



The Art of Museum Exhibitions

By Leslie Bedford

In 2014, I published a book titled *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences*. In the book, I explore the world of “working in the subjunctive mood,” meaning the mood of imagination, emotions, and “what if?” that, for me, is at the core of museums’ work. The book captures my interest in how museums can move away from emphasizing education and learning goals and come closer to the power of narrative, imagination, and meaningful aesthetic experience.

I think the exhibition medium is closer to art than education. Efforts to use exhibitions to transmit lots of information not only distort the medium but also are doomed to failure. But what does this art form entail? In this article, I introduce the three “tent poles” for my approach—story, imagination, and aesthetic experience—and then look at how they work in practice.

STORY

In the mid 1990s, I attended a workshop sponsored by Facing History and Ourselves, an educational organization that encourages teachers and students to think about their everyday civic and moral choices (www.facinghistory.org). The instructor asked us to define the term hero—for me, someone who stands up for his beliefs, a larger-than-life figure—and then showed us a film about ordinary people who chose to risk their lives to protect Jews during the Holocaust. It was a powerful story.

Later, I took a subway home. As I stepped into the car, a man dropped to the floor, writhing in a violent epileptic fit. I stood looking at him while my mind literally replayed the lesson of the stories I had just heard: “You can help or walk away; the choice is yours.” I turned to the guy next to me, and we agreed to separate and look for help. Within

moments, a subway official showed up and all was well. I headed home.

The incident lasted seconds, but it changed how I thought about our work. I realized that for an exhibition to offer a transformative experience, there was a good chance it would involve story.

The truth is that story (what happened) or narrative (how story is presented) is foundational to being human. Story is how we make sense of the world, how we measure time, and how we communicate from a young age. Story is an effective way to learn; we are more likely to remember information received in story form. Finally, story is interactive and generative; story opens up the listener’s mind and creates more story.

IMAGINATION

Around the same time, I discovered a field called Imaginative Education. Founded by Canadian scholar Kieran Egan, it is a philosophy of education that puts imagination as the core or engine of learning. (For more information, see the Imaginative Education Research Group, ierg.ca.) Egan says that in teaching someone, start not with what the person knows but with what he or she can imagine. He says imagination is the ability to think of the possible, not just the actual.

The exhibit of *Australopithecus afarensis* (“Lucy”) and her mate at the American Museum of Natural History is full of narrativity—the power to evoke story in the viewer’s mind. Photo courtesy AMNH



Visitors to Chicago History Museum's *Sensing Chicago* exhibition use their five senses to explore Chicago's past and present—including by climbing into a giant Chicago-style hot dog. Photo courtesy Chicago History Museum

His fundamental point is that imagination involves emotion, and emotional engagement is key to learning. He delineates several cognitive or learning tools that help us do that. To explain cognitive tools, Egan makes up a story about early man. He conjures up an image of an old guy sitting under a tree somewhere in the plains of Africa. A crowd gathers around in admiration and gratitude: The man has just invented the past tense. Two weeks later, his clever daughters come up with the subjunctive mood and metaphor. Egan asks us to imagine living without the past tense or the ability to ask “what if?”

As you might expect, story is a key cognitive tool for Egan who encourages educators to approach content, regardless of discipline, by asking, What's

the story? What will provide the emotional kick to engage learners?

Imaginative education has much to offer the museum field. First, it gives us a framework for making decisions about interpretive strategies. Just as exhibition developers in children's and science museums often turn to child development theory, such as Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's notion of a zone of proximal development or U.S. psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, they can add Egan's framework to their planning toolkits. Second, imaginative education is appropriate to museums' intergenerational audiences. The cognitive tools and related ways of understanding the world that Egan outlines continue through the lifespan; adults' use of story differs from that of preschoolers, but they are still storytellers.



AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

My third tent pole comes from attending workshops on different art forms at Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education. As I learned to deconstruct various forms of art—from string quartets to Beijing opera—it occurred to me that exhibition might also be an art form with its own vocabulary and methods of working. And I recalled an earlier experience from my goodbye party as exhibition developer at the Boston Children’s Museum. One of the guests at the party remarked that the museum was “losing an artist.” I almost looked around to see whom he was talking about. The comment, both pleasant and puzzling, stuck with me.

I decided to go back to graduate school and figure it out. My book grew from my doctoral dissertation,

for which I asked, Are exhibitions an art form, and if so, what might that mean for both exhibition teams and visitors?

PRACTICE

In the final section of my book, I draw on the three tent poles to articulate some strategies or habits of mind that everyone can use to create memorable, meaningful exhibitions. I suggest that working in the subjunctive mood means we focus on the imagination—ours and our visitors’—and use the arts to bring content to life. I ask us to step back, show not tell, use metaphors and emotionally charged language, involve all the senses, and give people’s imaginations room to breathe. Here, I describe three of these strategies: metaphor, narrativity, and embodied experience.

- **Metaphor**—talking about one thing in terms derived from another quite different thing—is the kind of academic term that can turn off practitioners, but it is relevant to our work. By generating, not simply articulating, relationships among disparate things or ideas, metaphor expands our understanding. It is one of Egan’s cognitive tools.

For instance, in 1983, exhibition designer Don Hughes used a collapsing row of giant dominoes to introduce the exhibition *Andy Warhol’s Animals: Species at Risk* at the San Diego Natural History Museum, California.

- **Narrativity**, a literary term, is the power to evoke story in the listener’s or viewer’s mind. For example, an exhibit of *Australopithecus afarensis*, known as “Lucy,” with her mate at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City inspired U.S. naturalist and writer Diane Ackerman to write

“A volcanic eruption, shown in the background, is coating the landscape with white ash and as they walk through the savanna, they leave a trail of footprints. Lucy’s head is turned left, her mouth open. She seems startled by us. She does not know what she will become. Looking forward as he walks, her mate has his arm around her shoulder in a familiar gesture of tenderness. She doesn’t know about

dinner dates, Valentine's Day, custody battles. What was their courtship like? What worries them? Do they imagine a future? What delights their senses? How do they comfort their young? I long to meet them face-to-face, to reach through time and touch them. It is like recognizing one's kin across the street in a bustling city." (Ackerman, 1994, p. 335)

In 2007, the museum updated the presentation. Fortunately, scientific evidence still supported the storyline of two figures, one larger than the other, walking together across the plains. Two sets of footprints had been preserved in the volcanic ash for some 3 million years and there is no way the two sets could have been so close together if one didn't have an arm around the other. The museum dispensed with the rather fanciful backdrop and installed the figures at ground level. It is perhaps harder—at least for adults, though not necessarily for children—to empathize with these quite short, more simian figures, but their pose remains evocative and full of narrativity.

- **Embodied experience** describes the importance of our senses to learning, something the museum field has understood for years. From the Giant Heart at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia to *Sensing Chicago* at the Chicago History Museum, exhibitions have incorporated touch, sound, smell, and especially sight. Recent work in neurocognitive sciences not only reinforces these insights but also suggests new ways of working. For example, as U.S. science writer Annie Murphy Paul reported in 2012, using vivid, sensory language such as “coffee” or “cinnamon” lights up the primary olfactory cortex just the way actual experience with these phenomena does. Words like “chair” or “key” do not. People have similar reactions to metaphors with sensory language.

Through our networks of mirror neurons we register the gestures and expressions of others—including

representations in paintings—and can empathize with them. The “Lucy” display is not only about storytelling but also about empathy. The viewer knows, on a precognitive level, what it is like to have an arm around his or her shoulder. As our understanding of the growing field of neurohumanities increases, we may be able to apply this knowledge to exhibition design.

I suggest that exhibition makers pay attention to the capacities people bring with them to the museum. We are embodied storytellers, endowed with imagination and capable of making meaning. The making of meaning is not only what we do every day but also what gives value to human existence and thus contributes to our personal and societal well-being. We are also learners and social beings who enjoy play and seek pleasure. Museums can and do respond to all these needs—and many others. Just as each visitor differs and comes to a museum with his or her personal agenda, no exhibition can respond to everything we ask of it. And certainly not every exhibition should be designed as an aesthetic experience.

I argue for a particular continuum, the one that I found worth examining: one that begins with the fundamental search for story, bridges to the possibility of imagining, and moves into aesthetic experience. I think these elements of the subjunctive mood—in the hands of people who both acknowledge them and have the skills to employ them—are more likely to make a difference in our ongoing search for meaning and happiness. ■

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