

Risk, Failure, and ‘Foolishness,’ Anyone?

by Peter Linett



As the economic downturn becomes more like a landslide, it may seem bad timing to suggest that museums should take more risks, encourage failure, and embrace “foolishness,” at least when it comes to the experiences they offer visitors. Yet that’s exactly the right prescription for a field that, even before the downturn, was increasingly worried about its relevance in a changing society while at the same time paralyzed by its own well-meaning insistence on values such as professionalism, high academic standards, and “best practices.”

Those values may have helped museums greatly in the past, but they have also led to an unfortunate sameness of exhibit approaches across the field, in which one art museum feels much like another, despite whatever differences may exist in their collections, architecture, missions, and communities. They tend to evince the same assumptions about what a museum exhibition is, whom it’s for, and how it works. Something similar can be said of history museums, science centers, and other types of museums. Genuine innovations in the museum experience—the kind that innovation experts would call disruptive innovation because they change the market and the rules of competition—are rare; cautious incremental change is the rule.

The resulting sameness ensures that progress is slow, because there simply isn’t enough variation to fuel the healthy competition that marks most thriving human social endeavors. Think of visual art itself, where relentless competition is driven from the “bottom” up as art schools train more artists than the market can sustain and the best (or at least the most provocative) talents rise to prominence on the strength of their creativity and uniqueness. Or, more prosaically, think of consumer electronics, where an unremitting stream of innovations flows from young start-up companies as well as from Fortune 500 players. In such environments, alternatives abound; there are always a myriad of selections available to the public. So, as cultural conditions shift, there’s likely to be something on the market that speaks with relevance to contemporary consumers’ needs.

What does it mean, then, that the conditions of display in today’s art museums—the White Cube and its subtle variations, the dispassionate voice, the taste for objectivity—were largely set by the early decades of the twentieth century? Where is the upwelling of creative variation in exhibition and experience design that might let culture consumers, via their individual selections, engage in the collective process of propelling some approaches forward and leaving others behind as no longer relevant?

The anthropologist Jay Rounds, who chairs the museum studies program at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, has noted that variation is of vital importance precisely when cultural and economic conditions are in rapid flux, as they have been in recent years. What museums need most in such times, Rounds argues, is the kind of “explorative behavior” that could lead individual institutions and the sector as a whole to become more adaptive to their changed circumstances. He points out that exploration is often guided by intuition rather than rational logic, and that successfully explorative organizations cultivate what an emi-

nant Stanford psychologist once called “a technology for foolishness.” Instead, what we see in museum practice is a variety of efforts to milk our current skills, ideas, knowledge, and technologies to make museums more efficient at what they’re already doing. Adaptiveness, by contrast, is about discovering what else museums could be doing: new possibilities that might lead in exciting directions.

But “might” can be scary. It’s the uncertainty inherent in exploration of this kind that poses the greatest challenge for museums. The literature on innovation is frank about the risks involved: most innovations fail, yet those failures are necessary for progress and sustainability, and the money invested in them (which can be considerable—think of the pharmaceutical industry) is rarely wasted. Of course, an organization can be less or more efficient in its explorative behavior; some of the most progressive enterprises have adopted the mantra, “fail fast, fail often.” The idea is to test many innovations with real audiences as early as possible in the development process, so that energy can be focused on the ones most likely to work. Laboring to perfect one or two ideas before offering them to the public burns up unnecessary time and money.

Of course, nonprofit organizations like museums lack the profit margin that corporations can reinvest in research and development. On the other hand, enormous resources have gone into new and expanded museum buildings in the last two decades, investments that many leaders and trustees seem to hope will serve as large-scale, one-time demonstrations of their ability to innovate. What happens inside the new buildings, though, is often more of the same, as if the creative energy that went into the building obviated the need to reexamine the core experiences the museum offers. So the problem is not exactly a lack of capital; it’s a matter of the priorities and, I believe, the anxieties of museum professionals and their partners in the arts and culture sector. What museum likes to admit failure internally, much less in full view of its visitors, donors, and funders? What foundation program officer wants to underwrite a “foolish” new approach, the outcome of which can’t be defined in advance? Arguably, art museums are more anxious about failure of this kind than other types of museums, perhaps because the status of the visual arts in American society is even shakier than that of science or history. Art museums feel the need to show their most professional face at all times. There’s an irony here, since the visual arts demonstrate precisely the capacities for not-always-rational experimentation, risk, subjectivity, and multiplicity that I’m suggesting museums themselves could use. There is a deep gap in the art museum sector between the spirit that animates what museums show and the spirit that animates how they show it. What if an art museum gave itself the license to think more like an artist when conceiving its next exhibition? What would exhi-

bitions look like if they were as opinionated, or erotic, or political, or angry, or melancholy as the artworks they display?

The same questions could be asked of science museums and other institutions where collections might seem to have little to do with the artistic impulse. Why are museums almost never funny? Why do they limit themselves to a rational, Enlightenment definition of truth: that which can be conveyed in a series of factual propositions and elicited through rhetorical questions? Why do they almost never venture into the messy, hard-to-paraphrase kinds of truths we associate with a novel, a dream, or a favorite song?

Few museums have spaces, processes, or budgets dedicated to posing these questions, much less to answering them through experimental exhibit practice. And today’s worsening economy makes that internal risk-taking even more unlikely. So perhaps it’s time to shift some of the risks of innovation outside the walls of individual museums to an independent entity, a “laboratory” or workshop dedicated to creative, even radical investigation of new possibilities for museum experiences. Imagine a kind of MacDowell Colony or Yaddo for museum people—a retreat center/workshop where exhibition designers, curators, educators, and other museum professionals become “innovators in residence” for a few weeks at a time, collaborating with scholars from various disciplines, artists, theater directors, comedians, physicists, and other creative thinkers and do-ers. Working in an atmosphere of inventive play, the “innovators” would not only

debate ideas but also give those ideas concrete (or virtual) form, creating prototypes of new exhibit approaches, environments, and “platforms” for engagement, then evaluating the prototypes with real audiences. Moreover, imagine that the most promising innovations that emerge from this workshop are taken up—still on an experimental basis—by a network of “receptive host” museums around the country, institutions whose leadership, board, and curators are ready to rethink the experiences they offer their visitors and their communities.

Eventually, this process of innovation and dissemination will create a set of plausible alternatives to current practices and assumptions. I have begun to draft plans for such a workshop with a few like-minded colleagues and with the support of two potential partners: the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago and the new Center for the Future of Museums at the American Association of Museums. With this article, I invite your input as well. What kind of support for innovation would help your art museum? What kind of involvement might you and your colleagues want in such a workshop? Would your institution be likely to volunteer as one of the receptive hosts? The conversation about this “innovation incubator” is just beginning. I hope you’ll join it by emailing me or posting a public comment at <http://museumworkshop.pbwiki.org>. □

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