

Labels Unleashed

Breaking the Tyranny of Information

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There will always be a need for exhibition labels, whether the text is silkscreened on the wall, embedded in a screen, or recorded as an audio file. Labels serve many functions: They organize. They alert. They invite. They describe. They explain.

Labels of the future will need to work across platforms, following best practices of label writing as well as emerging electronic style guides.¹ But when information on any subject is only a tap away on a smart device, future labels may no longer need to do the heavy lifting when it comes to carrying information.

Admittedly, information is a vague word. All labels are informative, but the informational label's role is to provide facts and background information. Beverly Serrell makes a clear distinction between an (informative) interpretive label and one that carries information in the form of facts.

Interpretive labels tell stories; they are narratives, not lists of facts. Any label that serves to explain, guide, question, inform, or provoke—in a way that invites participation by the reader—is interpretive.²

So, too, Freeman Tilden's classic work on the principles of interpretation,³ used widely by the National Park Service, suggests that information is only part of interpretation. Yet the goal of "providing information" about a topic often overshadows other exhibition goals. When this happens, teams can spend a lot of time devising clever ways to cram in as much information as possible, from placing books at the end of the exhibition (hopefully next to comfy chairs) in art museums to creating digital encyclopedias that masquerade as

touchscreen games in natural history museums. Labels stuffed with information can't do much in terms of delighting, inspiring, and provoking. And a jam-packed label doesn't leave much room for the reader's thoughts. An exhibition full of informational labels is often just a beautifully designed book-on-the-wall.

Before the proliferation of online resources and the ubiquity of smart devices, museums were a primary, sometime sole source, of information and labels had to do the heavy lifting in terms of conveying this information. But today the museum is just one node in what digital strategist Nancy Proctor describes as a distributed information network.⁴ Information seekers have a variety of resources at their disposal and many feel comfortable consulting their smart devices in the environment in which they find themselves, whether office, school, or museum. In fact, the *2013 Horizon Report on Museums*, an annual report published by New Media Consortium that tracks how emerging technologies are affecting key educational sectors, identified BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) as a significant digital trend that is changing the way museums deliver information.⁵ In other words, electronic devices—whether brought by visitors or provided by the museum—can become primary fact providers, and labels can be unleashed from their heavy informational burden.

What would happen if we wrote labels primarily to start conversations, spark curiosity, and inspire imagination? What if we evaluated labels using these criteria rather than how well the reader understood the information conveyed? What if we wrote labels intentionally to spur readers to use smart devices in

1 See Stephen Bitgood, *Attention and Value: Keys to Understanding Museum Visitors* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013); Judy Rand, "Adventures in Label Land" (paper presented at the IMLS Family Learning Idea Incubator, Boston, Massachusetts, 2010); Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). For an example of an electronic style guide, see "BuzzFeed Style Guide," accessed on September 2, 2015, www.buzzfeed.com/emmyf/buzzfeed-style-guide.

2 Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*, 19.

3 Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

4 Nancy Proctor, "The Museum as Distributed Network, a 21st Century Model," *Museum ID*, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.museum-id.com/idea-detail.asp?id=474>.

5 "BYOD. Time-to-Adoption Horizon: One Year or Less," *NMC Horizon Report 2013 Museum Edition*, 11-14. <http://redarchive.nmc.org/publications/2013-horizon-report-museum>.

George Wesley Bellows (1882–1925)

Waldo Peirce, 1920

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase, gift of the Charles E. Merrill Trust with matching funds from the M. H. de Young Museum Society

67.23.1

Betraying No Emotion

by Ben Erickson, fourth grade, Ohlone Elementary School

Paint me sitting
on a wooden bench
holding a cane

Paint me with a dull brown
overcoat and a turquoise
sweater

Paint me with a yellow hand
resting on a wine red hat

Paint me betraying
No emotion

fig. 1. This winning label in the 2014 Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition illustrates the power of poetry to arouse curiosity.

Go to <http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/awards/2014-excellence-in-label-writing-winners.pdf?sfvrsn=0> to see the painting it describes.

the gallery to find the information that answered *their* questions? What if we borrowed the conversion rate metric from web developers to measure the effectiveness of a label?⁶

Models for the Unleashed Label

While authors such as Serrell and Tilden offer guidelines specific to interpretive labels, other forms of writing can open our minds to what labels might do in the future. Poetry and flash fiction are—like labels—constrained by word count, yet can powerfully convey emotion and a sense of connectedness. Graphic novels that artfully combine words and pictures can offer insights into ways that labels might become better graphic narrators.

Labels as Poetry Good labels are a form of poetry. Both are written to be read aloud, emphasizing the sounds of the words and evocative imagery. Both poems and interpretive labels convey emotion. But poems are not good at telegraphing information and often raise more questions than they answer. Would unleashing labels from their informational role provide more room for poetry? This poem (fig. 1) illustrates the power of a poetic label. This label entices and leave the reader wanting more. As Beth Kaminsky, a juror in

NAME's 2014 Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition wrote, "This label/poem made me want to see the painting..."⁷

Poetic labels are interpretive. They invite readers to participate in the experience. They offer clues for seeking additional information without making information a prerequisite for looking, enjoying, or sharing. What could we learn if we paired poetic labels with digital projects such as the Brooklyn Museum of Art's ASK program in which visitors can ask questions about the artwork they encounter in the galleries and receive instant answers from staff?⁸ Might this be a way to measure the conversion rate of a poetic label to encourage visitors to ask questions or even create their own poetry?

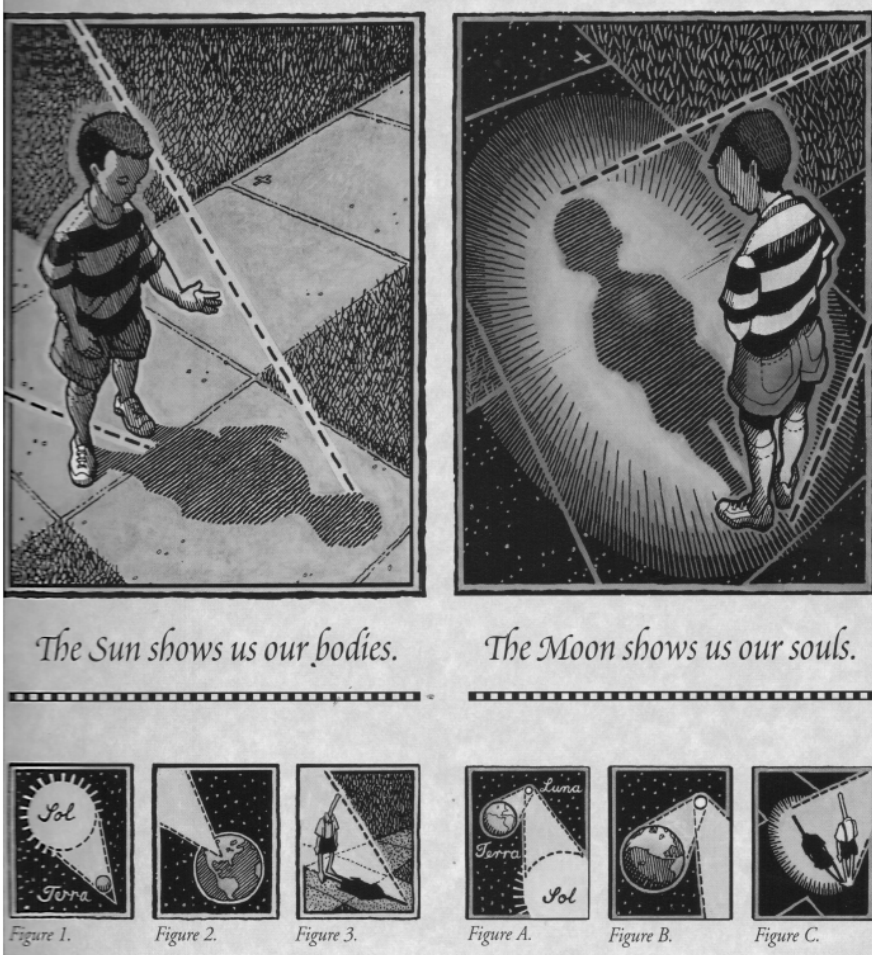
Labels as Flash Fiction Flash fiction is a literary genre that does everything a longer piece does: develops character, creates tension, and resolves a conflict, but in less than 750 words.⁹ The often-cited example of flash fiction comes from an apocryphal story about novelist

6 Defined as the percentage of visitors that take a desired action. See Technopedia™ at <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/1450/conversion-rate>.

7 "Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2014," American Alliance of Museums, <http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/awards/2014-excellence-in-label-writing-winners.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.

8 Sara Devine and Shelley Bernstein, "Responsive in Planning and Practice: Comment Kiosks at the Brooklyn Museum," *Exhibitionist* vol. 34 (2015), 42-45. See also Sara Devine, "All in a Day's Work," *BKM Tech* (blog), accessed January 2, 2016, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/>.

9 Dinty W. Moore, introduction to *Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, (Brookline, Massachusetts: Rose Metal Press, 2012), xix-xxii.



The Sun shows us our bodies.

The Moon shows us our souls.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR, JEFF HOKE

fig. 2. This drawing is one of many that create a compelling and engaging museum world in *The Museum of Lost Wonder* (see www.lostwonder.org).

Ernest Hemingway.¹⁰ The author, who did write a 750-word piece titled “A Very Short Story,” purportedly won a bet as to who could write the shortest narrative by penning the following on a napkin:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

Dinty W. Moore, prize-winning nonfiction writer and editor of the online journal of flash nonfiction, *Brevity*,¹¹ traces the history of flash fiction and its cousin, creative nonfiction, noting that all flash pieces share an energy generated from the abbreviated form. He declares that a flash piece “needs to be hot from the first sentence and the heat must remain the entire time.”¹²

Flash writing seems to fit today’s digital lifestyle. Twitter and Tumblr are essentially experiments in flash writing, with numerous sites offering morsels to be consumed like potato chips.¹³ Writing flash pieces can be addictive, as witnessed by the popularity of the website

www.sixwordmemoirs.com.¹⁴ Try it yourself. I bet you can’t write just one.

What makes flash pieces so compelling? They can be read and absorbed quickly. They offer a flash of insight into the human condition. As a label model, the elegance of a flash piece is that it requires the reader to fill in the blanks using their own experience and imagination. Reading flash pieces is participatory. Labels written as flash pieces could serve a variety of roles. For instance, this piece by novelist and flash fiction writer Ronnie K. Stephens could be a tantalizing way to begin a history exhibition.¹⁵

Here is a town that has learned from its history;
a town that does not fight the mountain, does not
fight the river.

The mine shaft opens its mouth. Holds two bodies
in its teeth until they are wet and blue and soft.

10 Robert Swartwood, introduction to *Hint Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 21.

11 *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction*, <http://brevitymag.com/>.

12 Moore, introduction, xxiii.

13 Check out #flashfiction on Twitter and Pinterest.

14 See also *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, edited by SMITH Magazine (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2008).

15 Ronnie K. Stephens, “Build and Build and Build Again,” *Hippocampus Magazine*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.hippocampusmagazine.com/2015/12/build-and-build-and-build-again-by-ronnie-k-stephens/>. Excerpt used by permission of the author.

Come back. The sky grieves, and the banks swell.
Everywhere, another pool of water on the street.
Come back.

Novelist Robert Swartwood, who also writes short fiction (often 25 words or less) explains,

For me, a story should do four basic things: obviously it should tell a story; it should be entertaining; it should be thought-provoking; and, if done well enough, it should invoke an emotional response.

Now, if those four basic principles can be applied to a story of twenty-five hundred words, why can't they be applied to an even shorter story?¹⁶

Why indeed? Labels unburdened from their informational role have a better chance of maintaining their energy.

Graphic Novels Labels, of course, are more than words. At their best, they are thoughtfully designed collaborations among words, typography, and images—a form of visual storytelling. They fall along a spectrum that includes graphic novels, comics, and even political cartoons. Art Spiegelman, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for his graphic novel, *Maus*, is often credited with elevating graphic novels beyond the superhero comic mold.¹⁷ Graphic nonfiction is a useful genre for sensitive or complex subjects and is being used to communicate topics from evolution to genetics.¹⁸

Graphic novels are intriguing because of the interplay between language and drawing.¹⁹ In contrast to the informational label—in which images and illustrations often play a supporting role—word and pictures are equal partners in the graphic novel. In fact, some graphic formats eschew words all together. In *The Museum of Lost Wonder*, author Jeff Hoke uses a graphic style to create an imaginary world.²⁰ The illustration shown here (fig. 2) evokes wonder, but it also explains the solar zenith angle and lunar reflection in an intuitive way. Modeling labels after graphic novels might open new possibilities for visual storytelling.

In *Designing Culture*, scholar and researcher Anne Balsamo, whose work focuses on the intersection between culture and technology, describes an experimental exhibition that she and her colleagues at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center developed for the San Jose Technology Museum.²¹ *XFR: eXperiments in the Future of Reading* showcased a variety of low- and high-tech approaches to engage audiences in reading and storytelling, including a room-size graphic novel that visitors walked through to follow the story (fig. 3). In reflecting on the lessons learned through developing this exhibition, Balsamo notes, “Throughout the XFR exhibit, the reader’s body was provoked to engage the speculative reading devices in multiple ways...by bending, reaching, lifting, walking, poking, touching and pointing.”²² In the future, unleashed labels could facilitate whole-body learning, combatting the belief that reading is a passive experience.

16 Swartwood, introduction, 27.

17 Art Spiegelman, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

18 LJ Reviews, “Drawing on Reality: Graphic Nonfiction from Bechdel to Zinn,” *Library Journal*, February 1, 2012, <http://reviews.libraryjournal.com/2012/02/collection-development/drawing-on-reality-graphic-nonfiction-collection-development/>.

19 Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015), 143-153.

20 Jeff Hoke, *The Museum of Lost Wonder* (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser LLC, 2006), <http://www.lostwonder.org/>.

21 Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture. The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 72-94.

22 Balsamo, *Designing Culture*, 87.



fig. 3. Walk-In Comix, part of the *XFR: eXperiments in the Future of Reading* exhibition, let audiences physically engage with the story by walking through a life-size graphic novel.

The Music Lies Between the Notes

Poetry, flash fiction, and graphic novels demonstrate that a few well-chosen words can have a lasting and profound effect on readers. But modeling labels after poetry and flash fiction isn't solely about the word count. For all the books, presentations, and discussions about writing interpretive labels, many exhibitions continue to be populated with labels that are bogged down with extraneous detail and too much information—labels that stifle rather than enhance compassion, empathy, and understanding. Recasting labels as a literary form akin to flash fiction or poetry shakes up the current exhibition paradigm. Unleashing labels frees exhibitions as well.

In *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, museum consultant and pioneering exhibit developer Leslie Bedford describes exhibitions as a unique communication medium, one that transcends the assumption that “the primary purpose of exhibitions is education, that is, the transmission of knowledge.” She argues that the exhibition medium is rooted more in the subjunctive mood of engaging the participant’s imagination, engaging them in the mood of “what if?”²³

This view has significant implications to how we identify our goals for evaluation and standards as does questioning the primacy of the informational label. Following this line of thinking will force us to move beyond the oft-stated exhibition goal of providing information and help us envision exhibitions in new ways. If “music is the space between the notes,” as a famous composer is said to have posited, then perhaps curiosity lies between the words. ■

²³ Leslie Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 15.

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