



# Pop Up Museums:

## Participant-Created Ephemeral Exhibitions

by Nora Grant

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The term “pop-up” has become an international buzzword used to describe ephemeral, experimental projects—from pop-up restaurants to pop-up boutiques—but a pop-up *museum* is still puzzling: how can you take something as substantial and precious as a museum and add a pop-up twist? What happens when you do?

Various pop-up museums or pop-up exhibitions have surfaced in the last few years. The Pop-Up Museum of Queer History in New York refers to itself as “a grassroots organization that transforms spaces into temporary installations dedicated to celebrating the rich, long, and largely unknown histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.”<sup>1</sup> New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art presented a two-week “pop-up exhibition” during the Super Bowl that celebrated football history with vintage trading cards from the Met’s collection.<sup>2</sup> The San Francisco Mobile Museum calls itself an “experiment” and collaborates with art institutions and communities to “play with short-run exhibits that appear in store fronts, parks, and social spaces.”<sup>3</sup> A common theme amongst these pop-up experiences is ephemerality, and, for the Pop-Up Museum of Queer History and the SF Mobile Museum, mobility. With all three, content is primarily curated by staff from the respective organization, and in the case of the Met, content came from the museum’s collection.

At the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History (MAH), we host “pop up museums” (we do not hyphenate the name) that are both ephemeral and mobile; however, content comes from participants rather than museum staff or

museum collections. Part exhibition, part program, part story-potluck, our pop up museums offer a hybrid experience that allow us to facilitate conversations around community issues and personal stories. How does this work? Imagine a potluck in which, instead of a dish, everyone brings an object and/or story to share with others. We collaborate with community partners and choose the pop up museum’s theme and venue together. We then invite people to bring something on-topic to share.

Typically, our pop up museums occur at a partner’s site, simultaneously activating the location with a museum experience and grounding the exhibition in a relevant setting. For example, we partnered with local historian Geoffrey Dunn to have a pop up museum on “Chinatown is in the Heart” in September 2013. The pop up museum took place at what was once the heart of Chinatown (Santa Cruz no longer has a Chinatown), and is now the parking lot of Bay Federal Credit Union. People shared family relics and stories from their experiences in the former Chinatown (fig. 1). Partnering with organizations is critical to our planning process because it allows us to learn about different groups in our community, reach new audiences, and have help promoting and staffing the event.

Our pop up museum setup is simple: we set out folding tables, signs, and frames so that when people show up, they can write a label for their object and leave it on display. We spread black tablecloths over the tables to make objects stand out and have small foam pieces to prop-up 2D works (fig. 2). The museum lasts for a few hours on one day, with people coming



Fig. 1. Pop up museum on “Chinatown is in the Heart” in the parking lot of Bay Federal Credit Union in 2013. Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History



Fig. 2. Here is an example of our setup with black tablecloths and frames at a pop up museum we held at the Santa Cruz Public Library on the theme of “Altered Books” in 2013. Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History

and going as they please. We favor this “potluck approach” (meaning everyone can bring something to share) because it:

- empowers people to share meaningful stories and objects with one another;
- enables the museum to step outside its physical confines, and collaborate with community partners who wouldn’t ordinarily come to our programs;
- and allows us to experiment with themes, content, and collaborations in an intimate yet short-lived, simple way.

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We adopted our format from Michelle DelCarlo’s Pop-Up Museum project, which she developed in 2011 while attending a museology graduate program at the University of Washington. DelCarlo’s project was a traveling community event, and her goal was to “create conversation between people of all ages and walks of life.”<sup>4</sup> In 2012, DelCarlo held a pop-up museum on “Love” at the MAH, which sparked the development of our pop up museum project. With DelCarlo’s permission, and support from the James Irvine Foundation, we were able to expand upon DelCarlo’s project to create a sustainable

pop up museum program, website, and how-to organizer’s kit.

The kit, which anyone can download for free on our website ([www.popupmuseum.org](http://www.popupmuseum.org)), was our way of offering global support for anyone interested in having a pop up museum. It offers advice on choosing a strong theme, working with a collaborator, and designing a portable structure, as well as anecdotal tips for implementation. Designing a pop up museum structure that was portable, replicable by anyone, could work in diverse venues, and was appealing enough to attract a broad spectrum of participants was not easy. We experimented with different set-up designs and language to realize a structure that satisfied these objectives. Having many pop up museums and observing what did and didn’t work enabled us to learn more about our community while providing practical, real-life content for the organizer’s kit. While the kit offers a pragmatic, step-by-step guide for organizing pop up museums, I want to share some of the more unexpected take-aways I’ve learned through the process of having more than 40 pop up museums in Santa Cruz County.

**The Name “Museum” Sparks Confusion—But Also Meaningful Conversations.** Technically, the pop

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Fig 3. Pop up museum on “Growth” at the University of California Santa Cruz Arboretum in 2013. Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History

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up museum functions as a temporary exhibition, but by calling it a “museum” the project encourages people to rethink museum spaces and experiences. In 2012, we surveyed visitors anonymously at a pop up museum on the theme of “Homemade,” where people could bring in something homemade to share with others. During the event, one participant commented, “People were willing to talk about what they made, how and why. And it can be loud, unlike museums. I think of museums as . . . you can’t touch anything, you can’t be noisy. It’s nice how you can touch anything. It was casual, but official-feeling at the same time.” This participant’s comment suggests a discomfort with museum spaces and with the inability to touch exhibited content. The pop up museum offers a hands-on experience in which people can touch the objects and speak directly with the exhibitor. We all have interesting things, but people rarely share them with strangers or display them in a museum context. Calling it a “pop up exhibition” or a “pop up show” would describe the physical structure, but it wouldn’t ignite as much conversation about the conceptual space of a museum. We want the project to activate museum space both physically and conceptually.

### Pop Up Museums Work Best Outside of a Museum.

The pop up museum exists within a paradox: it’s a museum outside of a museum, a room without walls. It’s appealing to plan a pop up museum in conjunction with a museum exhibition or event, but people are rightfully confused about a pop up museum taking place inside a museum. Like a café inside a restaurant, a museum inside a museum feels redundant rather than complementary. When framed by a larger museum, the pop up museum loses its individual vibrancy, as it can’t be decontextualized from preexisting notions about the host institution. It also defies the point of its mobility. When popping up in nontraditional exhibitory spaces, you have the unique potential to physically unite location and theme. For example, we held a pop up museum on “Growth” at an arboretum. People were able to bring objects they had grown themselves or something that symbolized their ideas of growth. Situated amongst green hills, flowers, and fresh air, the context—with all its sounds and textures—became part of the exhibition (fig. 3).

### Empty Frames Invite Public Curation.

When we first started hosting pop up museums, we displayed objects on tables with black tablecloths. The aesthetic, though, felt “flat.” So I bought different shapes and sizes of vintage frames from a nearby thrift store to accommodate various objects. The frames are affordable, so anyone can replicate this set up. They not only enhance the aesthetic of the black tablecloths, but they also visually communicate that the pop up museum serves as an open framework for the participants’ narratives. An empty table looks lonely, but an empty frame looks like an invitation. People can choose



Fig. 4. Here is an example of an object being displayed at the pop up museum on “Altered Books” at the Santa Cruz Downtown Library in 2013. Though the altered book is fragile, the exhibitor still felt comfortable displaying it in an open, non-traditional frame. Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History

which frame they want and design their own display within the communal show. Fortunately, we’ve never experienced someone bringing anything harmful. We don’t filter the content before the event, but every pop up has staff available for questions or problems that might arise. The empty frames also enable touching, while still recognizing the given object as one of value and significance. The touch-ability can discourage some participants from showing rare or fragile objects, a challenge inherent in our casual format. We offer “do not touch” signs, and encourage people to stay close to their object(s) if they are worried about

something being damaged, but most people are excited to share things with people in tactile ways (fig. 4).

**Exhibiting Museum and Community Content Together Bridges Institutional and Personal Narratives.**

One of the reasons we wanted to develop the pop up museum was to question the idea that museums are “the authority on what is and what’s not valuable.” We thought a do-it-yourself structure for museum making would inspire non-museum professionals to create autonomous exhibitions and value systems. We were somewhat surprised to learn that pop

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>The Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, accessed December 2014, <http://www.queermuseum.com>.

<sup>2</sup>“NYC’s Met museum shows off football trading cards,” published January 2014, accessed January 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/14/nycs-met-museum-shows-off-football-trading-cards/?page=all>.

<sup>3</sup>SF Mobile Museum, accessed December 2014, <http://www.sfmobilemuseum.org>.

<sup>4</sup>“Case Study of the Pop Up Museum,” ExhibitFiles, published June 20, 2012, accessed January 2015, [http://www.exhibitfiles.org/the\\_popup\\_museum](http://www.exhibitfiles.org/the_popup_museum).

up museums were most compelling when we exhibited objects from MAH’s collection alongside individuals’ objects. This juxtaposition bridges institutional and community-created content, and by sharing the same space, you’re illustrating how a personal object can have the same value as a museum object. People have diverse views about, and diverse relationships to, museums, but I noticed that collaborators and participants were more attracted to having a pop up museum in partnership with the MAH than throwing one on their own. This is not to say that everyone loves the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, or that everyone sees our pop up museum as a museum, but it suggests that partnering with the MAH was validating for some people.

**Serial Pop Up Museums Sustain**

**Interest.** Pop up museums are ephemeral, and, because of their brevity, it can be difficult to maintain and sustain momentum for each one. In the fall of 2013, we experimented with serial pop up museums that were thematically tied to an exhibition. Held in collaboration with six different partners, taking place

in six different locations, and occurring on consecutive Saturdays, each pop up expanded the overarching theme of the exhibition. Unlike other pop up museums that live for one day, serial pop up museums have the advantage of reaching a larger audience and encouraging repeat participation.

We’ve been popping up around Santa Cruz County for over a year now, and have had diverse pop up museums and partnerships. The pop up museum is a fill-in-the-blanks space that prioritizes conversation over objects. Call it relational aesthetics, potluck, exhibition, museum, or non-museum—its changeability is its charm. We don’t know exactly how, or where, or with whom it will pop up. Like the blank labels or empty frames we leave out on the table, we hope pop up museums will continue to invite and support public conversation, personal empowerment, and open-ended narratives.

Editor’s note: This article originated from a blog post written by Nora Grant on June 11, 2014 for MAH Executive Director Nina Simon’s blog, “Museum 2.0.” ✨