

Do Museum Exhibitions Have a Future?



Kathleen McLean

Abstract A 50-year retrospective return to the first volume of *Curator: The Museum Journal* suggests that colleagues half a century ago were vitally aware of the cultural potential of museums, the well-being of visitors, the need for interpretation and learning, and even the appeal of staying open 24 hours a day. So the more things change, the more they stay the same? The question leads to others: Are exhibitions an obsolete medium? Can museums keep pace with the interactions available elsewhere: virtual games, video arcades, jazz clubs, even a good Chinese restaurant? Is the glass half full of optimism or pessimism?



I was asked, in this fiftieth volume of *Curator: The Museum Journal*, to reflect on the changes in museum exhibitions over the past 50 years and to speculate about their future. In order to ground myself in past practice, I read the entire first volume of *Curator*, published in 1958, and compared the musings, expectations, and best practices of today with those voiced by our colleagues 200 issues ago. Then, against this backdrop, I reflected on my increasing concerns about the future viability of museum exhibitions.

The future is on my mind a lot these days as I ponder a variety of predictions: fundamentalist movements are dragging us back into the Middle Ages; we are just starting to simmer in a global warming soup; the U.S. national debt is eroding world economic stability; and exotic viruses are just waiting for the opportune moment to infect us. At the same time, across the world, new communities are forming, woven together by astonishing new technologies and shaped by unprecedented change and complexity. How museums and their exhibitions will fit into such a chaotic picture is anyone's guess.

Until recently, my response to this uncertain future has been mostly ambivalent. In September 2005, when I was asked to lead a conversation about the future of museums

Kathleen McLean (kmclean@ind-x.org) is principal of Independent Exhibitions, exhibitions editor of Curator: The Museum Journal, and is one of 100 museum innovators of the past 100 years named in 2006 to the American Association of Museums Centennial Honor Role.

with the Chicago Museum Educators Group, I couldn't decide whether I was an optimist or a pessimist. In the end, I presented both viewpoints. Museums might take a leadership role in developing new models for learning and critical thinking, or they might continue to serve an outdated industrial revolution model of public education. Museums might become centers for inspiration, reflection, and social interaction, where people connect deeply with their humanity, with beauty, and with the natural world; or they might become more like their amusement park cousins, serving up "fun" determined by a market economy. Museums might open their doors wider to public discourse, becoming physical "Wikipedias" that are created and sustained by the people who use them. Or they might not.

Looking Back

I took the opportunity of this fiftieth anniversary issue of *Curator* to do a bit of backward-looking investigation. My thinking was that if I could connect the historical dots back through time, I might be able to gain some perspective on how far we have come as a profession. And I might be able to plot a more optimistic trajectory going forward.

As I read through the four issues that comprise the first volume of *Curator*, I was reminded that I come from a long lineage of articulate colleagues, passionate and optimistic about the future of museums and eager to experiment with the making of exhibitions. The original editors promised a publication for "the expression of opinion, comment, reflection, experience, criticism, and suggestion . . . on all the activities of museum work" (Editorial Statement 1958, 5–6). I found it interesting that "criticism" was included here, since, in my experience, many museum professionals have an aversion to the notion of criticism. The editors also reminded us that:

The skill and competence now required to organize and administer a modern museum, to plan and prepare exhibits, to serve and deal with the public need for education and knowledge, to use and maintain collections, and to control the manifold interrelations of all these and other things as well, have taken on a highly professional character that reflects both the growing role of the museum in our culture and the high standards of performance that museums have taught the public to expect (Editorial Statement 1958, 5).

This certainly is true today as well. In fact, I detected a disconcerting similarity between much of what was written those many years ago and what is still being debated today. To test my hunch, I called a respected colleague and read to her quotes from the 1958 articles without disclosing the date or source. She proposed that while the ideas might not be *new*, they are contemporary ideas that generally have not yet been—but *should be*—put into practice.

Every article provided interesting glimpses into the concerns of colleagues across the museum field, but I focused on content specifically related to museum exhibitions and the visitor experience overall. Most of the authors worked at the American Museum of Natural History, which started the journal and published it for nearly 40 years. There were also authors associated with the Smithsonian, the Milwaukee Public Museum, uni-

versity museums, state museums, an art gallery, and a nature center. They came from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines: curators and administrators, designers, educators, and even a “museum television coordinator.”

The visitor experience—Concerns about and reflections on the quality of the visitor experience were foremost on many of the authors’ minds. Some described their own exhibitions and discussed what might be learned going forward; some proposed entirely new ways of thinking about exhibition practice; and two authors even reflected on the implications of what was learned from a visitor survey conducted at their museum (Schaeffer and Patsuris 1958, 25).

I was surprised to see an article on designing for the well-being of museum visitors by providing adequate seating, easily accessible parking, clear wayfinding, and information when and where visitors need it (Reekie 1958). I thought this was a much more current idea, given the lack of such amenities in some museums today.

There was a great deal of discussion about what visitors needed in order to have memorable experiences, acknowledging that their interests and backgrounds are diverse and that they will “pick and choose as the layout designs or objects strike [their] fancy” (Schaeffer and Patsuris 1958, 25). One colleague suggested that we should become much more familiar with the communities in which our museums are situated, and we should work with and speak to those communities in the planning of exhibitions (Beneker 1958, 78). There was even a hint of the notion of museum-as-advocate: “Programs must serve the best interests of our population and stimulate in them the need and desire to form their own opinions, establish their own convictions, and take whatever action is appropriate, whether it be more thought on the subject or a letter to their congressman” (Burns 1958b, 65).

In “Exhibits—Firing Platforms for the Imagination,” Katharine Beneker suggested that exhibitions should “enrich and enlarge the life of the person, child or adult, who sees them. Their value lies not within the museum walls, but in how much the visitor takes with him when he leaves. If you have started him on a new thought process, if you have made him curious enough to look more deeply into a subject, if you have changed his point of view, then your exhibition has been successful and your visitor is ‘off the ground’” (1958, 81).

Objects and ideas—Coming out of a tradition of taxonomic display that was the heart and soul of many natural history museums, a number of articles, not surprisingly, focused on the tension between the display of objects and the presentation of ideas. “There is a conspicuous modern trend to attempt, by means of thoughtful arrangement and labeling, to set forth abstract concepts and principles rather than to merely show objects, however intrinsically fine these may be. . . . It seems evident that this shift of emphasis from the particular to the general is a pervasive one, found or to be expected in all museums everywhere. Not all of the efforts in this direction have been successful, for much experiment and much testing of results is still essential” (Schmidt 1958, 27–28).

This tension was prompted, in part, by the understanding that object-based exhibits worked well when emphasizing the specificity of the individual object or specimen,

but alone they were not adequate for conveying the important, more abstract ideas of the time—related to ecology, biogeography, and evolution—ideas that are even more important today. And the tensions were well articulated: “It is noteworthy that such exhibits demand far closer cooperation between the scientific and the educational staffs than the ‘old style,’ take it or leave it exhibits. Efforts to transform exhibition halls in this direction are sometimes over-zealous, and there is danger that the museum baby may be thrown out with the bath” (Schmidt 1958, 28).

Out of these discussions of object and idea arose the notion of focusing an exhibition around one main exhibit idea—what museum professionals call “the big idea” today (Serrell 1994). “By far the most of the museum visitors are constantly on the move. It would therefore seem a reasonable conclusion that an exhibit should be limited to a single idea or two. . . . This principle of a one-idea exhibit is not new in the field of education. In fact, it is one of the classic rules of teaching. Yet many museums seemed not to have learned it” (Hellman 1958, 75). This notion, put forth by an educator, elicited a curiously familiar response from a curator, who was advocating the value of a primarily aesthetic experience: [He] “. . . states that it is now known that specific ‘one-idea’ exhibits convey more to the viewer than those giving a general impression. Who, one wonders, found this out? Probably they were educators, who proved it by testing the subjects with small, specific questions” (Amadon 1958).

Interpretation—For me, some of the most relevant and familiar ideas focused on interpretation and learning. Rosenbauer suggested: “Much has been learned in the past 50 years about the nature of the individual, and there is much to be learned. Museums should take advantage of the knowledge that is available and design their activities accordingly. There are also opportunities for research and new knowledge in the field of what is both broadly and loosely called visual education. Museums are the obvious places for such research. This will require some new thinking on the part of curators. Interest must be centered not on things but on the meaning of things to ordinary people with ordinary lives and backgrounds. This would be simple if meanings were fixed and universal—which they are not. . . .” (1958, 6).

There were reminders throughout that exhibitions have stories to tell (something I’m hearing a lot these days), and the ways museums tell them should be carefully examined. Robert Dierbeck described how museums might make better use of the medium of television to “speak the language of our time” (1958, 44). Schaeffer and Patsuris referred to “many articles and books on exhibition techniques” that focus on the importance of adequate and well-written labels with clear and understandable language, brevity, and a clear relationship to the objects and ideas being described (1958, 32). It would be interesting to compare them to Beverly Serrell’s writing on the subject these many years later (1996).

Rosenbauer cautioned us not to focus primarily on facts and information delivery. “Our curiosity, wonder, and delight are the driving forces that keep us constantly seeking knowledge. We should realize that the particular facts we acquire are only important because they fit into and enlarge a total concept. It is awareness of life, not just facts of life, that we must provide.” He suggested, “It is essentially a problem of communication. We

must first be sure of what we want to say, then find a communicative device that will do what we want. The device will be found to be closer to art than to language" (1958, 9).

Mission and market—I always assumed that the tensions between mission and market were a relatively recent phenomenon in museums, emerging full-blown in the 1980s with blockbuster fever. And yet, to my surprise, I found a number of references to the familiar entertainment-versus-education debate that underlies so many of these tensions: "Trained museum educators must take the responsibility of seeing that museum exhibits are more than a free Sunday afternoon entertainment for the public" (Hellman 1958, 76). ". . . [T]he museum's concern should be less for the number of its visitors than for what it does for them. If it wants to be an educational institution, then it must have an educative philosophy. It must offer the individual visitor something more than the fleeting pleasure of novelty" (Rosenbauer 1958, 7). And in discussing the relationship between museums and commercial television, William Burns noted that ". . . producers and directors on commercial stations worry about ratings even without an agency on their trail, and their shot-in-the-arm for a low audience index harks back to the old-fashioned museum with its bizarre, its mysterious, its largest and its smallest. This is what we have been trying to avoid. . . ." (1958b, 66).

Design and display—I expected that the more practical and technical aspects of exhibition practice in 1958 would seem quite dated and irrelevant to contemporary museums, but even here I found some unnerving parallels. I was delighted to read about the installation of unprotected chalk murals drawn directly on the walls in the Brontosauer Hall of the American Museum of Natural History (Colbert 1958), not only because they were so elegant and unusual, but because they reminded me of a wall writing and diagramming technique I thought was quite innovative in Bruce Mau's traveling exhibition *Massive Change*, organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery. The exhibition, which finished its run at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, looked at design and its potential for improving human welfare.

I found it curious and refreshing that in one issue, six pages were devoted to museum-related photographs of "oddities of institutional sign-posting in New York." In another issue, eight pages focused on a description and critique of Expo '58, including photographs of architecture and exhibit installations—evidence that our colleagues were actively looking outside the museum field for inspiration. Even in the highly technical articles by preparators that *Curator* was so well known for in the past, I found a contemporary connection. Two different articles described early forms of plastination of biological specimens, one that included a human fetus, and the other a human head (Sills and Couzyn 1958a; 1958b). Here, in plastinated flesh, were the ancestors of Gunther von Hagens's *Body World* clan.

Foretelling my own concerns about the prescriptive and limiting nature of "best practices," Katharine Beneker declared, "I do not feel that we can establish standards of display, because such standards change with each generation and with each turn of fashion. Our predecessors firmly believed that they were using the latest and most modern display methods when they installed what appear to us to be antiquated exhibits. Today



Writing on the wall in *Massive Change* at the MCA, Chicago. Photo by Robert Keziere, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

we feel that ours are also the last word. Yet tomorrow or a decade hence, these same exhibits will be just as obsolete. Therefore, let our standards be in the field of content—simply, clearly, and accurately defined—and in the richness of our imagination” (1958, 80).

Experimentation—In reflecting upon all the ideas contained in these articles written almost 50 years ago, what I found most surprising was the recurring theme of experimentation, which rarely gets mentioned today, outside the context of prototyping in science museum exhibits. “At the display level, the designers often have to deal with physically small but esthetically subtle and intricate problems that are little appreciated by those not trained to understand them. The problems tend to be unique and therefore not capable of solution by the application of already established principles. Opportunity to experiment is essential” (Parr 1958, 36–37). And “. . . the designer must be allowed to design by trial and error. This may seem extravagant and imply poor planning, but on the contrary, it is a necessary ingredient of all major accomplishments, whether in science, music, or art” (Witteborg 1958, 38).

“In the temporary exhibit we have opportunity to experiment with future forms, without committing ourselves to the results of our experiments, while still being able to expose them to public reaction. . . . even in the permanent exhibits we work on today we must strive for the forms of tomorrow, if they are not to be ‘dated’ before the halls are opened. In a natural history museum, it may take five to 15 years to complete a hall. It is logical for us to aim our temporary exhibits not even at the forms of tomorrow, but towards those of the



The steps at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. *Photo by Robert Keziere, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.*

day after tomorrow, so that, in navigator's terms, we can at least get one 'fix' to guide us to the forms of tomorrow in our permanent exhibition halls" (Parr 1958, 40).

Even the way museums conduct fundamental business was grist for experimental ideas: "As for night openings, museums have tried the hours from seven until 10 to give people who work during the day a chance to benefit from their exhibits and programs. What do museums think of staying open 24 hours a day, with film showings at two, four, and five-thirty *in the morning*, with classes in 'Painting for the Amateur' or 'Science for the Layman' at midnight?" (Burns 1958a, 44–45). Two recent examples of presenting programs at unusual hours—both considered quite innovative today—are the Exploratorium's overnight eclipse viewing programs, and the Dallas Museum of Art's centennial celebration, which included staying open for 100 hours. Both were stunningly successful with visitors, and other museums are cautiously considering similar experiments.

And Katharine Beneker reminded us that museum exhibitions exist within a much larger dynamic cultural context, one that we sometimes forget about in our focus on the inner workings of our own field: "For years I have heard that museums are poverty-stricken, but I am inclined to believe that we are stricken with poverty of the mind as well, and this is a more serious drawback than lack of money. An exhibition is a means of communication, and, if we have nothing to say, neither will the exhibit. Too often our lives are confined to four museum walls—fireproof, mothproof, rainproof, and thought-proof. We have not taken the time to broaden our base of understanding by getting out among

people to find out how others are thinking, eating, laughing, loving, and hating. Try going to a stock-car race, a 'greasy spoon,' a burlesque show, a rodeo, a revival meeting, an opera, or a ballet, and talk to the people there. By enlarging our experience in all directions, we will bring a freshness and richness to our thinking if not to our pocket books" (1958, 80).

Back to the Present

From today's vantage point, colleagues' 1958 concerns over unprecedented museum growth, hiring people untrained in museum work, and uncoordinated and wasteful museum expansion seem like recurring nightmares. Yet here we are, 50 years later, treading the well-worn path. Is this evidence of professional consistency and a continuing dialectic about museums and society? Or is it a sign that we haven't evolved much over the last 50 years?

Recently, as one of the "silverbacks" in "Silverbacks and Young Bloods Debate the Future of Exhibitions," a panel at the American Association of Museums 2006 Annual Meeting in Boston, I spent a Sunday in Toronto with "young blood" Erika Keissner from the Ontario Science Centre in preparation for the session. We went to three of the city's major museums and compared our experiences. It is not important to know which museums we actually visited or which exhibitions we attended, because, regardless of the specifics, I believe our experiences are indicative of the general visitor experience in many museums today.

There were very few people in the galleries at the first museum we visited, perhaps because it was in the midst of renovation. This museum had excited Erika as a young visitor, and had inspired me as a young exhibit designer, particularly the way the staff had reflected upon their exhibit development processes and evaluated their mission, goals, and galleries. We visited an exhibit that was one of Erika's favorites as a child—an open natural history diorama with labels that encourage visitors to find camouflaged animals in the forest. After 10 minutes of searching in vain, we left in frustration. On the way out, a gallery attendant informed us that many of the animals had been removed from the diorama long ago because of deteriorating taxidermy. She blamed visitors who "snuck food into the galleries and attracted pests" to the specimens. Our frustration could have been easily avoided if there had been a sign explaining why the specimens were removed or in some way acknowledged the decrepitude of the exhibit. And the gallery attendant's disdain for visitors could have been tempered, had she been familiar with Gordon Reekie's notion that "as the only personal contact the visitor has during his stay. . . employees represent the museum in a way that is often remembered for a long time" (1958, 94).

We found it curious that several old sporting exhibits were being torn down, while a newer, adjacent case contained the display of a contemporary hockey uniform. We suspected that this might be an attempt to provide objects more "relevant" to the community, but while it's possible to lay your eyes on hockey uniforms almost anywhere in this town, the chance to see these antique sporting artifacts was an opportunity soon to be lost. We reminded ourselves that these were old exhibitions, and that the museum was

currently in a major capital transformation. But even the newly opened art galleries, with case upon case of objects without labels laid out like housewares in a high-end department store, seemed a bit behind the times, given that visitor research continues to indicate that people want and need some context and information about objects on display.

Our second destination—a progressive art museum—was only a bit more satisfying, since it, too, was in the middle of renovation, with only a few galleries open for visitors. Over the years, I had read about the museum's innovative interpretive experiments designed to help visitors look deeply at an artwork, and I was interested in experiencing them first-hand (Worts 1990, 1995; Clarkson and Worts 2005). I expected to see several of these exhibit elements on display, since the depth of visitor response and engagement had sounded quite profound. Unfortunately, we were able to find only one small exhibit, and it was suffering from lack of upkeep, with scrunched paper and unsharpened pencils. The artworks in the family center were charming and playful, and the display of architectural models of new buildings around town gave us a different perspective on the city. But there was not much to keep us there for very long.

By the time we reached the third museum, it was three minutes to five and they were locking their doors. Even though Erika knew the guard with the key, he wouldn't let us in for a peek. Too bad they hadn't taken William Burns' advice to stay open during the hours that visitors are actually available (1958a, 44-45). I was never able to see the temporary exhibition that had drawn us to the museum, since I had to leave Toronto early the next morning. Luckily, Erika returned on another day, and it was a satisfying experience for her when she finally saw it. But most general visitors probably would not be that diligent.

After the museums, we unintentionally took Katharine Beneker's suggestion to "get out among people to find out how others are thinking, eating, laughing, loving, and hating" (1958, 80). We visited a videogame arcade, where dozens of young people in their teens and early twenties were exhibiting their skills in an electronic dance competition. We then visited a jazz club, where people of all backgrounds, persuasions, and ages—from 19 to 90—were thoroughly engaged in keeping the beat with a funky brass band. We ended the evening at a Chinatown restaurant, where dozens of people lined up in the cold to get in for a late-night dinner. In each place, the commingling of a diversity of people, cultures, and social interactions provided us with rich, energetic, and satisfying experiences.

This experiment in museum-going only reinforced a concern I reluctantly have been entertaining these days that museum exhibitions might be an obsolete medium, out on the dying limb of an evolutionary tree, and unless they significantly adapt to their rapidly changing environments in the coming years, they could be headed toward extinction. You might think it unfair to judge those aging museums by their sags and wrinkles. After all, we visited them in the midst of major cosmetic surgery, and soon they would be vibrant once again. Or would they? The nature and scope of the changes—new buildings by celebrity architects, and newly installed galleries with new cases and settings—seem to focus on the bricks and mortar, with no evidence that the exhibitions and programs will be significantly different. And while these museums are undergoing their transformations, they seem to be ignoring the day-to-day visitor experience—evidence, perhaps, of their true affections.

These grand institutions gave little attention to simple things that might have made my experience rewarding, despite the faded carpets or lack of funds. The three venues we visited later in the day—the video arcade, the jazz club, and the Chinatown restaurant—were nothing fancy. The furniture was old and worn, the architecture was less than memorable. But the programs and offerings were compelling, the social energy was uplifting, and the excitement palpable.

Part of the problem comes from a lack of imagination about what exhibitions could be in this new and complex world, and part of the problem comes from the traditional ways in which exhibitions are developed. It may take many years to develop a major exhibition, usually because of museum bureaucracies, fund raising constraints, and the number of people involved. The huge amounts of time and people required means that the exhibitions are very expensive to produce. And the bottom-line reality, combined with increasing marketing pressure to attract millions of visitors, means that much exhibit development time is spent trying to get curators, designers, developers, evaluators, funders, stakeholders, and marketers to agree on what exhibitions should be about. And once built and open to the public, those very same exhibitions are left on their own to deteriorate slowly, forgotten in the rush to create the next new thing.

Certainly, museums and their exhibitions have changed with the times to some extent, reflecting the changing values of the societies of which they are a part. Democratizing influences on authorship and authority, coupled with an increasing reliance on the earned income from admission fees, have pushed museums to diversify their menu of offerings. An increased understanding about how people learn, how they spend their leisure time, and why they attend museums has influenced the goals and features of some exhibitions. And revolutionary advances in new technologies have allowed museum exhibitions to provide a level of dynamism and action that had been much more difficult previously.

But despite these changes, opportunities, and new understandings, exhibition professionals still seem to be saying the same things colleagues were saying 50 years ago, while thinking they are new ideas. And we don't seem to be putting many of these ideas and theories into practice. I find it curious that exhibit professionals today still cite as most innovative the exhibition, *Mathematica*, created by Charles and Ray Eames in 1961, a couple of years after the first volume of *Curator* was published.

I acknowledge the claims of progress made by museum scholars and historians over the years, yet I see a stultifying sameness in many of the exhibitions being created today. Administrators still think of exhibitions as products; curators, exhibit developers, and designers still think of exhibitions as stages for their own performances; and everyone still uses the phrase "talk about" when describing what an exhibition will do. Most new museum exhibitions today are still primarily populated with glass boxes accompanied by passive labels telling museum peoples' stories. Even when digital media replace the printed label—often at great expense—the experience remains essentially the same, except with talking heads delivering the stories. Most science center exhibits are no exception; instead of glass boxes, just substitute hands-on devices that are the same from one institution to the next. The fundamental changes in most museum exhibitions today seem to reside in the decibel levels of their marketing campaigns, claims of innovation,

and ambient sound in the galleries. Most exhibition resources are put into expensive furniture, media, and graphics, and all are designed to last for the next 30 years, which, based on their high costs, will probably be a necessity.

Perhaps this underlying stasis has to do with the nature of museums as civic matriarchs—benign cornerstones of societal infrastructure. Fashions may change, but the general assumption has been that these great cultural storehouses will not be dismantled any time soon. And perhaps this security has created in exhibition professionals a complacency that keeps us predictable, a bit dull, and unaccustomed to imagining how exhibitions could play more engaging roles in this complex and changing world.

Looking Forward

If museum exhibitions continue to cover the same ground, I'm not sure they will have a future, particularly if the future is anything like the predictions looming on the horizon. The James Irvine Foundation, in its new working paper, *Critical Issues Facing the Arts in California*, warns that nonprofit arts and cultural organizations are "facing major, permanent, structural changes brought on by technological advances, globalization and shifting consumer behavior" and "are likely to become increasingly peripheral as the modes of creating, delivering and consuming artistic content and experience are affected by large-scale changes in the broader environment" (2006, 2,1). The report goes on to say:

[I]ncreasingly audiences expect artistic creators and distributors to be technologically literate, responsive to their personal interests, and constantly generating fresh content. This is a formidable challenge for most nonprofit arts organizations, which are neither organizationally nor financially structured to allow for rapid innovation or hypersensitivity to consumer expectations. Most cultural organizations are not equipped to "personalize" their audiences' experience in ways that are becoming commonplace in the commercial sector, placing them at a disadvantage in capturing and sustaining customers.

While not all museums are "arts organizations" as described above, I believe they face the same challenges to their future viability. And museum exhibitions—the most prominent and expensive of a museum's offerings—could be the hardest hit. Again, from the Irvine Foundation paper: "The environment for arts and culture in California and the rest of the U.S. has irreversibly changed, and the nonprofit arts sector has reached a breaking point, where it must adapt to evolving technologies and consumer demand or become increasingly irrelevant. Inaction or 'business as usual' is not a viable option" (2006, 6).

As our visitors increasingly deal with the effects of religious and cultural conservatism, war and power politics, the effects of global warming and species loss, and deadly new viruses that can spread across the globe in a matter of days, will our exhibitions be enlightening, comforting, or useful to them? As new communities emerge and evolve within the increasingly complex arenas created by new technologies, will our exhibitions have a place on the playing field? Only if, in the words of Thomas Friedman in his bestselling book, *The World Is Flat*, they allow for "multiple forms of collaboration—the

sharing of knowledge and work—in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language” (2005, 176). And only if, in the words of Katharine Beneker, they “fire the imagination”:

To me an exhibit is a springboard, although I suppose that in this day and age a better comparison would be a satellite-carrying rocket. The rocket gets the satellite off the ground and hurls it into that vast unexplored area, outer space. An exhibit gets the visitor “off the ground” and into an area that is still unknown to him. In both cases, there must be a firing platform, and that, in an exhibition, is the familiar, whether it be an object or an idea. From this platform, you, the exhibitor, can fire the imagination and carry it out into other areas of knowledge, or (and this happens all too often) your exhibit can fizzle and never get the visitor off the ground (1958, 77).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Darcie Fohrman, Erika Keissner, Catherine McEver, Wendy Pollock, Beverly Serrell, and Jay Rounds for their thoughtful criticism and suggestions in writing this article.

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