

# Winners of the 27th Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition

by Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt

Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt is the owner of I D Museum Services and NAME's past Program Co-Chair. She may be contacted at [rita@idmuseumservices.com](mailto:rita@idmuseumservices.com).

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please go to the NAME page on Facebook or send us a tweet @NAMExhibitions.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition is the American Alliance of Museums' premier venue for honoring achievement in one of the major functions of the museum field—the creation of exhibitions. The competition recognizes exhibitions for overall excellence or for specific innovative techniques that move our field forward. AAM received 37 entries for this year's competition. Our four winners received Excellence in Exhibition Competition Awards for their ability to embrace a key aspect of exhibition development and execute it boldly. In addition, the competition awarded three honorable mentions this year: to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts for *FreePort [No. 007]: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot*; Boston City Archives in Massachusetts for *Dear Boston: Messages from the Marathon*; and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for *The Big Graph*.

## **Interstitial Area Installations, National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New York City, New York**

*Interstitial Area Installations* opened on May 21, 2014 as part of the public opening of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. The permanent exhibition is comprised of a set of repatriated artifacts, archaeological remnants of the World Trade Center buildings, art tributes, and installations of remembrances and hope (figs. 1 & 2). Its 80,000 square feet (7,432.24m<sup>2</sup>) of space surrounds the *historical exhibition* of the museum—dedicated to telling the story of 9/11—and the *memorial exhibition*, created to honor the victims of the attacks. The *Interstitial Area Installations* serves to connect the historical and memorial galleries, while providing a continuous experiential journey through the World Trade Center site. The visitor's journey starts at the street level, then descends slowly down seven stories underground to the foundation level.

Since nearly everyone visiting the museum had personal, intense emotions, and complex (and sometimes conflicting) narratives around 9/11, the exhibition created multiple touch points and narratives in order for visitors to connect their personal experiences with those in the exhibition. First-person narratives are favored over a "museum voice." In the media installation "We Remember," an audio collage of overlapping memories from visitors across the world lets visitors listen to the voices of people describing where they were, how they heard, who they called, and what they felt on September 11, 2001. Later visitors have an opportunity to become part of this collective memory by adding their own



Fig. 1. *Interstitial Area Installations* includes many objects from the 9/11 attacks. Here a section of the antenna from the North Tower, an elevator motor, and a crushed fire truck are presented with minimal interpretation. This presentation allows visitors to witness the scale of destruction without graphic material that might otherwise be overwhelming. Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum



Fig. 2. Touchscreens near the “last column” artifact let visitors zoom in on any portion of the 37-foot (11.28m) piece of steel. By doing so, they can learn about a particular story behind an affixed memento or written tribute. In addition, digital interfaces allow visitors to explore objects in more depth, research and develop new stories, and add them to the archive of materials available for the visitor experience. Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum



Fig. 3. Visitors entering Our Living Languages are welcomed by a “Language Forest.” Here they can explore and listen to recorded greetings in 34 language groups. Each of the seven language families is represented by a color that is keyed to a large interactive map on the other side of the Forest. Photo by Shane Lighter, Royal BC Museum, Victoria, Canada

9/11 reflections. A variety of tribute artworks—including quilts, children’s paintings, sculptures, and other unique items created by both professional and amateur artists—are on rotating display. The pieces serve as entry points by which visitors can reflect on the significance of the event, remember and honor those lost, and be comforted. The exhibition itself serves as a platform for storytelling, in which visitors are encouraged to share their own experiences, and the galleries become places to gather the reflections of all—becoming a living, collective act of memory.

By providing visitors multiple ways to enter the story, the space allows visitors to powerfully engage with a vividly traumatic event without being overwhelmed, and enables them to bear witness in a safe space. The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to award this exhibition because of its ability to help process the events and experiences of 9/11 while demonstrating how collections can be utilized in an emotionally intense experience.

***Our Living Languages: First Peoples’ Voices in British Columbia, Royal BC Museum, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada***

The 3,400-square foot (315.87m<sup>2</sup>) permanent exhibition, *Our Living Languages: First Peoples’ Voices* opened on June 21, 2014. The exhibition

was co-produced by the Royal BC Museum and the First People’s Cultural Council, an Aboriginal-run group with a mandate to support the revitalization of First Nations arts, cultures, and languages. The exhibition offers new perspectives on First Nations languages, reasons for their decline, and efforts to bring these languages back into culture.

The exhibition’s advisory group articulated five major themes for the exhibition: Diversity, Disruption, Resilience, What We are Doing, and Call to Action. These themes became the exhibition’s narrative arc and main exhibition areas. In “Diversity,” visitors enter into a “Language Forest” where they can listen to recordings and learn about the rich diversity of 34 First Peoples’ language groups (fig. 3). “Disruption” includes powerful archival images that illustrate the loss of land, people, and cultural identity, which contributed to the destructive historical pressure on First Nations languages in British Columbia. An immersive theatre features the voices and stories of those who are connected with their native languages, and what they are doing to save them. Throughout

“Disruption” includes powerful archival images that illustrate the loss of land, people, and cultural identity, which contributed to the destructive historical pressure on First Nations languages in British Columbia.



Fig. 4. In the “Cradle of Language” theatre, intended as a counterpoint to the “Disruption” area, visitors can sit in their own cozy cradleboard and enjoy a First Nation language experience, in which they are comforted by the sounds of a mother’s lullabies, grandmothers chatting over tea, and childhood songs. Photo by Shane Lighter, Royal BC Museum, Victoria, Canada

The exhibition’s primary goal was to connect with a general audience with limited exposure to contemporary art—people who felt that contemporary art “wasn’t for them.”

the space, the exhibition illustrates how language structures our culture, society, values, concepts, and a sense of place (fig. 4). Thus, a loss of language is much more more than a loss of dialect. Finally, the last area of the exhibition invites visitors to support language revitalization and invites visitors to become language champions.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition as a winner because the museum worked in true partnership with the subject’s constituents. In addition, the judges noted that the exhibition contained many thoughtful accessibility components, particularly for auditory experiences.

**State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas** State of the Art, a 19,000-square foot (176.52m<sup>2</sup>) temporary exhibition, opened to the public on September 13, 2014 and closed on January 19, 2015. The exhibition’s primary goal was to connect with a general audience with limited

## Jonathan Schipper

b. 1973 Studio in Brooklyn, NY



### Slow Room

2014

Household objects and furniture, cables, pulley, and electric motor

Courtesy of the artist and Plerogi Gallery

This is no ordinary living room. Each component is affixed to a cable leading to a hole in the wall. During the exhibition, a mechanism slowly drags each object toward the hole, both amassing and destroying them in the process. Snap a picture. Visit again. See what changes.

<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, no matter how sure anybody is about where we came from or where we’re going, it’s still a mystery. *Slow Room* focuses not only on the end but on that process of being moved from one state to another.<sup>99</sup>

JONATHAN SCHIPPER

SEPTEMBER 13, 2014



Visit [StateoftheArt.CrystalBridges.org](http://StateoftheArt.CrystalBridges.org) to view *Slow Room* in motion

Fig. 5. “Slow Room,” an installation in State of the Art, with an accompanying label. Artwork featured quotes from the artist as well as additional context to help visitors interpret the exhibition. Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

exposure to contemporary art—people who felt that contemporary art “wasn’t for them.” The secondary goal was to engage with audiences who were intrigued by contemporary art, but were not necessarily well versed in it.

These goals were generated by Crystal Bridges’ discussions with visitors, which revealed that many felt that contemporary art lacked the virtuosity they perceive in historic works, did not relate to current issues, and did not easily convey an artist’s intent. *State of the Art* attempted to overcome these disconnects by showcasing the artist’s expertise,





Fig. 6. Digital labels (iPads) paired with several works offer visitors the opportunity to interact and explore the art in greater depth. Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

highlighting the artist's voice, and teasing out relevance to our times. Museum staff spent a year meeting with nearly 1,000 artists to see their work and hear their stories. The resulting exhibition featured 102 artists with 227 artworks on display, each of which exemplified technical virtuosity, addressed a contemporary issue, and shared a compelling story (fig. 5). Digital iPads augmented physical labels, encouraged visitors to vote on which emotion an artwork evoked for them, and provided a deeper dive into the interpretive narrative (fig. 6). A brochure titled *Collections Connections* paired contemporary artworks with others in the permanent collection. A free accompanying audio tour and app featured videos of artists discussing their work.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award because of innovative aspects of collaborating with a large number of living artists. Additionally, the judges felt that the level of formative research was commendable, particularly in how it led to developing strategies to overcome visitors' obstacles, thus building an audience for contemporary/modern art in a deep, thoughtful manner.

### ***Your Brain*, The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

*Your Brain* is a permanent, 8,500-square foot exhibition that opened on June 14, 2014. With a target audience of eight- to thirteen-year olds and their families, the exhibition's educational goal is to help visitors understand that their brain is constantly changing, signaling, and creating their unique world. The exhibition uses more than 70 interactives, focused on experiential phenomena, to help visitors discover just how amazing their own brains are. The exhibition purposefully chose not to focus on brain structure (i.e. the parts of the brain), since front-end testing showed that people were confused by the unintuitive labeling. Instead, it focuses on the broad functioning of the brain. The exhibition also did not address brain diseases and disorders, but instead created complementary programming on it, as research indicated that visitors preferred to have conversations around these potentially difficult topics.

Unlike many science exhibitions, *Your Brain* has a linear flow and narrative to scaffold content as visitors journey through the space. A bright, engaging, and accessible introduction gallery

The exhibition uses more than 70 interactives, focused on experiential phenomena, to help visitors discover just how amazing their own brains are.



Fig. 7. The inspiration for “Neural Climb” in *Your Brain* comes from the iconic walk through *Giant Heart*, also at the Franklin Institute. *Neural Climb* is a multisensory experience using light, motion, sound, and touch to immerse visitors in brain activity. Photo by Darryl Moran

Each of the winners tackled a potentially challenging issue—related to content, process, and/or audience—and leveraged it to create an engaging exhibition experience.

welcomes and orients guests before they move deeper into the brain and the exhibition, exploring brain structure, function, and communication. Visitors then step through a “neural climb” designed to evoke the active, dynamic signaling inside the brain (fig. 7); afterwards they explore neuron structure and function (fig. 8) and move through a street scene to learn how their brain processes the world around them. The final two galleries let visitors first see how their brain is changed by everyday experiences they have each day; and then gives them a better understanding how brain science is evolving rapidly.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to give an award to *Your Brain* because of its ability to successfully take a very dense subject matter and make it relatable to the visitor through an effective use of exhibit elements and a balanced use of interactive and touch applications.

### Conclusion

Each of the winners tackled a potentially challenging issue—related to content,

process, and/or audience—and leveraged it to create an engaging exhibition experience. The creators of *Interstitial Area Installations* understood that their subject matter was extremely personal and often emotionally intense, so created a platform for conversation that honored multiple viewpoints and feelings. Creating an exhibition about another culture can be difficult without buy-in from that community. *Our Living Languages* was co-created with a group made up of those critical community voices. Finally, while contemporary art and neuroscience are two subjects that are unfamiliar to many visitors, *State of the Art* and *Your Brain* found ways to connect and engage with visitors by recognizing that their subject matter needed appropriate content scaffolding.

By acknowledging potential snares associated with their project, each of our winners pushed forward an element of exhibit development or design that resulted in an exhibition worthy of recognition. Congratulations to this year’s winners! ✨



Fig. 8. After creating an emotional connection to the dynamic activity of the brain in Neural Climb, visitors begin to learn more about neurons. Here, a large, touchtable interactive allows groups to work together to create neurons, connect them, and send signals. Photo by Jeff Fusco

---

## About the Competition

The Excellence in Exhibition competition is sponsored by four of AAM's professional networks: research and evaluation, curation, education, and exhibitions. Stacey Swigart (CARE) served as this year's competition coordinator. The 2015 judges were David Kennedy, Curator of Collections, Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center (CurCom); Juli Goss, Research Associate, Museum of Science, Boston (CARE); Niki Ciccotelli Stewart, Chief Engagement Officer, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art\* (EdCOM); and Doug Simpson, Associate Principal, Cambridge Seven Associates (NAME).

\*If during the adjudication process there is a conflict of interest between judges and a specific entry (i.e. a judge consulting on an exhibit/judge is a client of an institution with an exhibit/judge working at a submitting institution, etc.), the affected judge recuses him or herself from the process and abstains from voting on the exhibition under consideration.