

**SKIMMING ALONG:
A REFLECTION ON FORTY-FIVE YEARS OF EXHIBITION ISSUES.
A speech for the University of the Arts, London, England,
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INTRODUCTION

This paper will touch on a number of factors that have propelled museum exhibition activity over the last half-century. Among these are the following: the educator as progressive learning theorist, the exhibition process as politics, the curator as autocrat, the economics of inclusion, the positives and pitfalls of the team approach, the exhibition creator as artist, designers as mercenaries, the successful rewriting of rules by indigenous people, and the emergence of technology as a serious change agent.

I have been writing about such subjects over many decades, and upon rereading I am reminded how consistent my thinking has been. This current paper is an amalgam of my former writings, seen through a contemporary lens.

I am an American and my working career has been mostly, but by no means entirely, domestic; therefore, the examples and generalizations that follow arise mainly from my experiences in the U.S.

Overall, I take the position that every decision one makes rests on an internalized philosophy, and further, that “philosophy mixed with power becomes politics”.² This paper while overtly about exhibitions is, in the end, about philosophy and politics.

THE EDUCATOR AS PROGRESSIVE LEARNING THEORIST

When I entered the museum field in the late 1960's, exhibitions were predominantly produced by a curator who was knowledgeable about the subject matter in question. S/he picked the objects, wrote the text, held sway over the outcome, and typically authored and edited the exhibition catalogue and brochure as well. The designer worked to the curatorial brief. The educator, when there was one, created programs for school children that explicated the exhibition. That educator wrote any school curriculum materials, created programs and lectures, and communicated with the less advantaged members of the community. The palette the educator used was the exhibition as mounted or planned. Forty-five years later, I find this division of power and labor unchanged within many museums in many countries. And I find this unfortunate, indeed.

In many of such curator-centric exhibits, the viewer needed to have a reading ability often at college level, and some familiarity with the background of the exhibition subject matter including the geography and history surrounding the various objects being displayed. In art museums viewers were presumed to know the meaning of words used to indicate the processes employed in creating the object. The assumptions regarding the target audience was that the visitor was familiar with museums and that the exhibition would add on to a preexisting knowledge base.

The subject matter of the museum determined a set of intellectual conventions. For example, in the late 1980's I visited two different Aboriginal art exhibitions on the same day. The exhibitions had no interpretation overlap even though they were in side-by-side buildings (one in an art museum, the other a natural history museum). The art museum dealt only with art making -- artist's name if known, the date produced and the current owner. The history museum provided tribal context, with no indication of individual artist. The directors explained patiently to me, as one would to a child, that these museums perforce used different taxonomies.

An impetus to change these exhibition conventions began (or perhaps just gained initial visibility and momentum) in the 1960's with the efforts of museum educators (of whom I was one). Educators were mostly political liberals committed to diversifying the audience. They believed that curatorially created exhibitions were useful for the knowledgeable and educated but needed translating for the novice learner, regardless of age, culture, class, education or previous experience.

Educators found their views echoed in emerging US government policies on equality of access in the fields of housing, education, voting, employment, and jurisprudence. In the 1960's and 1970's when the civil rights movement was in full swing there were successive statutes and executive orders enabling people traditionally excluded (minority groups, women, the handicapped -- and later homosexuals) to enjoy access to places, activities, and funding that had previously been withheld. In the same spirit, museum educators argued that cultural patrimony belonged to all and should be available to all. It was in that milieu that I began my career in the late 1960's.

Museum educators mostly came from teaching backgrounds and were interested in learning theory. Child-rearing research in the late 1960's suggested that the earlier and more broadly a person was exposed to stimulation of all kinds, the more likely s/he was to succeed.³ Increased access to institutions geared for very young learners led to the creation of the national "head start" program, and new children's museums that focused increasingly on pre-school and early elementary aged people were established in almost every US city.

Interestingly the original five or six children's museums, dating from the turn of the 20th century and founded on the learning theory of Dewey, were geared toward much older children. These original museums focused on natural history and had collections. They were subsequently changed by the experimentation that director Michael Spock brought to the remaking of the Boston Children's Museum at the end of the 1960's, where I found myself. What Spock created was also based on the then contemporary hands-on learning theory of the progressive schools movement, one of which he had attended as a dyslexic youth.

THE ECONOMICS OF INCLUSION

In the late 1960's, the United States Democratic party-controlled government created the national cultural funding agencies and in the 1970's under the director, Nancy Hanks, NEA began to award specific grants making museums more accessible to under-served populations. So it became monetarily worth a museum's time to explore these new avenues. Directors, most of whom came from the curatorial ranks, while not persuaded by the idealistic arguments espoused by their educators, were nevertheless interested in "following the money," in part because of a diminution of the patron form of philanthropy that had sustained them previously.

The increased interest in large temporary traveling exhibitions (aka "blockbusters") in the 1970's allowed for alternative forms of curatorial adventure while sometimes bringing earned income of unheralded proportions to museums. Charging extra for these exhibitions also slightly reduced the reliance on continuous philanthropy and helped propel the onset of museum charges in institutions that had been previously free.

However, blockbusters were economically beneficial only if they were well attended, and gaining large audiences required encouraging the participation of the novice museum goer through a new world of cultural marketing that emphasized, sometimes not too subtly, a presumed social cache for the attendee.

So in a roundabout and largely financial manner, curator/directors also became interested in increasing attendance by broadening the audience and making the museums more "popular".

Every one of the educator-inspired strategies for broadening audiences and content had vocal detractors. Some of the contrary arguments included: making text understandable would result in "dumbing down" the presentation; adding interactive elements would create inappropriate museum behavior; presenting or including material to create context would lessen the aesthetic quality of the visual experience; the western world's traditional canon of quality should be learned by all and therefore need not and should not be changed; contemporary art produced within minority groups had not been collected because it lacked artistic merit, or if collected should not represent a specific culture but should enter the general art canon; and on it went.

THE EXHIBITION PROCESS AS POLITICS

The archetypal educator believed that the powerful curator was the protector of the old order. On the other hand, that typical curator believed the educator was naive, idealistic, not sufficiently grounded in the subject matter and, fortunately, his/her position within the museum was insufficiently powerful to effect institutional change. Accordingly, things were a little tense within the museum world in the 1970's as I continued my work.

Exhibition methods were targeted by many educators as the most visible sign of the museum's intentional exclusion of the uninitiated. And since it was the educator's desire, and often even mandate, to make the museum's holdings more available to

many more visitors, educators decided to attack the curators' hold on exhibition creation and they began to demand representation early in the process.

And so it came to be in the early 70's that a new system of exhibition development, known as the "team approach", was touted. Simply put, it suggested that a team of people containing a representative for the content (curator), the design (designer), and the audience (educator) would collectively create an exhibition that, while still content rich, would be understandable to all. It was the role of the educator to represent the audience -- not only who visited already but those who might come but didn't. Rounding out the team would be a facilitator, known -- in the Boston Children's Museum when I worked there -- as the broker (and now as the team leader or project manager), and a final authority figure, usually the director, known as the "client".

This seemingly practical solution had at its heart a political agenda -- to break the monopoly over exhibition choice and presentation held by curators, to enhance the role and power of the educators, to include exhibition modalities that mirrored current learning theory, and to change the demographics of museum use to include a more representative cross-section of visitors.

Much has been written about this exhibition development form and many modifications were and are still being created. Today, some version of the team approach holds sway in many institutions. As a political change in museum thinking it was highly successful. The fundamental change was that the audience became part of the equation right from inception rather than after the fact. As Steve Weil, famously said, "Museums went from being about something to be for someone."⁴

Today even in art museums (though they mostly remain a holdout against inclusive exhibition production) there is a broad series of exhibition techniques employed, piloted elsewhere and advocated by educators trying to appeal to a wider demographic. These include reading corners, access to the catalogue within the exhibition for browsing, physical and technological interactive devices (often set in alcoves adjoining the exhibition location), increased seating and large print, and multiple language brochures.

Almost all exhibitions today put an introduction for the novice at the beginning of the display. The audience is often treated to a map to situate artifacts in their geographical context and a timeline to understand the historic circumstances of their creation. The features of inclusion are everywhere to be found in exhibitions. It now seems quite "of course" to include such elements, which at one time were the matters of heated debate.

THE EXHIBITION CREATOR AS ARTIST

The team approach has not enjoyed consistent success, however. The principal reason is that group decision-making does not always, or even often, result in a creative or well-focused exhibition. The process required by the team approach is a rational and collegial one while the process of artistic creation resides in an intuitive and quite other part of the brain. These two processes may, in fact, be quite incompatible. It turns out, not surprisingly, that exhibition formation is a creative (and thus not wholly rational)

endeavor, and additionally, the specific cultural underpinnings of the team may militate against group problem-solving.

If exhibition production is, as I suggest, a creative form of activity then it is an ensemble one. Any exhibition production requires a lot of people to complete it, which makes the creation of exhibitions more akin to the performing arts than to the solitary visual arts it often showcases. While the objects are the medium they do not dictate the method or process of display.

Like an orchestra, each of the players has his or her specialty. Each of the specialties involved require the ability to creatively problem-solve. But the overall direction and vision is not comfortably arrived at, in a group process of equals, unless the underlying culture of the team members is comfortably egalitarian.

Creation of anything is not always polite. Creation of exhibitions is usually a tense process with strong personalities involved. The reason that the team approach often does not work as intended is that someONE rather than the group as a whole, has to control the spirit and direction. There has to be a designated and agreed upon leader, and that person, for the resulting exhibition to have panache and sizzle, has to have the soul and creativity of an artist.

A variety of people, no matter what positions they may hold, can perform the exhibition leadership role -- as long as they are imaginative. The initial impulse -- to dethrone the curator -- was correct inasmuch as all curators were not necessarily creative. Many were downright pedantic and produced pedantic shows. It was, in part, because of the most plodding of the curators, who believed exhibition creation was the province of their office, that curators got a bad rep. There were (and continue to be) curators of genius who produce shows well worth attending.

And there have been educators and designers who had a natural talent for exhibition creation and rose through the profession because they produced noteworthy exhibitions. And I sometimes think that the greatest exhibition change agents of the 20th century all have come from outside the profession. My personal hero list (to name only a few): Frank Oppenheimer, the creator of the Exploratorium, was a physicist and high school educator. Michael Spock, the Director of the Boston Children's Museum had been a bio major and dyslexic who happened on exhibition production when out of work. Charles Eames was a designer and filmmaker of note. Ivan Chermayeff is a graphic designer, Janet Kamien was a costumer, Fred Wilson is a practicing artist, and David Wilson is a conceptual filmmaker. And Shaike Weinberg, the creator of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a warrior for the state of Israel, came from the theater. So I speculate that growing up within the profession may not be the best way to effect creative change. In fact, it may lead to the stultifying and hardening of the inventive, experimental process.

So while the team approach developed as a valid political change vehicle it was as antithetical to making the best exhibits as was the prior curatorial model. Instead, the

fundamental prerequisite for the production of truly great exhibitions may be the hiring of a creative person with a deep respect for content experts and visitor needs, but above all an intuitive understanding of exhibitions as an art form.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE CHANGE THE EXHIBITION RULES

While various changes to the exhibition process were going on, the 1990's found indigenous peoples in many countries gaining control of "their" artifacts, wherever they were. They got legal protection and entitlement if they could prove the material had been stolen or if it was secret, sacred or contained human remains. Much more happened that was not covered by the law but rather by the mutual respect that First Peoples and the museum community established through often tense and slow negotiations. This process of the redefinition of "ownership" is ongoing, filled with pitfalls and misunderstanding, but for the purposes of this paper I assert that the collective work of tribal peoples worldwide has constituted the most profound change in the world of exhibition making.

The notion of ownership moved from who had title to who were the proper spokespersons for the descendants of the makers. In many, but certainly not all countries, no indigenous material will be put on display without consultation with and agreement of appropriate living tribal descendants. The understanding that in the world view of many tribal peoples, artifacts are not "dead things" and must be respected as entities in their own right, has led to many changes in access, repair, conservation, and exhibition presentations. The idea that all items can be put on view is gone. Preservation is not seen as a universal good and in some cases objects have been returned for traditional destruction or reburial. Collection pieces have been made available for ceremonial use and others have been "fed" by the descendants rather than kept "safe" in environments that are sterile. These are examples of how the patient and principled work of some native peoples of the world have changed many of the fundamental tenets of museology.

Yet exhibit design has not sufficiently broadened to mirror the world-view that these same native communities hold. Often the exhibition "palette" has not taken the needs of the originating community into account. For example, in many cultures, a high premium is placed on oral tradition, environments and places, music, dance and song, language and rhetoric, protocol, smell and physical interactions. These holistic demands remain quite outside typical museum design conventions. Consequently, exhibitions of indigenous material, while now more politically sensitive, are generally not truly responsive to the requested spirit of the people. Enlarging exhibition methods so that they can mirror the culture's belief system is, I believe, a fruitful study area for students interested in contemporary exhibition issues.

This resistance to First People's exhibition requests does not necessarily come from the designers. Designers have always paid attention to exhibition methodologies, often borrowing from their attractions and commercial display neighbors. But these design elements are often considered *déclassé* by museums and therefore cut from the product even though they could help expand the multisensory field of indigenous exhibits.

The edges between popular culture and “high” art, and between entertainment and education, may be blurring sufficiently so that in future a creative exhibition producer could be applauded for using all available techniques. In fact, if one were to analyze the most creative exhibition producers of the past, their work would likely be marked by their use of every exhibition presentation method extant at the time. I look forward to a much expanded design palette in the future.

THE DESIGNER AS MERCENARY

From a designer’s point of view perhaps the biggest change has been the closing down of most in-house design and production facilities and the rise of for-profit design and production companies. In today’s world, most designers will not, and may never, work inside a museum. They are, if you will, design mercenaries. They produce good work, align with novel technology specialists, experiment widely and sometimes/often create novel and interesting exhibitions.

On the negative side however, some design houses get into a rut of endlessly repeating the same style despite the venue. The famous designer whose company bears his or her name often flies around producing magical visions but then does not have enough time to supervise underlings closely. Flushed with success design shops often overstep their design role, creating content that is secondary to project bells and exhibition technique whistles.

In many cases former museum exhibition developers move to a design house where they too become “guns for hire”. As such, they are at one remove from their subsequent museum clients and gradually become so culturally different that they need a translator.

With the focus shifting to big name outside design houses, the museum curators feel ignored and downgraded. Enter the in-house design liaison, sometimes in the form of the project manager, who tries to get all sides playing nicely in the same sandbox. And presto, we are back to finding out who is in charge really and whose vision will prevail. This is hardly the team approach as it was originally created. Life for design houses now revolves around proposals, competitions for work, contracts, time and money. They are distracted with many clients and frustrated by museum staff who do not live by deadlines.

THE WORLD OF TECHNOLOGY AS A SERIOUS CHANGE AGENT

Ah but wait! The design world is profoundly changing again. Enter a new world order based on ubiquitous technology that now changes everything. Into the current exhibition design slurry with its many moving and unsettled parts comes a cadre of expert technology workers who know cutting-edge technology but may not be versed in museum philosophy.

Technology has brought a profound change in information availability through the net, and the corresponding ways museums may choose to change their relationship with information access and control. Inevitably all this available technology must either

change the roll of the curator or cause a realignment of the staffing structure. The position of curator is the role most closely linked with the museum's reputation as an authoritative institution, and it is this authority itself which is undermined by the many ways an individual can gather content for him/herself mostly using the smart phone they carry in their pockets.

In response to this sea change I believe that museums need to shift from being a unitary authority to becoming an encourager of intellectual and social engagement among a field of experts and among its visitors. In my notion of an ideal museum the curator would be transformed from today's knowledge tsar to the enthusiastic facilitator of available knowledge, gleaned from many sources and many points of view and in real time. Curators have the option of becoming knowledge managers, light editors, an expert among experts, and an eager "includer" -- or they can choose to remain the single-source one-way knowledge provider that many are today, and watch their diminishing power further erode.

To the extent that curators have been an impediment in holding back museums from becoming more candid about contested content, more responsive to their publics, and more catholic in their exhibition choices, refocusing their work to include the distribution of views from multiple sources would help museums become the more democratic and inclusive institutions I have long worked for. If such a content bonanza were easily made available, the visitor would pick and choose what interests him/her. That will further visitor customization making the museum a much more useful resource.

And if the proliferation of available content were not enough, in comes the participatory museum exhibition made so popular by Nina Simon⁵. Participatory exhibitions are based on including the visitor as change agent, personalizer, customizer, and teacher. A participatory exhibition is changed by the user so that the next user can see the changes and can add to the mix themselves. The world of interactivity piloted by so many children's museums and science centers set the stage that merge and often overlap with participation. These strategies include hand's-on, screen's-on, immersion techniques, and more. Participatory exhibitions can add content that often the originators could not foresee. My favorite (and constantly used) example is the Molndal museum in Molndal Sweden where the exhibition is intentionally not finished until it closes rather than when it opens.

The future of museum exhibitions may rest on how the visitor is integrated within the creative process. That will change the very nature of the exhibition product and add vitality and relevance to museums themselves.

CONCLUSION

So here I am at the second decade of the 21st century, having witnessed and participated in many attempts at exhibition reform, concluding that none of the exhibition making processes work universally or even especially well -- understanding that the most interesting of the artistic exhibition achievements are not really a product resulting

from a process between equals but one that must have a clear-eyed and gifted leader to succeed.

Thinking as I have from the beginning that the personal core philosophy of the leadership actually informs all things (and simultaneously believing that museums are actually an expression of civic need and their presence must be shaped by including us all in the process), I am struck by how opposed these two beliefs often are. I am left, late in life, with the same unresolved dilemma I began with, namely the essential need for inclusion for all, on the one hand, and the knowledge that the gifted leader often prefers and is rewarded for being an autocrat rather than an includer.

Does that mean that exhibitions will over and over reinvent old authoritative methods? Not necessarily! The educators in their long fight might have permanently sensitized us all to a number of issues that we did not acknowledge in the past. There is broad acceptance that we all have, as Howard Garner eloquently writes, different learning styles and capacities which need multi-sensory input in order to appeal to a wide range of visitors.⁶ Most now believe that exhibitions are not so much intellectual but rather impressionistic and sensory experiences.

Museums have gained a wider understanding of the spiritual world that informs the native people worldwide. Thus, some museums are tentatively beginning to allow psychological, spiritual and emotional content implicit in many objects to be made manifest rather than edited out.

And now with the imperative of “shared authority” brought on by the social internet, the very nature of museums’ unilateral intellectual presentations will perforce evolve with the availability of technology in every visitor’s hand. And with the rise of blogs, word clouds, and content sharing on the web, museums will have to incorporate ways of including their audiences as equals, co-creators, and even in charge of exhibitions.

We are only at the beginning of that process of experimentation but I know I leave all this in good hands -- your hands and those of your world-wide colleagues. I wish you all an outstanding work life that extends these changes and champions new ones not yet visible to any of us in this room today.

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² Dean Anderson in a private conversation. Dean is my husband and editor and always earns my gratitude.

³ A useful monograph appears on the Boston College website, entitled "Early Intervention, by Jack Shonkoff and Samuel Meisels.
<http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/lsoe/pdf/EICS/EarlyChildhoodInterventionTheEvolutionofaConcept.pdf>

⁴ S. Weil, "From Being About Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999).

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⁶ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*(New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).Howard Gardner