

THIS
IS
A
VOICE

A hand holding a red dental model of a mouth with white teeth and a pink tongue. The hand is positioned as if presenting the model. The background is black.

Museum
Footnotes

About Museum Footnotes

The MAAS Learning team were inspired to create Museum Footnotes by an article in *Journal of Museum Education* by Alan Marcus and Jennifer Kowitt. The article reported on a project they worked on at the Fairfield Museum and History Centre, Connecticut, United States, where they created a form of footnotes ‘much like those used by historians, to help visitors better interpret and learn from exhibitions’. The Learning team thought this sounded like a really interesting idea, and decided to try creating a set for the exhibition *This is a Voice*.

These footnotes are intended to give visitors a behind-the-scenes look at exhibition development in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Every exhibition is different, and processes vary wildly between museums, but we hope these footnotes will give you a deeper understanding of how exhibitions evolve.

When you walk into an exhibition you see the finished product. There are plinths and labels and things under spotlights. Everything is in its place and looks perfect.

A lot happens behind the scenes in the weeks, months and even years before the exhibition opens. Many people work to bring exhibitions to life. The core team constantly discuss things, make decisions, negotiate and solve problems to deliver the finished product.

Museum Footnotes explores that world, the decisions that could have gone either way, the issues talked through by the team and parts of the exhibition that didn’t make it into the final show, which you won’t miss but we know aren’t there. We hope the footnotes contribute to your thinking about how ideas are shaped and presented in museums.

About Tilly



These footnotes were written by Tilly Boleyn. Tilly is a MAAS Curator focused mainly on science, health and medicine. She is passionate about issues of equity in the delivery of health services, highlighting pseudoscience, science communication and education, and how art–science collaborations can contribute to knowledge. Basically, she is a massive nerd who’s curious about the world and everything in it. Tilly co-curated the Sydney presentation of *This is a Voice* together with Katie Dyer.

Karolina Novak from the Learning team helped Tilly put these footnotes together, Jo Lyons edited them, and Fil Bartkowiak did the design.

How do we choose what goes in?

There are 100 things in this exhibition. About 60 of them were part of [the London version of *This is a Voice*](#) and about 40 of them were sourced by the curatorial partnership of Katie Dyer and me, Tilly Boleyn. Katie's background is mainly in contemporary art curation and mine is in science, health and medicine communication and curation. Combining forces, we had networks and knowledge to make a truly collaborative science, art and medicine extravaganza in partnership with the Wellcome Collection, London.

To shape the ideas we explore in the show we drew on the [MAAS collection](#) and the [Wellcome Collection](#), as well as many loans from other museums, galleries, universities and artists from Australia and beyond.

Many large museums and galleries need about a year's notice to loan their things for an exhibition. This meant Katie and I sat down about 18 months before the opening date of the exhibition to go through the List of Works (LOW) from the London show, discussing each one and whether we should include it in the Sydney show or find a local work to replace it.

Because some of the works that we wanted to include in the Sydney show had already been on display in the London, we had to negotiate with the registrars and conservators who are responsible for those things. Part of a museum's job is to care for the objects that we keep. When museums are thinking about loaning things for an exhibition they consider a range of factors before going ahead with it to ensure the object isn't damaged. They consider things like: When was it last on display? For how long? How long will this exhibition be open? What light level should we expose it to so it doesn't deteriorate?

Some objects are less robust than others. Old books, for example, can be quite delicate. We have to limit the amount of light that the pages are exposed to. Part of the loan negotiation over the year before the exhibition opens involves the registrars from both institutions carefully discussing the environmental conditions that things will be living in for the length of the exhibition. Our loan registrar, Lucy Clark, fine-tuned the loan agreements with all our international and local lenders, including the British Library and the Science Museum, London. Part of our agreement was that for some of the very fragile old books we shine only a very low light on them. In other cases we will have the actual books on display for only the first three months, then we will swap the books with a reproduction of the page.

- **If different objects are displayed, is it still the same exhibition?**

The exhibition as a soundscape

Museums are often known to be quiet places. However, sound is integral to *This is a Voice* and played a big part in the design of the show. The team thought a lot about the physical spaces and the acoustics of the exhibition to create a soundscape that intentionally filters through the space.

The entry to the exhibition is through an anechoic chamber created using acoustic padding to reorient the visitor to listening. Each section is connected, and sound intentionally travels throughout the show. There aren't many 'real' walls but rather permeable walls that use fabric and lighting to create different spaces.

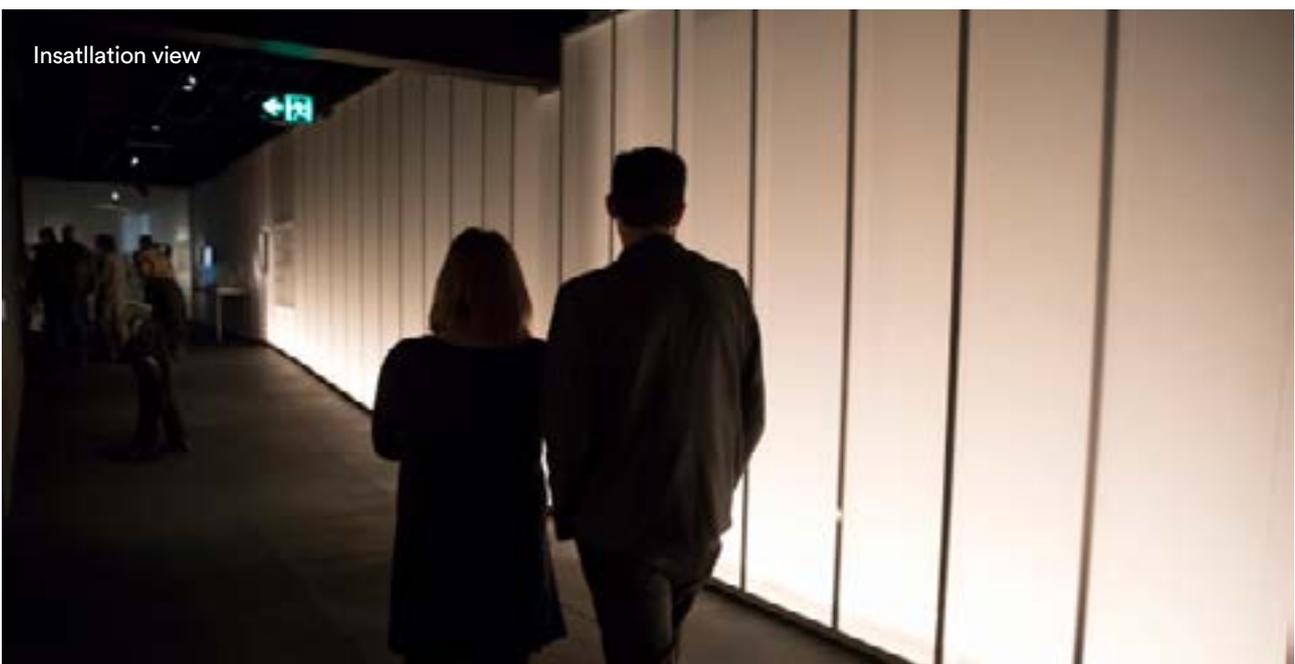
Some of the walls are constructed with white muslin pulled over a wooden frame. When lit from behind, the muslin becomes transparent but when lit from the front it appears solid. These effects are used throughout the show. At various points it looks like a skin membrane pulled over wooden bones.

Multiple devices were used to release and control sound, depending on the location and placement of other objects or works. The team discussed each work in the show to decide how the different sounds would overlap. We ended up with a combination of sound showers, headphones, speakers in the ceiling, contained pods with directional speakers, TV screens with internal speakers and more.

The last week of installing the exhibition was very busy. Once we had placed every object and work inside the space we spent a lot of time adjusting the volumes and considering how the show sounded as a whole. We walked through the space many times with our acoustic consultant, Robin McCarthy, and our in-house audiovisual technicians to try to find the right balance.

- **We're pretty used to being surrounded by visual media these days. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by sound? What was it like?**

Installation view



How much exhibition text is too much?

Blending science, technology, art and performance, *This is a Voice* is an exhibition with a lot going on throughout. As you move through the rooms, corridors and more open-flow space, many things compete for your attention.

Quite early on in development (mid 2016) we decided to differ significantly in the usual approach to exhibition text at the Museum. Often in exhibitions each object will have a label close to it, telling the visitors about that object in the context of the exhibition.

For this show Katie and I proposed that we strip back the explanatory text in the show. We worked with our editor Jo Lyons to create a succinct wall panel for each section with about 100 words setting the scene for the visitor about that space. Then each object or work is accompanied by just the basic level of information: the name of the creator, the title of the object or work, the year it was created and the name of the institution or person who lent it to us.

A free exhibition guide is provided at the start of the exhibition and on [the exhibition website](#). In this guide we provide a more detailed explanation of each section of the show (about 200 words) and each item contained within it (a photo and between 50 and 80 words).

- **If this is an exhibition about voice, what if you listened to someone explaining each work to you?**



TILLY BOLEYN

Curator Katie Dyer and Production Coordinator Helen Johnson apply some text to a wall in *This is a Voice*.

The larynx, or why half a head isn't in the show

The London presentation of this exhibition featured [this human specimen](#) from the Hungarian Museum. It is the larynx and throat of Marianne Harland, a young woman known for her musical talents and the beauty of her vocal range. Tragically, as a result of tuberculosis she lost her voice – and, soon after, her life. This specimen is all that remains of Harland's famed voice, now encased in a state of permanent silence.

As the health and medicine curator, I wanted to find a local specimen for the Sydney presentation of the show. MAAS doesn't hold any ['wet' human specimens](#) so I started connecting with our colleagues at health and medicine museums and universities to see if they had a specimen I could borrow.

The University of Sydney has two museums that hold human specimens, the [Ainsworth Interactive Collection of Medical Pathology](#)

Human larynx and tongue specimen



THE AINSWORTH INTERACTIVE COLLECTION OF MEDICAL PATHOLOGY

and the [J.T Wilson Museum of Human Anatomy](#). Both collections help people studying anatomy, health and disease. There were many specimens to choose from, ranging in size and complexity from just larynxes to specimens of a person's head and neck. These more complex specimens were dissected down the back half of the head and neck, revealing the intimate anatomical structures within all of us.

I wanted to include one of these specimens to truly bring the human element into the show. Katie had serious concerns and was less enthusiastic about the prospect of such a potentially confronting specimen being featured in the exhibition. We discussed different display possibilities that could alleviate some of the risk, like blacking out the back of the case so the specimen's face was in darkness, or covering it so the visitor had to choose to view it. When I contacted the Anatomy Museum manager to discuss these potential options and seek his advice I learned that specimens with faces are never loaned to other institutions. This is to ensure a member of the public doesn't accidentally see someone they knew without warning. People donate their bodies to the university for educational reasons, and even though museums are also places for education, we have unrestricted access that increases the risk of an accidental identification of the specimen.

So Katie breathed a sigh of relief and I happily progressed with the loan discussions to borrow the human larynx and tongue specimen you can see in the show.

After discussion we included a warning on the introduction panel that there were human remains in the show.

- **Would you have included a human specimen in the exhibition?**

Chatbot dilemma

For this exhibition we wanted to represent the evolving relationship between technology and the human voice. We didn't want to include Siri as she is already in so many people's pockets all day.

Two chatbots feature in the exhibition: Karim and Sara. Karim is an Arabic-speaking artificial intelligence (AI) psychologist created by [Eugene Bann and Michiel Rauws](#) to help Syrian refugees through the trauma of civil war and displacement. You can read more about Karim's development and story in the exhibition guide or in [this article](#). Sara is the English-speaking version of Karim, available to chat to people anytime on Facebook Messenger.

We really wanted to include Karim in the 'Unlocated Voices' section of the exhibition, so we featured a video of Karim speaking in

Arabic to a person. What struck me about Karim is that when the creators trialled the chatbot in Lebanon, they realised that when people found out they would be talking to a computer it made them more comfortable about opening up and discussing their fears. So now AI is delivering services previously thought of as uniquely human, perhaps better than humans could deliver it. Technology, once used only to record and play back the human voice, continues to dislocate the source of the voice completely from humans.

We also wanted to include Karim's English-speaking chatbot, Sara. I really wanted to have Sara in the exhibition, available for visitors to chat with. That is how we set it up for the first week of the exhibition: a computer monitor and keyboard, with a chair to encourage people to sit and chat to Sara.



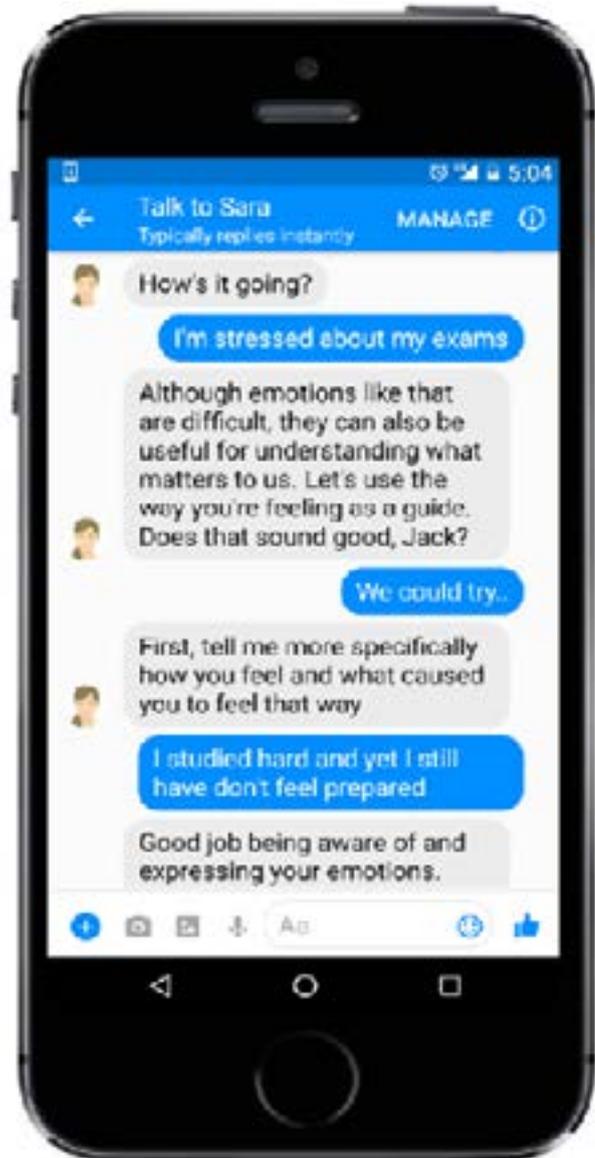
X2AI

Karim, the AI providing psychological support to those in need, Bann and Rauws 2014–17

We experimented with the interactive mode in that first week but couldn't make it work. For example, the power in that area is on a timer which switches off overnight, meaning a member of the team had to log in every morning. Also we had set up a keyboard with only the letters and space bar turned on, and no mouse so visitors couldn't log into their own Facebook accounts (which was causing big headaches for our team). I had to find a more sustainable solution.

So I decided to switch from the interactive chatbot to a video showing visitors how to download Facebook Messenger onto their own phones. I'm really happy with the result as feedback from visitors shows that they feel much more comfortable starting a chat with Sara on their own device; they take it more seriously and can continue in their own time. Also, we don't have visitors filling the screen with their best attempt at rude words. :)

- **Do you think you would feel more comfortable opening up to a real person or a chatbot?**



X2AI

Sara, the AI psychologist, Bann and Rauws, 2014–17