



# In a Flash:

## Pop-up Displays at The New York Public Library

by *Kailen Rogers*

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Sometimes it takes a line of exuberant visitors snaking out the door to raise the question: do we have a hit idea on our hands?

For three days in July 2013, The New York Public Library (NYPL) exhibited its copy of the Declaration of Independence—written in Thomas Jefferson’s hand—alongside its original copy of the Bill of Rights. The documents were on public display together for the first time in decades. Over the course of the three days, 16,288 visitors viewed them, many after waiting in line for more than an hour (fig. 1). Media coverage was extensive, and on the final day the Library extended its hours to accommodate the demand it generated.

In response to the success of this venture, NYPL’s exhibitions program and communications department began a joint series of small pop-up presentations. These “flash displays” related the Library’s collection strengths to current events and differed dramatically from the more typical major exhibitions that have to be planned years in advance. The flash displays provide new opportunities to generate attention across both social media and traditional media platforms and underscore the Library’s continued relevance to the general public. With sponsorship by TD Bank, we presented six displays, each running for two to four weeks, in the first year of the pop-up project.

### Launching a New Approach

The mandate of the Library’s exhibitions program in the landmark Stephen A. Schwarzman Building (the largest of NYPL’s libraries) is to advance learning

while broadening public access to, and awareness of, the Library’s expansive collections. Since 2011, the annual exhibition schedule at the Schwarzman Building has featured one major exhibition in the main, 6,400-square-foot gallery, two exhibitions in the adjacent, 500-square-foot gallery, and two print and photography exhibitions in corridors of the special collections on the third floor. The number of objects in each ranges from 60 to 600, depending on the gallery and the particular materials shown. Recent exhibitions include *Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, filled with centuries of religious treasures from the Abrahamic traditions; *Lunch Hour NYC*, which featured a gleaming wall of restored Automat machines; *Charles Dickens: The Key to Character*, presented as a cabinet of curiosities (a perfect setting for Dickens’s ivory letter opener featuring the paw of his beloved cat, Bob); and *Play Things*, highlighting works of



Fig. 1. The line of visitors waiting to view the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights in July 2013. Courtesy of Jonathan Blanc/The New York Public Library



Fig. 2. An installation photograph from Charles Dickens: The Key to Character, showing the intricate custom environment constructed for the exhibition, typical of many installations at The New York Public Library. Courtesy of Herb Scherr/The New York Public Library

art that trick, tease, and whimsically engage viewers.

All of these projects had big budgets, used outside exhibition designers, featured nuanced narratives and immersive built environments, and took years of planning (fig. 2). The flash displays, in contrast, are modest endeavors, each housed in a single case in the McGraw Rotunda, a large, central space. Some are planned a few months in advance, such as those created for the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day, or for *A Raisin in the Sun*—coinciding with Black History Month and the play’s Broadway revival (fig. 3). Others, such as tributes to anti-apartheid revolutionary and politician Nelson Mandela and writer Maya Angelou, come together in a matter of hours.

Memorials to recently deceased luminaries will continue to be a major component of the initiative, and one goal is to identify ahead of time collection items that would be suitable for future tributes to those whose lives have been filled with accomplishments. Beyond these flash memorials, the Library also strives to address current topics with the program, but due to the nature of the collections any contemporary themes must link to a deeper history. Few divisions beyond the periodicals, print, and photography collections have strong holdings in the very new.



Fig. 3. The Raisin in the Sun flash display in the Schwarzman Building’s McGraw Rotunda. Courtesy of Jonathan Blanc/The New York Public Library

The inaugural flash venture, an example of a display with a (relatively) long lead time, was organized to mark the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. It was anchored by a condolence note on White House stationery that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (the public intellectual who was assistant and speechwriter to J. F. K.) wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy the day her husband was murdered in Dallas. Everything for the display was carefully planned out in



Fig. 4. Visitors responding to the Holocaust Remembrance Day display. Courtesy of Jonathan Blanc/The New York Public Library

advance. We held many meetings; selected and prepared objects; fabricated custom mounts for them; wrote, edited, designed, and produced a poster, introductory text, and descriptive labels; and arranged press visits.

In contrast, the Maya Angelou display was set in motion the morning she passed away, when NYPL's director sent an email at 9:50 a.m. Twenty-six minutes and at least 14 emails later, the head of the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division at NYPL's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem, was pulling potential items from the Maya Angelou Papers while others located an available case. (This display, unlike the others, was mounted at the Schomburg Center.) Previous engagements postponed further progress until the next day, when this member of the exhibitions program toted a large bag of Plexiglas mounts on the subway and met with the Schomburg Center curators to determine which items would be included.

The conservator arrived from the NYPL facility in Queens armed with mat board, Mylar, and a bevy of tools. Other exhibitions staff arrived to arrange,

mount, and install the objects. We opened the display to the public that afternoon, albeit without the curator's text and the graphic elements. Over the next three days, the communications department revised the draft text, prepared the graphic components, and produced a press release, social media posts, and a notice on the Library's homepage.

For four weeks, visitors to the Schomburg Center were greeted by a selection of materials showing Angelou as a writer and a person: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in manuscript, typescript, and published versions; a letter from the author James Baldwin; a letter to the actor and civil rights activist Julian Mayfield; an elementary school scrapbook about the history of Alabama by the burgeoning writer; the jacket for one of her poetry albums; a Schomburg Center newsletter covering her 2003 visit to the building; two photographs; and the annotated typescript of "On the Pulse of Morning," the poem she read at President Bill Clinton's first inauguration.

### Success and Challenges

All of the memorial displays—whether planned over a long period or on the fly—

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resonated with our visitors, who would speak to each other and to staff members about the way these renowned individuals and tragic events had impacted their lives (fig. 4). Our marketing team received 55 stories about where people were when they heard about Kennedy's assassination, and related social media posts garnered more than a thousand likes and shares. Visitors from all over the world quickly filled a comment book mounted next to the Mandela case with moving tributes and expressions of grief. Certainly, these activities are some measures of success.

Beyond such evidence, however, it can be difficult to assess the impact of the flash displays. The pop-ups are mounted in a central location rather than an enclosed gallery, which stymies any efforts to track attendance. The Library does not charge admission fees for entrance into the building or exhibitions, so revenue cannot be used as a measure of appeal. Instead, media coverage and anecdotal observation have become the way we measure success.

Other challenges include selecting engaging and timely subjects that are reflected in our collections (for example, though we considered a memorial display for the author Gabriel García Márquez, we lacked visual or archival materials to augment his books); coordinating efforts from curatorial, conservation, registrarial, installation, editorial, graphics, and public relations staff in constricted time frames and across several buildings; working with a very small team around the demanding schedule for the large exhibitions; procuring a space that will not interfere with scheduled events; and ensuring that visitors realize these are small displays

rather than full-fledged exhibitions. This last lesson we learned after we received a series of negative comments from visitors who had traveled to see the J. F. K. presentation and arrived to find only a single case housing four objects.

### **The Value of Thinking Small**

From a curatorial standpoint, an unexpected benefit of the flash program has been the opportunity to elevate ephemera to a more exalted status. Ephemeral material makes up a large part of our collection and is valuable to researchers, but in large exhibitions it is easily overshadowed by blockbuster items. The recent major exhibition, *The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter* featured a treasure on cheap, acidified paper: a dense production chart from the Stratemeyer Syndicate showing how feverishly it was churning out new titles for such series as the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and the Campfire Girls. Yet just a few feet away the original Winnie-the-Pooh and friends—Christopher Robin's actual stuffed animals that inspired his father A. A. Milne's stories—beckoned, leaving the production chart in their long shadows.

The limited nature of a flash display, however, means that seemingly modest objects have a chance to shine, a useful reality for institutions of all sizes. The most powerful items in the Mandela tribute were all made of laminated paper: two small buttons supporting his release from prison, each a brightly colored square with a safety pin taped on the back, and a ballot from the first post-apartheid election in South Africa, which featured a long column of candidates'

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Fig. 5. Ephemera on display in the Nelson Mandela flash tribute. Courtesy of Jonathan Blanc/The New York Public Library

pictures paired with their parties' names (fig. 5). Not only were these diminutive but historically important artifacts brought to the fore because there was nothing to outstrip them, but they also spoke poignantly and directly to lived experience in a way that can be harder to achieve by mounting celebrated objects in large galleries.

#### Looking Forward

A year into the flash program, the collaborative process between exhibitions and communications has coalesced—a far cry from the first efforts, in which some tasks were accomplished twice while others were inadvertently left undone. We utilize the skills of our curators to identify objects and provide information for the communications department to craft into an accessible message, which they parlay into marketing and press materials while our exhibitions team handles the display itself.

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embodies a nimbler, pared-down approach to presenting topics. Our next display—which will celebrate the opening of the archive of the contemporary writer Tom Wolfe to researchers—will simply feature a hit parade of items, including shorthand notes from an interview with Grateful Dead musician Jerry Garcia about dropping acid for *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a letter from former astronaut John Glenn on U.S. Senate stationery correcting technical details in *The Right Stuff*, and a doodle-covered outline for Wolfe's bestseller, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Started as a reaction to the runaway success of exhibiting two iconic American documents, the pop-ups have given the Library's visitors more to see and speak about while also lending what can be a very imposing building a more approachable air. This, perhaps, is the greatest achievement and engine of these displays, and a justification for continuing to pursue them. ✨