

*Exhibitionist* is published twice a year and features news, information, and thoughts on the profession from the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), the Standing Professional Committee on Exhibition of the American Association of Museums.

# EXHIBITIONIST

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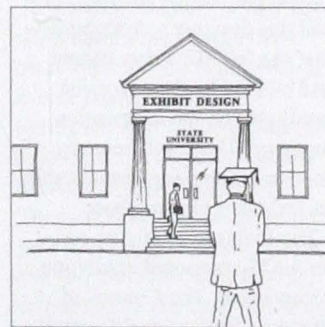
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## Should Exhibit Designers Professionalize?

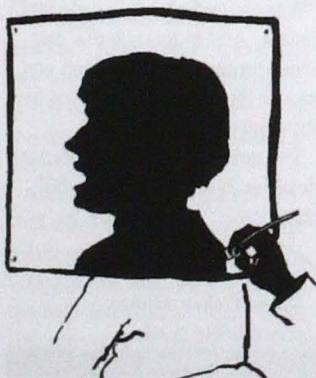
by David James Whitemyer



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## What Is an "Exhibit Developer"?

by Sharyn Horowitz and Katherine Krile



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## The Secret Life of the Home: An Initiation into Exhibit Design

by Tim Hunkin



GIVE YOURSELF AN ELECTRIC SHOCK



## From the President

Folks, it should be a hot time in Atlanta this Spring. NAME was extremely successful in its influence of session topics at this year's American Association of Museum's annual conference. We are sponsoring or cosponsoring 33 sessions at the meeting. [see pages 4-8]

Are you wondering what role you and your museum or clients should play on the Internet? I recall one designer's description—that she felt like a deer caught and blinded by the oncoming headlights on the information highway! There will be many sessions addressing virtual exhibitions and the digital medium.

The dialogue continues on an AAM-sponsored exhibition competition. The Council of Standing Professional Committees recently produced criteria to consider when judging excellence in exhibitions and urged the AAM to sponsor and administer the competition. AAM has taken the recommendation to heart and is considering it in their long-range plans. AAM's implementation will take some planning, but they intend to publish the document *Excellence in Exhibition*, offering it as a technical report, sometime this year. Be sure to attend the conference session on this topic, moderated by Jim Kelly, Chair of the Curators Committee, and offer your input to this issue!

These sessions promise a provoking and healthy dialogue about issues important to all of us. I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to Whitney Watson, NAME's VP for Programs, for an outstanding job done, getting these sessions proposed and accepted—and for his leadership on the Excellence in Exhibitions criteria.

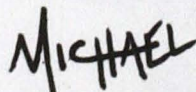
Please be certain to stop by the NAME booth. We will be up-

grading information (specifically e-mail and Web site addresses) for NAME's Directory, to be published this summer.

I know that you will all join us at Lou's Blues Revue to kick off all of this serious business in Atlanta. Please come dine and dive with us! NAME Secretary Serena Furman has once again assured our having a very good time.

NAME must face a melancholy reality. Mark Driscoll, the *Exhibitionist's* Designer, will be passing the baton after this issue. Mark has selflessly given countless hours to this publication and organization for many years. We will all miss his style, talent, and wit—a unique part of the personality of the *Exhibitionist*. Thank you, Mark. Thank you.

Get involved!



Michael Pierce  
NAME President

## From the Editor

It's the stuff of many a professional's nightmare: Does anybody understand what I am or, even remotely, what I do? Because I don't have a title after my name, does the rest of the world respect whatever it is they think I do? How do I even judge whether my product is successful?

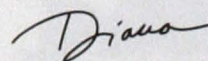
If there is a theme to this issue of the *Exhibitionist*, it is something like, "toward professional self-understanding." Put another way, it is "What do we think we are doing?"

The issue opens with Marlene Chambers' thoughtful investigation into what she believes is keeping us from effective exhibition criticism. Two feature articles wrestle with issues surrounding definitions and perceptions of "exhibit developer" and "exhibit designer." We have

a "confessional" piece by a filmmaker who has wandered into the world of the exhibit designer (it ends well). Add to this a piece about marketing to that elusive Generation X that leads with the gut question "How do we get a multi-generational audience to come see an 81-year-old man on stage?" And in the Critiques division, we have critiques of two publications aimed at making sense of just a few of the complexities of the field of creating and staging museum exhibitions.

With part of NAME/the *Exhibitionist's* mission being to "aid in the professional enrichment and advancement of all those involved in the exhibition process," the *Exhibitionist* aims to build on the self-examination theme. We urge you to fill out the questionnaire included with the "What Is an Exhibit Developer?" article. And to let us know any other professional concerns you would like to have addressed in these pages in the future.

The next editorial submissions deadline is June 15 for the fall issue.



Diana Cohen Altman  
cohendi@ic.si.edu

## Exhibit Designer World Symposium

The Second Annual Exhibit Designer World Symposium is scheduled for June 23-25 at the Georgetown University Conference Center in Washington, D.C. Mike Vance, the chairperson of the Creative Thinking Association of America, will deliver the keynote address and lead a facilitated workshop. The E-Cubed Awards, honoring excellence in exhibit environments, will be presented at the closing-night

dinner. The symposium is managed and produced by Stewart Associates, an Atlanta-based marketing, management, and design agency. For information contact Rebecca Eadie at Stewart Associates at 404-872-5461.

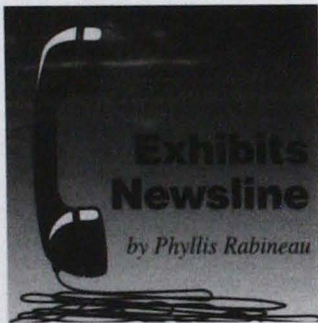
## New Technologies: Focus of 1997 Museum Management Program

New technologies and their impact on museums will be the focus of the 1997 Museum Management Program short course for museum administrators at the University of Colorado in Boulder June 29-July 3. To find out more contact Victor J. Danilov, Director, Museum Management Program, 250 Bristlecone Way, Boulder, Colo., 80304, 303-473-9150, fax 303-443-8486.

## Textile Symposium 97

"Fabric of an Exhibition: An Interdisciplinary Approach," will be hosted by the Canadian Conservation Institute, Dept. of Canadian Heritage, in Ottawa, Sept. 22-25. This four-day symposium will bring together curators, designers, conservators, and other museum professionals to discuss issues related to the successful exhibition of textiles. For information and registration material, contact Tara Grant, Registration Coordinator, Symposium 97, CCI, 1030 Innes Rd., Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0M5, 613-998-3721, fax 613-998-4721, tara\_grant@pch.gc.ca.





It's always an adventure to embark on this column. Twice a year, I dig into the file where, for six months or so, I've been tossing miscellaneous items. By the time I sit down in front of the computer, it's new all over again. Let's get to it.

Long-time Newsline stringer Andy Merriell continues as "le resource nonpareil." A native Texan, Merriell delights in sniffing out great cultural offerings of the Lone Star State. His latest find is **The Devil's Rope Museum and Route 66 Exhibit**, in **McLean, Tex.** Housed in a remodeled brassiere factory (!), this outfit stakes its claim for being the largest barbed wire museum in the world, featuring every known barbed-wire-related object. Every last artifact is on display; not one is in storage. This organization is aggressively non-professional, built and staffed entirely by volunteers. Its promotional material asserts that the museum has no grants, no hired labor, and no outstanding debt. Admission is free. McLean's own total population is 850—in its first six months, ending October 1994, the museum had 21,000 visitors. For additional audience appeal, the museum joined up with the local Route 66 organization, and so they also screen videos of the old *Route 66* TV show. To serve the local constituency, they have a Western Heritage Community Room, which is available for meetings.

Along related lines, Andy asked me to mention a wonderful exhibition he saw last year at the **National Building Museum** in

**Washington, D.C.** *Between Fences* traced the history of fences as a defining element in US landscape and culture. Andy really liked the thought-provoking content of this exhibition, which used the metaphor of fences to explore how we deal with the land and how we deal with each other. Topics ranged from the broadest scale (international borders) to the most intimate (privacy and neighbors). As well as the richness of subject matter, Andy liked the exhibit design, which used fence structures in myriad ways—to divide space, to support graphics, and as historic artifacts. I'm sorry I missed this one, but I'm planning to buy the catalog.

Now, neighbors, I've heard tell about **another barbed wire museum**, located down the road in **DeKalb, Ill.** (home to the very first manufacturers of the nasty fencing). Alas, I don't know anyone who has seen this museum. If you have, drop me a line so we can let our readers know what's there!

Although I'm ignorant on DeKalb, I do know about two exhibitions that just opened here in **Chicago, Ill.**, and they'll be up for the next few months. Many of us lose our sense of humor during the exhibit process; I trust this wasn't a problem for the staff of the **Spertus Museum** as they designed *Let There Be Laughter! Jewish Humor in America* (through Aug. 17). There are more than 400 objects in this exhibition, as well as radio, TV, and movie clips, all relating to humor as part of Jewish culture, and the role of Jewish humor in American culture at large. Included are individuals from Groucho Marx to Billy Crystal, and styles from vaudeville to books such as *How to Be a Jewish Mother*.

Shifting from the ridiculous to the sublime, I can highly recommend the **Mexican Fine Arts Museum's** lovely *La Reina de las Americas*. This exhibition highlights dozens of images of

the Virgin of Guadalupe; some of these sacred and beloved objects are being displayed outside Mexico for the first time ever. You can only catch this through mid-May . . . Ande! Ande!

I will confess that I've never visited another Chicago cultural gem, the **International Museum of Surgical Sciences**, but I have heard much about it over the years. A recent article in a local paper described its offerings vividly, as follows: "Room after room leaves you breathless with horror at life's inherent pain and suffering." I'm not sure if that's a recommendation, or not. Featured in the exhibits of the Urology Room is a collection of kidney, bladder, and uterine stones. Prized objects in the collections include organic materials such as the preserved remains of the world's first cancerous stomach operation, as well as technological gems including anal retractors excavated at Pompeii; Renaissance arrow-removal forceps; and other gizmos too horrid to contemplate.

My former colleague Dianne Hanau-Strain trekked to Cleveland, Ohio, last summer, and loved the **Steamship William G. Mather Maritime Museum**. Docked near the **Great Lakes Science Center** and **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame**, this ore boat is slowly being restored. It features a museum on the subject of **Great Lakes ore shipping, belowdecks**. Dianne says she and her son enjoyed the volunteer-led tour: "It's real, kinda dirty. We liked being able to climb all over the ship, and we liked the interactivities on rowing and on ore."

This is from Jeff Hayward: the **International Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe, N.Mex.**, is featuring *Recycled, Reused*, an exhibition about recycled industrial waste put to use in a myriad of art forms. Jeff thinks several aspects contribute to making this a winning project. For example, the "people stories" associated with

the objects really come through, there are plenty of opportunities for people to interact with materials in the exhibition, and the museum has organized some exciting workshops for adults and kids to fool around with recycled stuff. For an institution whose visitorship has traditionally been adult-based, Jeff thinks this is a really successful effort to reach out to families and multicultural audiences. This exhibition will be traveling; keep an eye out for a venue near you.

It's always exciting to hear museum news from foreign countries; this time, I'll share excerpts from a report by Myriam Springuel, who would like us all to know about the activities and interests of our colleagues just "90 miles south." During the 35 years of Communist rule, Cuban arts and museums were heavily subsidized by the state. Says Marimba Clavijo Colom of the Ministry of Culture, "In 1960 there were seven museums in Cuba. Today there are 254."



Entrance to the Castillo de la Fuerza. Photograph by Myriam Springuel.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accompanying loss of financial support, Cuba's cultural institutions have been faced by enormous challenges. Despite the hardships, "museums form an integral part of the fabric of city life in Havana. Throughout Old Havana, museums and cultural



centers are mixed in with residential buildings.

The old city, a small section of modern Havana, contains 900 buildings of historical or architectural importance; more than 60 have been restored so far." Examples include the **Castillo de la Fuerza**, a fort built about 1550 that today houses a collection of ceramic arts. The **Museum of the City of Havana**, housed in the



Central patio of the Museum of the City of Havana, former Palace of the Captains General. Photograph by Myriam Springuel.

Palace of the Captains General, includes 19th-century period rooms, displays of documents, paintings, and decorative arts.

Around the Plaza de Catedral, visitors will find the **Experimen-**

**tal Graphics Workshop**, the **Museum of Colonial Art**, and the **Museum of Education**, which celebrates Cuba's 1961 literacy campaign. Myriam writes, "This plaza, serving as an informal folklore market, underscores a growing dual economy; those with dollars—whether in museums or in the market—can obtain goods and services simply not available in pesos."

Myriam continues, "The desperate need for renovation is perhaps most obvious on **Plaza Vieja**. My guidebook describes an 18th-century merchant's house on the corner; it is now a



Wooden beams help keep buildings from falling on Plaza Vieja in Havana. Photograph by Myriam Springuel.

pile of rubble. . . . In wandering the streets of Havana, it is not unusual to see buildings that have literally caved in on themselves."

Several important collections are housed in historic homes. For instance, "**Casa de Africa** specializes in African culture south of the Sahara, with an emphasis on those countries from where enslaved people originated, as well as Afro-Cuban culture. The galleries devoted to African culture are on street level, with many open doors to the sidewalk, providing a sense that the Casa is part of city life and everyone is welcome to stop in and look around on their way to and from daily activities."

Havana's two largest museums are the **National Museum of Fine Arts** and the **Museum of the Revolution**. Myriam was impressed by the collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, which includes ancient art, European painting, and 20th-century Cuban art. In particular, despite the embargoes and attempts to isolate Cuba, she found the work of fine artists attuned to all the major 20th-century artistic movements, as well as steeped in the country's own Afro-Cuban heritage. The Museum of the Revolution, occupying the former Presidential Palace, is one of the few museums

in Havana run by the military. "Obvious and subtle messages abound. . . . Room after room documents the Cuban people's fight for independence, beginning with slave irons and shackles. The exhibition relies primarily on documentary photographs, newspaper reproductions, models showing the progress of particular battles, military items, and clothing worn by revolutionaries. Atrocities of the Batista regime, the heroism of individual revolutionaries, and Cuban campaigns in Angola and Ethiopia are recounted in detail. It is probably one of the last museums in the Western world glorifying the fight for communism. In this museum, there is no room for differing or multiple points of view, or any of the issues of representation that many American museum professionals are struggling with. It is The Museum of the Revolution."

That's it for this go-round. I've got a new address and e-mail, but the same old longing to hear from you all. Drop me a line, any time.

*Phyllis Rabineau*  
Chicago Historical Society  
Clark Street at North Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
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## Murphy's Laws of Exhibition Drawn from Real Life

- The more outside vendors, equipment, or services involved in the project, the greater the personnel problems, equipment failure, and delays.
- Objects will prove to be larger or heavier than space is allowed, and design changes will be necessary.
- When your boss says, "We will do this," it really means, "You will do this."
- Life will challenge your ability to handle natural or man-made disasters, e.g. hurricanes, blizzards, four gallons of paint spilled on the floor . . .
- Family (pets, children, spouse, relatives) will test your commitment and dedication to the project.
- Label errors defy editing! And you will be informed of them on opening night.
- Key personnel (your or your right-hand person) will develop health problems.
- Suppliers won't be able to furnish just what you want and will insist on closing at the end of their normal business hours.
- Your shipper will deliver on monsoon day, and the coverage over the loading dock will be far from adequate.
- Your construction personnel will prove to have little or no experience . . . in constructing anything.
- Important creative decisions will be left to people in non-creative positions.
- The simpler it looks, the longer it takes; what normally takes one hour will take five hours.
- Women involved in constructing or designing exhibitions may experience "the guy thing."
- The government will decide to shut down without concern for your incoming foreign art exhibition.
- The longer it takes to find the perfect label paper, the less likely the paper will go through the copy machine.
- Ideas can be like a bad song or ditty: they tend to get stuck in your head.
- Indecision comes at the time when decision is needed the most.
- Visiting artists and scholars will keep "artists' and scholars'" hours.
- Pre-budget plans can be foiled by price increases.
- Everybody ELSE is an expert.
- There is no such thing as child-proof.
- The grander the job title, the smaller the in-house staff.
- Never underestimate the power of Murphy (or Bob).

*Kristine L. Hastreiter, Curator of Collections and Exhibits, Thornton W. Burgess Society, East Sandwich, Mass.; Linda Eppich, Rhode Island Historical Society; James Swan, Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art; and Amy Leidtke, Leidtke Design, Providence, R.I. derived these guidelines from their own real-life experiences and from input from fellow exhibitionists.*



**Sunday, April 27**

8:30-9:45 AM

## Who Gets the Talking Stick? Voice and Authority in Exhibitions

Chair: Jim Volkert  
Deputy Assistant Director for Exhibitions  
National Museum of the American Indian  
Washington, DC

Many museums struggle with a variety of approaches to layering content and context around exhibition objects. At the same time, a clearer understanding of the narrative as a medium in itself is emerging. This session will look at the impact of turning to resources outside the traditional museum staff to define exhibitions and using first-person voices in exhibition interpretations. The broader implications of transferring a museum's authority outside its own ranks will be addressed.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition. Cosponsored by the AAM Curators Committee.*

## The Rural Initiative: A Partnership in Service to the Small Museum

Co-Chair: Martha Sewell  
Assistant Director for Programs  
SITES  
Washington, DC  
Co-Chair: Carol Harsh  
Exhibitor Relations Specialist  
SITES  
Washington, DC

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), state humanities councils across the country, and National Endowment for the Humanities have teamed up to make national and state cultural resources available to small museums, libraries, and historical societies in rural areas. The goal is to enable these institutions to work within their own communities and to establish systems that will allow them to utilize state and national resources now and in the future. Through public/private collaborative partnerships, small and rural museums can use SITES and state councils to provide resources for institutional advancement and professional skills enhancement. Ways in which this national collaboration is translated to the local level will be examined.

*Sponsored by the AAM Small Museum Administrators Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

10:00-11:15 AM

## Sizing Up Exhibitions

Chair: Ava Ferguson  
Exhibit Developer  
Monterey Bay Aquarium  
Monterey, CA

Exhibit planners often base the size of an exhibition on physical or financial criteria, such as the extent of a museum's collection, the amount of space available, projected attendance figures, and budgets. Many other factors must be taken into consideration when determining the right size for an exhibition. In examining the advantages and disadvantages of small versus large exhibitions, panelists will discuss how visitors respond to exhibitions of various sizes and how exhibit planners can ensure a better fit among museums, exhibitions, and intended audiences.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Pushing the Boundaries: Assessing the Long-term Impact of Museums

Chair: John H. Falk  
Director  
Science Learning, Inc.  
Annapolis, MD

Museums offer brief but powerful experiences that have the potential to change the way individuals think about their world—but do they? Answering that question requires looking at the museum experience within the context of a total life, not just a few hours spent in a museum. This session will review recent research and evaluation studies that have attempted to identify the longer-term impact of museum experiences. It will present approaches used to study this impact, illustrate what types of learning occur, and offer findings to justify and fund museum programs.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation. Cosponsored by the AAM Public Relations and Marketing Committee, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the AAM Education Committee.*

11:00 AM-12:00 noon

## Mentoring Groups for Young Museum Professionals

Back by popular demand, these informal roundtable discussions, offer an opportunity to share experiences and swap suggestions in response to personal challenges that new museum professionals frequently encounter on the job. Topics and group leaders will vary at each session. Sample issues include:

Getting Useful Experience for the Future; Making and Imperfect Job More Rewarding; Combining Rich Personal and Professional Lives; Responding Constructively When Your Ideas Aren't Heard; Deciding When to Change Jobs; Collegueship and Professional Networking Beyond the Job; Juggling Many Projects, But No Job; and Making a Big Move—Settling Into A New Community

*Open to all AAM delegates. No advance registration necessary.*

Marketplace of Ideas 3:00-5:00 PM

## Taking the Devil Out of Exhibit Development

Chair: David Shurbutt  
Exhibition Designer  
Virginia Marine Science Museum  
Virginia Beach, VA

Through the use of 3-D models representatives from institutions such as art museums, historic sites, science centers, history museums, zoos or aquaria, explain their methods of exhibition development. Conversations with delegates will emphasize the benefits of the particular system in use demonstrating how they build on the institution's strengths and minimize any areas of weakness. The marketplace will include examples from small to large institutions.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Monday, April 28

8:30-9:45 A.M.

## Security for Your Collections During Transit

Chair: Thomas H. Bresson  
Deputy Director, Office of Protection Services  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, DC

What level of protection should be afforded to collections moving between museums? Focusing on security and insurance matters, this session will delve into the care and protection of works of art during transit. Discussion will include the role of the NEA Indemnity Program, security requirements for indemnified exhibitions in transit, and ways to speed shipments through airports, minimize risks, and securely handle collections. Insight into working and negotiating with insurance providers and local police departments will also be provided.

*Sponsored by the AAM Security Committee. Cosponsored by AAM/ICOM, the AAM Committee on Museum*

*Professional Training, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the AAM Registrars Committee.*

## When Is the Text Not Context Anymore? Content, Authority, and Interpretive Voice in Labels

Chair: Dona Horowitz  
Curatorial Director, Department of Records, City of Philadelphia  
Bryn Mawr, PA

Past sessions have addressed the role of the educator in writing labels as well as the nuts and bolts of producing labels, but what should be the primary source for their content? Should it be scholarship, an institutional voice, or the voice of the museum's audience? The presentation of scholarship is itself subject to interpretation. At what point does the content become too simplified or even false? The panel will examine issues surrounding the presentation of scholarship, institutional voice, and audience evaluation, and will highlight institutions that are utilizing new interpretive strategies.

*Sponsored by the AAM Curators Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee, the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, and the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Before, During, and After: How Visitor Responses Impact the Formation and Design of Exhibits for Young Audiences

Chair: Kris Morrissey  
Curator of Interpretation  
The Michigan State University Museum  
East Lansing, MI

Young visitors and intergenerational groups are a large and important component of museum audiences, but predicting and dealing with their interests, activities, interactions, and learning styles are complex and elusive undertakings. Visitor studies can help museum professionals design exhibits and implement interpretive approaches that are appropriate and engaging for children and their families. Turning to visitors for input before, during, and after implementation has assisted development teams to formulate effective projects, revise existing exhibits, design new ones, and create unique institutions.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*



## Standards for Excellence in Museum Exhibitions

Chair: James C. Kelly  
Assistant Director for Museum Programs  
Virginia Historical Society  
Richmond, VA

The draft statement of standards for excellence in museum exhibitions, developed by a task force of the Standing Professional Committees Council of the AAM for use in judging exhibition excellence, will be introduced. Following presentations by those who drafted the document, a town meeting format will permit discussion and debate about the proposed standards. Ways to modify, disseminate, and encourage the use of these and other standards of excellence will be considered as well.

*Sponsored by the AAM Standing Professional Committee Council. Cosponsored by the AAM Media and Technology Committee, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the AAM Museum Management Committee.*

## From the Crate to the Wall

Chair: John Molini  
Head of Packing  
Chicago Art Institute  
Chicago, IL

The set of skills required for properly packing and unpacking object crates differs greatly from those needed to install an exhibition. In many museums, however, the same personnel is asked to perform both functions. This session will provide basic instruction for handling works in transition from the crate to the exhibition space. Basic tools, materials, and techniques will be reviewed, along with simple and complicated technical installations.

*Sponsored by the AAM Registrars Committee and PACIN. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition and the AAM Small Museum Administrators Committee.*

## Maintaining the Integrity of a Traveling Exhibition

Chair: Sara Rosenfeld  
Exhibitions Coordinator  
The American Federation of Arts  
New York, NY

Inherent challenges are involved in preserving the integrity of an exhibition when it travels beyond its initiating institution. How can the level of quality achieved for a single presentation be maintained throughout a tour with several venues? This important topic deserves consideration at a time when museums are frequently collaborating on traveling exhibitions and developing programs in

consortia. Panelists will discuss ways in which the curator's concept, the registrar's standards, and the initiator/host's identity can be maintained.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

2:00-3:15 PM

## Community as Consultant: Tools for Communication

Chair: Amy Leidtke  
Principal  
Leidtke Design  
Providence, RI

Museums can no longer realistically produce exhibitions for the public without first consulting and working with members of the community as partners in development and design. Issues of community involvement are reviewed in three successful case studies in which communities were consulted on major museum projects. Participants will learn the pros and cons of introducing community members into the design and planning process of museum programs, events, services, and operations.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee, the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, the AAM Development and Membership Committee, and the AAM Small Museum Administrators Committee.*

## Getting Up to Date: Guidelines for 21st-Century Museum Studies Programs

Chair: Terry R. Reynolds  
Director of Museum Studies  
University of Anthropology, University of Denver  
Denver, CO

In this working session, participants will develop a dialogue on which new guidelines for museum studies programs can be based. After hearing brief reports on the history of museum studies programs and expected human resource needs in museums in the next century, participants will discuss which specific guidelines require revision. The AAM Committee on Museum Professional Training will then form a subcommittee to use these suggestions and draft proposals applicable to museum studies programs in the future.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Professional Training. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, the AAM Education Committee, and the AAM Media and Technology Committee.*

## Contested Urban Space: Making Place, Embracing Conflict

Chair: James Sims  
Professorial Lecturer  
George Washington University  
Washington, DC

Effective history exhibitions simultaneously embrace different perspectives and give space and time to conflicting stories about the past. In the process they make a space into a place. In three case studies of recent projects, an urban setting was identified and presented to the public in the form of new regional history. Each exhibition has proven popular and has developed new audiences for the museum.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## The Artist and the Museum II

Chair: Lela Hersch  
Director, Collections & Exhibitions  
Museum of Contemporary Art  
Chicago, IL

As a follow-up to the Artist and the Museum session held with Frank Stella in 1993, this presentation addresses the important relationship between artists and the institutions that collect and exhibit their work. Jim Dine, a modern master whose career spans more than 40 years, will discuss his perception of the artist's role in contemporary society and the interplay between the artist and the museum. As he sees how the artist/museum relationship has evolved in the last half century, he feels that fresh ways must be found to deal with the work of contemporary artists. Dine and three museum professionals will exchange ideas on how to promote harmony between artists and institutions, as well as how to utilize art in new technologies and include contemporary work in exhibition programs with limited budgets.

*Sponsored by the AAM Registrar Committee with generous support of MOMART, London. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition and the AAM Curators Committee.*

## The Medium, the Message, and Memory: Live Versus Recorded Experience in Museum Exhibits

Chair: Ann Mintz  
Executive Director, Science Center  
Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts  
Harrisburg, PA

Electronic media and live programs animate objects, establish context, and add drama to abstract histories or

concepts. Although they may provide similar information, live and recorded experiences are inherently different. A range of philosophical and operational issues must be considered when deciding which form best suits a specific museum purpose or educational program. Similarities and differences between the live and the recorded experience will be presented through examples of each, with special attention given to exhibits for young children.

*Sponsored by the AAM Media and Technology Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the Museum Computer Network.*

## Playing in the Museum: What the Research Says

Chair: D. D. Hilke  
Director of Exhibits  
Maryland Science Center  
Baltimore, MD

Museum professionals are struggling to create experiences that are both educational and entertaining. Now research suggests that the focus should not be on work, but on child's play. While previous research has indicated that play is an important component of intrinsically motivating educational experiences, new research reveals more about the importance of play for all ages and its role in the learning process. How should environments be designed to stimulate and support meaningful play? Participants will be able to share ideas on the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, the AAM Committee on Education, and the AAM Committee on Public Relations and Marketing.*

## Mounting a Traveling Exhibition for Small Museums by Small Museums—A Collaborative Venture

Chair: Sally Newkirk  
Director  
Floyd County Museums  
New Albany, IN

Representatives of small museums and their collaborators (i.e., state humanities councils) will discuss how they researched, developed, and funded accessible and affordable traveling exhibitions that could be shared with their colleagues. Panelists will cover how an exhibition theme was conceived and implemented, and how collaborators strengthened the content and scope of the material, secured funding sources, determined the logistics of traveling the



exhibition, and developed an educational component that addresses the needs of a larger community. They will also discuss traditional exhibitions, hands-on interactive displays, and exhibitions that travel within a community rather than remain static in one location.

*Sponsored by the AAM Small Museum Administrators Committee, Cosponsored by the AAM Registrars Committee, the AAM Committee on Museums Exhibition, and the AAM Development and Membership Committee.*

## Tuesday, April 29

8:30-9:45 AM

### Call of the Wild: Museum Visitors' Response to Conservation Messages

Chair: Jenny Sayre Ramberg  
Exhibit Developer/Writer  
Monterey Bay Aquarium  
Monterey, CA

As museums respond to concerns about global, national, and local environmental issues, natural history museums, aquariums, and zoos are putting an ecological spin on permanent collections and developing exhibitions with explicit conservation messages. How do visitors respond to this "greening" of public institutions? Are these the proper arenas in which to raise an environmental consciousness? How can we balance a message of alarm with a visitor's desire for an enjoyable museum experience? In addition to presenting the findings of an audience evaluation conducted at three institutions, panelists will present ways to develop ecological programming for current and potential museum audiences.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition and the AAM Education Committee.*

### Are We There Yet? Interpreting 20th-Century Urban History

Chair: Maud Margaret Lyon  
Director  
Detroit Historical Museum  
Detroit, MI

Are museum planners fulfilling the mandate of being responsive to their constituencies through their exhibitions? Project directors from three museums and one design firm invite participants to judge their efforts through a presentation and discussion of different exhibitions on urban history and industry: *Metropolitan Frontiers* at the Atlanta History Center, "Motor City" at the Detroit Historical Museum, and

*Furniture City* at the Grand Rapids Public Museum. Panelists will describe how designers were involved in exhibition content to generate a range of historical narratives and to probe the future of the city.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

### How to Buy Design

Chair: Eryl Platzner  
Director  
The Octagon  
Washington, DC

What should an institution look for in an exhibition design firm? How can you identify qualified designers? How can you be assured that limited funds are well spent? These urgent and pragmatic issues directly affect an institution's ability to articulate an exhibition's content, effectively use creativity, sustain cooperation, and compete with other museums. Three designers will present criteria for evaluating and managing the creative process of making exhibitions.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

12:00 noon-1:00 PM

### Mentoring Groups for Young Museum Professionals

Back by popular demand, these informal roundtable discussions, offer an opportunity to share experiences and swap suggestions in response to personal challenges that new museum professionals frequently encounter on the job. Topics and group leaders will vary at each session. Sample issues include: Getting Useful Experience for the Future; Making and Imperfect Job More Rewarding; Combining Rich Personal and Professional Lives; Responding Constructively When Your Ideas Aren't Heard; Deciding When to Change Jobs; Collegueship and Professional Networking Beyond the Job; Juggling Many Projects, But No Job; and Making a Big Move/Settling Into A New Community

*Open to all AAM delegates. No advance registration necessary.*

Double Sessions 2:00-4:45 PM

### Varied Approaches to State and Regional History Overview Exhibits

Chair: James C. Kelly  
Assistant Director for Museum Programs  
Virginia Historical Society  
Richmond, VA

This double session is a roundtable

discussion by representatives of six institutions that recently opened exhibits that "overview" the entire history of a state or region. Different models answer various questions of how history should be presented and interpreted. Which events and information should be stressed? What are the roles of chronology and narrative? What is a balanced presentation, and who should have a voice in it? What should visitors learn and what do they actually learn? Presenters will also share evaluation data used in formulating the exhibits and measuring their success.

*Sponsored by the AAM Curators Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the AAM Education Committee.*

### Exhibition Lighting: Reconsidering the Fundamental

Chair: Eden Wilson  
Curator of Collections  
Polk Museum of Art  
Lakeland, FL

Recent research has raised many questions about variables that affect the "visual experience" in museums, particularly light intensity and color temperature. In this double session, a number of critical factors that influence light-induced damage to collections and the appearance of colored objects will be examined. Ways to integrate essential lighting variables into successful exhibition conditions will also be explored as important concepts are linked in a practical and comprehensible manner.

*Sponsored by the AAM Registrars Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition and the American Institute for Conservation.*

2:00-3:15 PM

### Developing the Interactive Exhibit: A Team Project

Chair: Larry J. Ralph  
Director of Exhibit Design & Production  
Museum of Science  
Boston, MA

Creating successful interactive exhibitions requires more than meeting educational goals and completing the project on schedule and within budget. Producing easily maintained exhibits that meet all visitor expectations, including being comfortable, safe, and accessible to the broadest possible audience, is critical. Acting as advocates for visitor concerns, accessibility, maintenance, production,

and design, panelists will achieve these goals through a team process that encourages consensus and a balance of design, cost, and production concerns.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

### If It Works Is It Obsolete?

Chair: Kathy Jones-Garmil  
Assistant Director  
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology  
Cambridge, MA

Many museum professionals feel compelled to keep up with rapid changes in information technology. While these technologies have great promise to serve traditional museum needs, they do raise questions that must be considered when introducing technology into public exhibitions, collections management systems, or on- or off-site educational programs. How long will this technology serve our needs? Does it matter when will it become obsolete? How can planning maximize the useful life span of a computer system? Participants will learn how to evaluate technologies to support defined needs and to balance public use with institutional goals.

*Sponsored by the AAM Media and Technology Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee, the AAM Registrars Committee, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, the AAM Small Museum Administrators Committee, and the Museum Computer Network.*

3:30-4:45 PM

### You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet! Acoustic and Audio Systems in Museums

Chair: Rochelle Slovin  
Director  
American Museum of the Moving Image  
Astoria, NY

Sound plays an integral role in film, television, and digital media. At the American Museum of the Moving Image (AMMI), the opportunities and obstacles inherent in audio presentations posed rigorous demands that required complex solutions. Today, AMMI's exceptionally rich and elaborate audio environment allows more than five hours of continuous audio-visual material to be seen and heard in mini-theaters, semi-enclosed spaces, and open exhibition areas. The importance of identifying and integrating audio-visual consultants into an exhibition design team, matching audio delivery systems to curatorial content, selecting appropriate equipment, and using specialized acoustical materials



to achieve desired architectural and aesthetic effects will be covered.

*Sponsored by the AAM Media and Technology Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Label Content: Three Conceptual Approaches

Chair: Stephen C. Bitgood  
Professor of Psychology, Jacksonville State University  
Board of Directors, Berman Museum Jacksonville, AL

Labels are a vital part of exhibit development and presentation. Without effective labels, visitors tend to spend less time with exhibits and are less likely to receive the intended message. Label design requires careful consideration of both physical characteristics and content. Three conceptual frameworks for handling label content will be investigated: the constructive approach, the levels-of-understanding framework, and the labels-as-narrative approach.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation. Cosponsored by the AAM Curators Committee, the AAM Education Committee, and the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Looking for Beauty in Exhibitions

Chair: Jane Bedno  
Director, Graduate Program in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design  
The University of the Arts  
Philadelphia, PA

In the 1990s, aesthetics is a forgotten element in most exhibition planning. Learning dominates visitor studies, and issues of leisure choice drive museum marketing profiles. Despite all this, a museum visitor will long remember a moving aesthetic experience. Intuitively, museum professionals have made important choices on the basis of aesthetics, such as the selection of architects and designers, and the creation of spaces, environments, and methods of display. Some European and American museums have created exhibitions that are both effective and compelling in their beauty. Is this just a lucky by-product of the planning process? This session looks at why aesthetic effects should be a conscious part of exhibition planning, how they can be achieved, and the role of the museum visitor in the process.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

## Wednesday, April 30

Double Sessions 9:00-11:45 AM

### Making It Real Compared to What: Physical Exhibits and On-line Exhibits

Chair: Diana Cohen Altman  
Senior Exhibits Editor  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, DC

How can on-line museum exhibits manipulate cyberspace? What do experienced practitioners of physical exhibit design have to teach those responsible for creating an on-line exhibition? In this freewheeling dialogue centered around the physical exhibit medium and its design process, discussion will be geared to developing intelligent approaches to the growing phenomenon of on-line exhibitions. Shared insights should provide tools for unlocking and harnessing creative possibilities for virtual exhibits.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee and the AAM Media and Technology Committee.*

Double Sessions 1:45-4:30 PM

### Critiquing Museum Exhibitions VIII

Chair: Kathleen McLean  
Director of Public Program and the Center for Public Exhibition  
Exploratorium  
San Francisco, CA

Continuing the tradition of providing a forum for exhibition criticism at the AAM annual meeting, this double session will critique *Metropolitan Frontiers* at the Atlanta History Center. At the first session, members of the exhibition team will present the exhibition's intent and the process of its development and design. At the second session, three museum professionals will critique the exhibition by identifying, defining, and analyzing those properties that elicit personal reactions and impressions.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

### Gorgeous and Accessible: Developing Exhibition Design Guidelines That Work

Chair: Janice Majewski  
Smithsonian Accessibility Coordinator  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, DC

Museums can create exhibitions that are exciting, beautiful, effective, and accessible. During this double session,

panelists will address participants' concerns about designing exhibitions that work for museums, historic sites, and their visitors. They will also discuss guidelines for accessible exhibitions, object conservation, lighting, aesthetics, and video captioning. Finally, participants will be asked to experiment with the guidelines in problematic design areas in their own museums and to report their results to the session's chair. The chair will make this information available to session participants throughout the coming year.

*Sponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition. Cosponsored by the AAM Registrars Committee.*

1:45-3:00 PM

### Continuing Conversations About Museum Theater

Chair: Catherine Hughes  
Executive Director  
Museum of Science  
Boston, MA

This interactive session extends the 1996 session, *Conversation on Museum Theater*. A short performance provides a frame of reference for participants. Panelists will then take strong positions on three issues in the field of museum theater. Should museums and the theatre artist share copyright for theatrical materials? How much should be extrapolated from primary documentation when producing dramatic pieces? Should actors other than staff or volunteers be used in museum theater? Since these questions relate directly to larger discussions in the museum world, it is important that educators, exhibition planners and designers, and museum theater practitioners explore the ways this medium fits into the mission of museums.

*Sponsored by the International Museum Theatre Alliance. Cosponsored by the AAM Education Committee and the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

### Build a Brand and They Will Come

Chair: David Ellis  
President  
Boston Museum of Science  
Boston, MA

Developing a strategic identity and merchandising program can result in increased membership, attendance, and museum shop sales. A coordinated design system of corporate and brand identity attracts public attention, distinguishes the museum, and clarifies benefits to visiting and/or joining the museum. Inside the museum, signage, exhibitions, and decor enhance the visitor's experience, educate

the audience, and allow patrons to navigate their way easily and pleasantly through the galleries and exhibition spaces. Panelists will also discuss how branding principles used by corporations and retail stores can be applied to museums.

*Sponsored by the AAM Public Relations and Marketing Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition.*

3:15-4:30 PM

### The Big Ticket: The Microcosm and the Macrocosm of Exhibition Budget Planning

Chair: Suzanne Quigley  
Head Registrar, Collections & Exhibitions  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
New York, NY

Armed with very little information, registrars are frequently asked to devise a budget for a projected exhibition. These "concept" budgets are often difficult to determine, yet they are as necessary as a real projected budget since the registrar's portion can soar to one-third of an overall exhibition budget. A panel of registrars and budget managers will discuss concept and actual budgets, detailed budget categories, and the overall exhibition budget and its place in an institution's planning process.

*Sponsored by the AAM Registrars Committee. Cosponsored by the AAM Museum Management Committee, the AAM Committee on Museum Exhibition, and the Museum Computer Network.*

## NAME Activities

### Saturday, April 26

**Executive Board Meeting**  
(board members only)  
12:30 - 5:00 pm  
**Dinner at Lou's Blues**  
7:00 - 10:00 pm

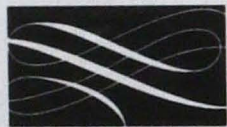
### Monday, April 28

**NAME Business Meeting**  
7:15 - 8:15 am

### Wednesday, April 30

**NAME Issues Lunch**  
12:00 noon - 1:15 pm





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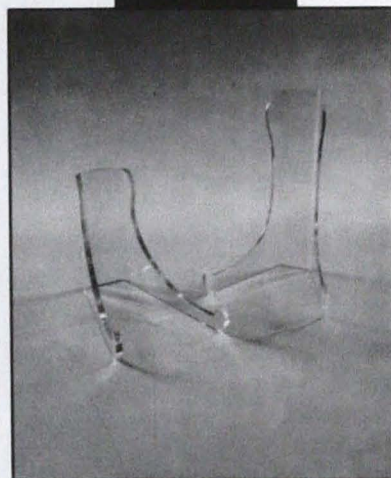


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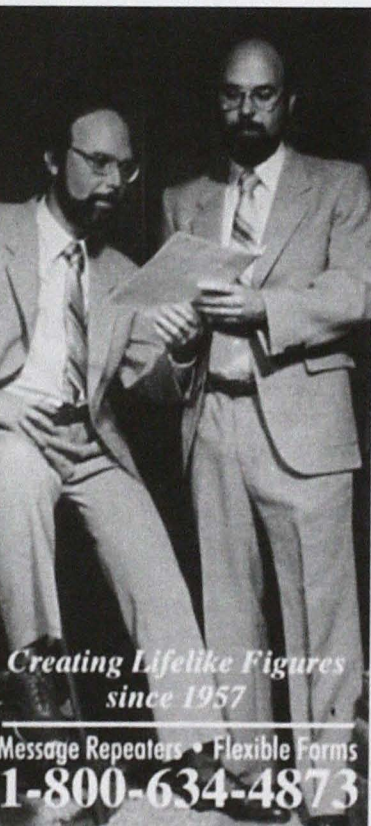
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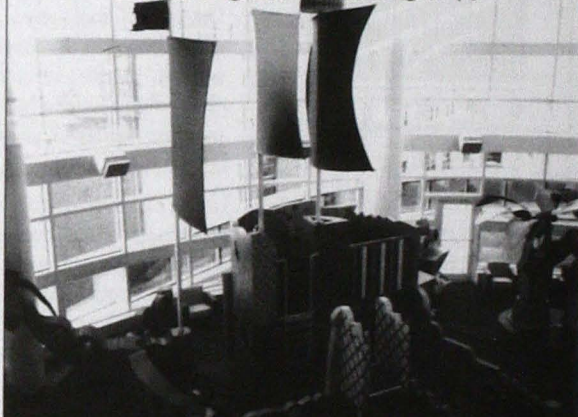


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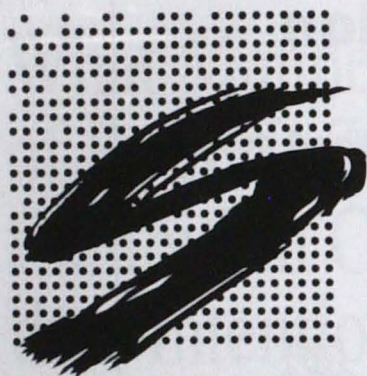
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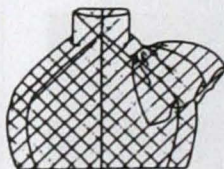
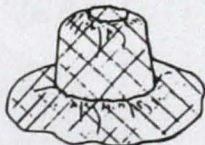
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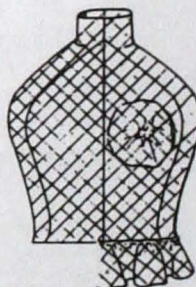
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# What Manner of Beast Is This? Exhibition Criticism and the "Intentional Fallacy"

by Marlene Chambers

**Are we barking up the wrong tree in our chase after "what makes an exhibition successful"? By considering the source, do we make it impossible to judge what the thing really is? How can we effect the kind of exhibition criticism the profession seems to have been hankering for all these years?**

**Marlene Chambers gives exhibition professionals a lot to chew on in this contribution to the *Exhibitionist's* continuing dialogue on exhibition criticism.**

The wonderful "critical issue" of the *Exhibitionist* (spring 1994) did much to pinpoint the blind spots that keep us, as museum professionals, from seeing just what kind of beast we have by the tail. Most obviously, we seem hampered by our lack of a common vocabulary for talking about exhibition criticism. In fact, we aren't even agreed about what differentiates a review from a critique, much less about how much objectivity, if any, is possible or desirable in appraising an exhibition.

Even more telling, all of our discussions about what kind of criticism we need are permeated by a blind faith in what I call the "intentional fallacy"—the belief that the exhibition makers' intentions should color our judgment of their finished work.

First we must decide whether or not we can regard the museum exhibition as a work of art rather than as a textbook or a laboratory. If not, we are barking up the wrong tree with all this talk about criticism.

It has been my impression that the profession still generally views exhibitions as an educational medium. As such, an exhibition's impact on visitors is susceptible to the techniques of educational measurement. And, indeed, a whole new field of museum practitioners has been opened up by what Harris Shettel calls the "paradigm shift" to confidence in the validity of audience studies as a means of determining whether an exhibition has met its declared goals and is, therefore, "good/successful" (p. 12).

The theory is that you can't determine the effective-

ness of a teaching tool without measuring the student. And perhaps you can't. But by unquestioningly accepting the claims of visitor studies people to objectivity and validity, we have fallen into a semantic and logical confusion. Audience evaluation has become confused with exhibition evaluation. The intentional fallacy has risen to a central place in our discourse.

Given our desire for criticism (see, for example, Kathleen McLean, pp. 6-8), I think we might ask how much of our insistence on the educational character of exhibitions is genuine—and how much is driven by the museum's historical injunction to justify public funding. More and more I find museum practitioners admitting, and imaginatively responding to, the rather obvious truth that the exhibition hall is not conducive to the acquisition of an organized body of knowledge. Increasingly they talk about the museum "experience" rather than about communicating information.

Janet Kamien (p. 16), for instance, points out that education, as generally understood, "really does require day-to-day reinforcement and quiet study—two things that most museums are very short on." Instead, she says, exhibitions can "give order or meaning to half-remembered ideas" and may even influence visitors' later thinking and behavior. She would like to see visitor studies techniques adapted to describe visitors' "affective experience." She also assumes without question that the yardstick against which these findings should be measured is the exhibit maker's intention (p. 17).

If we really want to submit exhibitions to critical criteria, as opposed to educational and psychological measurement, we'll have to approach them as works of art. And if we want to think clearly about these criteria, we'll have to pay some attention to that branch of philosophy that deals with aesthetics (which, contrary to the popular notion, has probably more to tell us about logic than about Beauty).

Aesthetics, according to Monroe C. Beardsley, the philosopher who writes about this demanding discipline more lucidly than anyone else I know, is "not about works of art, but about what the critic says" about them. It "consists of those principles that are required for clarifying and confirming critical statements [and can be thought of] as the philosophy of criticism, or *metacriticism*" (*Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 1981).

It is but a short step from thinking about the "affective

**The intentionalist approach can only tell us something about the developers, nothing of whether their product was good or bad.**



tive" element of a museum visit to thinking of exhibitions in terms of the aesthetic experience. Nonetheless it is important to keep in mind the cognitive nature of the aesthetic experience.

An early proponent of designing museum interpretive materials to facilitate a rewarding visitor experience rather than to convey information (1988 AAM *Sourcebook*), I based my theory and my definition of a rewarding experience on research by behavioral psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Since his work on the way experts perceive their peak or "flow" experiences while engaged in other intrinsically rewarding activities such as chess and rock climbing (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, 1975), Csikszentmihalyi has published a book about the psychology of the aesthetic experience. In this publication, he points out the striking correspondences between his criteria for the flow experience and Beardsley's criteria for the aesthetic experience (*The Art of Seeing*, with Rick Robinson, 1990). Given these parallels and correspondences, it seems reasonable to suppose that we might fruitfully apply the critical standards of aesthetics to exhibitions.

Even a cursory knowledge of aesthetics would help us get over the opinion-vs.-objectivity hurdle that has kept us in thrall to number-crunching<sup>8</sup> and has prevented us from developing a set of critical standards. Criticism demands a particular kind of objectivity. When critics speak *objectively*, they are speaking about the aesthetic object. And to maintain this objectivity, they have to take care to stay focused on the intrinsic features of the object. They must not become distracted by extrinsic concerns such as the intentions of the object's creator.

As Beardsley points out, critics interpret their role in various ways. Some believe their job consists solely in describing and interpreting, in helping others see as much as possible about the complexities of the aesthetic object. Others think they should add to this analysis something about their own liking or disliking and sometimes even a word or two about how someone else, with this or that predisposition, might respond to the work. Still other critics believe they should end by grading the work, "either absolutely or comparatively." It is in this act of evaluative criticism that most of the errors of the intentionalist approach come into play.

To be sure, critical statements that describe and interpret are also subject to intentionalist error. Often, however, descriptive and interpretive statements that appear to confuse internal evidence found in the work with external, biographical evidence are actually only misleading verbal conventions. In such cases, words such as *intended*, *aimed*, *strove*, and *wanted*—though seemingly applied to the artist—are only careless ways of talking about the work itself. However, when critics write about the *intentional* or *unintentional* irony of a work without referring to the features of the work that support such a conclusion, they are no longer being *objective*. They are also not being objective when they take the creator's own statement about her intentions at

face value even when it contradicts evidence offered by the work.

Recently a curator told me flatly that I shouldn't even consider discussing one of Lucas Samaras's abstract quilts as a landscape because "that wasn't what he had in mind." What if the characteristics of the quilt say otherwise? (See Beardsley for more examples.)

When critics come to make value judgments, they are even more likely to fall victim to the intentional fallacy. The reasons critics give for declaring a work good or bad might be classified as cognitive, moral, or aesthetic (again, following Beardsley, although other philosophers prefer to call these mutually exclusive categories truth, goodness, and beauty).

If a critic declares an exhibition to be successful because it advances our understanding of evolution, we should recognize this as a cognitive valuation—one that has nothing to do with the exhibition's aesthetic qualities. Similarly, when an exhibition is praised for its social criticism or censured for its political incorrectness, the judgment is being made on ethical or moral grounds that are outside the realm of aesthetic standards.

If we want to be able to establish critical criteria for judging exhibitions, we will have to learn to focus on exhibitions' aesthetic features. The reasons advanced for making this or that aesthetic judgment, Beardsley tells us, fall into three general categories: objective, affective, and genetic.

The objective reasons for aesthetic judgments are directly related to the perceptible features of the object—those qualities open to sensory awareness. Affective reasons, as you might guess, deal with the emotional or psychological effects of the object on its reader, viewer, or auditor. These reasons Beardsley admits as relevant but insufficient unless they take into account the features of the object that provoke the emotional response. Thus, appeals to states of our own being to explain our critical judgments lack validity unless we can say what it is about the object that makes us feel as we do. When affective reasons are *sufficient*, they are really objective reasons sailing under another flag.

Genetic reasons for supporting a critical evaluation—reasons grounded in the causes and conditions of the object's origin—cannot, however, ever be admissible as either relevant or valid, for they predate the work and exist independently of it. The intentionalist evaluation, which falls into the category of genetic reasons, assumes that the maker's intentions can be fully known and that the completed work can be compared to and judged against them. Complete knowledge of intentions is rarely accessible. But even when a comparison between intention and object is possible, any judgment based on such a connection is inevitably about the maker, not about the work. If the artist accomplishes what he set out to do, we can say, "bully for him," but we should recognize that it is the artist to whom we are giving high grades, not the work. And we are still a long way from an evaluation of the work because we have not yet ad-



addressed the question of whether the intention itself was a worthy one. We can only do this by returning to an examination of the work.

Suppose, for example, an exhibition developer or a team of developers decided to bring together a group of paintings that had little in common except for their having been shown at the same 19th-century gallery sometime during its 20 years of existence. We could applaud the effort that must have been necessary to assemble perhaps 50 widely scattered and more or less representative works. But would we be justified in pronouncing the exhibition good if it lacked any other unifying principle or if all the works were inferior productions of third-rate artists? Here we can finally begin to think about critical standards that might be applied to exhibitions as works of art in their own right.

Or let's take the example of an exhibition that may still be fresh in the memories of those who attended the 1996 AAM meeting in Minneapolis. A visitor to *Families*, staged at the Minnesota Historical Society, hardly needed an explicit statement of intention from the exhibition developers to know what the team was up to. (Museum professionals who sat in on the AAM critique session learned straight from the source that the team had taken up the challenge of creating an "affective, personally relevant experience for visitors.") It took no more than a few minutes in the exhibition hall to realize that you were in for a good emotional bath.

If, then, the exhibition managed to tug the visitor's heartstrings, can we pronounce it good/successful because it achieved its goal? Of course not. Before we can make any judgment of the exhibition, we need to look closely at all its features. We need to look especially at the means used to provoke its emotional effects, which I believe were bound to strike the visitor, even as she sniffled into her hanky, as excessive.

If the exhibition were a movie, I would call it a "tearjerker," because the situations and props to which I'm asked to respond are not inherently equal to the emotions I'm asked to feel. The pathos is piled on so heavily that it becomes bathos, and I feel jerked about. Put baldly like this, I've made an appraisal of the exhibition that seems to fall into the category of affective judgments. No one can or should take it very seriously until I get down to brass tacks and begin looking at the way specific features of the exhibition support it, singly and in the aggregate. But the appraisal at least suggests avenues of fruitful and objective investigation of the exhibition as object. The intentionalist approach can only tell us something about the developers, nothing of whether their product was good or bad.

Since 1990 Kathy McLean has been organizing an exhibition critique for the annual meetings of the American Association of Museums. These sessions have become more and more popular and lively over the years despite their unfortunate scheduling at the very end of several exhausting days. Kathy has devised a format for the critiques based on the equal-time prin-

ciple; we hear from both exhibition developers and critics. Perhaps this is the only format possible in a public (if professionals-only), democratic forum. Yet the format merely confirms us in the errors of our conventional thinking about exhibition criticism. That is, it gives equal weight, as well as equal time, to the exhibition developers' intentions and to the critics' observations about the actual features of the exhibition.

Even though the developers' intentions are not disclosed to the critics until after they have made their evaluations, subsequent discussion is almost always dominated by these intentions and the difficulties encountered in their realization. Intention is inevitably trotted out to justify any failures of execution, and this appeal to intention over observation tends to support the erroneous notion that the critics' remarks can be discounted as nothing but personal opinion.

No wonder we remain confused about what criticism is and how it can actually get us to think more clearly and deeply about our work.

I set out here to lay to rest the ghost of intentional fallacy that seems to stalk all our dreams of establishing critical standards for exhibition appraisal. Once this has been done—and I don't flatter myself that this persistent ghost won't ever again raise its frightful head—we still have other phantoms to pursue.

We'll need to decide whether the general canons of unity, complexity, and intensity used by critics to judge musical, literary, and visual works of art are applicable to exhibitions. And we'll have to establish through practice what special canons might be particularly useful in reaching value judgments about our complex medium. What are the characteristics of coherence in an exhibition? How much variety is possible without disrupting unity? Are attention-getting devices always a merit? Is subtlety or ambiguity ever a virtue? We have a lot of work ahead if we are really looking for objective exhibition criticism. And we must constantly bear in mind that the aesthetic value of an exhibition, as of anything else, depends on its "capacity to impart—through cognition of it—a marked aesthetic character to the experience" (Beardsley, p. lix). Obviously this means differentiating the capacities of the exhibition from the capacities of its visitors as well as its makers.

But if we want to continue to present and judge exhibitions as an educational medium, then by all means we should continue to use visitor testing as the measure of our success. Kamien is absolutely on target when she claims that summative evaluation is "the best bet for a reality against which to test your intention" (p. 16). But intentions have no place in making critical evaluations. And if we want visitors to value and enjoy exhibitions as they do other aesthetic mediums, we have to learn to construct and judge exhibitions as works of art.

*Marlene Chambers writes, edits, and wears out blue pencils at the Denver Art Museum.*

**Any judgment based on . . . a connection [between intention and object] is inevitably about the maker, not about the work.**



# Should Exhibit Designers Professionalize?

by David James Whitemyer

Tucked away in the poorly lit back closet of our office, near a box of spray adhesives and adjacent to the decommissioned Waxmaster, is a dusty file drawer labeled "Resumés." I recently took the opportunity to shuffle through the folder of old job applicants, curious about the varying experience and skill levels of my colleagues and competitors—the ones who never made it into this small exhibit design firm.

Where did these job seekers come from? What did they have to offer? And what similarities did I have with them? In all honesty, I was just looking for an ego boost. What was it in my resumé that made me a better candidate?

Paging through the pile of resumés—altering in shades of off-white and stock weights, all with matching envelopes—I was humbly reminded of the impressive diversity of backgrounds from which we, as exhibit professionals, come from.

The question surfaces often in many fields, including exhibit design: Should there be a professional criterion to which all exhibit designers should adhere before they be allowed to publicly practice in the exhibition business? In the introduction for her book *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, Kathleen McLean states, "The field lacks clear professional standards and offers few comprehensive training programs."

The argument on behalf of professional standards usually arises from one of two scenarios. It comes up when we witness an exhibition that is unsuccessful, unattractive, or unsafe. How easy it is for us to raise our noses and scoff at the museum display created by an untrained "designer." Or worse, the standard is taken up when we see beautiful and successful exhibitions built from the minds of architects, interior designers, or industrial designers, and we feel justifiably threatened.

In the United States it is against the law to advertise yourself as a medical doctor or lawyer without the appropriate registration. It is improper to place the word *Architect* after your name without a state license.

Yet, looking through our stack of resumés, I frequently spotted *Exhibit Designer* written as a title, regardless of the person's schooling or past experience. In one case, the applicant was still in college. And in another, a museum employee had helped to develop a small exhibition and had done some writing for a related publication. Both called themselves Exhibit Designers.

## A Matter of Degree?

There are presently only a scattering of universities that offer any type of museum exhibit design or planning program. An increasing number of design schools are beginning to offer one or two exhibition planning courses. As more and more colleges begin to add exhibit-related courses to their curriculum, such courses may become expected precursors to entering the field.

This may be a disappointment to, for instance, the young man currently enrolled in a political science

**I frequently spotted *Exhibit Designer* written as a title, regardless of the person's schooling or past experience. In one case, the applicant was still in college.**

program who finds, after graduating, that he has a knack for capturing the minds of young children with his visual displays of scientific principles. Or to the talented woman who after graduating high school went to work building cabinets for a fabricator but discovers an ability to envision inviting and educational three-dimensional spaces. Should these people be excluded in practicing exhibit design simply because they lack the educational requirements of our related associations and organizations?

I enjoy the wide assortment of personalities and experiences of my co-workers. In the exhibit design field, where you are always learning something new, be it about the history of prairie dogs, the art of Gauguin, the workings of fiber optics, or whatever the topic of the day, it helps to have the support and input of so many different minds.

**A person with a degree in forestry has a very different thought process from one who was educated in exhibit design or museum studies and took forestry courses as a side interest.**



## The Argument for Multidisciplinarity

One of our copywriters was educated in forestry. One of our exhibit developers has a degree in landscape architecture. It is the variety of personal contexts that adds so much to the success of each project. A person with a degree in forestry has a very different thought process from one who was educated in exhibit design or museum studies and took forestry courses as a side interest. When an exhibition is required to communicate something as specific as, say, the evolution of Euclidean geometry or the 19th-century slaughter of bison, it is vital to have many types of thinkers readily available in the office. And it is a closed mind that believes only an appropriately trained exhibit designer can, in a three-dimensional fashion, present this information successfully.

My educational background is in architecture. In school, I was somewhat turned off by the rigid professionalism and exclusion that the field of building design offered. It created a large clique of automatons that were only able to think, write, and converse in terms of architecture. In exhibit design, I find just the opposite. Every day is a gathering basket of new information from differently trained minds. And that is what is so appealing.

**A group of workers with identical training and similar educational backgrounds will create stale, unimaginative spaces.**

Multidisciplinarity is an essential aspect of successful exhibit design offices. A group of workers with identical training and similar educational backgrounds will create stale, unimaginative spaces. An ideal preparation for future designers cannot be defined by a grouping of college courses. The cultivation of well-learned exhibit specialists cannot be achieved by the requisites drawn out in a syllabus. Many voices sharing different opinions is what creates successful design.

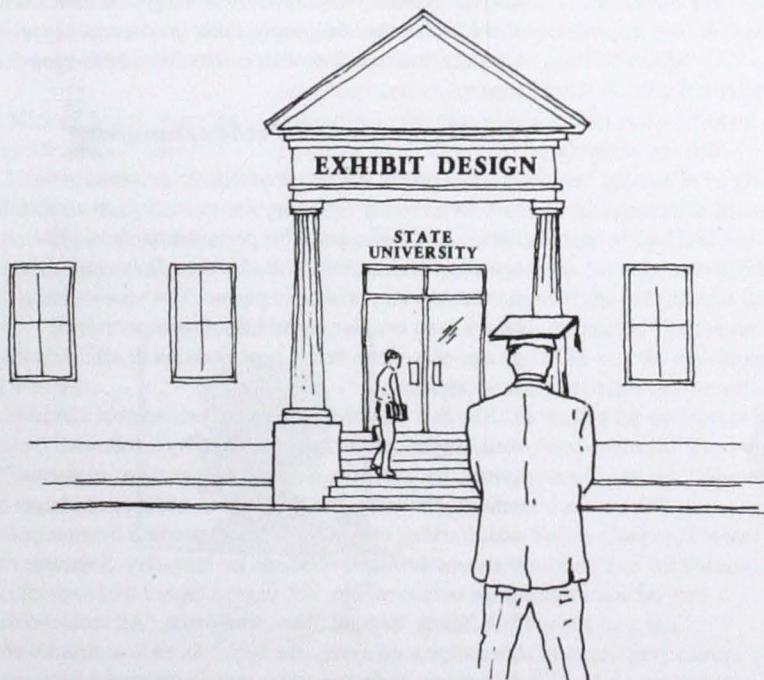
## Learning the Ropes

In architecture, as in medicine and some other occupations, a certain type of apprenticeship is required before practice is allowed. The concept of apprenticeship was born from the medieval crafts guild, where vocational training was the only formal education a young person ever received.

Our modern-day equivalent of medieval apprenticeship is internship, a rite of passage for many professionals that usually begins immediately following school. Our interns are usually energetic young graduates doing lots of work in various areas and, like their medieval predecessors, receiving little or no pay.

The architecture profession has created the IDP (Intern-Architect Development Program), which specifies 14 different training areas that the entry-level architect must be exposed to before becoming eligible to take the registration exam.

There is no comparable process to the IDP for exhibit development and museum space-planning. When applying for a job, an entry-level exhibit designer is usually expected to have certain skills that can, and will, be developed further, such as drawing, writing, three-dimensional thinking, and a basic knowledge of production. It is management's responsibility to determine—most often with only trust and assumption to go on—that the person being hired is somewhat familiar with the tasks required of them. This doesn't always work out. I have seen a few graphic designers become frustrated or even leave the job because their experience in print work left them unprepared for exhibition



work. I have often found myself a bit frightened and embarrassed because of my unfamiliarity with certain building materials.

*Illustration by David James Whitemyer.*

## The Importance of Dirt under the Fingernails

The Bauhaus school of thought stressed the importance of getting dirt under your fingernails as key to learning about design. Students were encouraged to take up a trade, such as metal-working or plaster-forming, and learn how objects are constructed. Only then, it was believed, would they excel as designers.

My experience suggests that students who spend their summers on construction sites seem to become



better designers than the ones who spend it with pencil in hand. Perhaps a year or two spent in a fabrication house, mixing paints and cutting acrylic, should be suggested to young designers looking to enter the exhibition field.

### Which Course to Follow?

So, what should be considered proper training for an exhibit professional?

In an *Exhibitionist* interview ["On Being an Exhibit Designer," spring 1996], Ralph Appelbaum answered a similar question by saying, "Read, travel—literature, human experiences. Really engage yourself in what the world is like."

Much more is needed in displaying ideas than just technical expertise and good design skills. In a well-managed office, apprenticeship will occur naturally. It is a good idea for a young designer to have a mentor, whether formally or informally. Managers and mentors should encourage the people under their wings to pursue other interests and other outlets for exhibit-related topics.

### The Tyrannies of Professionalism

The concept of professionalization evolved in the mid-19th century. The idea was to create career-related laws meant to designate the persons who should be considered adequately trained and credibly competent for the jobs they wished to pursue. This idea excluded others from working in the field. It also permitted groups of workers in the same vocation to achieve public recognition.

The first occupations to define professional standards were lawyers, physicians, and the clergy, followed quickly by architects, nurses, social workers, engineers, dentists, and more. In cases such as medicine and large-scale building construction, where people's lives are put at risk, professional standards are necessary. Someone has to be responsible. Yet, in most cases I tend to agree with George Bernard Shaw, who wrote, "All professions are conspiracies against the laity." As early as the turn of the century, Shaw and others were doubting the fairness and necessity of professionalism.

It might be too early in the evolution of our chosen profession to worry about such "conspiracies," but one can anticipate dangers. In *Rethinking the Museum*, Stephen Weil wrote, "the practitioners of the professions may themselves actually prescribe and monitor the preparatory training for the field, control the entry of new practitioners, and not only promulgate standards of achievement and conduct, but also enforce these standards by imposing sanctions upon those who violate them."

The question keeps entering my mind: who will watch the watchman?

Even ignoring the threat and unfairness of reduced competition, enforceable standards for exhibit design do not seem possible. Ours is a business that requires many

schools of thought and types of minds. Again, as in internship, the desired "standards" must rest with those doing the hiring and firing.

### Tyranny vs. Anarchy?

Without professionalization and without a well-defined criterion to which we should aspire, how do we control the field and separate the exhibit designers from the Exhibit Designers? Or is a separation even necessary? Are the untrained designers making us look bad? And are the other non-exhibit-related designers stealing our projects?

Such questions pop up at work and at gatherings. In the constant bettering of ourselves in our careers, we sometimes feel incomplete and inadequate because we lack the certification so many other vocations require. We yell "no fair" when we think respect is due and none is given.

Kathleen McLean warns against taking such concerns too far, saying, "The level of exhibit professionalism must be raised, but we must also take care not 'professionalize' ourselves into a specialized corner."

### Taking Ownership

At this stage in our field's development, perhaps the most useful way to keep ourselves out of a specialized corner is to claim more personal responsibility in our careers, and to not sit back, waiting for rules to be implanted by our various associations. This requires us to expend energy educating ourselves, our prospective clients, and students interested in the business, about what an exhibit designer *is* and what "standards" we demand from our colleagues.

It is the outstanding diversity of our backgrounds, specialties, and interests that will restrain us from ever achieving any type of "professionalization." But that is also the treasure that makes exhibition design so intriguing and so fun.

The control of our field and the respect we so much desire will be achieved not by good rules but, rather, by good work.

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*David Whitemyer is an exhibit designer in Cambridge, Mass., and has a Bachelor of Architecture from Iowa State University.*



Illustration by Jennie Alwood Zehmer

# What Is an "Exhibit Developer"?

by Sharyn Horowitz and Katherine Krile

**"It's time to acknowledge that from the audience's point of view, the exhibit designer's role is the single most important role in creating an exhibit. . . . An exhibit has its best chance for success, measured by whatever communication goals you wish to set, when the creative effort to bring a topic to an audience is led by an exhibition designer. The designer is often the only person on the team who is able to conceptually understand, organize, and integrate both the physical and intellectual content of an exhibit at all phases of the exhibit's development, design, and production."**

**—Don Hughes,  
"Growing up NAME,"  
Exhibitionist, spring 1996**

**Substitute the word  
developer for designer in  
the above paragraph and  
many exhibit developers  
would nod wisely.  
Is there a problem here?**

In search of what it means to be an exhibit developer in today's museum-exhibit-making community, we approached a range of people in the profession.

First on our list was Michael Spock, since the role and job title "Exhibit Developer" seems to have originated at the Children's Museum in Boston during his tenure there in the early 1970s. When he first came to the Museum there was "a tripartite model of curator, designer, and advocate for the visitor, who was either an educator or an evaluator." There was a general feeling on staff that something wasn't right with this model. Educators, he observed, excel at direct interpersonal interaction, but the exhibits process kept educators one step removed from the public. Evaluators, on the other hand, were too specialized; not necessarily skilled in working through the exhibit development process. He and his staff felt that while both of these parties are important to a successful exhibition, neither one really fulfilled the needs of the exhibition team. A new team player—the exhibit developer—was born to fulfill this need.

According to Spock, an exhibit developer is equally passionate about the content and about the visitor *and* has some sense of how to put exhibitions together. Exhibit developers should know the content but not be so buried in it that they can't keep their perspective.

Has this early model of an exhibit developer changed? We spoke with several other people to find out.

**Phyllis Rabineau, Deputy Director for Interpretation and Education, Chicago Historical Society**

"I always thought the developer's job was to identify and orchestrate resources—i.e. visitors (accessed through evaluation), the collection, and curators and other scholars—to create an effective public learning experience. Today, for cultural projects I'd add the constituency, i.e. the people whose culture or history is the subject of the exhibit.

The developer has to find the main ideas, think of some materials that can be used to express them, and bring these into a collaborative design process. Developers aren't responsible for figuring out how to deliver the message—that's the designer's expertise—but they have to decide what the message should be. Designers are often frustrated by developers, particularly if the developers are fuzzy in their thinking or miss their deadlines. Yes, these are crimes of which developers are often guilty!

It's a lot harder for people to understand what a developer does than it is to understand the role of curator or designer. Not only do you find exhibit developers lurking under all kinds of titles from one institution to the next, you also find many different expectations about what a developer is and does. Sometimes the title of 'developer' appears to be given to the project coordinator or to an interpretive writer.

Under Mike Spock's leadership at the Field Museum, the exhibit developer was not only responsible for the content of the exhibit, s/he was also the project director. The reason for this was that Mike saw the developer as the primary advocate for the audience, and he wanted the projects to be rigorously 'client-centered.' The most important issue was always, 'How will this work for the visitor?'"

**Marquette Folley-Cooper, Project Director, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), Washington, D.C.**

"An exhibit developer believes firmly in the art of collaboration. Like a conductor who works with trumpet players, saxophonists, and other musicians to create long moments of magic, an exhibit developer relies on individuals with different talents to tell an honest and intelligent human story.

An exhibit developer must learn how to stay with the vision for an exhibition. The message developed by the team at the beginning becomes the exhibit developer's mandate. Collaboration with others leads to a refinement of that vision. Within a climate of mutual respect fostered by the exhibit developer, nearly every idea has a place in that process, even if it is to wonder about the genesis of the idea. The act of answering allows the idea to test itself."

**Jennifer Thissen, Project Director, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), Washington, D.C.**





"Exhibit developers seem to me a lot like film producers, ensuring that everyone on a project has the information, resources, and intellectual environment necessary to craft a work of art. They must be acutely aware of the goals of the curator and other collaborators, the needs and interests of museum visitors, and find ways to forge a link between these groups.

Probably the most critical period in creating an effective exhibition team is the "brain dump." This is the curator's opportunity to educate the exhibition team on the topic, and for the team to respond with questions and ideas for the exhibition. This process not only informs the team about the subject but also introduces the curator to the possibilities and limitations of museum exhibitions.

When an exhibit developer has done her job well, the exhibition team can make the best possible use of their creativity and expertise."

**Karoline Lane, Exhibit Developer, Gerard Hilferty and Associates, Athens, Ohio**

"Exhibit developers are conceptual designers—what is the information the client wants to get across? How is that information best shaped for communication? And how can we successfully communicate that information through exhibits?

There's very little difference between an exhibit developer and an excellent exhibit designer. The biggest difference may be that we don't draw. We're also like evaluators because we have to know, for whom is this exhibit? But we depend on evaluators' expertise in gathering information and tweaking our work. We're also like curators, because we've got to become mini-subject-experts.

Working with big teams, everybody does a little bit of everything. All our efforts seem to overlap, but we all have something we're especially good at: aesthetics, materials, function (designers); scholarship (curators); visitor identity and biases (evaluators). All of us are concerned with communication, but perhaps that's the thing developers are especially good at.

As developers, we have to understand the medium, the possibilities of the medium; what it will and will not do. And I think we have a responsibility to help our clients understand. Ultimately it's about communication. To visitors. To clients. To in-house team members. It's up to us to see both the forest and the trees. And to have the skills (and patience) to bring an exhibit from concept to reality."

**Stephanie Ratcliffe, Senior Exhibits Specialist, Maryland Science Center, Baltimore, Md.**

"Exhibit developers at my institution wear many different hats, taking them on and off at different points in the process: team facilitator, translator, broker of information, evaluator, project manager.

You're often the one who synthesizes the team's

ideas into writing, so you have to figure out how to get the information you need out of the group. You bring your own ideas, but you must also tap into all perspectives on the team. Documents you produce must represent "group think" or you will run into many problems later. It is important that the team trust you to communicate the group's collective vision.

You may also be the one who gets to know the subject matter best, and you're probably the liaison to outside content experts. In this role, you have to translate the sometimes complex information for the visitors. Even before that, though, you often need to synthesize an immense amount of information for the rest of the team.

Traditionally here, the developers have been responsible for formative evaluation. But designers are participating too. It's good for the designers to see with their own eyes how visitors react to the prototypes, but it's right that the developer is the primary champion for the visitors.

In our process, you might be the project manager at the beginning, but at a certain time the ball gets handed to the designers. But still you're part project manager, in that you manage the editorial aspects.

You're responsible for creating enough of the script and for making key decisions to keep everyone else on track. When there's a problem, you do the things you need to do to get the team unstuck, whether it's interpersonal or content-related.

In my case, I'm working with a team that's been together for a long time, so these issues have shaken themselves out. But defining roles is part of the rules of the game, and the definitions may change because of lessons from other projects. I've

found it useful (and entertaining) to read and learn more about team process. Most of these models come from the business world. It is both frightening and funny to realize how predictable people can be when presented certain tasks. A recent reference I have found useful is *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith.

**Darcie Fohrman, independent consultant, Monterey, Calif.**

"I don't really know the definition of an exhibit developer. It's very important to have people on the team that are professional exhibit planners that understand how to be the liaison to the public. I'd like to think that the whole team is doing that and has that goal.

I don't call myself an exhibit developer. I feel that my skills have to do with developing team dynamics, determining who will do what, why it should be done, what is our main theme and messages, coming to consensus, then developing the appropriate media, always keeping that big picture.

I'm not necessarily a project manager, though there is some involved. I try to have someone else keep track





of all the logistics.

I do concept design and help plan the space, but I'm not an exhibit designer. My degree is in education. I think of myself as an interpreter."

**Doug Worts, Educator: Gallery Enhancement and Audience Research, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto**

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by exhibit developer. I'm an educator and visitor researcher. In the mid 1980s, we started to take an audience-oriented approach to exhibits: lots of interactives, different room environments, different interpretive techniques to appeal to visitors of different backgrounds. The technology is integrated with rather than separated from the artwork, which is kind of unusual.

We had been doing some experimental exhibitions, and we caught the eye of the senior curator, who asked us to work with him on the reinstallation of the Canadian galleries. He had modest ambitions about rearranging the artwork and putting up new labels. We asked him about his assumptions about how the galleries were used, and we did baseline testing of the experience. This made it clear to him that the public perception had no relation to his intentions. We turned it from a traditional installation to single room with seven focal areas, interactive computers, and digital audio systems. Subsequent evaluations suggest we succeeded."

**Portia James, Historian, Anacostia Museum, Washington, D.C.**

"I heard a curator at a conference say, 'We don't have a community of people to whom we feel responsible because our focus is on guns.'

No matter what you're doing, you're doing it for a group of people. Most people want to be responsive to the people in their neighborhood. Often for a particular exhibit, there's a community that has an interest in the subject matter. The neighborhood and the community should be a part of the exhibit development process.

That doesn't mean evaluation, which usually involves bringing in people to react to your work. Few people understand what goes on in order to realize an exhibit. That's disempowering. To ask them to give feedback is not effective.

To get the community involved, you need to be more proactive. It's to your own advantage. They've got insights that you won't have. Go after them. And build their participation into the process."

The dirty little secret of exhibit developers is that any of the tasks described in the adjacent listing could be done by somebody else on the exhibits team. Some share Darcie Fohrman's ideal of exhibit development, that is, that everyone on the team is an exhibit developer. Is our mission to propel the field toward this ideal? Is our mission to make ourselves obsolete?

*Katherine Krile is an exhibit developer with SITES. Sharyn Horowitz is an exhibit developer for the Health Museum of Cleveland and a regional editor for the Exhibitionist.*

## **What Do I Do?**

**If you're an exhibit developer, you might be all, some, or none of the following:**

**Visionary:** Inspire the process.

**Curator:** Without the Ph.D. or the years of preparation, but with the pressure for accuracy.

**Researcher:** Compile background, interview experts.

**Secretary:** Listen to the Board, listen to the administration.

**Thinker:** Synthesize all of it to get the main message.

**Warrior:** Defend the main message.

**Whiner:** Complain when the main message is ignored.

**Translator:** Turn words into a three-dimensional, interactive, exciting exhibit.

**Teacher:** Educate the designers who are too busy to learn about the content they're exhibiting.

**Evaluator:** Speak with visitors.

**Advocate:** Speak up for visitors.

**Project Manager:** Make charts, write purchase orders, manage, make it happen.

**Therapist:** Make sure everyone feels a part of the process, that everyone's ego is stroked.

**Parent:** Prevent squabbling from bringing down the house.

**Laborer:** Actually build the thing.

**This article is Part 1 of an Exhibitionist series on what it means to be an exhibit developer. Please contact staff or respond to the questionnaire on the next page if you would like to be included in this dialogue.**







## Survey

What do you think it means to be an exhibit developer? If you prefer, visit NAME's Web site to fill out this survey on-line.

Do you consider yourself to be an exhibit developer, regardless of your title? Why or why not?

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If you do consider yourself to be an exhibit developer, please list your job responsibilities (use the NAME application for ideas). If you don't, list what you think exhibit developers should be doing.

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Is the job title "exhibit developer" used in your organization?

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Describe your organization (i.e. art museum, historic site, . . .)

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Are you \_\_\_\_\_ in-house or \_\_\_\_\_ independent?

Who plays the role of "subject-matter expert" on your projects?

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If you're a developer, how do you communicate with exhibit designers? If you're a designer, how do you wish developers would work with you?

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How much money do you make?

- a. Under \$20,000
- b. \$20,000-\$29,000
- c. \$30,000-\$39,000
- d. \$40,000-\$49,000
- e. \$50,000 or over
- f. How rude!!

What's the future of exhibit development/exhibit developers?

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## Return this survey to:

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# The Secret Life of the Home: An Initiation into Exhibit Design

by Tim Hunkin

**In the last issue, British cartoonist, engineer, and filmmaker Tim Hunkin described his first efforts in exhibit design for the domestic appliances gallery of the Science Museum in South Kensington, London. Now, prototype completed, he presses ahead with design.**



Photograph courtesy Science and Society Picture Library, Science Museum, London

**T**he emphasis of the original domestic appliances exhibition, in place before my time, was on heating, with several large complete fireplaces and a huge Victorian kitchen range, complete with a fiberglass roasting pig. I decided these should go in order to make room for a home entertainment section, something on hobbies, and a room about home security.

## Breaking down Walls for Home Security

The worst job was demolishing the solid brickwork around the fireplaces and the kitchen range, which had to be done with a minimum of dust. It was decided that this job, together with the construction of the Home Security Room, would be done by the museum, with its formal procedure for competitive tendering. Producing the tender documents required drawing everything in detail, with dire consequences for any changes made at a later date. (I was told contractors generally tender at cost, confident they will get their profits on the subsequent "alterations and additions.")

I found generating the tender documents to be very difficult. It increased my respect for conventional designers and architects who have to work in this indirect way all the time. I found it particularly difficult trying to decide the dimensions of the small Home Security Room. With the Victorian kitchen range still in place, it was impossible to get any feel of the space. Unable to picture the room by drawing, I started measuring rooms at home, and everywhere else, to try and find one roughly the size I was thinking of. Even then, I wasn't sure if it would feel too claustrophobic stuffed with people. I wondered why architects didn't have a system of temporary screens to "mock up" spaces. Even if they had enough experience not to need them, their clients would benefit from it.

The demolition job went to the contractor who was already on site doing the education center next

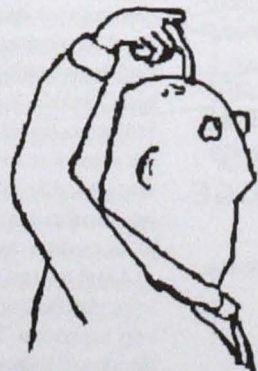
door. I arrived to find the demolition almost complete, with two men asleep on the rubble. I had imagined there would have been some high-tech method, but this was so primitive. It must have been insanely hot, dusty work, all done at night. It seemed like gross exploitation.

With the range gone, it was now finally possible to see the space; also, I could now see my drawings for the room were not quite right. While I was fretting about the expense of changing them, a draftsman turned up to do the final scale drawings. She seemed quite happy to alter my original dimensions. I don't think the contractor ever realized that anything had changed.

## Un-Designery Design

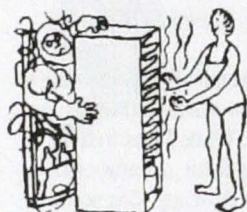
The design department was concerned about the outside of the Home Security Room. I wanted it to look like the exterior of a house and had proposed mock brick wallpaper. They said it should either look genuine, with real brick, or intentionally zany, with weird colors and crazy-shaped windows. My sister, who used to be an architect, rescued the situation by producing a fine drawing of the exterior covered in ornate ironwork, hanging baskets, and window boxes.

It was a delicate balance—getting the decoration for the whole gallery right. I knew I didn't want "designery" things like fancy materials, odd shapes, and wild colors, and anyway I had very little money. I decided to stick with the black and white colors of the original gallery—the white reflected light off the ceiling, the black was practical around the bases of the showcases, camouflaging dirt and scratches. I also decided to keep the original lighting—bright overhead fluorescent tubes. I liked the way they looked so old-fashioned, adding to the atmosphere of a traditional gallery. Just before the gallery finally opened, I changed my mind and switched the fluorescents off. I relied instead on the lights inside the showcases plus a few extra spotlights. Against my principles, I had to admit the more theatrical lighting did look better—it drew your

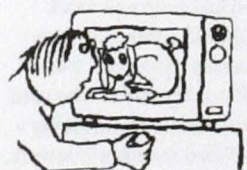


**SEE A BRITISH CARTOONIST  
DESIGN AN EXHIBIT**





TRY THE HAND-POWERED REFRIGERATOR



MICROWAVE THE DOG



FIND THE BOILING PORRIDGE

Illustration by Tim Hunkin

eye into the cases, away from the basement ceiling, cluttered with its ducts and services.

Despite my preference for plain and minimal color and lighting, I was a bit worried the gallery might just look too boring, so I decided it should have some sort of decoration to make the space more entertaining. Initially I toyed with the idea of having an overhead conveyor slowly moving suspended domestic appliances around the gallery. I later abandoned that notion, deciding that it would translate as noisy and distracting and would quickly become boring to look at.

This led to the idea of having individual appliances suspended from the ceiling that would spring to life occasionally. This fit the general idea of showing how everyday mundane things could be surprising and interesting. It also fit the brief to make the gallery more appealing to children. Further, it gibed with my idea of having the gallery at first sight look traditional and straightforward but then yield to a room full of surprises. Best of all, I already had a number of new-looking domestic machines—test failures given to me by the Consumer Association. Willy—the modelmaker—and I spent a happy autumn making 12 strange objects, including a microwave with a poodle trapped inside, a set of flying hot water bottles, a toilet with a plumber who popped out of the bowl and tank, and a television with a model of the museum director inside (so he could keep an eye on the gallery).

### Doubts and Convictions

Halfway through the project, when progress on every front seemed slow and difficult, I lost confidence in my ideas about the decoration. I became convinced that the gallery was still going to look stuffy and dull. Maybe the designers were right. I should have done something more dramatic with the gallery's appearance. I started wondering if I could make it into a sort of joke electrical superstore, complete with window displays, special offers, and guarantees on the objects. Initial reaction from people at the museum was enthusiastic, suggesting they too thought my original ideas were dull.

However, after some deliberation I decided to persevere with my original scheme, encouraged by the interest of the contractors working next door. I would often find them looking at the objects in the cases, even ones I hadn't refurbished. Their presence reminded me what a brilliant collection of stuff it all was. I decided against the superstore motif because, like the conveyor belt, it was a one-line joke that would quickly become irritating. I realized this was basically what I disliked about a lot of modern design.

Once the ceiling objects were finished, they still had to be installed, which turned out to be both difficult and very expensive. The museum bureaucracy, alarmed at the idea of suspended electrical moving objects, was particularly thorough. I gradually realized that the point was not simply to make everything safe, but to create a paper trail to prove that everyone within the museum

had acted correctly. I suppose this is quite understandable, and standard practice in any institution, even though it leads to decisions that waste money and defy common sense (like the pop-up toaster strung up by cables that could hold a full-size refrigerator).

More generally I found that the museum employees have ingeniously arranged their jobs to avoid responsibility. Although I was relying extensively on the museum staff's advice about building regulations, safety, conservation, etc., the responsibility for these aspects of the work was all mine. The only people who were responsible for their decisions about the gallery were the consultant structural engineer and the district surveyor—neither of which was a museum employee.

### Averting a Grand Entrance

The aspect of my design that created the most friction was the entrance. Assuming originally that the gallery would need some sort of entrance proclaiming its name, I had proposed an arch made of scrap domestic machines welded together. The problem was that the arch needed to be outside the gallery, within the expensive education center. From initial conversations with Ben Kelly, the designer, it was obvious he was not too keen on having my arch in his space (he suggested that an arch of video screens, showing the domestic machines, would be more in keeping with his designs).

I did other designs (I quite liked the one that was a corner of a house with a hole knocked through it, looking as if it had been ram-raided, with the gallery name sprayed like graffiti on the brickwork), but I evidently underestimated the strength of feeling about the whole issue. This finally came out at one of our few meetings.

Not only did Kelly and the museum's head of design dislike my specific ideas, they actually wanted something as minimal as possible so as not to spoil the aesthetic effect of their education center. Outside my other entrance, which was by the lifts and in so many respects a more obvious way into the gallery, they were insistent there should be nothing at all, to ensure that visitors went around the corner into the education center. (I have since heard the head of design emphasizing the importance of gallery entrances so visitors know where they are, but I suppose everyone contradicts themselves at times.)

Fortunately the other museum designer at the meeting made a brilliant suggestion: she said it wouldn't really matter what's outside, it's what people would see when they look through that would attract them in. So I rapidly abandoned any thought of an entrance arch and used the money to make the interior more enticing.

### Back in the Workshop

What helped to keep me sane throughout the process was regularly escaping to my workshop where I was building the interactive exhibits. It was something of a shock to realize all the practical restrictions in making them compared to doing demonstrations on television—



where anything only had to work once or twice, and where poking fingers could be used to explain it all.

I started by making an exhibit that explained how electric motors worked. This was followed by an hand-powered fridge, a hand-powered automatic washing machine (with the front of the drum replaced by plexiglass to show what happens inside), and finally a hand-cranked generator connected to a light, a heating element, and a fuse holder. The generator could make a fuse glow hot and then blow.

They all seemed dreadfully conventional and old-fashioned, particularly because they were all behind glass, with only the relevant handles, etc., poking through. (I had decided to put them behind glass partly to be in keeping with the rest of the gallery, and partly because I felt that many "open" exhibits I'd seen had become so dominated by their protective casings that the exhibit itself got rather lost.)

I tried to cheer up my exhibits by adding decorative signs—a motorized spinning sign for the motors, a washing line for the washing machine, and a frozen sign, with letters formed from copper pipe connected to a fridge unit so ice formed on them, for the fridge. I remained unconvinced whether this really solved the problem but decided to try the exhibits out at the museum for a few days.

## The Trial

Once the exhibits were set up, it was a wonderful feeling removing the screens and seeing visitors immediately swarm all around them. Trials are obviously a good idea, if only for the morale of the person building them.

The old-fashioned appearance of the exhibits didn't seem to worry the public. Most people spent several minutes playing with each one. Several people said how much they liked the idea of exhibits about ordinary, domestic things they use every day. It made me realize that though once very common, exhibits like this had largely disappeared from the museum. I was particularly impressed by the fridge—this had to be turned for a long time before it started to get really cold. I thought people would give up, but no, they turned it for ages, often forming relay teams. Energetic handle-turning in all the exhibits seemed to be particularly popular.

Once the initial euphoria subsided, I realized there were still substantial problems. The worst was the sheer intensity with which everything was used. I knew museums were tough environments, but I was still shocked. Every time a school party descended, it completely obscured the exhibits, leaving me with a view of feverish activity accompanied by overexcited noises. Every time a party departed, I assumed a pile of broken bits would be revealed. I realized it was impossible to make everything last forever, but I could make the exhibits accessible for repair by having easily replaced parts.

One exhibit, originally about gas heater flame failure valves (which cut off the gas if carbon monoxide levels rise), had turned into a simple gadget that dropped a hammer on a piezoelectric crystal and made a spark. What made it fun was extending the wires outside the case so you could give yourself a small electric shock. This caused endless entertainment. Kids dared each other to touch it or pestered an unfortunate parent to try.

The large electric shock warning notices the safety adviser asked for greatly improved the exhibit. They made the anticipation of the tiny shock into a big psychological ordeal. The psychology of a good interactive exhibit is remarkably similar to the coin-operated amusement machines I make. They have to draw people in, produce some satisfying result, and if possible make people laugh or scream. In one way interactive exhibits are more difficult. With a coin slot machine, once people have inserted their money they become captive audiences who read every instruction carefully, determined to get their money's worth.

About a year after I'd started work on the gallery, I was told everything had to be finished by autumn 1995 (another year away), to coincide with the opening of the education center. Despite my desire to work gradually around the gallery, I, perhaps inevitably, ended up with a frantic last few months.

## Epilogue

Looking back, my initial missionary zeal to show that traditional glass case displays could still be popular worked remarkably well. A bit of humor and bad taste were obviously good ingredients. It might not work so well elsewhere in the museum, with objects that are less relevant to visitors' personal experiences (although I wouldn't mind having a go at the shipping and farming galleries). However, refurbishment could in principle improve many of the old galleries, without destroying their period charm.

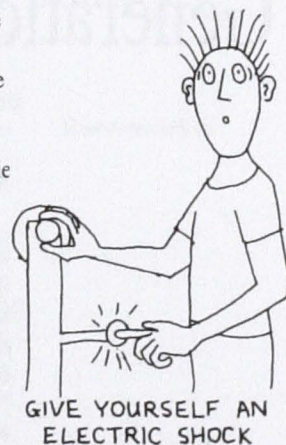
*The Secret Life of the Home* also showed that low-cost refurbishment was a good value. The money was all spent on displays and exhibits visitors do come to experience. Gutting the original space to create an entirely new gallery wastes money, re-creating the infrastructure.

The prejudices about museum design I started off with have been tempered. I've grown to like the extraordinary variety in the styles of all the galleries. I love the contrast between my gallery and the education center. I even like the look of the center.

*Tim Hunkin read engineering at Cambridge but became a cartoonist for the Observer, where he worked for 14 years. He created the award-winning TV series "The Secret Life of Machines," which demystifies household and office machines. He also makes public clocks and coin-operated amusement machines.*

*Unless otherwise noted, illustrations by Jennie Alwood Zehmer.*

**Trials are obviously a good idea if only for the morale of the person building them.**



*Illustration by Tim Hunkin*

**Every time a party departed, I assumed a pile of broken bits would be revealed.**



Illustration by Jennie Alwood Zehmer

# Marketing to Generation X

by Everett Arnold

**"H**ow do we get a multi-generational audience to come see an 81-year-old man on stage?" posed Marc Pachter, counsel to the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. "Unless you can teach your organization to market progressively," he said, "You don't have a chance."

Speaking to an audience of more than a hundred, Pachter was the first of five panelists at the "Marketing to Generation X" workshop sponsored jointly by the Cultural Alliance and the Smithsonian.

The 81-year-old man in Pachter's question happened to be legendary electric guitar innovator Les Paul, whom he had interviewed for a Smithsonian event. "There were fewer gray heads that I'd seen in the Smithsonian in a long time. And afterwards, he was

mobbed by young people as much as any rock star. Where was the Gen[eration] X problem there? Nonexistent."

The key, according to Pachter, is in understanding how different forms of art speak to generations. And this requires a new approach, when it comes to Generation X, the 18 to 30-year-old demographic. "Is this a generation incapable of reverence, or remembering what happened two days ago? No. It has to be a history that speaks to them—we have to find what interests them.

"I'm not a specialist on Generation X," Pachter said. "I am representing the concerns and the mindset of cultural organizations, or I should say 'traditional cultural organizations,' that's an important distinction, who really do need to reach out to this generation.

Pachter said that the main problem with the traditional arts community is that it draws a dividing line by assuming Generation X simply isn't interested in what it is to offer. "Break down the barrier of saying 'Well, there are the arts and then there is this generation in search of the arts although they don't know it.' They're finding a lot of [arts] needs and satisfactions already. That doesn't mean that we don't have a potential relevance to them, or that we can't learn from them in terms of how we think about and present the arts."

Pachter emphasized that placing the Generation X demographic isn't as difficult as arts organizations might think. "There is actually an extraordinary attendance, in general, even in museums,"

## WHAT the HELL is La Bohème?

### LA TRAGEDIA OPERA

L'azione si svolge a Parigi verso la metà dell'Ottocento.

#### ATTO PRIMO—Una soffitta

E' la vigilia di Natale, ma non c'è gioia nella soffitta di Marcello, dove da molto tempo la stufa è spenta. Marcello si sofferma sulle mura, cercando di lavorare al suo quadro "Il passaggio del Rodolfo, incapace di scrivere, guarda dalla finestra sui comignoli dei tetti vicini; improvvisamente si gira, comincia a strappare il manoscritto della sua tragedia, accendere la stufa (2). Quando entra Colline il fuoco, getta nella stufa altre parti del suo manoscritto (3). Improvvisamente Schaunard accompagnato da due fattori che portano pane, vino e legna. Il banchetto viene interrotto dal padrone di casa che esige l'affitto; Marcello viene buttato fuori. Marcello, Colline e Schaunard si guardano





he said. "There's a lot more buzz in them now—as opposed to the way they were marketed in the Sixties—in getting people inside the door. The Met[ropolitan Museum of Art] is the hottest dating place in New York on some nights.

"Arts museums are doing very well at getting younger generations in their doors. This is a generation of astonishing visual literacy. Does that mean that they know the art history of a particular work? No. But that's separate from visual interest and curiosity."

And that curiosity, Pachter said, is the key to cultivating young audiences. He referred to a theater advertising campaign by Millennium Communications Group, Inc., whose senior account executive, Kristen Grimm Wolf, also was a panelist at the workshop.

"What the hell is *La Bohème*?" was their slogan," Pachter explained. "It's a story that can be redefined and reinterpreted, that's what the hell it is! I don't have to push the *Romeo and Juliet* [movie adaptation] revelation, you've read it in the newspapers. Sure it's about the young—but they're not going to flock to it unless the essence of the story is there, captured in a modern framework. Think about what is eternal, and what is adaptable."

If Pachter was the panelist providing cultural context for understanding Generation X, it was Wolf who knew how to apply it to youth-centered marketing. With a delivery as rapid-fire as the youth-oriented Rock-the-Vote registration campaign commercials she helped create, she outlined a number of Generation X characteristics and strategies.

"One thing to realize is that the age range of 18 to 30 is huge—we're lumping together people who are at very different stages of life," Wolf said. "It's not easy to create one message that will reach the full spectrum."

Wolf recommended using a wide range of media to reach the youth culture, including the Internet. "This generation is technologically savvy. They're responsible for 30 percent of computer sales—they don't get stumped using computers.

"As a result, they want it when they want it. Fast, vivid and funny goes over well. They're used to 24-hour banking and pay-per-view and direct television. They don't want to have to wait in line for tickets to your show," Wolf said. "If you want to reach them and keep them happy, make it easy for them. Find out where they are—where their hang-outs are—on the radio, on-line, or in clubs."

She added that this generation has coincided not only with the rise of the World Wide Web, but of full-experience consumerism where goods and services combine.

"They like going to super-bookstores where they can sit on a couch and drink coffee while they decide if they want to buy the book," Wolf said. "They tend to be very skeptical of products and services—they want to try them out first."

Michelle Phillips, a panelist and marketing director for the Hard Rock Café in Washington, D.C., said that the 25-year-old restaurant chain found out just how skeptical they can be.

Only recently has the Café had to actively market to Generation X. The response from a marketing focus of George Washington University students was startling to Phillips. "They said 'Don't market to us. We're not your audience any more.'" The explanation was that the Café now is seen as a corporation whose main audience for rock n' roll memorabilia is the Baby Boomers. As a result, the Café is trying to market a "return to its grass roots."

In closing, Wolf showed samples of her company's Rock the Vote commercials to inspire the kind of "relationship-building that the Café needs. The spots were designed to run on MTV (that's Music Television, for you older folks).

Everett Arnold is publications director for the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington, which publishes Arts Washington. This article is reprinted with permission of Arts Washington.



# Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach

by Abigail Porter

**Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press [A Division of Sage Publications, Inc.], 1996), 261 pp., paperback.**

**"Good labels are guided by a strong, cohesive plan—a theme, story, or communication goal—that sets the tone and limits the content."**

In her new book, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Beverly Serrell offers practical advice and step-by-step suggestions for creating, designing, and producing effective exhibit labels. Well-organized and full of examples of labels, the book offers a comprehensive look at the process and pitfalls of developing good interpretive exhibit labels—along with research-based comments on how visitors respond to and use them.

Included in the book's pages are discussions of such thorny questions as deciding what to write about, how to write and present it (for diverse museum audiences), why evaluation is necessary, and when various tasks should be undertaken. An examination of writing labels for electronic media is also included, along with brief discussions of typography and production and fabrication issues.

But why should we care about exhibit labels, especially if people don't always read them?

Serrell, an exhibit and evaluation consultant, believes that good interpretive exhibit labels are key to the current effort by many museums to reach broader audiences. Although many museums strive to be captivating multimedia experiences and touch all our senses, they often fall short of such aspirations. So visitors still turn to words to tell them why something they are looking at or experiencing is important—to make a meaningful connection.

"When museum practitioners produce labels that are guided by clear goals, and contain accessible content and have words and visuals that work together," she says, "more visitors will understand, find meaning in, and enjoy museum exhibitions."

Good labels, in other words, can help us achieve our dreams of creating exhibitions that are full, rewarding experiences. Thus, although this book's content is primarily directed at the beginning and intermediate label writer, Serrell's suggestions for making better labels and effective exhibitions would be useful and provocative to anyone involved in the exhibit process, including designers, subject specialists, and educators. The book

is also a quick read, with 20 chapters designed to be sampled in any order.

## Chapter 1: The Big Idea

In the first chapter, entitled "The Big Idea," Serrell discusses the central importance of deciding what an exhibition is all about. Some exhibit developers or writers, she comments, don't exercise "self-control" when selecting content for an exhibition. They have no limits and want to tell every story, even if it takes 450 panels.

Interpretive labels will be easier to write and make more sense, Serrell argues, if an exhibition has a single focus that unifies all its parts. This plan, which she calls the "big idea," should be a simple, one-sentence statement of what the exhibition is about. The big idea then guides the development of the exhibit elements and their labels that support, exemplify, and illustrate aspects of the big idea.

Too often, Serrell observes, museum practitioners do not ask themselves what the big idea is. Instead they develop an exhibition as a bunch of "neat, affordable devices" that lack a cohesive purpose or relationship and do not support a larger exhibit objective.

Serrell also addresses, albeit less thoroughly, the importance of the big idea and its relationship to the point of view or voice in an exhibition. "The big idea determines what the voice or voices within the exhibit will be like: casual narrator, formal instructor, knowledgeable expert, or different voices with different points of view."

If the big idea is a controversial one, Serrell reasons, a presentation of different points of view may or may not be desirable as the presentation must be tied to exactly what the big idea is all about. The 1995 controversy at the Smithsonian Institution over plans for the Enola Gay, she suggests, was the result of a bad match between the subject (the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II) and the timing (the 50-year celebration of the end of the war, honoring those who fought).

"Was it supposed to be an academic history-of-war exhibit, or was it a tribute to the United States of America's armed forces?" she asks. A balance between these two approaches might not have been possible, she acknowledges, but a clarification of whose point of view was being communicated and for what purpose would have been useful. Not only for the exhibition planners, but for visitors as well. "Whereas museums used to be more about objects and authoritative points of view, they are now more about interpretation, and whose interpretation it is should be stated."

What Serrell understates is that getting exhibit teams or directors to clarify the big idea, or a particular point of view, is not all that easy. Things aren't always that clear—particularly in this day of powerful corporate funders, influential advisory board members, and sometimes vocal citizens.

Deciding on the "right" or appropriate idea, in fact, can seem like a delicate balancing act—a juggling of scholarship, aesthetic concerns, and divergent constitu-



encies or interpretations. And even if exhibit planners settle on a point of view, they can still spend agonizing weeks figuring out exactly what that means they can say or do.

What might be helpful, therefore, for many exhibit developers today is a framework for negotiating the increasingly contested process of deciding what the "right" story for a particular museum exhibition should be. How does an institution or exhibition team agree on what the "big idea" is?

Serrell's book suggests that the answer to this question lies in staying grounded in a visitor-centered approach—in finding out what visitors think and expect. Doing front-end evaluation at the beginning of a project can help clarify this matter. "A big idea can be tried out with visitors early in the planning stages, and visitor response can help developers shape or modify it, or tighten up the exhibit plan," she writes.

Serrell says this doesn't mean that evaluators should tell curators what the content should be, or tell designers what the exhibit should be like. But together players can "make decisions based on data from studies that will help shape the content and the design and improve the exhibit's ability to communicate effectively." It could, however, mean that some people would have to alter the way they work or their ideas, which requires a certain receptivity. It could also require changes in schedules and approaches to management.

As interesting as Serrell's discussion of the importance of "the big idea" is her description of just what constitutes an "interpretive" label. "Interpretive labels tell stories," writes Serrell. "They are not narratives, not lists of facts. Any label that serves to explain, guide, question, inform, provoke—in a way that invites participation by the reader—is interpretive."

Interpretive labels address visitors' unspoken concerns: What's in it for me? Why should I care? How will knowing this improve my life?

Key to the success of interpretive labels, Serrell believes, is concrete language that helps the reader look back and forth between the label and the object (or photograph). The label should help readers follow the narrative, and become part of the story themselves.

Also important is an eye to constructing sentences that have clear subjects and actions. If the label can be edited to include people as the subject, even better. In the examples given here, for instance, Serrell asks the reader to notice the improvement when the label writer both names who (the subject) actively did what (the action) and includes information that helps the reader move back and forth between the label and the object:

### **Pictograph**

Carvings and paintings on rock are scattered throughout California. They seem to have had magical or religious significance related to the hunting of large game. Other rock paintings were made during girls' coming-of-age ceremonies and boys' initiation rites.

### **Rock Carvings and Paintings—Pictographs**

Early people carved and painted on rocks throughout California. The pictographs they created, such as the one on your left, may signify magical or religious aspects of the large game they hunted. Other rock paintings showed girls' coming-of-age ceremonies and boys' initiation rites.

Like good storytelling, Serrell writes, "good interpretation carries the listener along with the sound of the words and the images they create, and lets the listener participate by anticipating where the story is going."

Beyond her description of interpretive labels, Serrell also gives advice on finding out who the audience is and what these visitors want. While current notions of appealing to diverse audiences stress the differences among people, Serrell cautions us not to be overwhelmed by the diversity of visitors' demographics, interests, and motivations. Through visitor studies, museum practitioners have learned that there are trends and patterns in an otherwise heterogeneous sample of museum visitors.

"Museum audiences are a diverse group of fairly well-educated, mostly middle-class people seeking a culturally oriented, leisurely social outing," she writes. "They come to the museum with a variety of interests, but despite their diversity, they have many expectations and needs in common." For example:

- A significant proportion of visitors comes for a social occasion, as a social group. Many of these groups include children.
- Gender ratios (percent males and females) are often not significantly different.
- Teenagers are under-represented in many different types of museums.
- A diverse cross-section of visitor types is attracted to the most popular elements in an exhibition. When something "works," it tends to work for many types of people.
- More people read short labels than long labels.
- If visitors cannot understand or personally connect with part of an exhibit, they will skip it.
- Visitors of all ages are attracted to exhibit elements that are more concrete and less abstract.

In fact, the most striking differences among types of visitors, Serrell states, are age-related. Children, for example, are more likely to touch and investigate things with their hands than adults, but are less likely to read labels.

Whereas the first few chapters in Serrell's book speak to a philosophy, later chapters deal more con-



cretely with ways to increase the appeal and accessibility of labels for broad audiences. Topics covered include the importance of layering information, selecting the right reading level, writing visitor-friendly labels, and using bilingual labels. All of these have little gems of information, some of which are common sense to experienced label writers but nonetheless remind us of what it takes to write short, well-crafted legible labels. Again, Serrell suggests getting input from visitors at all stages of exhibit development and label writing—before you begin, during rough drafts, and at the “final text” stage. “Evaluation can help sort out what visitors know, what is or is not obvious, and whether the assumptions the exhibit developers are making about the audience are grounded in some form of shared reality,” she writes.

Serrell also reminds us that one of the most important and difficult things to achieve with interpretive labels is getting words and images to work together. “Reaching this union,” she says, “is accomplished by an iterative (repeating, cyclical) process of word selection, image selection, word modification, and nonverbal content modification.” This means checking and rechecking to make sure that your label and artifact match (particularly if one artifact was substituted for another); that the directions in a label that say “on your right” are in fact correct; and whether type specs, particularly sizes, are really working. Similarly, labels for interactive media need to be customized so that they respond to and serve the specific design of an interactive and the way visitors see or use it.

Toward the end of her book, Serrell urges us to conduct evaluations of an exhibition after opening. Summative evaluation is useful because it can reveal problems with labels that can often be fixed relatively easily. Even minor changes in label copy can sometimes make a significant difference. At the California Museum of Science and Industry, for example, computer-generated labels allowed the museum to make minor fine-tuning changes to more than 50% of the texts and graphics in their *Molecules and Motion* exhibition. These changes improved directions for interactives and interpretations of the chemistry for younger visitors.

Although many institutions don’t have the time or money to revise an exhibition after it has opened, Serrell’s position is that “any evaluation and repair is better than none.” Summative evaluations can also be used to compare audiences in the same exhibition during different seasons. Or it can be used in collaborative studies that develop new ideas about visitor behavior or learning.

In closing, Serrell offers readers a list of “Ten Deadly Sins” and “14 Helpful Research Findings” that every label writer, curator, editor, or exhibit developer should remind themselves on a regular basis (or perhaps pin over their desk). These points cover both the good and the bad—what makes effective interpretive labels and exhibitions and what doesn’t.

If there is any complaint that I have about Serrell’s book, it is that her advice and insights make the label writing process sound so easy. Coming up with a doable “big idea,” clarifying who has the last word on an interpretive decision (and getting that person or group to make it), doing and using evaluation, and encouraging writers and designers with hectic schedules to work together and share goals isn’t always easy. Neither is the long, often underestimated job of getting labels done right—both editorially and graphically.

Maybe, with the help of this book and its visitor-centered philosophy, these missions will get easier. Many of the author’s points certainly are convincing.

*Abigail Porter is a writer and exhibit developer based in Washington, D.C.*



# Museum Premieres Exhibitions & Special Events

by Seth Frankel

**S**o you're going to be in Bismarck, N.Dak., for the weekend and want to find out if any photography exhibits will be at the State Historical Society. Or perhaps you're designing an exhibit on prairie schoolhouses and want to find out where similar exhibits exist. *Museum Premieres Exhibitions & Special Events* may have the answers.

The self-proclaimed companion to AAM's *Official Museum Directory* is a "guidebook of museum exhibitions and special events for museum researchers and travelers." The size of a phonebook and published annually, *Museum Premieres* is probably the most comprehensive national source for exhibition information. Its organization by state makes it easy to determine what is happening where. Exhibit descriptions, apparently drawn from material provided by the museums, supplement the listings. Permanent, temporary, and traveling exhibits are listed separately.

The guidebook's generally useful, but typographically painful (appears to be six-point type), key word index features six categories, from General Museum Information to Traveling Exhibitions. Although the key words refer to specific pages, I sometimes found myself scouring the prescribed page at length until the listing showed itself. Perhaps refining the search options further would be of some assistance.

I also found that searching for traveling and temporary exhibitions can be confusing. For example, I located four listings for exhibitions related to John James Audubon in temporary exhibitions and one in the touring exhibition section. Reading the exhibition descriptions that accompany each listing made it difficult to tell exactly how many different exhibitions there are. Was this one exhibition with four venues or four distinct yet similar exhibitions from each of the museums' own collections? Indication of origin for each traveling or temporary exhibition would prove useful.

Also useful (and perhaps too painful for our broken-budget backs) would be the opening date for permanent exhibits. As would any available discounts (only ad-

mission prices are included). And while I can hear the publisher groaning, a multiple-field searchable CD-ROM version of *Museum Premieres* would be nice too.

It's easy to be critical of a good, almost great, guide like this. But for now it's the best, and only one like it.

An exhibit designer at the Smithsonian's Office of Exhibits Central, Seth Frankel is also a furniture and jewelry maker.

**Paul D. Groenier and Sally E. Miller, ed.,  
*Museum Premieres* (St. Louis: Information Services & Co., 1996).**





NAME,  
the National  
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announces  
its annual fall  
workshop,  
continuing a  
tradition of  
offering hands-  
on learning  
opportunities  
to the people  
responsible  
for producing  
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Each workshop will be held in conjunction with a regional museum conference. Workshop participants will have a good reason to stay an extra day (or two) and attend sessions on a variety of topics. Dates, conferences, and locations are:

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## About the *Exhibitionist*

The *Exhibitionist* is a forum of the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), whose mission is "to foster excellence in museum exhibition and to aid in the professional enrichment and advancement of all those involved in the exhibition process."

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Queries are welcome.

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