



The Unexhibitable: A Conversation

by Gretchen Jennings and Maureen McConnell

Editor Gretchen Jennings
may be contacted at
gretchenjennings@rcn.com.

Maureen McConnell is a
Museum Exhibitions Consultant.
She may be contacted at
mcconnellmaureen@me.com.

Introduction

What, if anything is “unexhibitable”? In May-June 2008 we posted this question to several thousand colleagues in the United States and around the world through the NAME membership list; on Museum-H, an international listserv moderated from Europe; and in the blog on www.ExhibitFiles.org. In this article we summarize and comment on the responses we received. We have organized the topics into categories, while acknowledging that some address a variety of themes. We have also edited (with permission) the entries to accommodate as many as possible in the space allowed.

Note that a longer version of this article, with more postings, can be found on the NAME website at www.n-a-m-e.org.

Since the authors worked together on “Too Hot to Handle? Museums and Controversy,” an issue of *The Journal of Museum Education* (1999) we have been interested in the question of the “unexhibitable.” Are there some topics that are truly unexhibitable? Is this so because they are inappropriate in themselves or because of outside forces? What role do time, place, culture, community, funding, and a host of other issues play in shaping answers to this question?

The Cultural and Economic Context

We were also curious to see how today’s museum climate compares with that of our earlier issue. In 1999, blockbuster exhibitions were the order of the day, and while some museum staffers worried about the long term effects of these giant exhibitions, the public was responding positively to them. Today, museums have not completely recovered from the

precipitous drop in museum attendance after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, though attendance figures have steadied. The public has come to expect blockbusters at the larger museums, but these shows are not always in ready supply. How do these conditions affect our assumptions of risk in the subject material we choose to exhibit in museums?

Moreover, as the economy worsens and as funding becomes tighter, museums may be under increased pressure to select exhibition topics that are unlikely to make waves. There is a general sense that funders will balk at exhibition themes that are too controversial, too abstract, too political. At the same time, there is greater discussion in the field itself regarding the social and educational responsibilities of museums. It was in this cultural and economic context that we sent out our question, curious to know what our colleagues were thinking.

Assumptions Behind the Question

The exhibition format has boundaries that are extremely flexible, indeed almost infinite, and that defy easy definition. We didn’t define the term when we sent out the email, trusting in a common understanding in the field. And the responses indicate to us that our colleagues share a number of assumptions with us when they think about what is or is not unexhibitable:

- The question relates to what can or cannot be made into an engaging exhibition rather than referring to the technical feasibility of presenting difficult subject matter.
- Exhibitions are a legitimate and useful form of human communication.
- When they address topics that are full of suffering, evil, hatred, prejudice, and strife,

The question of the unexhibitable highlights the relationship of museums and their communities.

exhibitions must still educate, expand, and enrich our experience, i.e. contain some kind of social capital, even while they disturb us.

- We asked for (and received responses about) examples of exhibitions rather than the museum programs that accompany them because the majority of the visiting public sees the exhibition only. A well-used tactic to avoid risk is to relegate any controversial material on a subject to associated programming without addressing difficult issues in the wider venue of the exhibition itself.
- The question of the unexhibitable highlights the relationship of museums and their communities: both their actual audiences, with their varieties of ages and perspectives; and the concentric circles of the communities in which museums exist—historical, current, local, national, global, to name a few.

Topics That Are Unexhibitable, or at Least Very Difficult to Exhibit

The Human Body: Alive, Dead, Healthy, Sick

It's probably not so surprising to learn that a large number of responses regarding potentially unexhibitable topics had something to do with exhibiting ourselves—especially our bodies—about which we seem to be endlessly curious and at the same time ambivalent.

We received a number of comments such as this one regarding the display of human remains:

☀ *Of course, display of human remains is a huge historical sore point with indigenous peoples in the Americas and is one of the matters, along with sacred items, that concerns*

NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act]. I suppose the way you can get away with an exhibit like **Body Worlds** is because the corpses are Germans who signed up for it voluntarily.

Daniel Spock, Director of Minnesota History Center Museum. Daniel.spock@mnhs.org

While we were receiving emails commenting on the display of human remains we came across the following pertinent commentary on the internet:

☀ *Coming to a museum near you! Katrina Victims Bodies on Display! Twenty African-American, unclaimed and unknown victims of this hurricane tragedy are artistically dissected and posed in lifelike educational exhibits.... This exhibit does not exist, thankfully, not because there aren't unclaimed victims of Katrina...[but] because of the staggering outcry an exhibition like this would bring... How about twenty dissected and unclaimed Jews? How would you feel? How about twenty Chinese? Wait. Twenty Chinese? Twenty Chinese on display without their consent. Where's the outrage? **Bodies: the Exhibition**, opening February 1, 2008 at Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, is just such an exhibition (Tsai, 2008).*

In February 2008 when the above was written, Premier Exhibitions, the company that created **Bodies**, maintained that the bodies were those of people unclaimed by family or friends and obtained legally from official Chinese sources. In May, under the terms of a settlement with the State of New York regarding the display of the exhibition at South Street Seaport, Premier agreed to post at the exhibition a disclaimer warning that the bodies may have

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On the whole, I've been struck by how often I've seen things that probably only could be shown in a museum.

been given without prior consent and may have been prisoners in Chinese jails. See the **Bodies** website for full disclaimer (New York Times May, 2008).

☀ *At Medical Museion, the medical history museum at University of Copenhagen, we are currently writing an exhibition proposal on obesity... Can we actually make an exhibition that will be appealing and not offend people? Is obesity such an unexhibitible topic? ...We have thought a lot about how to solve this dilemma and our solution might be to present as a cultural history... But still, will it neutralize the subject enough for the visitors with weight problems to feel welcome and not patronized by the subject?*

Camilla Mordhorst and Bente Vinge Pedersen, Medical Museion @ University of Copenhagen. bvpn@sund.ku.dk

The Human Body: Sex and Nudity

As the discussions both above and following reveal, we continue to puzzle over how and when and in what context to display our bodies. Nudity in art is probably the oldest and most common topic of exhibition controversy, especially in art museums. If there were a scale of *daring to provoke vs. avoiding controversy*, it might run from contemporary art museums on the daring end, through fine art museums, children's museums, history museums, to science centers on the avoidance end. That said, **What About AIDS?** produced by the Franklin Institute, proved that sensitive topics could be handled well by science centers.

☀ *On the whole, I've been struck by how often I've seen things that probably only could be shown in a museum. When I was a kid in the early '60s, the museum was certainly the*

only officially sanctioned space where the display of nudity was not only allowed, but celebrated. Even as a kid I was struck by this contradiction.

Daniel Spock, Director of Minnesota History Center Museum. daniel.spock@mnhs.org

At our institution—Questacon—our main concern in considering potentially controversial topics...is their suitability for the primary age students who come in large numbers... The catch 22 is that we want to do more for teenagers and upwards, but some things that are very topical for them might not be deemed appropriate for others. Should we have a "16 and up" rated gallery? A lot of parents said they'd like to bring their kids there and use it as a way to start discussing the subject with them, but many wouldn't want their kids to see it without them. It's hard to find a balance between attracting new audiences / engaging youth / tackling controversial issues and keeping the centre "family friendly."

Em Blamey, Exhibit Developer, Questacon, Canberra, Australia. eblamey@questacon.edu.au

☀ *It's tough to imagine something that is intrinsically "unexhibitible." It's conversely easy to imagine content that would be ragingly inappropriate for specific audiences.... I was once told by a Lewis Carroll scholar that she would be happy to work on an Alice exhibition in a children's museum only if we included Carroll's photos of nude little girls. I understood it then, and still do, as fundamental disregard of the audience on her part.... Maybe it simply boils down to a respect for, and careful assessment of, the audience for the content in question. Robert Mapplethorpe's "fisting" photos ruffled few feathers in their*

Is obesity such an unexhibitable topic?

compelling debut at ICA in Philadelphia in 1982.... an appropriate audience and context. The same show landed the Director in jail in Cincinnati just a year or two later.... I have always suspected that there would have been ways to avoid the circus had a careful consideration of audience taken place....

Aaron Goldblatt, Exhibit Developer/Designer and Museum Planner, Metcalfe Architecture & Design. aarong@metarchdesign.com

Impact of Politics or Government Control

A number of responses referred to historic or current events that are so sensitive that the writers believe they are “unexhibitable.” Two of these are related to incidents of mass killings that some believe are still too painful in public memory, and two examples discuss the potential impact of governmental censorship in institutions that are funded by local or national authorities.

✻ *I believe the story of the Rape of Nanking would be an unexhibitable topic. On December 13, 1937 the Imperial Japanese Army entered the city of Nanking (the capital of China at the time) and occupied the city for several weeks...many members of the Japanese army raped, looted, and executed prisoners of war and civilians (an estimated 150,000-300,000).... There has been a lot of contention over Japan playing down the massacre in their school text books and referring to it as an “incident” while minimizing the violence and number killed during the occupation. 2012 marks the 75th anniversary of the massacre. I would like to see some institution do an exhibition on the Rape of Nanking but I think it may be considered too controversial...[in Japan], and I think American institutions would honestly be too afraid to work on a*

project like this. The topic of Nanking is discussed in China and there is actually a museum/memorial to the massacre in Nanjing (Nanking) today.

Submitted by a Chinese-American museum professional who does not wish to be named.

One of the authors contacted a colleague, Ayumu Ota, at the National Museum of Japanese History about the Rape of Nanking. Here is a reply, translated from the Japanese by Mr. Ota, from a curator at the museum:

✻ *...It is true that exhibiting controversial themes requires great care and sensitivity, because such exhibitions can spark adverse criticism and even, at times, protest. However, this does not mean these topics are unexhibitable. The important thing is to develop exhibitions that stimulate dialogue by paying attention to the many points of view inherent in exhibited topics rather than presenting only a view from within the museum.... The role of museums must be to collect the discussions that arise from these exhibitions and use them to inform further research. My museum is currently investigating how it could fill this role, and this research will inform the possibility of exhibiting controversial themes including the Nanjing Massacre.*

Kosuke Harayama, Assistant Professor, National Museum of Japanese History. harayama@rekihaku.ac.jp

✻ *One exhibit subject ...that so far has been considered too controversial in my region is the Columbine High School shootings. To my knowledge there has been no effort by any institution to start to pull together the material culture and surrounding story related*

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to this historic event..... Currently it is still too painful. It would be an enormous challenge to present this subject matter in an exhibition that would be perceived as sensitive and objective. No doubt it would serve as a lighting rod of attention and controversy. It begs many questions, one important one is of the role of museums in interpreting recent history and if that role might include some resolution of long standing emotions for the community in which it exists. I feel this exhibit will happen one day. It is only a matter of when and by whom.

Charles Counter, Counter@Colorado.EDU

Two postings discussed the display of politically sensitive information by a government agency, and questioned whether such an exhibition can get at the heart of the controversy. One says yes, and the other no—or at least not yet.

*When a government or institution tells its own history, sometimes its mistakes are overlooked. Without an honest examination of the past, the institution loses the ability to learn from mistakes and improve future efforts. Situated on the campus of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the NLM's new exhibition **Against the Odds: Making a Difference in Global Health** includes a section on AIDS in America during the 1980s....[telling] the story of activists who challenged the slow pace of research at the NIH. Some might consider this history unexhibitible, especially at this location. Instead, the exhibition presents a clear-eyed look at America when its government was slow to respond and the medical community struggled to cope with the public health crisis. Through their actions, activists changed the policies of the NIH and the course of history.*

Patricia Tuohy, Head, Exhibition Program,

National Library of Medicine, Bethesda MD.
patricia_tuohy@nlm.nih.gov

In January of this year I wrote an article about police museums for Britain's "Museums Journal" (2008). In it I concluded that, "when it comes to the question of policing today, it is clear that the traditional approach of an exhibition open to self-guided museum visitors does not work." By this I meant that museums dealing with policing and dependent on the support of local police forces are unable to address contentious contemporary issues.

Dr Stuart Burch, lecturer in Museum Studies at Nottingham Trent University, stuart.burch@ntu.ac.uk

Graphic Violence

Several postings discussed the display of violence inflicted on animals or humans.

Torture. In this case, animal torture. I ...wanted to mention a recent "controversy" in San Francisco around an art exhibition that had, as an element, videos of human-inflicted animal torture. It was the first time I have ever supported shutting down an exhibition because of inappropriate content. It was at the San Francisco Art Institute and officials closed the show and canceled a program because of threats of violence from PETA protesters. I then learned about an artist, Guillermo Vargas, who was accused of starving a live dog to death in a gallery—as part of "his art." ...Some people say it is a hoax—that the animal was only chained up for a couple of hours a day and fed at night—but others dispute this. ...The issue here, of course, is one's personal threshold. I am fully aware that live animals are put on display at zoos all the time, and that journalists photograph war,

Torture. In this case, animal torture.

killings, etc. and put those photos on display. And of course there are artists who self-mutilate as part of their art-making. And yes, I know about bullfighting, cockfighting, etc that are legitimate (but to me horrifying) "sports."

Yet, despite these precedents, I can't condone the idea of inflicting suffering (and death) on live innocent animals "on stage" as an exhibition practice...

Marjorie Schwarzer, Chair, Department of Museum Studies, John F. Kennedy University. schwarzer@jfku.edu

☀ ...exhibits related to child pornography and abuse. A difficult call on how to raise consciousness without slipping into voyeurism and the "rubberneck at the accident out the window" syndrome.

Judith Stewart-Abernathy, Arkansas Tech University Museum. jstewartabernathy@atu.edu

☀ Sometime ago I sat on a funding review panel for an exhibition of an artist whose large paintings showed nude women with knife cuts on their breasts. Some of the women had their breasts almost severed and hanging off. The paintings also included bloody knives some of which were stabbed into the women... The group tried to balance concerns about censorship with the right of people to view this work. Ultimately we could find no redeeming social reason for exhibiting this work whose only message seemed to be promoting violence against women. If you believe, as I do, that exhibitions should have some social value and spark productive discussion then such an exhibition is without merit.

Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Distinguished Professor and Director, Cooperstown Graduate Program. SORINGS@oneonta.edu

The Abstract and the Mysterious

There were a number of postings about the difficulty of exhibiting topics that are too complex, or abstract, or even linked with mysterious powers.

☀ Working with the history of technology and science I suggest the following: [topics that are] too large and complex [may be unexhibitible]. I am specifically thinking about large technological systems which smaller objects are just part of, for instance electrical systems. Also, a lot of today's technology is computer based and technically so complex that museum staff and museum audiences only seldom comprehend them and therefore tend to focus more on other more comprehensible aspects of a technology, for instance the social and political context of the object/technology.

Marie Ørstedholm, Head of Exhibition, The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology. Marie.Orstedholm@tekniskmuseum.no

☀ This answers the question literally: what is not possible to exhibit? For me, the defining characteristic of an exhibit is that it makes objects and phenomena accessible, thereby providing visitors with something to see or do.... It follows then that you cannot exhibit an idea or principle...as abstractions, they exist in the mind only, not in the physical world. Labels, of course, can introduce ideas, but writing something into a label is not the same as exhibiting it. This distinction is important if our goal is to have engaging exhibits that encourage visitor inquiry. For example, an exhibit of a ball rolling down a track, ...is rich with opportunities for observation and inquiry. But energy is not being exhibited. Many science centers, however, have labels implying that visitors should be able to see the changing

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potential and kinetic energy. Since this is not part of the direct experience, the result is more likely confusion than understanding.

Ted Ansbacher, Science Services. TedAns@aol.com, www.scienceservs.com

☀ *Whilst in the geology section [of the Natural History Museum in London over 20 years ago] I asked a curator if he had anything unusual that could be displayed and he showed me a small brown box. Before he could show the contents to me he went away to confer with another member of the department and by then had changed his mind about showing it. Later ...I asked him why the change of mind. He told me that the box had contained a ruby, that all previous owners had met grisly ends, and that it would be inappropriate to put it on display. ...Needless to say it was never displayed—even my suggestion of just displaying the unopened box with a label telling the story was turned down. Later the department even denied owning such a specimen.*

Mark Magidson, Exhibition Plus, London. m.magidson@virgin.net

Nothing is Unexhibitable

Finally, we heard from a number of colleagues who felt that, within reason, there is no unexhibitable topic:

☀ *Anything and everything is exhibitable. Certainly the value derived from exhibiting an object (or asset) involves thoughtful consideration towards interpretation, context, audience and purpose. Sometimes the purpose is to shock...If the exhibitor does not regard standards (museum, community, cultural, legal, etc.) then, yes, anything is exhibitable...but sometimes with negative consequence.*

Donald R. Rooney, Curator of Urban & Regional History, Atlanta History Center. drooney@atlantahistorycenter.com

☀ *Having seen the lynching exhibition at the Great Blacks in Wax Museum (Baltimore), I'm convinced that no subject or presentation method is absolutely taboo. If you haven't visited this museum, note that they offer a full-scale, detailed diorama of a lynching scene and reproduction artifacts ("souvenirs") from a lynching event. There is an ample, albeit simple, warning at the threshold. ...this institution gave me (the visitor) the honor of making my own decision whether to engage. I was empowered to explore the subject matter, not ashamed or embarrassed to.*

Matt Kirchman, MKirchman@objectIDEA.com

☀ *From my point of view there is nothing that is not exhibitable. ...I believe the true barrier is one of leadership. Leadership within an organization, and the concomitant leadership required within the community (i.e. Board of Directors). Is some of this stuff scary? You bet. But not unexhibitable.*

Jennifer Martin, President and CEO TELUS World of Science, Calgary. Jennifer.Martin@calgaryscience.ca

☀ *By identifying the audience, respecting and listening carefully to them early on, it seems that any content can be explored. That said, more courage may be required for some things than others. Maybe that's a good thing.*

Aaron Goldblatt, Exhibit Developer/Designer and Museum Planner, Metcalfe Architecture & Design. aarong@metarchdesign.com

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Conclusion: Is Anything Inherently Unexhibitable?

Yes—But Not Much

Within the assumptions discussed in the introduction, our online conversation indicates to us that the range of topics that are essentially unexhibitable is limited. As some have mentioned, ideas in and of themselves cannot be displayed directly and must rely on models, metaphors, illustrations, simulations, and other ways of transforming the intangible into two or three dimensions. It seems also that there are some topics that are so devoid of social capital and social value as to be inherently inappropriate. These include any that involve actual violence and exploitation in their execution, e.g. an exhibition on animal torture for which a dog is actually starved; or depictions of child abuse or child pornography, even if the intent is to condemn it. Another assumption about exhibitions appears to be that the creators stand at some distance from what is exhibited. In the case of child exploitation for example, it seems to us that it would be extremely difficult for a museum to create enough distance between the display of this material and the museum's stance against it. For most issues, however, factors other than the topic itself come into play when determining what is unexhibitable.

The Importance of Cultural Context and Cultural Ownership

The discussions on the human body indicate that it is not human remains as such that are unexhibitable. Rather it is their context, involving layers of history, cultural tradition, political and economic power, the voice of the displaying entity, and its connection both to the community of the dead as well as of the

living. When remains are displayed within a cultural community and accorded due respect, as with relics in shrines and churches, their exhibition is not only accepted but welcomed. In the case of *Body Worlds* great emphasis was placed on the fact that the bodies were acquired with the consent of willing donors. When, with regard to *Bodies: the Exhibition* it was discovered that the bodies came from those who did not give prior consent, controversy ensued. The issues raised by NAGPRA and by the indigenous peoples of many nations, whose burial sites were opened and emptied without their permission, reinforce the importance of community consent and of the relationship of the displaying institution to that community. The issue always returns to the question of whose story is being told, and who owns and controls the story.

The Impact of Place and Time

In the discussion of two exhibition topics—the “Rape of Nanking” (itself a name that presents a certain perspective) and the Columbine shootings, our correspondents believe these topics cannot be exhibited at this time and in the relevant communities. It is not that these exhibitions could not be executed technically—artifacts, photographs, documentation, and personal accounts of each incident abound. Moreover, other painful events within living memory, with the obvious example of the Holocaust, have been addressed in successful and engaging exhibition formats. We should mention that we did not receive any responses from various sites that are creating museums and memorials related to the events of September 11, 2001. Presumably they are struggling with just these kinds of concerns. The question arises—when is the “right” time to address the violence of one group against

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another? Could a courageous museum "create" the right time with an exhibition that would provide a healing and safe place in which to encounter and address the pain? Or would such a decision be foolhardy, given the potential for violence and danger both for the museum and its visitors?

...not in our stars but in ourselves...

Overall, the responses from the museum peers who answered our survey suggest that the designation of much that is unexhibitible lies within us—our exhibition skills, our administrations, and our boards—before it lies within the perceptions of our public.

In 1999 when the authors worked on "Too Hot to Handle," Maureen was unable to persuade the museum that she worked for at that time to host on its website the *Controversy Timeline* (Hess & McConnell 1999) contained in the publication. Years later, when Fiona Cameron of the University of Western Sydney, toured American museums as part of her research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites*, she asked if her project could host the timeline, and there it now resides. (<http://www.austmus.gov.au/amarc/contested/>)

In the symposium held in Sydney Australia in 2003 as part Fiona Cameron's project, Elaine Heumann Gurian lamented:

That said, museums and their staffs remain

mostly timid. When confronted with public debate, we find that the most threatened have retreated. Fiona Cameron is right to point out that those who feel most public, and whose funding is most controlled by politicians, are most vulnerable to the pressure put upon them by the funders. That does not surprise me. However when the same institutions are led by courageous people, they create programs, policies and exhibitions that have led the world to change (Gurian,2003).

Thank You for a Stimulating Conversation

We wish to thank all who responded to our query. When we began, we had no set plan for the end result, and as with all good conversations, the discussion went in a variety of directions that we never could have anticipated. One conclusion that we can draw from our very unscientific survey: the idea of a museum that addresses difficult and thought-provoking issues within its mission; confronts controversy with integrity; and refrains from self-censorship as it moves forward with future exhibition planning *remains an "operative ideal,"* i.e. a goal on which everyone agrees and continues to work, even if it is never fully realized. But it cannot remain only an ideal. Our colleagues' words encourage us to press on towards this goal, even though we may differ on the means to attain it, even though it may never be perfectly achieved. We encourage and applaud all of our colleagues who struggle daily with this ideal. ☀