

Review of the *Memory Palace* exhibition,
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Memory Palace was a curatorial experiment exploring the relationship between the written word and its visual interpretation. Victoria and Albert Museum curators Laurie Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar commissioned Hari Kunzru to write a short story, then assigned 20 illustrators and graphic designers passages of this story to interpret. These visual interpretations were presented within a custom built space at the V&A. The catalogue describes *Memory Palace* as a “physically immersive illustrated story that explores the idea of an exhibition as a walk-in book.” (84)

In Kunzru’s dystopian narrative, a magnetic storm wipes out all digital technology. Due to humankind’s dependence on this technology to record and store information, ‘memory’ ceases to exist. Chaos ensues. A fascist regime outlaw recording, writing, art and collecting anything, hoping to push the human race back to a purely animal existence. The narrator is part of an underground sect known as Memorialists whose mission is to revive the lost Art of Memory, recalling the past as a form of resistance. The narrator is imprisoned and does his part to fight the regime by transforming his cell into a Memory Palace, a mnemonic technique in which you visualise a building/space and arrange the things you need to remember as ‘objects’ within that space.

Kunzru’s 10,000-word story does not appear in its entirety within the gallery. Visitors are given a general impression of the fictional world via a two-paragraph introduction on the room sheet and a glossary of terms is displayed in vinyl lettering on the passage leading into the main gallery space, explaining key concepts such as:

Memory palace – a technique used to remember, a space in which to place memories
The Withering – the present time of decline
The Booming – the golden age before the Withering
Magnetisation – the magnetic storm that brought about the time of the Withering
The Wilding – a time in the future when humans live in complete union with nature
The Thing – the great council of rulers in the time of the Withering who want to bring about the Wilding

The curators paired passages with artists carefully. For example, information designers Francesco Franchi and Stefanie Posavec were each assigned passages that establish the complex context of the fictional world, whereas passages heavy with dialogue were assigned to illustrators with backgrounds in graphic novels and children’s books. The artists were briefed to respond to their passage of text ‘freely’; some incorporated long sections of Kunzru’s text, others none at all.

The first work, Franchi’s synoptic map depicting the history of the Art of Memory, is a beautiful thing but overwhelming in its complexity. After a moment I move on to get a better understanding of the whole collection, intending to return to this work later. Next, Posavec’s diagrams are more immediately decipherable, possibly because I’m familiar with Posavec’s [Literary Organism](#) work. I have to restrain myself from touching Sam Winston’s intricately patterned letterpress plates – a speckling of greasy prints shows others were less restrained. I am delighted by Le Gun’s large installation of a shaman-like medicine man being pulled on a wagon by a team of uncanny foxes (think Tim Burton meets *The Might Boosh*). There’s much to admire in the individual works, though as in any exhibition some engage me more than others. Yet as I move through the space, I feel increasingly disoriented. I understand the works are linked because they each visualise a section of the same text, but the stark contrast between the graphic style of each work throws me – I struggle to make connections between the fragments. The room sheet promises a ‘walk-in book’, yet I cannot draw a strong sense of a story.

Illustrators often choose to reinterpret well-known stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* and Hans Christian Anderson fairy-tales because viewers arrive at the illustration with an understanding of plot and character. Starting from a point of common understanding, the illustrator can take risks, be playful

and engage the viewer by subverting or challenging the general understanding of the story. Curating an exhibition of mismatched artworks around an unknown story is a brave experiment. Before viewing the artwork, the audience need to find our way into Kunzru's post-apocalyptic world. Then, we need to move between visually and formally disparate works to try to piece the story together. The story revolves around a memory loss, the characters patch together scraps of information to understand a hazy past and uncertain future, so I understand disorientation and fragmentation is part of the experience. However overall, the exhibition didn't engage or affect me as much as I want it to. It feels too much like an experiment – a curious and conceptually interesting one – but not an 'immersive narrative experience'.

Standing in the gallery I find I don't want to read the longer graphic novel sections, which are carrying the narrative through character development and dialogue. There's a reason comics and graphic novels work well in book form – they are intimate and private. We hang our heads over books, closing off the rest of the world to enter the fictional realm. A white gallery with high ceilings is not a private and intimate space. I understand from the room sheet that the exhibition was designed by CJ Lim and Studio 8 Architects to be part of the experience, but the high white walls and so much blank space leave me feeling disengaged.

I arrive wanting to engage with the story, to have the promised immersive experience, but exit feeling strangely empty. Not ready to revisit the early works yet I exit via the gift shop, picking up a copy of the catalogue.

The catalogue looks and feels like a hardback novel. I sit down with a coffee, hoping to get my head into the story before returning for another pass of the artwork. It is not a conventional catalogue of works on the wall accompanied by curatorial/critical essays. In fact, none of the final work appears in the book – only process sketches, printed in black ink on novel-standard stock. Kunzru's full story is printed, followed by an essay from Newell and Salazar about their curatorial process, and Robert Hunter's 'part actual, part imaginary' wordless comic that shows the process of creation from the various contributors.

I wonder if the absence of final artwork is because the book needed to be printed well before the exhibition opened, so people like me could arrive understanding the story before engaging with its visual interpretation. Or perhaps the catalogue is produced without images of the final work for a more strategic reason – will this work exist in other forms such as a website, a film, a more richly produced book? Or are the curators withholding the visual documentation as a strategy to force visitors to experience being denied access the visual record after the show, experiencing memory fading with no tools to recover it?

Later, I look up sponsor Sky Arts Ignition's website, and find a promotional trailer and a documentary showing Kunzru discussing his creative process and interviewing several of the artists involved in their studios, showing their design process. The final works are still not shown. In particular, I want to show Stefanie Posavec and Sam Winston's work to a colleague. The [V&A website](#) has a section with all the works listed accompanied by the passage of the story the image maker worked from, but many of these – Winston and Posavec's included – are the same process sketches as in the catalogue. In trying to write about more of the works now, I have only hazy memories of most of the pieces. I'm disappointed I cannot go back and refresh my memory with an image, or more descriptive text on the room sheet. Although this memory loss is appropriate for the fictional world Kunzru and the curators have created, it seems disrespectful of the illustrators and designers whose rich, thoughtful works cannot be appreciated other than in situ. Kunzru's story is inked in the catalogue in its entirety, his name the only one gold foiled on the hardback cover. Within, the image-maker's sketches float amongst Kunzru's words unattributed – finding the image-maker's identity requires reading through the alphabetically listed biographies to find the page number they appear on.

From a design/illustration perspective, this is an exciting curatorial model because it seems to position the image maker in a powerful role: by briefing the writer to compose an original work with the intention having it visually interpreted in experimental ways – at the whim of the image makers – the visual communication is foregrounded. And yet, after leaving the gallery space, the text is preserved fully, but the images fade almost without trace.