."
Female stroller, expectations met

"I had expected a more conventional understanding of art but this seems fairly science based." Female purposeful visitor, expectations not met

Table 7: Did visitors know they were about to see a contemporary art exhibition?

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	<i>Total</i>
Yes	4	23	27
No	23	8	31

Recommendations

Ensure the exhibition is well signposted so that prior to entering the exhibition visitors are aware that they are visiting a contemporary art exhibition. The panel outside of the Mark Dion exhibition did say that it was a contemporary art exhibition, but this could only be read close-up. In addition, the text was frequently obscured by visitors standing in front of it.

5.7 Visitors' cognitive responses to the exhibition

Visitors were asked what they thought the exhibition's messages were: "What do you think the exhibition was getting you to think about? Why is that?"

The responses from interviewees were largely in line with the exhibition's generic visitor outcomes, and focused on, for example, the science and natural life around us, biodiversity, conservation and environmental issues.

More purposeful visitors than strollers mentioned ecology and diversity, taxonomy, the relationship between the artist and Linnaeus, and breaking down barriers between science and art. However, more strollers than purposeful visitors mentioned Linnaeus, specimens and the scientific process. This may suggest that strollers felt more comfortable in the introductory part of the exhibition (on Linnaeus) and, having no prior knowledge of the artist, had more difficulty in trying to express what messages they felt the exhibition as a whole was trying to convey.

Table 8: Visitors' thoughts on the exhibition's messages

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
History of science/historical scientists and their effect on the present	9	6	15
The science/natural life around us	5	6	11
Taxonomy / classifications	1	10	11
Ecology / biodiversity	2	5	7
Conservation / environmental issues	4	2	6
Fieldwork / sampling methods	3	3	6
Scientists and their working environment	3	2	5
Breaking down barriers between science & art	0	4	4
Linnaeus	3	1	4
Specimens	4	0	4
Process used by the artist	0	2	2
To question and investigate things	2	0	2
The scientific process	2	0	2
Relationship between the work of Linnaeus & Dion	0	1	0
Other	2	2	4
Not sure	2	2	4

"How science is all around us whether or not we notice it. The specimens from the city environment makes you rethink the environment as a scientific place." Female stroller

“The human need to order everything – from early taxonomies through to modern procedures.” Male purposeful visitor

“The fusion of art and science, the diversity of life that you can find in London, and the contrast between the historical and modern world.” Male purposeful visitor

“Not sure. The historical part was obvious but the rest is very confusing. I didn’t take anything away from this part.” Male stroller

Recommendations

Text panels and videos are often the main source of information for the majority of visitors, and the information gleaned from these enables them to think about and understand the exhibition’s messages. Providing background material would be useful for visitors who have no prior knowledge about the exhibition, and additional material or depth of content would be useful for those visitors who already have an interest in the theme or artist.

Provide sound on videos, either through the use of headphones or directional speakers.

5.8 Linnaeus’s relevance to the exhibition

Half of the visitors interviewed (9 strollers and 20 purposeful visitors) could name Linnaeus as the inventor of taxonomy. A further nine purposeful visitors stated that Linnaeus’s thinking formed the basis of the exhibition and/or was key to Mark Dion’s work. Four visitors stated that Linnaeus collected species, while two knew he was relevant to the exhibition because he was an historical scientific figure. Fourteen visitors left still unsure of who Linnaeus was and/or of his relevance to the exhibition.

A minority of visitors almost treated the Linnaeus part of the exhibition and the installations behind it as two separate exhibitions, and found it difficult to make the link between the two.

Table 9: Linnaeus’s relevance to the exhibition

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Inventor of taxonomy	9	20	29
The basis of the exhibition / key to Mark Dion’s work	0	9	9
Collected species	2	2	4
As an historical scientific figure	2	0	2
Unsure who he is / of his relevance	11	3	14
Other	3	2	5

“He’s very directly linked – it’s about him and the processes of classification and the way things are ordered. Compare the ordering systems of historical specimens with the polytunnel specimens.”
Female purposeful visitor

“The forerunner. He invented the way of naming new species.” Female stroller

“Don’t know. Is he a contemporary of the artist?” Male purposeful visitor

Recommendations

Ensure that the exhibition links clearly together so that visitors are not left feeling that they are visiting two separate exhibitions. If an introductory area is provided, it should tie-in graphically and also by way of display style with the main exhibition space.

5.9 Visitor enjoyment and inspiration

Visitors were asked what they enjoyed most or found inspirational in the exhibition.

Some differences in terms of what was most enjoyed or found to be inspiring occurred between strollers and purposeful visitors. For example, purposeful visitors were far more inspired by the display aesthetics, how things are classified and seeing the process and work involved in creating an exhibition of this nature. Strollers were more inspired by the electric car, the tools and instruments used past and present, and the Olympic 2012 site.

“Lab recreation – it gives the idea of what happens in science.” Female stroller

“The simplicity of turning a lab into an installation.” Male purposeful visitor

“Science is modern and contemporary: living, as opposed to a Victorian Museum.”
Female purposeful visitor

Table 10: Visitor enjoyment and inspiration

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Linnaeus display & his work	6	15	21
Polytunnel display	4	7	11
Seeing the process involved in creating the exhibition (including films)	3	7	10
Exhibition display aesthetics	0	9	9
Herbarium books	4	3	7
Electric car	6	1	7
How things are classified	0	6	6
Seeing tools and instruments used	3	1	4
Text panels	2	1	3
Laboratory recreation	2	0	2
Cemetery display	1	1	2
London 2012 site	2	0	2
Other	2	3	5
Nothing/not sure	2	2	4

5.10 Most memorable part of the exhibition

Relatively few differences occurred between strollers and purposeful visitors in terms of what they thought they would remember most about the exhibition.

The Linnaeus display (including the pictures of him and his herbarium books) and the car were by far the two most memorable parts of the exhibition. This was followed by the idea of using the laboratory and other rooms as installations, the cemeteries fieldwork and the polytunnel. As above, the same differences occur between strollers and purposeful visitors: for example, for purposeful visitors the Linnaeus display and the polytunnel were most memorable, while for strollers the electric car and tools/instruments used were the most memorable parts of the exhibition.

“Linnaeus display, particularly the tools he might have used and books.”
Female stroller

“The equipment that was used, for example in the Lab room. Seeing visually how much work is involved is very effective.” Female stroller

“Different room recreations are unusual, and the humorous details in the labs like the historical writing.” Female purposeful visitor

Table 11: Most memorable part of the exhibition

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Linnaeus display (including Herbarium books)	5	8	13
Electric car	7	3	10
Using lab and rooms as an installation	3	3	6
Polytunnel display	1	4	5
Cemeteries fieldwork	1	2	3
Olympic site environment and redevelopment	2	1	3
Tools and instruments used	3	0	3
Concept & aesthetics of the exhibition	1	1	2
New species discovered in London	0	2	2
Methods/complexity of classification	0	2	2
Teams involved	0	1	1
Other	7	8	15

5.11 Knowledge gained about the NHM and its science

Visitors were asked *“Now that you’ve visited this exhibition do you feel you know more about the work of the Museum and its science?”*

Approximately half of the strollers (14 visitors) and just under half of the purposeful visitors (19 visitors) felt that the exhibition had enabled them to learn more about the museum and its science. For purposeful visitors this was felt to be a greater understanding of the behind the scenes work of the museum and the teams/skills it had. Many purposeful visitors had also come to realise that the museum was a living, active working environment. Less of the strollers felt that they knew more about the Museum, and this is reflected in the answers they gave to this question (see table below).

“It refers to the methodologies of the Museum. I’m looking at it through a new perspective.” Male stroller

“Seeing the science, seeing science processes, knowing that 300 scientists are working here.” Female stroller

“It accentuates what goes on in the Museum, updating it and making it relevant to local people. This is essential otherwise the Museum is fossilised.”
Male purposeful visitor

“It explains the work of the scientist – their passion, their work and instruments.” Female purposeful visitor

“It’s easy to forget that ...the Museum is part of the present.”
 Female purposeful visitor

Table 12: What visitors learned about the Museum and its science

	Strollers	Purposeful visitors	Total
Behind the scenes work of Museum / staff and their skills	2	9	11
See the Museum in a new way – living & active environment	2	5	7
How things are collected and classified	1	4	5
Methods and processes used	3	1	4
About the collections of NHM/other galleries	1	2	3
How Museum is using art to capture interest in science	2	0	2
Other	3	0	3

Recommendations

The way in which Mark Dion involved NHM scientist in its fieldwork acted as a reminder to visitors that the Museum is a working scientific environment, employing a large number of specialist staff. This made a real impact on visitors and made them rethink the way they thought of the Museum. The work of Museum scientists is something that future exhibitions could pick up on.

5.12 Words used to describe the exhibition

Visitors were shown a word list containing a mix of 26 positive, negative and neutral words and were asked to select as many words as they desired to describe the exhibition (see Appendix B for the complete word list). In addition, a small number of visitors suggested words *not* on the list to describe the exhibition.

Four out of the top five words chosen by strollers and purposeful visitors were the same. These were: informative, thought provoking, contemporary and unusual. Strollers also chose ‘intriguing’ to describe the exhibition, while purposeful visitors chose ‘enjoyable’. Interestingly, with the exception of ‘enjoyable’, all of the words that appear in the top 5 are neutral words.

Table 13: Top 5 words selected by visitors to describe the exhibition

Strollers top 5 (in order)	N° of times selected by strollers	Purposeful visitors top 5 (in order)	N° of times selected by purposeful visitors
Informative	13	Thought provoking	19
Intriguing	10	Informative	15
Unusual	8	Contemporary	14
Contemporary	5	Enjoyable	12
Thought provoking	4	Unusual	10

Strollers tended to select neutral words far more often than they selected positive or negative words. In contrast, purposeful visitors selected the same amount of positive and neutral words, but very few negative words. Positive words were selected fifty times by purposeful

visitors, in comparison to only nineteen times by strollers, and negative words were selected only four times by purposeful visitors in comparison to twelve times by strollers.

Table 14: Words on list selected by visitors to describe the exhibition

Word	N° of times selected by strollers	N° of times selected by purposeful	Word	N° of times selected by strollers	N° of times selected by purposeful
Enjoyable	3	12	Unusual	8	10
Intriguing	10	6	Contemporary	5	14
Frustrating	0	2	Empowering	0	2
Boring	2	0	Worthwhile	3	8
Inspiring	2	11	Exciting	2	0
Entertaining	1	1	Incomprehensible	1	0
Thought provoking	4	19	Pointless	2	0
Daring	1	0	Fun	1	4
Confusing	3	0	Motivating	1	5
Disappointing	1	2	Informative	13	15
Challenging	3	3	Difficult	1	0
Beautiful	4	4	Radical	1	1

Words on the list not selected by either any strollers or purposeful visitors were: ‘trivial’ and ‘stressful’.

Table 15: Words *not* on list selected by visitors to describe the exhibition

Word	N° of times selected by strollers	N° of times selected by purposeful	Word	N° of times selected by strollers	N° of times selected by purposeful
Un-engaging	1	0	Interesting	1	2
Articulate	1	0	Imaginative	1	0
Self-aware	1	0	Preserving	1	0
Out of place	1	0	Inventive	0	1
Aesthetically pleasing	0	1	Shocking	0	1

Recommendations

Visitors want a contemporary art exhibition to be informative and thought provoking. They do not mind the exhibition being a bit more unusual compared to the rest of the Museum, or indeed, having their thoughts and opinions challenged, so long as the exhibition is not difficult or frustrating for them to understand. Care should be taken to include strollers when planning the exhibition content as they, without the background knowledge of purposeful visitors, may find visiting the exhibition a more negative experience.

5.13 Explorations beyond the exhibition space

Visitors were asked whether there was anything in the exhibition they would go away and find out more about (i.e. whether they would be inspired to continue their explorations after they had left the exhibition).

Getting visitors to continue their explorations beyond the exhibition space is a real challenge, as half of the strollers (n=14 visitors) and just under a third of purposeful visitors (n=9) felt that there was nothing they wanted to find out more about.

The remaining visitors mentioned a range of things they wanted to find out more about. Often each of these topics was mentioned by a maximum of two or three people. These included the electric car, the Olympic park, the Museum and its' research, the environment, biodiversity, how to preserve/press plants, the process of collecting, Linnaeus and his classifications, and Mark Dion and his art.

Recommendations

In the Mark Dion exhibition very few visitors were observed picking up a copy of the booklet accompanying the exhibition, which provided information and links for those wishing to find out more. Panels could refer to accompanying booklets, and these booklets should be attractively presented nearer to the entrance/exit points so that visitors do not miss them. Front of House staff could also hand out the booklets as visitors enter the exhibition space.

Information (for example, details of relevant organisations and/or URLs) could be made available on exhibition text panels for visitors to note down. The NHM website could contain an exhibition micro-site that held useful information to help visitors to continue their explorations.

5.14 Attitudinal change as a result of visiting the exhibition

Visitors were asked whether, having seen the exhibition, they felt differently about any of the issues raised in it.

The vast majority of visitors (25 strollers and 24 purposeful visitors) did not feel differently. Furthermore, after visiting the exhibition two visitors were still unsure of what issues the exhibition was highlighting. Of the few visitors who did feel differently, their main concern was about the need to protect and preserve the environment and to recycle. The exhibition had also made a couple of visitors more aware of the nature that surrounds us.

“The need to protect and preserve – I feel more strongly about that now because I’m more aware.” Female stroller

“It’s a reaffirmation of what we do and how it affects the environment.”
Male purposeful visitor

“I’m more aware of the thriving life in the environment around us.”
Female purposeful visitor

Visitors were also asked whether, as a result of visiting the exhibition, they would change the way they thought or behaved in future. Again, the vast majority of visitors (three quarters; n=46; 22 strollers and 24 purposeful visitors) said they would not change their ways. Some of these visitors explained their response by saying that their behaviour would not change because they were already committed to recycling and suchlike. Of those who thought they would change their actions or behaviour, the environment focused highly (6 visitors). Three visitors were inspired to make changes to their own artistic practice, two thought they would appreciate London in a new way, and one visitor (a stroller) wanted to become “more cultured”.

“Recycling and not dumping things in the ground. Thinking of my use of plastic and whether it’s biodegradable.” Female stroller

“I might incorporate the aesthetics of classification into my own work a

bit more.” Female purposeful visitor

“I will appreciate, look at and explore the city in a new way.” Male purposeful visitor

Recommendations

The environmental theme of the Mark Dion had a real impact on some visitors, to the extent that they said they would change their behaviour as a result. For others, although preaching to the converted, it re-iterated the importance of their actions (for example, recycling and trying to cut down on the pollution they caused). When visitors could see the impact of pollution in their local environment (such as the items collected from the River Thames and displayed in the polytunnel) it brought the message home to them. Future exhibitions should seek to have this kind of impact – and more - on visitors.

5.15 Exhibition tours

All of the three tours observed were very popular with visitors when they ran of a weekend. Four visitors who were interviewed had taken a tour of the exhibition with a Museum guide (one stroller and three purposeful visitors). All four visitors agreed that taking the tour had added positively to their experience of the exhibition by increasing their understanding of it.

“We had an explanation of the samples and how scientists work outdoors. It did change how I saw it.” Female stroller

“I wouldn’t have understood the background to the exhibition without the tour – it would have been harder to get a snapshot.” Male purposeful visitor

Recommendations

Providing regular free short-tours adds value to the visitor experience. Visitors to the Mark Dion exhibition found the tours extremely useful in providing them with a level of knowledge and understanding which they could not have hoped to achieved by going round the exhibition by themselves. Future exhibitions should also seek to include regular free short-tours, and the tour times should be extended, if possible, to include weekdays.

5.15 Text readability

Visitors were shown a scale and were asked to rate how easy or difficult they found it to read the exhibition text panels and labels.

Half of strollers (n=13 visitors) and just under two thirds of purposeful visitors (n=20) rated the text as ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to read. However, ten visitors (one sixth of the overall sample) rated the text as ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to read. A variety of reasons were given for the text being difficult to read. These were:

The colour tones used affected readability

Too much information was contained in one panel (e.g. the fieldwork panel), making the panels unappealing and un-enticing to read

The labels in the Linnaeus section were too small

The font size used on the panels was too small

Some of the wording was unfamiliar to visitors, and especially difficult for visitors for whom English was not their first language

The seating was too far away from the panels for visitors to read it comfortably

The introductory panel was “too intellectual”

The Latin and Greek references were confusing for one or two visitors.

Four out of the ten visitors who rated the text as ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to read were aware that the text was available in large-print format.

Two visitors (both purposeful visitors) were in a hurry and did not read any of the text panels or labels.

Recommendations

It is imperative that text is presented in an accessible, easy to read format. This does not just include the presentation and style, the text and panel size, and the contrast between background and text, but also the intellectual accessibility in terms of the language used in the exhibition. Visitors who feel intimidated by the language or terminology used they are less likely to read other panels or labels, which impacts on their overall enjoyment of the exhibition.

Seating located close to large text panels would enable visitors to read the information more comfortably.

More effort should be made to make visitors aware at the beginning of their visit that large-print format text is available.

Appendix 6.1: Mark Dion summative evaluation questionnaire

Hello my name is..... and I work at the Natural History Museum. We are trying to find out what visitors think about the Mark Dion Systema Metropolis exhibition. Would you mind spending 3 or 4 minutes answering some questions?

1a. What made you decide to visit the Mark Dion exhibition today:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Saw it advertised in the press/on the tube | Heard about it in the Museum |
| Interested in contemporary art | Interested in the work of Mark Dion |
| Recommendation | Just strolled in |
| Interested in scientific processes/Linnaeus | Other (please state)... |

1b. Using the rating scale below, how interested are you in science? {Show scale to visitors }

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
very uninterested very interested

1c. Using the rating scale below, how interested are you in contemporary art?

{Show scale to visitors }

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
very uninterested very interested

1d. Who are you visiting with today

partner friends/family alone as part of a larger group

2. Approximately how much time did you spend in the Mark Dion Systema Metropolis exhibition today?

3a. Before you entered this exhibition, what did you expect to see, do and find out here?

3b. Were your expectations: met exceeded not met not applicable

3c. Why/how was that?

4a. Before you entered did you know that Mark Dion Systema Metropolis this was going to be a contemporary art exhibition? Yes/No

4b. What do you think about having a contemporary art exhibition in the Natural History Museum? Why is that?

- 5a. What do you think the exhibition was trying to get you to think about? Why is that?
- 5b. Anything else? Why is that?

- 6. What did you most enjoy or find inspirational about this exhibition? Why was that?

- 7. What do you think you will remember most about this exhibition? Why is that?

- 8a. Now that you've visited this exhibition do you feel you know more about the work of the Museum and its science? Yes/No

{If Yes}

- 8b. In what ways? Could you give an example please?

- 9a. Had you heard of Mark Dion before you visited this exhibition? Yes/No

- 9b. Had you heard of Linnaeus before you visited this exhibition? Yes/No

- 9c. How do you think Linnaeus might be relevant to this exhibition? *{Prompt: If you're not sure please have a guess}*

- 10. If you had to describe the exhibition to someone else, what words would you choose from this list? You may select as many as you like. *{Show word list and note all words selected}*:

- 11. Is there anything in the Mark Dion Systema Metropolis exhibition that you think you will go away and find out more about? *{Prompt: Are you inspired you continue your explorations beyond the exhibition space?}* Anything else?

- 12a. Now that you have seen it, do you feel differently about any of the issues raised by the exhibition? Which ones? Why is that?

- 12b. As a result of visiting the Mark Dion exhibition, do you think you will change the way you think or behave in future? Yes/No
Why is that?

- 12c. Anything else?

- 13a. Using the rating scale below, how easy or difficult was it to read / view the exhibition's graphic panels and text labels? *{Show scale to visitors}*

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
 very easy very difficult

{If rating is 4 or 5, ask} Which ones in particular?

{If rating is 4 or 5, ask}

13b. Were you aware that copies of the graphics panels and text labels are available in a large print format? Yes/No

{Weekend visitors only}

14a. Did you join one of the Mark Dion exhibition tours?
Yes/No

14b. {If Yes} How, if at all, did this affect your experience of the exhibition?

{All visitors}

15. Which of the following age categories do you fit into?

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-59

60+

Thank and close. Hand out incentive.

Note gender: Male Female

Appendix 6.2: Word list used for question 10

If you had to describe the exhibition to someone else, what words would you choose from this list?

Please choose as many words as you like

enjoyable	unusual	trivial
contemporary	frustrating	empowering
boring	worthwhile	inspiring
exciting	entertaining	incomprehensible
thought provoking	radical	daring
stressful	intriguing	pointless
fun	confusing	motivating
disappointing	informative	challenging
difficult	beautiful	