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STRANGER THAN KINDNESS

AV technology brings depth to extraordinary Nick Cave exhibition



Exhibitions on icons aren't unique, but it's rare that the star of a show gets involved to the level Nick Cave has in helping to create *Stranger Than Kindness*, a Gucci sponsored exhibition at The Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen.

Visitors are treated to a journey directly from Cave's consciousness. It brings together artefacts and curios collected throughout his extraordinary life, conveys his emotional states through different time periods and events, and includes new content created by Cave specifically for this setting. Past and present, abstract and real, fact and fiction are intertwined.

A network of rooms in the basement of the modern Black Diamond extension to the Royal Danish Library were turned over to tell this story, with immersive soundscapes written by Cave specifically for the exhibition and recorded by him and collaborator Warren Ellis.

After getting Cave on board with the project, exhibition designer and developer Christina Back realised she needed to bring in technical expertise,

particularly on the audio side, to create the exhibition she imagined. She turned to consultancy and integration firm Stouenborg.

"From the very beginning the design team had some ambitious aims regarding the sound and the impact the exhibition should have on the visitor. They wanted to create a very strong impression. You should feel the exhibition just as much as you should understand it," says Kasper Stouenborg, CEO of Stouenborg and project manager for the exhibition.

One of Stouenborg's first challenges was to deliver systems that would immerse the audience in each soundscape, requiring a powerful audio set up. But that had to be balanced with not allowing the sound to bleed between the rooms. The soundscapes also had to deliver sound that would fill each room, as well as small local sounds in the spaces.

Luckily for the project, Meyer Sound became directly involved, with the manufacturer's staff even on site to tune the high-end systems to work perfectly within the spaces.

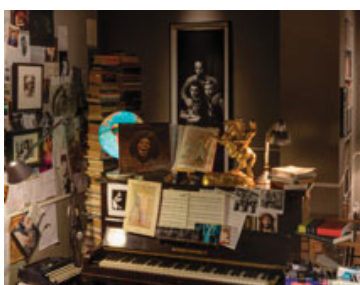
"Usually on this type of project the exhibitions are designed and then the designers say 'oh, we need some sound'," says Stouenborg. "Then you have to hide the loudspeakers behind the scenes, or in a corner. *Stranger Than Kindness* was the other way around. Loudspeaker positioning came first and then everything else was placed around the units because they were such an important part of the exhibition. If I said 'it would be best if the loudspeaker is right there in the middle of the wall' the answer was 'okay, you place it there and we'll work around it'."

It's hard to unpick whether the content was designed for the spaces, or the spaces moulded to suit the content. The reality is it's a bit of both. Cave and Ellis were aware of the challenges Stouenborg and the exhibition team were facing in playing the soundscapes in the network of rooms before composition and recording. They're carefully designed so that they standalone, but also there's continuity as you travel from one area to the next.

Cave and Ellis both spent a lot of time on site in Copenhagen and Ellis was intricately involved

A LIFE'S WORK

The life of Nick Cave is told in an exhibition that is a piece of art in its own right. **Anna Mitchell** finds out from integrator Stouenborg why AV technology was critical in bringing the story to life.



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Kasper Stouenborg, Stouenborg

in fine tuning and mixing the soundscapes live in the rooms, even recording extra material to take care of additional elements.

Audio is controlled by QLab 4 software running on a MacBook Pro, the only computer used in the entire installation. Elsewhere Stouenborg opted for local control, power and processing where possible: all video is delivered by local BrightSign media players and the loudspeakers are powered.

The spaces convey different aspects of Cave's life and the first deals with his childhood, growing up in a small town. It's fairly simple and focuses on his idols and musical influences from that time using photos and video footage playing on some screens to support the soundscape delivered by three Meyer Sound MM-4XP and three UP-4Slim compact installation speakers. Some of the audio is localised, for example in one space it supports a short clip of Johnny Cash. Visitors can also use Blackbox headphones, powered by solid-state audio players, to hear content such as a young Nick Cave singing in a children's choir.

Some of the ideas that Cave and the team at the library had were quite abstract, leaving Stouenborg the creative scope to find ways to convey ideas and feelings. This is demonstrated in the next space, Beautiful Chaos. It uses a circus tent to show Cave's wild youth, starting out with early bands The Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party.

Stouenborg explains: "They wanted projections all around the tent and the content had to come from a music video but they didn't know how they wanted that to happen. I brought in a video designer, Morten Just Hansen, to translate the content from the music video into something that could work in a three-dimensional room, projected onto a tent surface."

The soundscape here is designed to be powerfully immersive and linked with the projections around the tent. Two Meyer Sound Ultra-X40 point source loudspeakers are supported by an MM-10AC powered subwoofer and three MM-4XP for directed sound effects. Six Panasonic PT-VMZ60 projectors, coupled with Brightsign HD224 media players

and mounted with six Chief RSMAU ceiling mount kits, were deployed. More localised content includes interviews from that time and TV transmissions of The Birthday Party concerts.

From there visitors walk into Obsessions, a room that includes many objects from Cave's apartment in Berlin. It has a church-like atmosphere in a nod to the fact this was a religious period of Cave's life but that's juxtaposed with subtle indications of drug taking and creative writing projects Cave was engaged in. It contains three Meyer Sound UP-4Slim loudspeakers.

"Then we walk into Collaborations, a very interesting room from a technical point of view," says Stouenborg. "It's a black room, with 12 Panasonic 32-in monitors showing each of the 12 members that have been in the Bad Seeds. Content plays for 20 minutes and takes you through the history of the Bad Seeds in the members' own words. At first the members that were there in the beginning show up on the screens and talk about that period of time. As the band develops and some drop out, new ones come in, they disappear or show up.



“It’s 12 individual interviews that have been made and edited together by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard. It feels like they are kind of talking to each other and it’s a really nice way to do this because they’re not in a place where they would want to all be in the same room together. It’s the only way you can have an interview with all of them at the same time.

“Our job was to make sure all of interviews play back exactly in sync with one another and to achieve this effect we used networked BrightSign LS424 players. One is set as a master and the other 11 follow.” Twelve Genelec 4010A monitors are coupled with the displays.

The next space is a reconstruction of Cave’s office containing many physical objects such as his piano, his desk, a library of his own books, and personal correspondence including letters to and from PJ Harvey. Visitors are free to play on Cave’s instruments which has to be almost unique when it comes to exhibitions about iconic musicians.

Audio is delivered with two UPM-XP compact reinforcement speakers, three MM-4XPs and an

MM-10ACX subwoofer.

From there you walk into a room called Eclipse about his wife and the son he tragically lost. In an example of some of the very subtle AV effects used to enhance already powerful and interesting objects from Cave’s life, Stouenborg describes how projection was used to add movement to a grainy photo of Cave and his wife. The photo is a still image taken of a TV with a VHS recording from the wedding. Confetti falls in front of the couple and the barely perceptible projection from a Panasonic PT-RZ570 projector coupled with a Brightsign HD224 player achieves the effect that the pieces are gently falling. Two UP-4Slim speakers deliver audio.

A further three UP-4Slim units are used in the next space. This is the Hallway of Gratitude where Cave wanted to say thank you to people that mean something to him. The corridor is lined with picture frames, many of which use small monitors to add visual content or ear cups for audio specific to that ‘picture’. It’s here where a video of Cave dancing with Kylie Minogue is put into a Pepper’s Ghost installation with

the sound of a music box playing.

“They had to make the recording specifically for the Pepper’s Ghost installation and found time when they were both in the UK to create it,” notes Stouenborg.

The last room is dark and you hear Cave’s voice in powerfully immersive audio delivered by a combination of Meyer Sound loudspeakers: one UX-40, two UP-4XPs and two MM-4XPs. The audio is reinforced with visual words as what Cave is saying is echoed in text projected on the wall using a Panasonic PT-RZ970 mounted with a Chief bracket and coupled with a BrightSign media player.

The idea for the exhibition came from the team at the Royal Danish Library and exhibition designer Christina Back but Cave has been effectively curating it for six decades. It’s brave and personal and he was heavily involved. Stouenborg describes it best: “It’s really like an open book showing his life, not in a historically correct way, the way you would if you wrote a book about Nick Cave. It’s the way he wants to present his life and the journey he has been through.” 🌐



Tech-Spec

Audio

Behringer HA400 headphone amplifiers
Blackbox headphones and solid-state audio players
Genelec 4010A monitors
Meyer Sound MM-4XP, UP-4Slim, UPM-XP, UP-4XP and Ultra-X40 loudspeakers and MM-10AC subwoofers
QLab 4 software
Yamaha RO8-D Dante output and SWP1 network switch

Video

Beetronics 19-in display
BrightSign LS424 and HD224 media players
Chief RSMAU projector ceiling mount kits
Iiyama 19-in displays
LG 32-in display
Optoma ML750e projector
Panasonic 32-in and 50-in displays and PT-RZ970, PT-VMZ40 and PT-VMZ60 projectors