



The Shadow Side of Traveling Exhibitions

by Wendy Pollock

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If you were around 40 years ago, likely you too have memories of *The Treasures of Tutankhamun*. Mine include a train ride from Philadelphia and a shivering line outside the National Gallery of Art. *Tut* was a cultural event of late 1970s America that, for museums, established a benchmark, an endpoint on a spectrum of possibilities for traveling exhibitions. As one of the first to be called a “blockbuster,” the exhibition was, like the bombs that had earlier given blockbuster movies and books their name, big in every way.

Most traveling exhibitions don't come close to the impact of *Tut*. In fact, one sobering moment came for me, early in my nearly 30 years managing traveling exhibitions for the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), when follow-up interviews with visitors revealed that some people couldn't remember one of our exhibitions at all.

In that confessional spirit, I offer reflections from my years with the science center movement about the unanticipated effects traveling exhibitions can have on the museums that host them and the people who work there.

I use the word “movement” because that is the best way to describe the science center field in the years after 1969, when the Exploratorium and Ontario Science Centre both opened. Those events crystallized a concept for a new kind of museum—one that put people at the center and a spirit of inquiry and exploration first. Science centers were not about displays of objects, however dazzling, or curatorial lectures, however erudite. They were about the sheer

pleasure of learning with all of our senses, of cultivating the courage to ask “why?” There was a sense of missionary zeal.

As I look back, I see a movement that has become, in the words of many directors (or CEOs as they are now often called), an “industry.” And I suspect that a program of traveling exhibitions that began as a way to share resources and spread the spirit of the movement may have contributed to subverting that spirit instead.

But first, some background.

Learning Together, Spreading the Word

ASTC started a traveling exhibition program in the mid-1970s, shortly after the organization was founded, because back then the whole idea of a science center was fresh, and museums were still figuring out how to make exhibitions that reflected a “hands-on” approach to learning. The small group of member museums were eager to share new exhibitions and pool resources. Over the ensuing years, the organization managed tours of more than 200 exhibitions, with 13 openings during one peak year, in 1989. Early on, many of the exhibitions we handled were photography or panel shows—like a collection of stroboscopic photos by MIT's Doc Edgerton. But there was a push to find and put on tour, or if need be to create, more participatory and interactive exhibitions, which was aided over the years by funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF).

It was in part thanks to NSF support, in fact, that in 1980 the ASTC exhibition program reached an inflection point and then-director Sheila Grinnell persuaded



Inside the Look-into Kaleidoscope, built of plywood, mirrors, and imagination—one of the Exploratorium classics in Looking at the Light. ©Exploratorium, www.exploratorium.edu.

the Exploratorium to build a travel-worthy collection of exhibits about color and light. This was a first for the Exploratorium, which adhered strongly to the idea that exhibits should be what founder Frank Oppenheimer called “working prototypes,” not laminate-finished attractions. A collection of delightful and surprising experiences, *Looking at the Light* enabled more than a dozen museums, like Pittsburgh’s old Buhl Planetarium, to demonstrate to their boards and communities what one of these new-style, hands-on museums might be like. We sent along an emissary from the Exploratorium, an exhibit developer who met with the host museum staff and helped spread the word. Deeply political in nurturing the courage to question and radical in its commitment to experimentation, the philosophy embodied in this exhibition was well worth spreading and at least as timely now as it was then.

Looking at the Light had real and lasting effects, as did other exhibitions that followed, including a number from inventive developers at children’s museums—like a Boston Children’s Museum series that included *Salad Dressing Physics* and the San Jose Children’s Museum’s *Rhythms*. Along with workshops, internships, and publications

like the Exploratorium’s *Cookbooks*, these exhibitions helped to create a sense of common identity, spread ideas and practices throughout the growing science center field, and offer staff an opportunity to become familiar with new exhibit techniques. We were learning together about things like what visitors found most engaging, how to handle exhibits filled with fluids, what to do if one of those early computer-based exhibits failed.

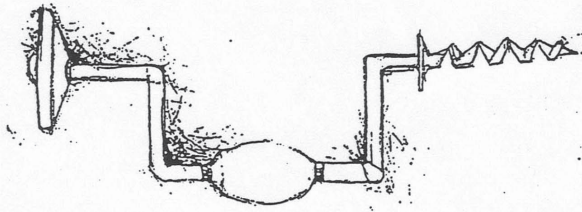
There was value for the communities these exhibitions traveled to, in the experiences they offered and the swirl of activities that surrounded them. But traveling exhibitions also were important tools for learning for the people who carried the spirit of the science center movement forward and continued to keep it fresh.

Turning Points

While the sense of a common mission was strong in those days, another dynamic was at work, as inevitably is the case when ideas become institutions: a push for efficiency and economy, an eye on the bottom line. The context was changing, too, as Reaganomics temporarily put an end to NSF funding for museums, belief in the value of the public realm eroded, and more museums were pressed to generate a

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Straight-jackets, electro-shock and lobotomies.



Who says psychology can't be fun?

Psychology: Understanding Ourselves, Understanding Each Other.
May 27-Sept 6

Several museums proposed ad campaigns for the Psychology exhibition that magnified popular misconceptions. This ad was vetoed by the exhibition's sponsor, the American Psychological Association. Courtesy Gretchen Jennings.

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greater share of their own revenue.

With the best of intentions, we looked for ways to contain costs, manage risks, and simplify the handling of exhibitions for host museums. Nonprofits owe it to the public to set high standards and use resources wisely. But as I look back, I believe that we changed our practices, in the name of efficiency, in ways that led us down a path toward commodifying the very experiences we valued so highly.

Turnkey: We began to prefer “turnkey” exhibitions that could be rolled out of their crates and opened to the public

with minimal effort on the part of host museum staff. The ratio of content and charm to cladding changed. More often than not, the local community had little if any role in shaping or contributing to traveling exhibitions. What messages were we sending? To take as little time as possible with this exhibition, and protect it from your visitors?

Big: There was heady pleasure in watching the field grow. The 1980s and 90s saw steady increases in the number and size of science centers. Demand grew for more and bigger exhibitions to fill the space and increase admission revenue. At one point, we actually ran lotteries to determine which museums would be lucky enough to rent ASTC exhibitions. At the same time, large-format film theaters were contributing to a sense of limitless possibility as they increased in number, shaped taste, and altered expectations about earned income. More science centers came to resemble big-box stores that needed outside banners to catch the attention of cars speeding by—and only big exhibitions with assured crowd appeal were deemed banner-worthy. Costs increased—for rental fees, shipping, technical support—and increased attendance was necessary to pay the bills. It was a cycle, and not a virtuous one.

Marketable: The pressure for higher attendance inevitably meant that market appeal became a major factor in the decision to book an exhibition. But how to increase the chance that a traveling exhibition would catch the attention of people who might not otherwise come to a museum? Hedging bets, more museums bought into exhibitions with pre-marketed themes like *Star Trek* and *Titanic*. Were

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they telegraphing the message that science was inherently unattractive and had to be masked as something else? More than once, we discovered that host museums had designed ad campaigns that magnified misconceptions instead of challenging them—in the case of the *Psychology* exhibition, playing on popular associations with hallucinogens and mental illness. Did campaigns like this one, intended to appeal to otherwise uninterested audiences, lead to any conversions? Evidence suggests that conversions, if any, were temporary (Grinell, 2006).

Risky: Bigger and more complicated exhibitions, beyond the capacity of host museum staff to handle on their own, also brought new kinds of risks. In retrospect it is a testament to the care and skill of the museum staff we worked with that so few problems arose. But arise they did—and even one injury was a sobering reminder of the web of responsibilities and perils of distance that increasingly surrounded traveling exhibitions. How to manage these increasingly complex relationships? Did the value of the exhibitions to their host museums and communities justify the risks they entailed?

Not mine: Higher risks led to iron-clad rental agreements. Of course it was good to be clear and specific about expectations and anticipate problems before they arose. But as everyone learned to be on guard, problems that might be fixed as a matter of course by unrushed museum staff—or design problems that in the spirit of the “working prototype” might have been regarded as interesting puzzles to work on together—were instead, more often, viewed by host museum staff as “not our

problems.” How had friends become adversaries?

Unstaffed: People and conversation are critical components of learning in informal settings like museums. But the sense that a traveling exhibition is an alien presence, added to the pressure to maximize returns, meant few traveling exhibitions were staffed. Thanks to NSF support, and with partners like the American Psychological Association, we were able to counter this trend on occasion by offering staff workshops, travel support, and incentives. But those were exceptions.

The Lure of Success

In spite of the risks and challenges, the success of traveling exhibitions in at least sometimes attracting publicity and increasing attendance lured more science centers—and, soon, commercial enterprises—into what had become an income-generating business. Capitalizing on the demand for big crowd-pleasing exhibitions, and lacking the constraints of nonprofit educational institutions, the for-profits skimmed off the most lucrative business as they concentrated on the ever-popular themes of dinosaurs, gold, death, and sex. BBH, later Clear Channel, offered a well-hyped award at the ASTC conference that called attention to their traveling exhibitions (a business they have since abandoned). The concurrent rise of the for-profit “edutainment” industry raised the stakes as museums worried about competing for leisure time and dollars. ASTC's traveling exhibition program fit into a narrowing niche, managing mid-size exhibitions that mostly had been funded by NSF, and the exhibition program increasingly

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was viewed, within the organization, as a source of income rather than a core program.

The truth is, there were deep historical roots in this commercial aspect of the museum experience, going back to the traveling mummies of the nineteenth century and P.T. Barnum's profit-making American Museum, which offered investors solid returns and sold experiences sure to please the crowds. But what had happened to the mission of serving as a vehicle for connecting the community and cultivating shared knowledge and expertise? What had happened to human-paced, hands-on experiences?

The exhibition had become a commodity, and the museum a machine for producing it. The community had become “targeted audiences” and relationships, commercial transactions.

A Legitimate Need for Novelty

There's a good reason why people want fresh experiences of the kind traveling exhibitions promise. We crave novelty. Our hearts soar when we encounter the rare, distant, outsized, or one-of-a-kind. Recent analyses by Reach Advisors confirm that “a sense of change does seem to correlate with happier visitors.” This is especially true for science centers, they find. But novelty can take many forms—not just the cotton-candy variety that quickly melts in your mouth. And, as Reach Advisors comment, “change doesn't mean an expensive line item, and it doesn't mean changing over the entire museum every six weeks” (2011).

People offer infinite variety. Reach

Advisors found that visitors to outdoor history museums were least interested in changing exhibitions, a finding they attribute to “interpreters [who] lend a sense of change naturally to these sites” (2011). Rather than designing for unstaffed exhibitions, we can design for convivial exchanges both among visitors and with staff and volunteers.

Compositions that change offer fresh pleasure and food for thought. The Association of Art Museum Directors notes a return to such “home-grown” exhibitions (2011). Living collections have built-in freshness—animals always up to something new, plants that change through the seasons. Science centers can emulate both.

Complexity invites slow and repeated attention—a savoring of experience rather than a quick gulp. Exploratorium founder Frank Oppenheimer wrote of the “built-in richness that makes it possible for people to find things that even the staff...didn't know about” (1982).

In any case, familiarity also has a place in museums. People may not come often to see an old favorite, but iconic exhibits are part of the attachments people form with “their” museums (Perry, 1993).

Dialing It Down

Perhaps, as a colleague said recently, it's time to “dial it down”—to consider other ways of solving the problems traveling exhibitions were invented to address.

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citizen science projects, and experimental enterprises like the San Francisco Mobile Museum. *See the related article in this issue. The Editor.* And there are many ways museums can share ideas and resources—through ExhibitFiles, for example—that don't entail shipping objects long distances. None of these is likely to outgrow its mission and none will leave a carbon footprint like a traveling exhibition (shipping alone, for a three-van exhibition going cross-country one time, produces nearly 18 tons of CO₂) (CarbonFund.org, 2011).

Environmental activist Bill McKibben wrote recently, and with hope, that we are entering an era of “small and many.” Science centers may find inspiration in

the increasing number of small farms he refers to that use less energy and produce better food than the “big and few.” To extend the metaphor, consider what Aldo Leopold wrote in that classic of the environmental movement, *A Sand County Almanac*: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive...” (1970). We might say: We abuse museum experiences when we regard them as commodities; when we see these experiences as by and for our community, then we may work in a spirit of love and respect and foresee a more sustainable future. ✨

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