

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/may/10/powerhouse-museum-whistleblower-staff-claim-more-exhibition-items-damaged-or-put-at-risk>

10 May, 2023, The Guardian

Powerhouse Museum: whistleblower staff claim more exhibition items damaged or put at risk

Current workers blame policy of ‘open display’ for compromising safety of collection, in new allegations the museum rejects as ‘lies’

- **Get our morning and afternoon news emails, free app or daily news podcast**
- **Get our weekend culture and lifestyle email**

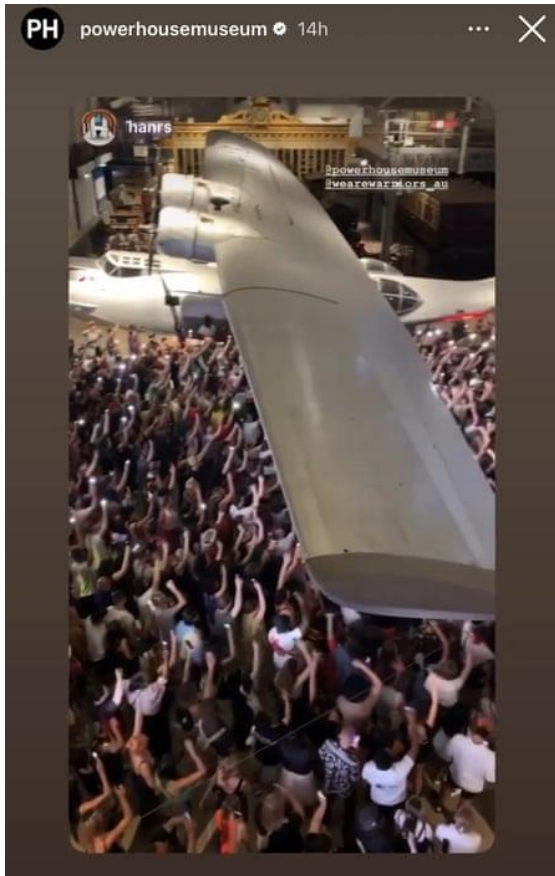
Kelly Burke

Wed 10 May 2023 15.58 AEST



The Powerhouse Museum’s 1950s Catalina seaplane, pictured before it was lowered from the ceiling in August

Powerhouse Museum staff members have raised further allegations of damaged exhibition items, as pressure rises on the NSW Labor government to intervene in the Ultimo museum’s future. In April, *Guardian Australia* reported claims that the museum’s 1950s Catalina seaplane was damaged with white spray paint late last year, after being lowered from the ceiling in August; and that a 20th century Bleriot monoplane was put at risk while the transport exhibition hall was gutted.



The 1950s Catalina seaplane at a party hosted by the museum last year

On Tuesday, Guardian revealed that another priceless antique was potentially at risk: the world's oldest working rotative steam engine, the 1785 Boulton & Watt. Ahead of the contentious \$500m redevelopment of the Ultimo site, the Powerhouse plans to dismantle and store the engine, against repeated expert advice that its components are as "fragile as 200-year-old glass"; and that plans to electrify part of it would be an act of "cultural vandalism".

The museum has denied these claims of damage and risk, saying that the safety of the collection has been ensured "at all times" and that "the care and preservation of the museum collection is our highest priority".

Since then, more staff members have come forward with other instances of damage to exhibition items, including a Victorian-era indication board from Sydney's Central station; a rare 1970s Mellotron keyboard; a dress designed by Ron Muncaster; and two works by HSC design students.



‘Cultural vandalism’: Powerhouse Museum’s landmark steam engine under threat, experts warn
[Read more](#)

In a statement to Guardian Australia, a Powerhouse spokesperson declined to respond specifically to the examples of alleged damage to exhibits detailed in this story, but said “the museum strongly refutes these lies”.

New claims of damage

More exhibition items have been damaged, current staff members claim, in instances they blame on recent staffing cuts, an introduced policy of open display (removing protective barriers and “do not touch” signs), and the use of the space as a party venue.

Three staff members said the Victorian-era indication board from Sydney’s Central station – a signature item that was previously in the extensive transport exhibition – had been irreparably internally damaged after members of the public attempted to manually operate the fragile timber rods that change the destination signs.



The Victorian-era Central station indicator board has been ‘irreparably damaged’, according to three staff members. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons

A rare 1970s electronic Mellotron keyboard was also allegedly recently damaged by members of the public attempting to play it.

More than two dozen sequins on designer Ron Muncaster's elaborate "cotton blossom" gown – designed for the 1994 Mardi Gras – have allegedly been souvenired by visitors to the museum's Absolutely Queer exhibition.

The dress had been sitting on a plinth in a thoroughfare with no signage; one museum employee said: "As more and more sequins disappeared, I watched the [other staff] debate whether they should just take the dress off display."



A rope barrier has been erected around a Ron Muncaster gown after sequins were allegedly taken by visitors

Management recently agreed to trial a small rope barrier around the plinth. "It's kept people back a bit ... and no new sequins have gone missing as of yesterday when I checked," said a second staff member, who confirmed the initial damage.

In January, two exhibits in the Shapes exhibition – a display of selected HSC design students' work – were damaged. A weather machine had its funnel snapped, and a timber workbench had a number of removable dowels stolen. The weather machine took a month to repair and has now been reinstalled inside a glass case.



A weather machine created by an HSC student was repaired and placed under a glass case after being damaged

A spokesperson from the NSW Education Standards Authority, which handles the annual HSC exhibition, said the students were not available for comment. “The Powerhouse Museum resolved this matter efficiently and with careful consideration to the student works on display,” NESAS said in a statement.

According to minutes of a 29 March 2022 meeting of the museum’s executive obtained by Guardian Australia, there were claims of an ongoing mould problem putting items in the Clay Dynasty exhibition at risk. Concerns were also raised over the Eucalyptusdom exhibition, where some objects were at “high risk” from visitors “regularly interfering” with them, according to conservationists. A proposal to introduce acrylic covers to protect the Eucalyptusdom exhibit was deferred at the meeting; Guardian Australia understands the covers were never introduced.

‘We’re not allowed to have “no touching” signs’

Current staff members blamed some of the damage on a recent policy of open display. “We’ve been explicitly told ... that we are not allowed to have any barriers in front of most of the objects and we’re not allowed to have “no touching’ signs,” one said.

“There’s this idea that people understand how to behave in a museum,” another said. “But there’s kids ... there’s people who haven’t been to a museum before, they don’t necessarily know what museum etiquette is. It’s a very elitist idea. Stuff gets touched constantly. We’re getting significant damage.”

Two employees said damage had become a higher risk after recent staffing cuts, which meant two of the museums' four levels now went unpatrolled at times.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the Powerhouse said the museum had an expert team of highly skilled conservators who specialised in taking care of the collection.

“Like all museums, the Powerhouse presents open display exhibitions where risk is mitigated through supervision by security and Visitor Service Officers,” the statement said.

The Powerhouse's former deputy director Jennifer Sanders told the Guardian she was alarmed by the reports of damaged objects. Last month Sanders applied under NSW freedom of information laws (GIPA) for access to all reports detailing instances of damage, loss or repair since 2019, along with risk assessment reports, conservation reports and any insurance claims the museum had made.



Sydney Powerhouse 'a half-empty neglected mess' amid redevelopment, museum staff claim

[Read more](#)

On Tuesday her GIPA request was rejected, on the grounds that it would cause disadvantage to the exercise of functions of the trustees, prejudice the legitimate interests of the museum and compromise the privacy of some individuals. Only a list of talking points concerning the Catalina was granted, accessible only on request and in person by Sanders.

“The Museum's collection is held in trust for the people of New South Wales,” said Sanders, who plans to appeal against the rejected application. “It is taxpayers' funds, sponsorships, bequests and donations which have built up one of Australia's most significant and valuable collections of our

cultural heritage ... the Powerhouse Museum belongs to the people of New South Wales.”

In April, the Guardian published allegations from a prominent heritage architect that his conservation management plan was “buried” after it recommended the entire Ultimo site be heritage listed, which could have threatened plans for redevelopment. The Powerhouse and the former NSW government deny the existence of the CMP.