

Book Review

The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences

by Kathleen McLean

Kathleen McLean is Principal at Independent Exhibitions. She may be contacted at kmclean@ind-x.org.

Leslie Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences* Left Coast Press, 2014. 167 pages. Paperback.

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In the last few years, we've seen an abundance of books, articles, and blogs about museum exhibitions. Many of these articulate not-so-new thoughts on community engagement, visitor participation, objects/ideas, and creative practice. And many are "how to" propositions, describing simple step-by-step processes and particular styles of exhibition making. Meanwhile, in museums, more and more staff with little exhibition experience are making major decisions about exhibition content, project management, development, and design. It seems that anyone with just a few years of exhibition experience under her belt now can be an expert.

While "beginner's mind" is essential to creative practice, and museums need people with fresh new talents and a much broader range of skills than ever before, museum visionary Michael Spock reminds us that creating a memorable exhibition IS like rocket science. The complexity of exhibition making—from articulating intentions and identifying and clarifying goals, to developing ideas, designing environments, and arranging the elements—requires a fine-tuned ability to understand the implications and nuances of choices and decisions. It requires an ability that comes from lessons learned, mistakes made, and in-the-trenches experience.

On the other hand, many museums have "professionalized" themselves into a corner with codified exhibition processes, compelling some of the most experienced professionals to keep making exhibitions the way they've always done them. This supposedly ensures that exhibitions will come in on time and within budget, even though it has little to do with the quality

of the visitor experience. And no matter how experienced these professionals might be, experience alone is not enough. Without creative vision, inspiration, and imagination, their resultant exhibitions will most likely join the growing ranks of the unattended and forgotten.

Imagine my delight upon reading Leslie Bedford's new book, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences*. Not only does Dr. Bedford speak from over 30 years of practice and reflection, she also incorporates new ideas developed through her recent PhD research on the imagination, narrative, and the aesthetic experience, and applies them to her thinking about museum exhibitions. She provides us with a well-reasoned, thoughtful analysis of the ways people experience the world, and uses that analysis to make a convincing argument for shifting the way museum professionals think about and create exhibitions.

Dr. Bedford begins by taking us back in time, to her early work at the Boston Children's Museum and the context of exhibition practice in the late 60s and early 70s. It was a period of fermentation and change in some corners of the museum world, particularly in children's museums, where the proposition that museums were *educational organizations and potential agents of change* seriously challenged the status quo. The emphasis on education helped to shift our practice toward more accessible and equitable goals, affecting how and why exhibitions were created.

Over time, as this educational model took hold, some of us found ourselves saddled with a new constraint: the

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didactic. If, indeed, museums were educational organizations, then we assumed our exhibitions had to teach and deliver content. And, for the most part, we are still in that saddle today. Leslie Bedford wants us to consider other, potentially more powerful, modes of experience, asking, “How can we reframe the conversation more as art than as education?” (p. 16).

While this may seem a simple, straightforward question, it can provoke negative responses in colleagues, who immediately assume that “art” means an exemption from rigor. Bedford anticipates this reaction, weaving together the work of scholars (museum and otherwise) to provide a rationale for moving beyond the push-content model with which museums are so comfortable: “Conceptualizing exhibitions as aesthetic experience—as a kind of art in the lower case—asks museum professionals to contemplate different goals and different standards for evaluation. And that, in turn, demands a different way of working” (p. 87).

Bedford focuses our attention on what she calls her three “tent poles” that comprise the subtitle of her book—story, imagination, and the aesthetic experience. She describes a continuum of what she calls “elements of the subjunctive mood” that “begins with the fundamental search for story, bridges to the possibility of imagining, and moves into aesthetic experience” (p. 133).

She first looks at story and narrative as powerful modes of exhibition discourse and cites scholarly work that deconstructs and distinguishes “story” (what happened) from “narrative” (how the story is told or represented). She also points out that a

story doesn’t simply deliver information or tell you what to think:

...storytelling, or the narrative mode of thought, is about both the storyteller and the listener (or viewer or visitor). Narrative stimulates personal interpretation; the person watching the film, reading the book, or experiencing the exhibition is engaged in his own kind of internal dialogue with the story. In this process of making meaning, he creates story out of story so that perceiving and creating become two sides of the same coin. (p. 59)

Walking the talk, Dr. Bedford incorporates stories throughout the book that were collected by Michael Spock at two different museum conferences in 1992, as part of Spock’s “Philadelphia Stories” project. Told by museum professionals about their own memorable experiences in museums, they almost always describe wonderment and the sparking of imagination, Bedford’s second “tent pole.” She describes “the what-if language of the imagination”—her reference to the subjunctive mood—as an essential element of meaning-making in exhibitions.

Bedford proposes that story and imagination engage visitors in ways that shape their aesthetic experience, her third philosophical tent pole. She builds her own understanding of aesthetic experience based, in large part, on John Dewey’s work in *Art as Experience*, from which she quotes liberally. I found her elaborations on Dewey’s theories helpful, but I was left wanting more. (I think I know an aesthetic experience when I see one or when I’ve had one, but I still can’t adequately describe it.) It is a

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difficult challenge. While she references scholars familiar to many of us—like Vygotsky, Csikszentmihalyi, Gardner, as well as Dewey—she also cites the work of Maxine Greene, a scholar of aesthetic education, and Canadian scholar Kieran Egan and his philosophy of imaginative education. Her attempts to put these complex works and abstract ideas into a framework for exhibition makers will undoubtedly deepen our professional conversations.

Throughout, Bedford provides examples of exhibitions that she feels enliven the imagination and embody aesthetic experience. One excellent example is the exhibition, *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* at the Minnesota History Center. Indeed, the walls DO talk in this lovely, complex, and imaginative installation about one actual house and all of its inhabitants over time in St. Paul. The exhibition employs all types of narrative and storytelling techniques, provokes our imaginations through dozens of “what if” scenarios, and provides enough complexity to keep us engaged and wondering throughout the experience.

Like *Open House*, many of the exhibitions Bedford cites were created by her colleagues who worked at one time or another at the Boston Children’s Museum. Even during those early days, their exhibitions were grounded in story, imagination, and meaning-making, which makes them a natural fit for her current thinking about aesthetic experience. Clearly, the creative legacy of the work accomplished by Michael Spock and his staff over the years has had a lasting impact on the field, even though the lineages might not be as apparent today.

However, I wished for more diversity in her exhibition examples, and I would have liked more examples of the types of goals, processes, and evaluation standards that she says are required. I also think she missed an opportunity for greater understanding by not including exhibitions from science centers or art museums, because they might serve as a contrast to the types of exhibitions she did include. Perhaps that’s for another book and more conversations.

I wondered, as I began reading, if the museum field would find this book useful. I’ve always considered exhibition making an artistic enterprise, and I consider aesthetic experience the ultimate achievement. But for practitioners who are new to the field, or for exhibition makers content with the status quo, would this book motivate a change in practice? Before I had even finished reading, I recommended the book to several colleagues who were struggling with didactic and cumbersome exhibitions, and they found it both provocative and helpful.

The Art of Museum Exhibitions does not provide us with a step-by-step process or a recipe for success. And Leslie Bedford does not assume that anyone can create a powerful or meaningful exhibition. She understands the complexity of the enterprise. And she expects us to reflect more deeply on our intentions in exhibitions, proposing that “It is critical to examine the why, and not leap immediately, as we often do, to the how and the what of our work” (p. 16). Most importantly, she gently persuades us that creating exhibitions is, indeed, an art. ✨