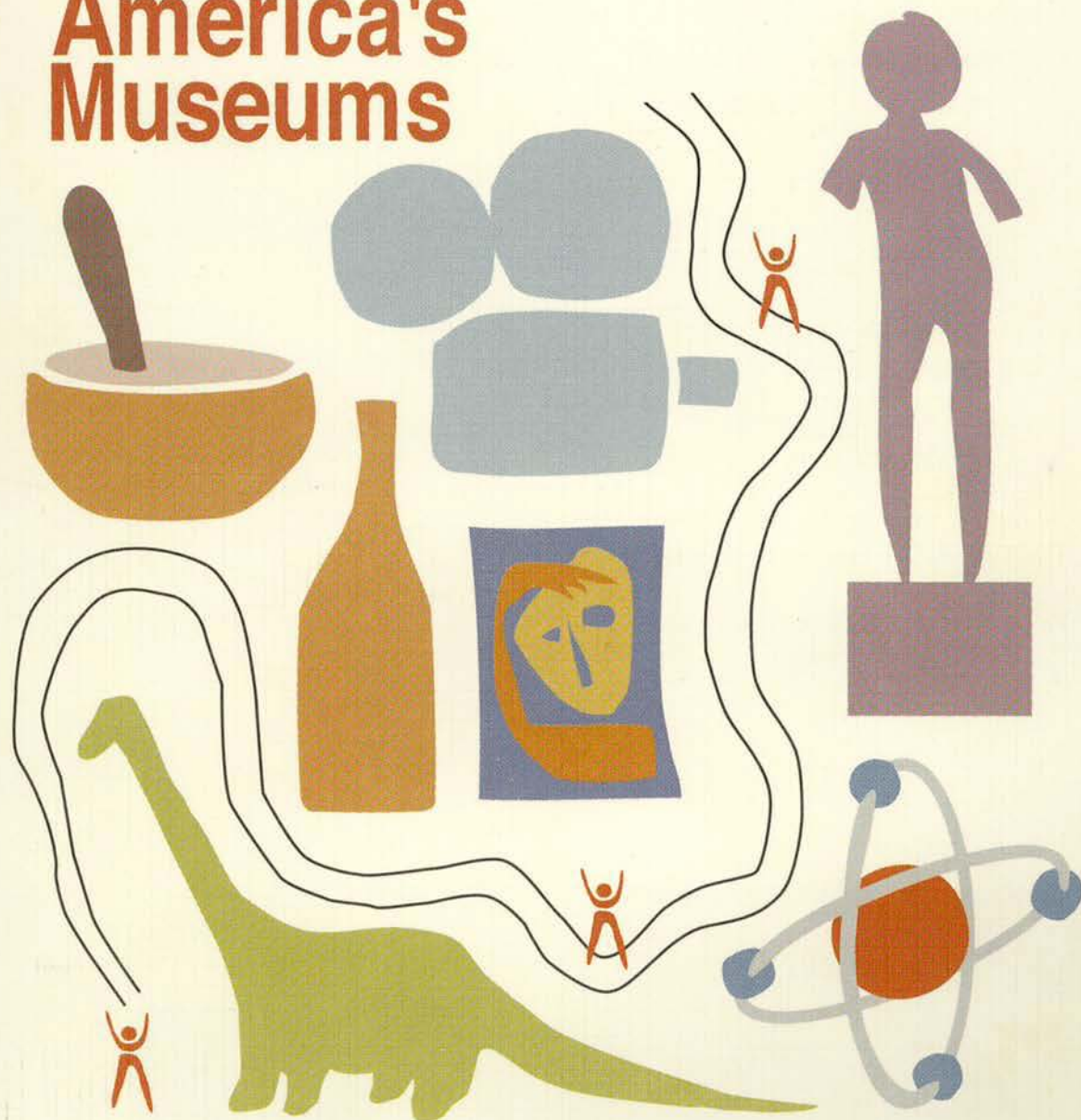


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Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue

MUSEUMS ARE NOT MUSEUMS without exhibitions. The most prominent and public of all museum offerings, exhibitions are the soul of a museum experience for the millions of people who visit them, as well as for many of the people who create them. As unique three-dimensional compositions, exhibitions show things, whether a work of art or a working machine, a history timeline or a bit of bone. This showing or exhibition is the one feature common to all museums, from institutions engaged in scholarly research for a small professional audience to large multidisciplinary organizations providing services for the broadest spectrum of people.

The act of showing brings with it an inherent dialectic between the intentions of the presenter and the experiences of the spectator. Even in the earliest temples of the muses, someone set forth some object for others to experience, and who selected what for whom is the question at the heart of all conversation about exhibitions. The objects may be trophies of conquest, curious things from the natural world, masterpieces, or constructed environments, but embedded in their presentation is material evidence of the presenter's intentions and values. Teasing out and uncovering this evidence has been an increasingly attractive activity for some museum professionals, critics, and social theorists, particularly since the intentions of exhibit creators are often opaque or hidden from public view, and sometimes even unconscious.

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The belief in a universal truth made apparent through the research and scholarship of curators has given way in some circles to the notion that display is no more than the act of promoting some truths at the expense of others. As museums give more credence to the diversity of ideas, cultures, and values in our society, museum professionals are becoming increasingly conscious of the need to diversify the pool of curators, exhibit developers, and designers who have control of exhibition content and style of presentation. And those who traditionally have been doing the “talking” in exhibitions—with the often anonymous voices of curatorial authority—are increasingly expected to state their motivations and authorship up front.

On the other side of the equation are museum visitors—the people doing most of the “listening.” Museums are getting to know them better, particularly since they have become more vocal in recent years, and possibly more discriminating. And museum professionals are coming to think of them less as passive spectators and more as active participants. Visitors now sit on exhibit-development committees, speak their minds in research and assessment programs, and even contribute to visitor-generated exhibits and labels in exhibition galleries.

As museums seek to attract and engage greater numbers of people, they are meeting, often for the first time, increasingly diverse audiences. People with different lifestyles and learning styles, cultural backgrounds and social perspectives are being enticed into museums. Whether they return will depend, to a great extent, on whether they can make personal connections and see something of themselves within. It will also depend on whether museums can keep up with the competition—the profusion of social, educational, and cultural activities vying for people’s attention.

We have come a long way from the days when exhibitions were organized exclusively by and for collectors and curators. Nowhere will you find a museum closed on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays “to keep out the ‘vulgar class,’ such as ‘sailors from the dockyards and the girls whom they might bring in with them.’”¹ Museums increasingly look to a general public audience for support, and competition for a market share

of people's leisure time is a driving force that focuses the heat on exhibitions. In the rush to attract more visitors, exhibit professionals across the country are making profound changes in their exhibitions—expanding their range of exhibitable and often controversial themes and experimenting with new exhibition techniques and styles of development. Exhibitions are increasingly filled with interactive elements, multimedia and networked technologies, catchy and conversational labels, and objects out from under the glass.

The public nature of exhibitions makes them the obvious stage on which to play out the tensions of our times—tensions between access and exclusivity, common and expert knowledge, the prescribing and the challenging of meaning, and market and mission. The proposition that exhibition creators must pay attention to the interests and needs of their visitors still meets with resistance, particularly among those who hold to the notion of museums as temples and sites primarily of scholarship. They express concern about focusing on entertainment at the expense of learning and other high-minded museum experiences. Much farther along the continuum, a growing number of administrators are equating rigorous scholarship and depth of content with an outdated and elitist model of museum exhibitry, convinced that the public will not attend serious exhibitions. A majority of professionals stake their claim somewhere in between, characterizing museums and their exhibitions with metaphors like sanctuary, showcase, ritual, forum, and celebration.²

Profound social change has led museum professionals to an almost obsessive self-reflection: what value does the museum, as a civic institution, bring to the social mix? Where is our unique niche? When attempting to characterize and distinguish exhibitions, museum professionals naturally associate them with books and classrooms, comfortable with a resemblance to the academy. But they also, somewhat cautiously, compare exhibitions with television, motion pictures, and theme parks, acknowledging family ties to the world of entertainment. Like books and classrooms, exhibitions provide a framework for learning, and like good films, television, and books, exhibitions take us on revelatory journeys to destinations as close as neighborhood streets and as distant as the beginnings of life on Earth.

But books, films, and television are relatively uniform media that deliver an experience to physically passive individuals. Much more like the theme park, the multiformity of exhibitions ensures that museum visitors will interact in an almost endless variety of ways with the exhibits and with each other. In a contemporary exhibition of any discipline, it is not uncommon to find an introductory film; a collection of objects for viewing; elements to manipulate; labels and text panels to read (and sometimes even a reading area with books and comfortable chairs); photos, maps, and other graphics; a learning center with Internet stations and computers; embedded film and video loops; an "immersion environment"; and an adjacent gift shop. That same exhibition might house a quiet area for contemplation, a demonstration area for public programs, and even a conversation area for discussion with other visitors.

SCHOOLCHILDREN AND SCHOLARS, BABY-SITTERS AND PIPE FITTERS: WHO IS LISTENING?

Demographic and psychographic studies reveal that most museum visitors are well educated and value worthwhile leisure-time experiences that focus on learning and discovery.³ While this is not new information, it is astonishing how little it seems to affect staff perceptions that visitors are less informed and knowledgeable than they. A 1974 survey of museum professionals and their attitudes toward their primarily college-educated visitors revealed that visitors were considered to be "untutored" or the "laity," "as if some great and sacred gap separated museum worker and the educated middle class visitor."⁴ To some extent, this attitude is still with us today, although it gets played out in different ways.

While exhibit creators insist that their exhibitions are designed for the general public, empty museum galleries are evidence of pedantic or esoteric intentions at work. More often than not, the creators of these exhibitions ignore public interests, assuming they are out of line with their own. With a bit of investigation, they could probably find common ground, providing more relevant experiences for visitors while retaining intellectual depth. Conversely, the characterization of the pub-

lic as “Joe Six-pack,” espoused by an increasing number of marketing advocates, results in cheerful exhibitions that attract visitors in the short run, but may erode the quality and depth of the experience that the visitors ultimately expect.

Research on how and why visitors use museums has played a major role in helping to turn exhibitions into more connected two-way conversations. Although formal visitor research in museums had its start in the 1930s, it did not really begin to take hold until the 1980s, prompted by a sincere desire on the part of some professionals to better understand the effects of their exhibitions on visitors and by expectations of funding agencies that museums be able to back up with real evidence their claims of audience impact. For those exhibitions claiming to make an educational difference, visitor research and evaluation provide the tools by which to measure at least some aspects of their educational and communicative success.

While the science of visitor research has become an increasingly sophisticated art in recent years, many art museums have been reluctant to embrace the practice, perhaps out of a fear that by talking to visitors, they will lose the high ground. As one arts administrator put it, “The public does not know. Their responses will be anecdotal, so why are we asking them? Why can’t we use creative intelligence and take intellectual risk?” A curator explained, “If we pander to what the public wants, we’ll lose the poetry and beauty.”⁵ Besides raising the question of just what “public” these professionals are envisioning, it is clear that their attitudes come from a confusion of visitor research and evaluation with a “give-’em-what-they-want” style of market research not unlike Russian artists Komar and Melamid’s nightmarish *People’s Choice* paintings, which were based on the results of public-opinion polls about preferred elements in a work of art. (Visitor research, on the other hand, is a process of inquiry and discovery that can lead to new theories for practice, and evaluation helps us measure our own performance against our own goals.)⁶

Of course, with the increasing emphasis on articulating *easily achievable* research and evaluation goals, there is a danger in focusing goals too restrictively and reducing them to discrete subject nuggets that do not embody the potential depth of an

experience or capture what is really important. In developing an exhibition for one of the nation's most significant natural history museums, for example, exhibit developers articulated the following goals: "Visitors will be able to name three different organisms on display in the hall, and a fact about each one," and "After attending this exhibition, visitors will be able to give one specific research scientist's name, research program name, or general area of research interest." Exhibitions resulting from such a process will suffer a dreary half-life. But good visitor research can lead to rich discoveries about visitor perceptions and the quality of their experiences and can encourage curators and designers to question their own assumptions about their intentions, their methods, and their audiences.

Exhibit creators focus a great deal of time on the ideas they are trying to convey and the forms their exhibitions will take, while visitor experiences are often inspired by more earthly constraints. Access to public transportation, ease of parking, and the availability of food services all have an influence on a person's decision to visit a museum. Once inside, a visitor may decide to attend a particular exhibition depending on its location within the museum, access to the restrooms, and other museum programs competing for attention. Exhibitions are places where people interact over time—an important factor in any exhibition experience—and people today never seem to have enough of it. On average, visitors usually spend less than 20 minutes in an exhibition, and a typical museum visit usually lasts from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours.⁷

Visitors' experiences in an exhibition, over time and within a three-dimensional environment, will be as affected by the quality of air and the condition of their feet as the openness of their minds. And they are just as likely to have their most memorable encounter with another visitor as they are with an object or idea, no matter how intentional the presentation. Exhibitions provide a safe and interesting environment in which to bring people together, and the presence of people—whether they are visitors or staff—transforms a constructed exhibition setting into a dynamic public space. Staff explainers, docents, storytellers, artists, and actors enliven exhibitions, create context, and encourage people to interact with each other and with the

exhibits. Even without staff, an exhibition designed to encourage face-to-face interaction and dialogue among visitors—often strangers—is arguably one of the most vital contributions museums can make to the social dynamics of our times.

THE CURATOR, THE EDUCATOR, THE DESIGNER, AND THE COMMITTEE: WHO IS TALKING?

Traditionally, most museum exhibitions have been a one-way conversation “designed around the cognitive order in the minds of curators.”⁸ Curators assembled the objects, established the conceptual framework, and wrote the exhibition “statement” and labels. Designers then packaged the curatorial material in a three-dimensional form, usually embodying the curator’s vision. Afterwards, educators prepared interpretive materials that could help visitors make sense of the exhibition experience. While this process ensured that the depth of a curator’s passion and knowledge made it out into the galleries, it was fraught with problems, particularly when the curator’s true affections were aimed at other scholars, leaving a majority of visitors in the dark.

In the challenging times of the 1960s and 1970s, the curator as the voice of authority was, of course, one of the first to be challenged. In some circles, this was characterized as wresting content and interpretive control away from curators and putting it firmly in the hands of educators. In the encyclopedic tome *The Art Museum as Educator*, editor Barbara Newsom reflects on the tenor of the times:

For both observers and administrators of art museums, the curatorial-educational encounter has become increasingly bothersome in the last decade. Joshua Taylor, director of the National Collection of Fine Arts, calls the relationship between the curatorial staff and “the activity of the increasingly aggressive education department” in art museums of the 1960s “a major problem,” noting that it grew “with the orientation of museums more and more towards the public.” Hilton Kramer, who covered the 1975 meetings of the American Association of Museums in Los Angeles for the *New York Times*, has found the division between curatorial and education departments that exists in most art museums “an endless source of conflict.”⁹

Art museums were not the only arena for this debate. In 1963, Albert Parr, then senior scientist at the American Museum of Natural History, suggested:

Whenever two entirely different types of skill and creative imagination have to be called upon to act together with equal authority, administrative problems arise, but it is, in my opinion, quite impossible to maintain high standards of exhibition quality by placing the functions of design under curatorial command. On the other hand, it seems quite possible to make the entire execution of the exhibition program an autonomous function within the museum's organization by including one or more educators or educational designers on the staff of the exhibition department itself.¹⁰

This proposition was a radical one for its time, with Parr offering the disclaimer that his idea was not meant as a general recommendation but only as a possible solution in cases when educational aims were given short shrift by curators.

In response to a need for more professional dialogue, museum educators formed the Museum Education Roundtable in 1969, and in 1971 the American Association of Museums created the President's Committee on Education to provide a more formal venue for the voice of the educator. Some museums actually reorganized their management structures to accommodate an increased emphasis on education in exhibit development. The New York State Museum, for example, formed a division of museum services in 1968 that was staffed with exhibit developers who came out of the school system, ultimately focusing exhibitions on educational goals.¹¹

At the same time, Frank Oppenheimer at the Exploratorium in San Francisco was creating a new kind of museum altogether, born from the philosophies of self-directed learning, interactivity, and individual discovery that were growing out of a burgeoning educational reform movement. At the heart of the new Exploratorium—"A Museum of Science, Art, and Human Perception"—was a fundamental mission to empower the public and "bridge the gap between the experts and the laymen" with exhibits and experiments that visitors could activate on their own.¹² Michael Spock, at the Boston Children's Museum, was on a similar mission to create a highly dynamic, hands-on

learning environment where visitors took center stage. While this populist attitude was essential in opening up museums to a whole new model of public embrace, it was often taken to the extreme, with sometimes unpleasant side effects. In the redesign of the Brooklyn Children's Museum (the oldest children's museum in the world), the museum's collection objects, at the heart of a rich and successful tradition of teaching about nature and culture, were, for the most part, warehoused in favor of "The Learning Environment," an interactive construction based on the laws of the physical world.

We do not want to have precious items but we want to have respect for precious children. . . . In museums the experiential component of learning is usually not present. Elements which are denoted as being interesting by their inclusion in the museum are placed behind glass or in textual or pictorial display which deny active participation and discovery. . . . Without arbitrary elements in the learning environment, without textual guidelines to the experiences, without objects behind glass that tell children that the objects' survival is more important than their own, without static pictorial explanations, without static human information sources, without fixed expectations of informational absorption, we will try and provide a learning environment for the children who arrive at the BCM.¹³

Although the underlying goals of open exploration and self-directed learning were admirable, the wholesale break with the tradition of using collection objects—a previously successful strategy for the museum—led to a more homogenous, less diverse program that eventually slid into neglect. Spock and Oppenheimer, on the other hand, understood the complexity of the public exhibit experience and worked at blending a variety of media—objects, text, images, and interactive experiences—to create richly textured multiform environments.

While educators were unrelenting in their pressure to influence exhibition perspectives, museum audiences were also getting into the act. Democratization of museums, at the heart of the struggle, focused on access and representation. In 1969, the landmark exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, igniting a series of conversations that

has continued to this day. The exhibition attempted, through a new immersion-environment technique of super-graphics and multimedia, to tell the story of the history of blacks in Harlem, from the early days at the turn of the century through the civil-rights movement and the unrest of the 1960s. What was perhaps most troubling was that in the rush to create a new type of exhibition, the museum went too far. The exhibition was designed with techniques and curatorial methods unlike any other display at the Met, exoticizing an already disenfranchised African-American community. To make matters more contentious, this black history exhibition was organized by a white curator. In a *New York Times* article twenty-six years later, Michael Kimmelman reflects, "From the distance of a generation it seems clear what went wrong with 'Harlem on my Mind.' Coming as it did in the midst of racial crises, the show was a Molotov cocktail of then-radical exhibition techniques and reckless social politics."¹⁴

On the other side of the country, the Oakland Museum in California opened its doors in 1969 to pickets over the blatant lack of representation of many in the community whose taxes had paid for the new institution. The museum's response was to create a Special Exhibits and Education Department with its Guild for Cultural and Ethnic Affairs, which organized its own exhibitions developed by designers working cooperatively with representatives from the community. Exhibitions like *Black Pioneers: Scientists and Inventors*, *Mine Okubo: An American Experience*, and *Three Generations of Chinese: East and West* were added to the traditional mix of art, history, and natural science exhibitions. Because these designers and community participants worked primarily outside curatorial terrain, they were free to organize themselves and their exhibitions in unusual ways. Juxtaposing diverse and often controversial points of view within theatrical environments, these exhibitions were more celebratory and dialogic than most of the exhibitions of the time.

Taking their cues from the educators, exhibition designers began to speak out. Despite the experimental exhibition designs of artists like El Lissitzky (in the 1920s) and Herbert Bayer (in the 1930s–1950s), most museum exhibitions were formulaic in

their design and installation. And most exhibition designers were expected to be stylists at best, and more likely tradesmen, simply necessary for the building of walls, the application of plaster, and the positioning of furniture. During the 1960s and 1970s, innovative designers like James Gardner in England and Charles and Ray Eames in the United States were creating some of the more interesting exhibitions in museums. In the Eameses' exhibitions, *Mathematica: A World of Numbers and Beyond* and *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the designers replaced the curator as auteur, creating conceptual frameworks for the exhibitions and developing the content as well as the design. The exhibitions contained objects, models, dense collages of graphics, some of the first history timelines, and, in the case of *Mathematica*, a collection of participatory exhibits.¹⁵

Although these holistic designers had a salutary effect on the way some exhibitions were developed in museums, for the most part designers were considered extraneous to the development of ideas in exhibitions. In 1981, designers and other exhibit-focused professionals organized the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) in order to have a voice in the professional arena and promote more designer involvement in the conceptual development of exhibitions. A major impetus in organizing was to "promote excellence in the creation and installation of museum exhibitions; to provide a means of communicating among museum exhibition professionals; and to organize workshops and seminars on design and all other aspects of museum exhibition."¹⁶

As museums struggled to create more effective frameworks for exhibit development, models employed in other fields provided alternatives for coordinating all of the people involved. While the auteur approach of film directors (and art museum curators) worked for some, the collaborative spirit of ensemble theater better suited those museums that emphasized community involvement and democratic representation. Additionally, the sensibilities of cross-functional business and industrial design "teams" infused exhibition practice with a market-driven emphasis. In the 1980s, museums embraced the "team approach" to exhibition development as a way of improving exhibit quality and ultimately diversifying exhibition presenta-

tions. In the team model, an assortment of specialists (usually a content specialist or curator, a form specialist or designer, an audience specialist or educator, and sometimes a process specialist or project manager) work together to create exhibitions, with the assumption that an equal relationship among specialists would produce exhibitions more cohesive, accessible, and richly textured than the curator-driven model. While team proponents consistently pointed to mutual appreciation among team members as a significant outcome of the process, there was no discernible improvement in the quality of exhibitions developed by teams. And pseudo-teams often generated a committee-style process that dulled creative vision.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE DIALOGUE

By the late 1980s, exhibition creators had become much more sensitive to the subjective representations inherent in exhibition display. In 1988, the Smithsonian Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation organized "The Poetics and Politics of Representation," an international conference on interpretation in exhibitions, culminating in a book of essays from the museum administrators, curators, historians, anthropologists, and folklorists who attended.¹⁷ One of the most interesting and clarifying essays was by Stephen Greenblatt, who identified "resonance" and "wonder" as two conceptual models in art exhibitions (although these models can also apply to natural history, history, and science exhibitions):

By *resonance*, I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By *wonder* I mean the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.¹⁸

As an example, Greenblatt described the then newly installed collection of late-nineteenth-century French art at the Musée d'Orsay, which was designed to present a social history by juxtaposing furniture, decorative arts, photographs, and sculp-

ture with masterpieces as well as with paintings by lesser-known artists:

The museum remakes a remarkable group of highly individuated geniuses into engaged participants in a vital, immensely productive period in French cultural history. . . . But what has been sacrificed on the altar of cultural resonance is visual wonder centered on the aesthetic masterpiece. Attention is dispersed among a wide range of lesser objects . . . many of the greatest paintings have been demoted, as it were, to small spaces where it is difficult to view them adequately, as if the design of the museum were trying to assure the triumph of resonance over wonder. . . .¹⁹

Greenblatt articulates the polarization of conceptual intent taking place in the exhibition-development arena, and he goes on to make the case that the triumph of one over the other is unnecessary, that “almost every exhibition worth viewing has elements of both” and that the goal “should be to press beyond the limits of the models, cross boundaries, create strong hybrids. For both the poetics and politics of representation are most completely fulfilled in the experience of wonderful resonance and resonant wonder.”²⁰

Heeding a recurring call for more experimentation in exhibit design (something that NAME had been proposing for some time), the Smithsonian opened its Experimental Gallery in 1991. Its mission was to “present techniques [that] are pushing the edges of our museum experience and/or take chances in their choice of subject matter or viewpoint . . . to celebrate and encourage innovation in exhibition technique and . . . the exchange and development of management styles and peer relationships across cultural lines.”²¹ The mission of the gallery was commendable, and a few of its exhibitions truly “pushed the edges” of practice, although most were focused on cultural resonance and rarely strove for the hybridization of resonance and wonder that Greenblatt encouraged.

One of the more memorable exhibitions at the Experimental Gallery was *Etiquette of the Undercaste*, a mazelike interactive installation that attempted to replicate symbolically the experiences of loneliness and alienation. In this highly resonant “social simulation,” developed by Antenna Theater, visitors would

lie down on a mortuary slab and get pushed into the exhibition. Once inside, people were “reborn” and forced to follow a constricted path through a series of tight corridors and claustrophobic rooms constructed of flimsy cardboard, tape, string, and glue. The prerecorded audio provided a voices-in-the-head narrative that was designed to give visitors “a sense of helplessness when faced by a series of disasters, where every solution attempted only leads to more problems.”²² What was, perhaps, most significant about this exhibition was that it was not created by museum professionals at all, but by artistic directors of a theater company.

Indeed, some of the most interesting and thought-provoking exhibitions were being created by artists, who played a major role in creating a new genre of self-reflective exhibitions that challenged the traditional values and interpretations of exhibit planners and the conventional contexts of museum display. Ripe for deconstruction, the environmental settings employed by many history, science, and natural history museums and the cultural interpretations in art museums—particularly when people of one culture interpret cultural objects of another—led to landmark exhibitions like *Mining the Museum* by artist Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society. Wilson juxtaposed startling combinations of collection objects that called into question notions of context, value, and point of view. In the case labeled *Metalwork 1793–1880*, for example, ornate silver vessels were displayed with a pair of slave shackles. Wilson reflects, “Quite possibly, both of these could have been made by the same hand. To my mind, how things are displayed in galleries and museums makes a huge difference in how one sees the world.”²³ Wilson’s more recent installation, *Speaking in Tongues: A Look at the Language of Display*, at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, contained a thought-provoking room, “Secret/Sacred,” that was “closed to the public and accessible only to members of indigenous groups who have cultural affiliations with the objects included in the collection,” highlighting some of the behind-the-scenes tensions of museum ownership and access to collections.

Artist David Wilson, on the other hand, went even further and created his own museum. After moving his provocative

installations from space to space, he finally settled on Los Angeles as the permanent site for the Museum of Jurassic Technology in the late 1980s. Wilson employs the traditional display elements of a natural history museum: specimens stuffed by a taxidermist, curious objects in vitrines, scholarly text, environmental recreations, and even a visitor-activated orientation slide show and a small gift shop. What is unusual about this museum is that, while the voice of museum authority rings out, the elicitation of wonder comes from a dense environment of semi-real and hoax-like tableaux. Destabilized, visitors certainly come away from the experience questioning the fixed nature of "truth" and are perhaps more wary of the creator's intent.

Artists were not the only ones deconstructing exhibition curatorship and display. In the exhibition *ART/artifact*, organized by art historian Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art in New York City in 1988, four different display environments for African objects over the past century—a 1905 curiosity room, a natural history museum presentation complete with diorama, a reverential art museum presentation, and a contemporary art gallery installation—were elegantly inverted into a critique of exhibition practice. As Vogel described it, "The exhibition stressed that these different styles reflected differences in attitude and interpretation, and that the viewer was manipulated by all of them."²⁴

The most recent and ambitious in this self-reflective genre is the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, organized by curator Kynaston McShine. More than sixty artists explored the notion of "museum" in all of its manifestations, as arbiter of culture and solicitor of patronage, as storehouse and funhouse. From Charles Willson Peale's iconic painting *The Artist in His Museum* to Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of museum dioramas, from Lothar Baumgarten's *Unsettled Objects* to Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, the exhibition eloquently captured all that is poignant and problematic about museums and the exhibition medium.²⁵

While one might assume that these exhibitions would appeal primarily to exhibition practitioners, museum administrators, and critics, many have attracted larger-than-average public audiences. *Mining the Museum*, for example, was extended

from its original run of six weeks to one year, and during that time, attendance at the Maryland Historical Society increased tremendously. At the same time, these exhibitions have contributed to changing attitudes within the profession, as the *Excellence and Equity* report from the American Association of Museums indicates:

Concepts of the “meaning” of objects and the way museums communicate about them are changing. Objects are no longer viewed solely as things in themselves, but as things with complex contexts and associated value-laden significance. Each visitor supplies yet another context and another layer of meaning by bringing individual experiences and values to the encounter with objects in a museum setting. Changing interpretive approaches will have a strong impact on museum collections and the public’s understanding of them.²⁶

Of course, many of these changes have not gone uncontested. In a 1997 article in *The New Criterion* about changes at the Smithsonian Institution, for example, the author declared:

The Institution has been transformed by a wholesale embrace of the worst elements of America’s academic culture. The staples of cutting-edge academic “research”—smirking irony, cultural relativism, celebration of putative victims, facile attacks on science—are all thriving in America’s premier museum and research complex, its showcase to itself and to the world. The changes at the Smithsonian are not unique to that institution. Museums across the country have rushed headlong into what may be called the “new museology,” based on a mindless parroting of academic fads.²⁷

While this kind of hostility tends to make reasonable people dismiss it as a rant, it should at least sound a note of caution and inspire a more critical look at the quality and depth of exhibition enterprises.

As museum professionals have attempted to assess and appraise the quality of exhibitions, there has been an increasing need for a forum for exhibition critique or review. Historically, exhibition reviews have focused on curator-based content concerns with little or no analysis of form and experience, or design-based aesthetic concerns with no consideration of content and experience. Rarely were museum exhibitions held to

the holistic scrutiny necessary to create a theoretical base and actually improve the practice. Since 1990, critique sessions at the American Association of Museums' annual meetings have attracted standing-room-only audiences, suggesting that exhibition professionals are hungry for a more substantial dialogue about the quality of museum exhibitions.

Exhibitions featured in these critiques have ranged from newly installed African galleries at the Seattle Art Museum to the Sixth Floor Museum, a historical display on John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. Critiques have focused on organizational clarity of exhibit concepts and elements, the ability of the exhibition environment to welcome and accommodate visitors while reinforcing themes and goals, the appropriateness of different media, and the overall effectiveness of communication between the exhibition and visitors.

An increasing body of academic literature on museum practice has been published over the last five years, much of it highly theoretical and not well-grounded in practice. While some of the discourse provides exhibition creators with a postmodern sociopolitical view from outside the field, one wonders how much the work will actually inform exhibition practice. On the other hand, museum curators, designers, and evaluators from the Standing Professional Committees Council of the American Association of Museums have recently developed "The Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence," and while there is always a danger in interpreting standards in too literal or concrete a fashion, they at least provide a more holistic baseline for exhibition practice and a window onto the current values and aspirations of the field.

Most exhibit creators agree that organizing a good museum exhibition requires the passion, intuition, scholarship, and expertise of a wide range of people, and more professionals are becoming multilingual (or fluent) in the languages of environmental psychology, aesthetics, learning theory, conceptual and spatial design, and interpretation. They are essentially "expert generalists," able to synthesize the variety of disciplines that inform the exhibit-development process—to recognize the importance of accurate and meaningful content, to comprehend

and be able to manipulate the dynamics at play in the three-dimensional environment, and to be sensitive to the expectations and interests of a diverse audience. They are first and foremost communicators, dedicated to sustaining the relationships and enriching the conversations between exhibition and visitor.²⁸

OF DIFFERENT PERSUASIONS

All exhibitions are three-dimensional experiences, compositions of images, objects, and architecture. But they are as varied as the subjects they examine. Art, history, natural science, and technology exhibitions may require different planning, design, and pedagogical considerations. Exhibitions designed for a number of locations will form around different constraints from those of exhibitions planned for one space, and exhibits that demonstrate the effects of natural phenomena may have different goals and require different development and design processes from those of object-oriented or topical exhibitions. But while museum professionals often view their exhibitions from within their own disciplinary boundaries, the current trend in exhibition development to provide a variety of visitor experiences is shifting exhibitions into multidisciplinary territory. Creators of art, history, and science exhibitions—traditionally strangers—would be well served to communicate with and learn from each other, since their collaborations should result in richer exhibit experiences for visitors.

In the recent *Memory* exhibition at the Exploratorium, exhibit creators intentionally combined scientific specimens, psychological models, and installations by artists with historical artifacts and interactive science exhibits in an effort to capture the notion of memory in its broadest sense. While each of these elements required different conceptual and display approaches in its development, when experienced by visitors the individual disciplines simply became pieces in the larger puzzle. Additionally, some exhibits were designed so that visitors created their own exhibits by adding their memories to the mix.

Temporary exhibitions have been the traditional testing ground for new exhibition philosophies and techniques, since they are

usually open for only weeks or months and require lower development, design, and installation budgets than the permanent installations, which are often designed to last five to ten years (or longer). Blockbusters in the service of the box office are the exception, often lavished with big budgets and intense attention. "Big" is the key word here, and many professionals argue that too big a percentage of museum resources is spent on blockbusters, to the neglect of other programs and permanent exhibitions. In art and science museums alike, administrators dream of blockbusters as "cash cows," drawing huge crowds and generating a frenzy of activity. And when these dreams turn into reality, visitors will often find themselves spending more time in lines than in the actual exhibition.

While temporary exhibitions can focus more immediately on a theme of current interest, like the lighting of the Statue of Liberty, commemorations of the quincentennial, or reflections on the millennium, for example, permanent exhibitions—the core museum experiences—must remain relevant during the entire time they are open to the public, able to weather trendy viewpoints and fickle fashions. Additionally, permanent exhibitions require enough material to attract repeat visitors and provide them with opportunities for new discoveries on each visit. This means that while experiments on risky new techniques, interpretation, and subject matter, if attempted at all, find their home in temporary exhibition halls, the permanent galleries tend to prefer more traditional inhabitants.

PAYING THE PIPER

Each year, more museums open their doors while the money available for them does not increase proportionately. Since exhibitions are among the most expensive of enterprises in any museum, their costs come under greater scrutiny as administrators attempt to stretch limited financial resources. There is competition for funding from corporations and foundations, and funders often expect high visibility and high attendance in exchange for financial support. While some corporations, through their philanthropic foundations, still support museum exhibitions without any strings attached, funding today more often

comes from corporate marketing departments, and it may be accompanied by the expectation of special treatment, such as exclusive use of particular products, direct access to exhibit audiences in order to advertise or distribute products and services, and, in some instances, influence in editorial decision-making.

The fund-raising practice of naming exhibits, facilities, and even museums after donors—euphemistically called “naming opportunities”—has long provided museums with an avenue for generating revenue. While generally a benign and gracious method of recognizing philanthropists, it can create identity and credibility problems when used indiscriminately. Perhaps the most extreme recent example is the Taco Bell Discovery Science Center, presenting “science Southern California Style . . . where science becomes a full-body contact sport.”²⁹

Limited resources have compelled museum professionals to improve efficiency, collaborate on a wide range of projects, and share the effort and expense of costly exhibition development, particularly for traveling exhibitions, interactive multimedia, and educational programs. More exhibits are available off the shelf, when one museum undertakes the costly research and development and then sells the plans or copies of exhibit units to other institutions. The advantage of using cloned exhibits is that they have been market-tested with visitors and are known to be durable and popular, but museum administrators must weigh the economic appeal of prepackaged programs against the risk of losing the distinct institutional voice essential in maintaining a clear public identity.

Shrinking pools of donated funds bring an increased reliance on “the gate” (admissions revenues) and other sources of earned income, shifting institutional emphasis even more towards the market. But broad public access may be jeopardized in the process. While museum exhibitions are being designed to provide for audiences with a wide variety of interests, learning styles, physical capabilities, and cultural and social orientations, they are also expected to increase gate revenues. Attendance fees at some museums may run as high as fifteen dollars per person, and, increasingly, museums are charging additional fees for entrance to special temporary exhibitions. In some

museums, exhibition budgets are balanced against projected attendance revenues, and if revenues fall below projections, budgets are cut accordingly. For those museums attempting to attract new audiences, this makes life even more complicated.

At the same time that exhibition budgets are coming under greater scrutiny, museum marketing budgets are growing, in some cases dramatically. While advertising clearly keeps information about museum exhibitions in the public eye, too often museum administrators confuse marketing with audience development. Audience attraction is not necessarily audience development, and, in some cases, attracting audiences in the short run may actually work against building a visitorship that returns over and over again. The "spikes" in attendance for temporary exhibitions often translate into the unbearable crowds most of us like to avoid. (It is ironic to note that while some museum professionals are convinced that "spikes" in attendance are essential to the health of the museum, they also often prefer after-hours and special tours of other museums to avoid the crowds.) Building a sustained audience means building participation in decision-making and meaning-making, activities that must take place in many ways over an extended period of time.

EMBRACING THE TENSIONS

Our times seem to be framed by an increasingly complex and layered dialectic of privilege, expert knowledge, and prescriptive meaning-making on the one hand, and access, popular culture, and the negotiation of meaning on the other. The public spectacle of exhibitions makes them a particularly dynamic stage for this unfolding dialogue.

The current trend to create "public-program" and "guest-services" divisions, in which exhibitions and educational programs are combined and the research and curatorial functions are often separated out, has educators replacing curators and science educators replacing scientists. While this reorganization has been essential in making exhibitions more relevant, accessible, and "user-friendly" for a wider range of visitors, educators, in shifting away from the pedantic style of curators,

have come up with their own style problems. Didactic, highly filtered "teaching tools" fill exhibition halls, and cognitive learning goals articulated with the reductionism of a multiple-choice test have begun to drive the exhibition-development process. Where museums once displayed a multiplicity of objects in their galleries, exhibit developers now favor the technique of selective display, with objects carefully selected to drive home a particular educational message. The hearts of these "audience advocates" might well be in the right place, but their exhibitions often suffer from an unnecessarily simplistic tenor.

As exhibitions pull away from the curator's grip, the momentum may have swung us too far in the other direction. The effects of splitting off the researchers and content creators from the public presenters have, in some instances, forced museum exhibitions to lose their essential relationship to the pursuit of inquiry and the world of mind in favor of a superficial and simulated experience much more connected to the world of mindlessness. This is particularly the case in science museums, in which elements like simulator rides and giant robotic insects are becoming *de rigueur*. While some of these techniques, if used intelligently, could contribute to the culture of learning that museums have traditionally embraced, for the most part the demeaning phrase "lowest common denominator" applies. In the traveling exhibition *Ice Age Mammals*, for example, a robotic woolly rhino and saber-toothed tiger were displayed alongside non-Ice-Age hominids, tossing scientific accuracy right out the window. Surprisingly, staff scientists at host museums either were ignored or shrugged off the exhibition as superficial entertainment, since the exhibition made its rounds to many of the nation's natural history museums. Defining "entertainment" with the mind-set of a scholar or "education" with the mind-set of a theme-park operator does a great disservice to the complexity and sophistication of our audiences. As Marshall McLuhan was fond of observing, "Anyone who does not understand the relationship between entertainment and education doesn't know much about either."

Many people, when recalling childhood museum memories, describe strange things in jars, sculptures larger than life, and chicken eggs hatching every few minutes. These unusual and

amazing things have the powerful capacity to surprise, fascinate, and inspire people—something that may be overlooked in the rush to prove the educational and marketing values of exhibitions (values that can translate into funding). Some would argue that in shifting our emphasis from temple (a place of contemplation or wonder) to forum (a place for negotiation and experimentation), we have lost the essential qualities that make museums unique.

But museums are both temple *and* forum. Just as Greenblatt urged us to strive towards a hybridization of resonance and wonder, we—like genetics researchers—will need to select this element for one characteristic and that for another. Focusing entirely on either market or mission engenders a static sameness that no longer suits our relative world. It may be difficult to create dynamic channels for dialogue between those with expert knowledge and the visiting public (those with common knowledge), but it is also more interesting. By embracing the tensions inherent in a dialogue, we will better understand how each form of knowledge informs the other, and, most importantly, we will become better able to articulate our issues *in common*.

Like other cultural and educational media, exhibitions are about people communicating with each other. How this conversation takes place, and who is responsible for conversing with whom, will depend on museum missions and the visions of exhibit creators, administrators, visitors, and their constituencies. No matter how the dialogue is approached—a dialogue as diverse as lectures and stories, pronouncements and prayers—it is inevitable that exhibitions will be judged by the societies of which they are a part. Museums have long been places of inspiration, conversation, investigation, and celebration—places that feed our natural curiosity about the world. Our most important work lies in more fully articulating the quality and tenor of the dialogues museum exhibitions could be having with visitors.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23.
- ²Although Duncan Cameron first juxtaposed the notions of temple and forum in the early 1970s, museum professionals still struggle with these dynamics today. See Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, A Temple or the Forum," *Curator* XIV (1) (1971): 11–24; for a description of one museum's metaphorical scope, see George MacDonald and Stephen Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989).
- ³John Falk, "Visitors: Toward a Better Understanding of Why People Go to Museums," *Museum News* 77 (2) (1999): 38–40.
- ⁴Barbara Y. Newsom and Adele Z. Silver, eds., *The Art Museum as Educator* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 77.
- ⁵In conversation with the author.
- ⁶Not all art museums are adverse to visitor research, and several, including the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn, the Denver Art Museum, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, have embraced it as an essential element of museum practice on some level.
- ⁷For more information on time spent in museums and exhibitions, see Beverly Serrell, *Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1998).
- ⁸Sheldon Annis, "The Museum as Staging Ground for Symbolic Action," *Museum* 151 38 (3) (1986): 170.
- ⁹Newsom and Silver, eds., *The Art Museum as Educator*, 37.
- ¹⁰Albert E. Parr, "Curatorial Functions in Education," *Curator* VI (4) (1963): 290.
- ¹¹Robert Sullivan, in conversation with the author, March 1993.
- ¹²Frank Oppenheimer, "A Rationale for a Science Museum," *Curator* XI (3) (1968): 206–209.
- ¹³Edwin Schlossberg, *The Learning Environment for the Brooklyn Children's Museum* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1975), 24.
- ¹⁴Michael Kimmelman, "Culture and Race: Still on America's Mind," *New York Times*, 19 November 1995, p. 1, sec. 2.
- ¹⁵John Neuhart, Marilyn Neuhart, and Ray Eames, *Eames Design: The Work of the Office of Charles and Ray Eames* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 254–259. The exhibition is still on view today at the Boston Museum of Science.
- ¹⁶"Exhibition Group Formed," *Exhibitionist*, October 1981.
- ¹⁷Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

- ¹⁸Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*, 42.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 54.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹From a Smithsonian Institution press release, December 1990.
- ²²From the exhibition catalog, February 1992.
- ²³Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson, "Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums," in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), 256.
- ²⁴Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion," in Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*, 198.
- ²⁵The exhibition was on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from March 14 through June 1, 1999. For more information, see the catalog: Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
- ²⁶American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992), 11-12.
- ²⁷Heather MacDonald, "Revisionist Lust: The Smithsonian Today," *The New Criterion* 15 (9) (1997): 17-31.
- ²⁸Kathleen McLean, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers, 1993), 37.
- ²⁹From an invitation to the president's opening reception, 9 December 1998.