



# Manifesto for the (r)Evolution of Museum Exhibitions

by Kathleen McLean

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**Photo credits:**

Manifesto #8. Advocate-Actor Xavier Carnegie performs the interactive presentation "Join the Student Sit-Ins" at the National Museum of American History. See [www.americanhistory.si.edu](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu) for schedule and more information.

Manifesto #9. Create wiki exhibitions—creative commons <http://www.flickr.com/photos/narcisonarcosis/2582522044/> ><a rel="cc:attributionURL".

Manifesto #12. Collaborate with others—photo by Kelsey Lynn & Pacific Lutheran University.

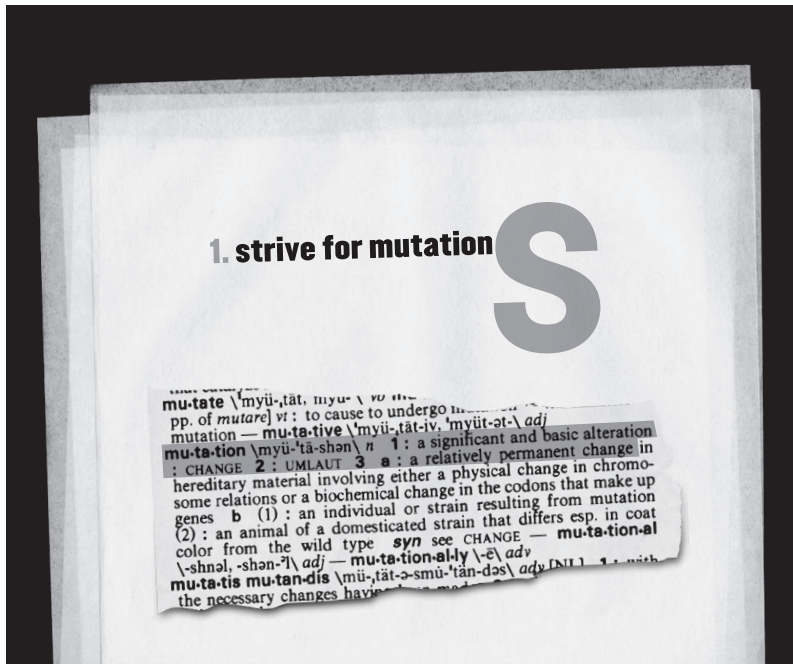
Manifesto #14. Join the commons—blosphere image by Matthew Hurst.

Graphic design by Dave Gottwald

**M**any readers may be aware of Kathy McLean's Manifesto through conference or web presentations. In light of this issue's theme, "Exhibition Frictions," we thought it might be interesting to ask Kathy if the Manifesto has received any resistance from colleagues. We're sure she has had much positive feedback, but the comments below reveal why positive response may not always be followed by actual change. Following are verbatim comments that Kathy has received either in person or in writing for each of her suggestions for (r)evolution in the creation of museum exhibitions. All of us should ask ourselves, "Do these sound familiar?" *The Editor.*



☹ "We don't need a manifesto, we need poetry."



Mutations create variation in the gene pool. The less favorable mutations tend to disappear through natural selection, while more favorable ones tend to accumulate—this is called evolution.

☹️ "Mutations are too scary—they create monsters."



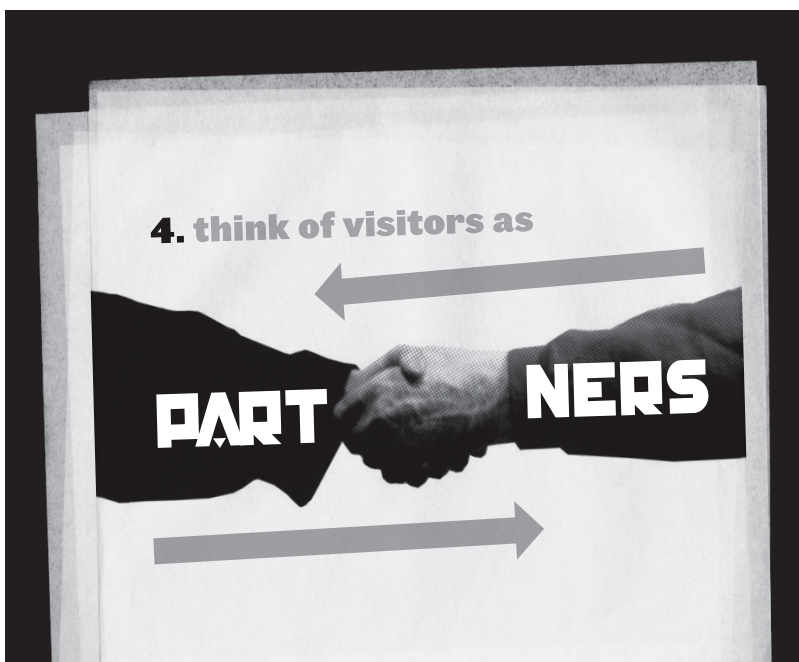
We will keep things fresh. Besides, there is no such thing as permanence.

☹️ "We don't have the resources to change things. We need to be able to create something that will be sturdy enough to stand alone and last for a number of years."



Stay open late, or for 24 hours. Ask visitors to vote on their favorite exhibits. Test a new hypothesis. Avoid phrases like “We don’t do that here.”

☹️ *"It's easy to say 'be experimental.' Yeah, thanks. But that's a lot of money you're putting at risk, a lot of people who might get offended, a lot of wasted effort and time that you can't afford, etc. There are reasons why museums are conservative. It's not just inertia and a lack of imagination."*



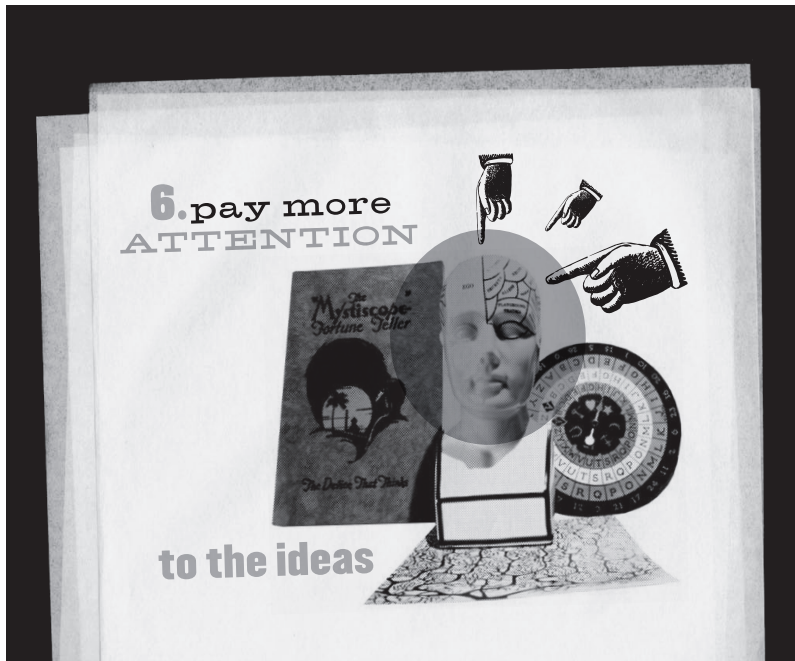
We must trust our visitors, and engage in what Web 2.0 proponents call “radical trust.”

☹️ *"We are the experts. Visitors don't know what they want or what they might be interested in."*



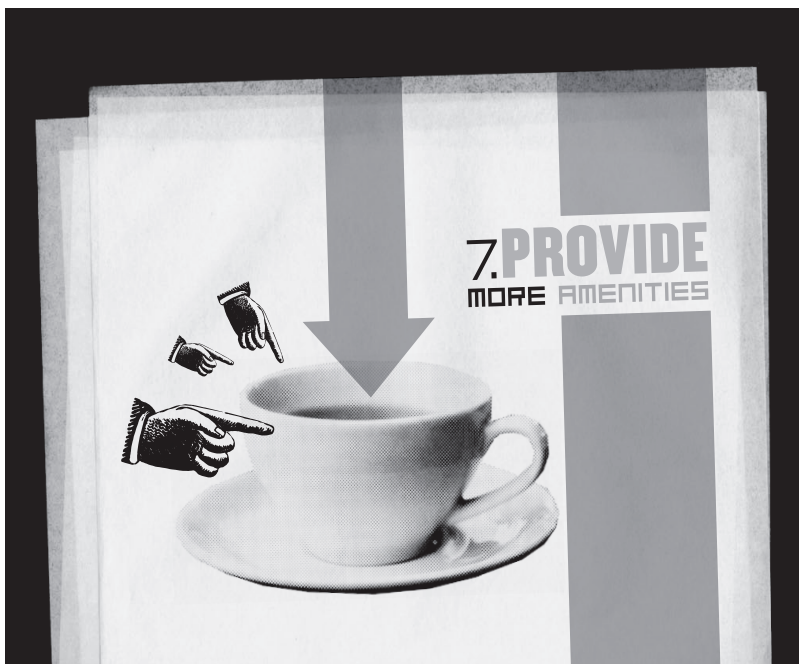
Both our imaginations, and our visitors'. We will ask questions and embrace the incomplete.

☹️ "We are the experts. Our purpose is to provide information and answer visitors' questions, even before they ask them."



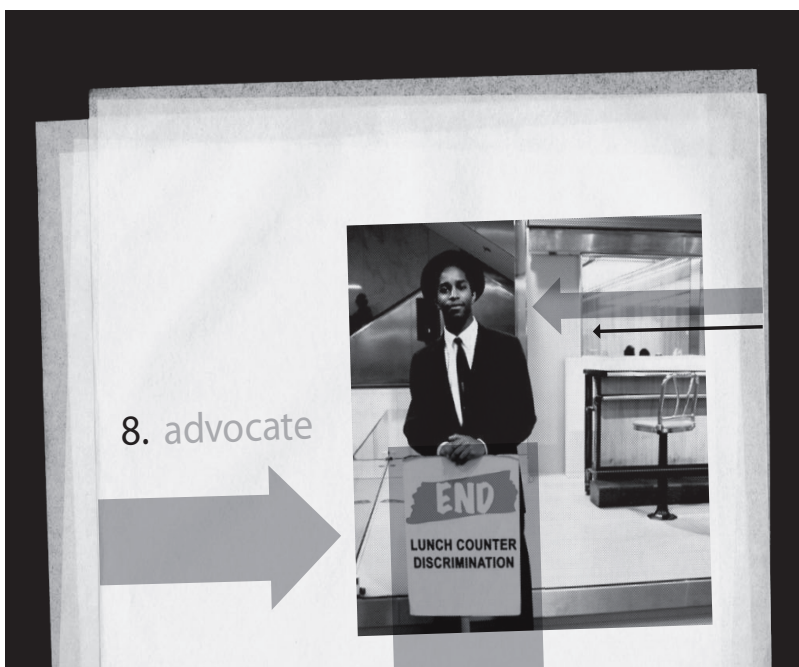
than the furniture, bricks, and mortar.

☹️ "We can't get funding for the ideas. Donors want to put their names on something tangible."



We will incorporate a coffee bar or lounge into our next exhibition.  
We will play music and include flower arrangements.

☹️ *"These amenities endanger the objects. And besides, museums are not lounges."*



We will state what we believe up front and include our photos and sign our names.

☹️ *"Museum should remain neutral and staff should remain behind the scenes. Museums are about truth, not opinion."*



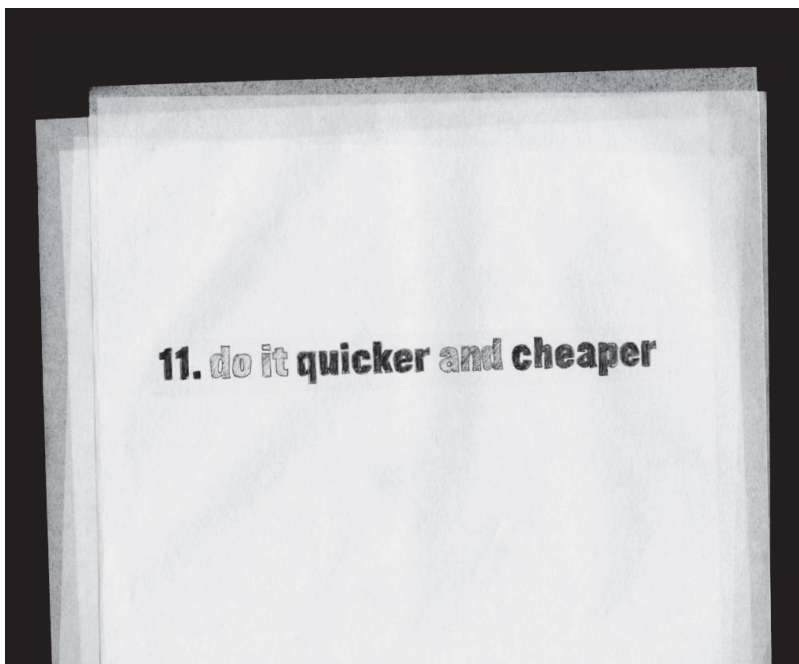
We will give our visitors the tools to design their own exhibition in our spaces.

☹️ "Visitors don't know how to design exhibitions."



Remember, small really can be beautiful.

☹️ "We need media attention, and the media is not attracted to 'small.'"



We won't invest so much time and money that we lose our sense of adventure.

☹️ *"People won't take us seriously if our exhibits look cheap."*



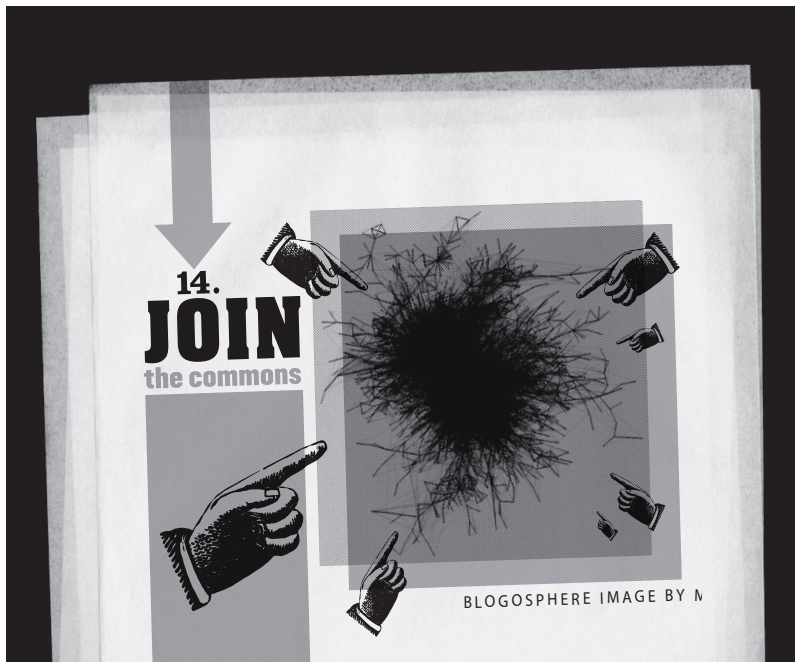
No matter how difficult it is.

☹️ *"Collaboration is simply a strategy, and not always the best one to get what you want."*



We will think of our next exhibition as a new cocktail. We'll cross boundaries and loosen up.

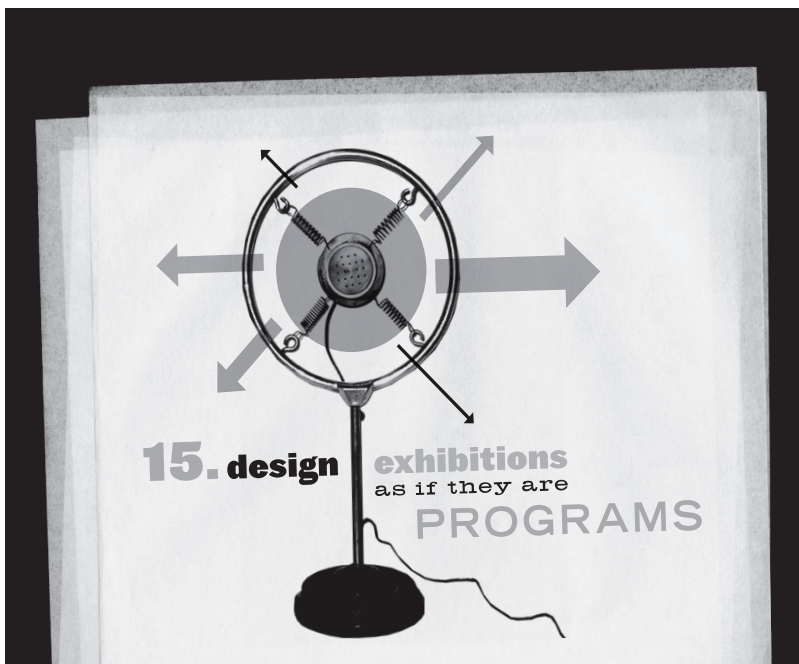
☹️ "This makes no sense at all."



We will learn about and from what others have done. We stand on the shoulders of colleagues. We won't be afraid of criticism.

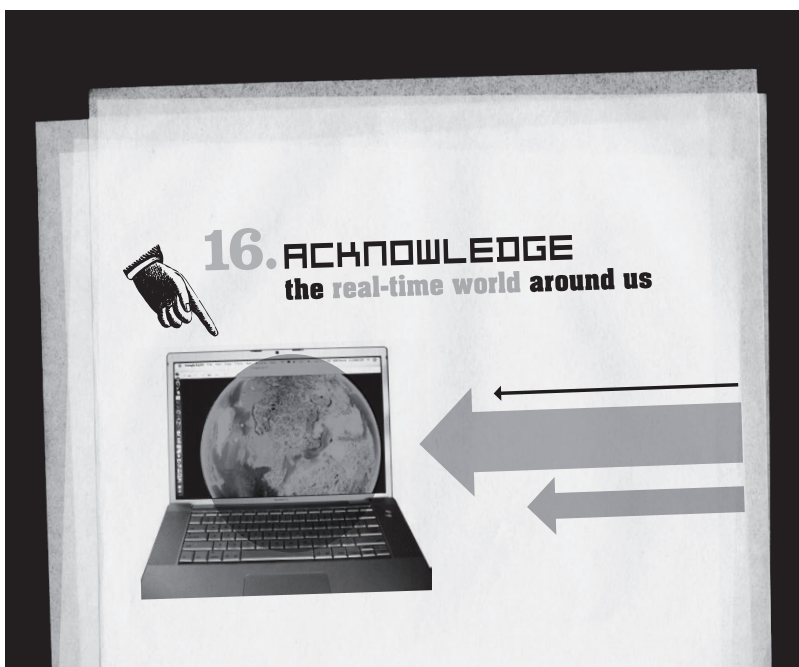
☹️ "We came up with these ideas on our own—who cares what others have done in the past? And critics are really mean."





Temporal and ephemeral programs provide immediate audience feedback.

☹️ "We can't do anything about the feedback, so why bother? We don't have the time or money to change things, even if we wanted to."



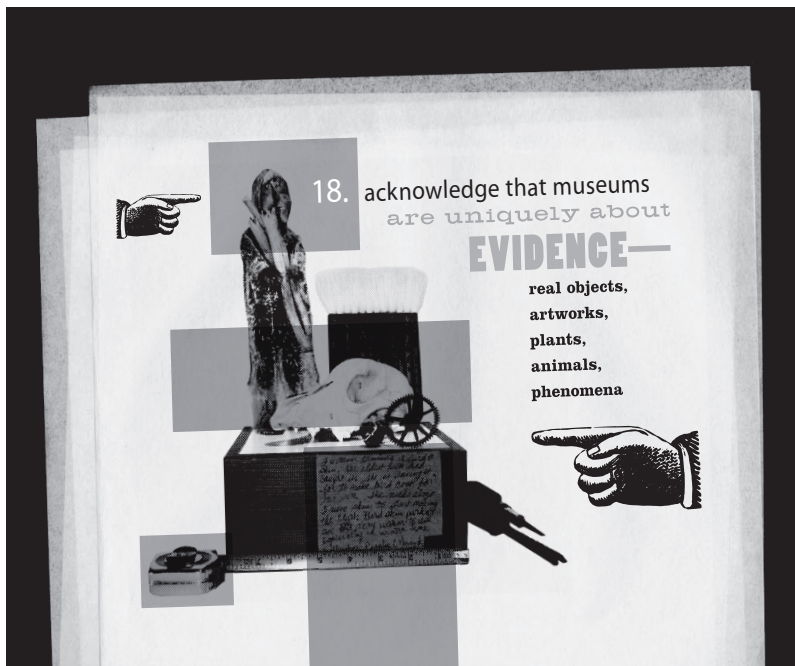
Museums don't exist in a vacuum. We will bring the world—in real time—into our exhibitions.

☹️ "Museums should be an escape from the real world."



Not only in terms of the materials we use or the size of our carbon footprints. We will think sustainably about the emotional and creative energy of staff, ongoing engagement of our audiences, and the ability of our organizations to thrive.

☹️ "Yeah, yeah, but that's expensive, and we don't have the money to work like that."



The display of tangible evidence is what makes museums different than other civic organizations.

☹️ "That's the old world. Museums are now about social participation. A focus on objects is elitist."



Add your own. ✨

☹️ "I'm too busy."