

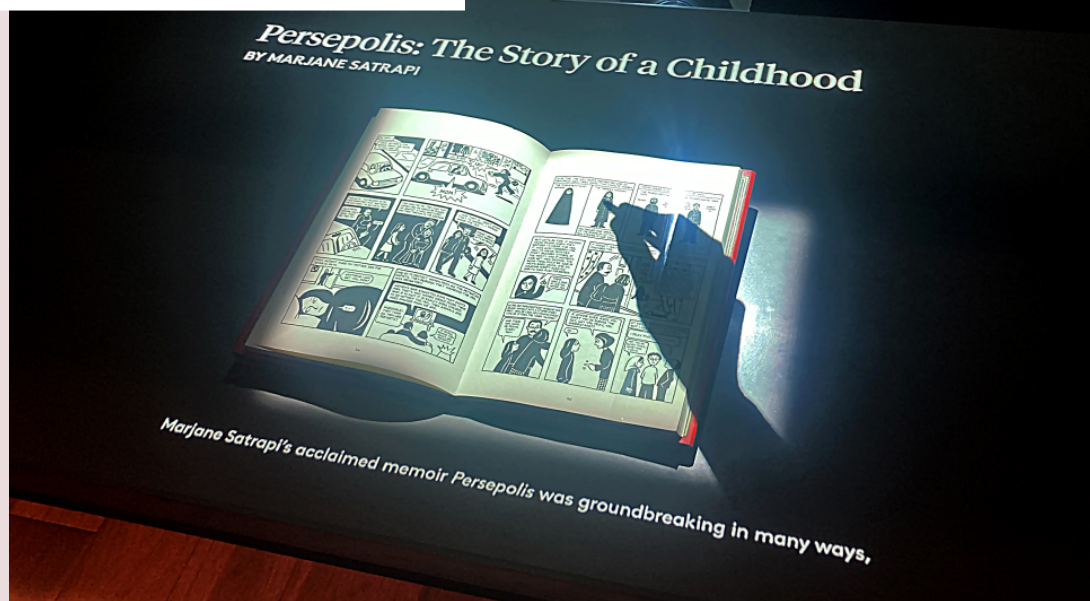
INSTITUTION Planet Word

LOCATION Washington, DC

Bringing Play and Magic Into Language Arts

Fig. 1.

Books come to life through audio and projection mapping when placed on an interactive table.



ALL PHOTOS BY SARAH NOLAN

During a recent trip to Washington, DC, I visited Planet Word, the new language arts museum founded by former teacher Ann B. Friedman and designed by New York City-based Local Projects. I approached this high-tech, voice-activated exhibition with my designer hat on, intent on bringing my critical, professional point of view. However, I dropped those plans when I was greeted at the entrance by a video montage of babies and toddlers making their first words and sounds. Captivated by the wonder of a little person's developing mind, I was all in.

Planet Word is marketed more as an experience than as an exhibition. It has a theme park-like sense of magic and play. There are zero artifacts and lengthy text

panels, yet unlike most theme parks you come away with new knowledge and a piqued curiosity, and without the headaches from gravity-defying roller coasters. Large-scale interactives in spacious rooms invite exploration and create an inviting, non-scholarly, immersive environment.

For instance, in one area that mimics a grand library, visitors place books on a tabletop to see them “come to life” with projection-mapped graphics and text over and around the book. Audio provides intriguing commentary ([fig. 1](#)), making the most reading-averse visitor want to open and consume that book right then and there. In another room, visitors paint over a landscape mural with different brushes,

each linked to an adjective. A visual effect is projected across the mural with each brushstroke (fig. 2). My favorite brush, “surreal,” turned a flying airplane into a dragon-like creature. Activating my chosen adjective left a lasting impression of the word’s meaning.

The exhibition also encourages participation through its many voice-activated interactives. One greeted me with an array of tablets with diverse faces peering out, ready to teach me their native languages (fig. 3). I approached a speaker of Irish-Gaelic, the native tongue of my parents, and of which I shamefully only know a few words. The woman gently prompted me to try a few phrases, and I obliged. As I worked to wrap my tongue around the complex linguistics, my digital host encouraged me to try more phrases with increasing difficulty. As someone who finds learning foreign languages daunting, this interactive made the experience feel remarkably accessible. The intimate nature of the one-on-one exchange and the small, manageable parcels of information left me with a newfound curiosity for this beautiful language.

As a designer, my main aspiration is to spark curiosity in the visitors’ minds and Planet Word did precisely that for me with its playful, magical and welcoming interactives. And I learned a thing or two along the way.

Sarah Nolan, Independent Exhibition Designer, Sarah Nolan Design

Fig. 2. Visitors select adjective paint brushes and see a word’s meaning appear visually as they paint on the interactive landscape mural.



Fig. 3. Voice-activated interactives offer visitors one-on-one tutoring in a diverse range of languages.

INSTITUTION New York Botanical Garden

LOCATION Bronx, New York

Becoming Cosmic with Nature at the New York Botanical Gardens



Fig. 1.

Commissioned for the NYBG installation, *I Want to Fly to the Universe* (2020) skates across the reflecting pool, greeting visitors on the entrance walkway.

I visited *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* at the New York Botanical Garden's (NYBG) 250-acre-site in the Bronx on a glorious spring day in April. Walking freely among the flowering trees and shrubs and viewing art live and up close was both liberating and joyful after all the restrictions of my pandemic existence.

The vibrant sculptures of Japanese contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama are installed on NYBG's arterial pathways, water features, and prominent buildings and the symbiosis between the two makes the familiar extraordinary. One of four new sculptures commissioned for the

ALL PHOTOS BY SHILPI CHANDRA



Fig. 2. Visitors walk between the “legs” of *Dancing Pumpkin* (2021) and take lots of photos.



Fig. 3. Ever moving and reflecting the plants and sky, the metal balls of *Narcissus Garden* (1966/2021) bob gently on the water and become trapped in the reeds.

NYBG show, *I Want to Fly to the Universe* (fig. 1), stands in a reflecting pool on the entrance pathway leading into the gardens. I was drawn to the edge of the pool to see myself, the trees, the sculpture, and the sky in the water and reflect on our interconnectedness. A short walk away, I found the interactive experience *Flower Obsession*. Visitors fill the inside of this “obliteration greenhouse” with specially made, bright-pink flower decals, constantly changing the viewing experience of the piece. Other signature Kusama pieces like *Dancing Pumpkin* (fig. 2) – a prime selfie spot – and two different versions of the Infinity Room (one scheduled to open in August 2021) are all here as well.

Narcissus Garden (fig. 3) is the piece that really shines in NYBG’s natural environment. It was first shown in 1966 outside the official Venice Biennial and is currently set up in the meandering water channels of the Native Plant Garden – 1,400 shiny metal balls floating on the surface of the water, clinking together in ever-changing patterns. The simple beauty of the floating balls responding to nature’s ebbs and flows creates a tranquil setting for personal contemplation. Additional drawings, paintings, and a performance video housed inside the Mertz Library complement the sculptures and provide a more rounded view of Kusama’s practice.

Cosmic Nature is an exhibition that gives us another perspective on Kusama’s practice – her attachment to nature – which started from a childhood spent on a seed farm. Observing Kusama’s sculptures nestled among foliage and within reflecting pools is a sensory celebration and a strong reason to see the show. Selfie stick not required.

Shilpi Chandra, Independent Curator



Exhibits Newsline

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewsline@gmail.com.

INSTITUTION Anacostia Community Museum

LOCATION Washington, DC

No Justice, No Peas



Fig. 1. Bold graphics have curb appeal in the exhibition's busy city environment.

These days in DC, some exhibitions are seeing visitors for the first time as museums slowly reopen. Others, however, moved the party outdoors months ago. One of the Smithsonian's nimblest museums, the Anacostia Community Museum (ACM), retooled its *Food for the People: Eating and Activism in Greater Washington* show for outdoor installation in April 2021. I cruised over to take a look, because this liminal time of pandemic flux and racial reckoning makes for fascinating museum work.

Food for the People uses brash colors and bold shapes (figs. 1 & 2), required to get people's attention in a busy outside spot, to make food justice feel big, clear, urgent, and fun. The logo is a clenched fist, a symbol of pride and power most recently tied to the Black Lives Matter movement, with an added orange carrot held aloft. It's one hell of a great way to signal that this show will be unapologetically about food and politics.

The installation's structures are sturdy, whimsical, and deliberately apparent: metal milk-crate towers



Fig. 2. Close-up of the exhibition's first section, where words are kept to a minimum.



Fig. 3. All exhibitions should have a little fake food, in this case to illustrate how much real food is wasted in America.

and bases (fig. 3) and outdoor-carpet farm fields. Lashed by summer storms and baked in the heat, the only element I saw out of place was a lonely piece of fake food that popped out of its milk crate.

The exhibition's largest section is a series of pylons featuring life-size photos and stores of local food activists (fig. 4). Crucially, each pillar also has a neon green panel with the words “Take Action” and often-radical ways to fight for food justice, like demanding a living wage for food workers. The pylons wind past a mural with corny food puns – like “no justice, no peas” – up to the museum entrance. The Anacostia Community Museum included only part of the originally planned indoor exhibition in the outdoor version, and I wonder if the rest will flow right through the doors when ACM reopens. I can’t wait to see what’s in there.

Farar Elliott, Curator of the U.S. House of Representatives



Fig. 4. Images of activists make food justice personal.