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Book Review

Science Exhibitions: Curation and Design. Editor: Dr Anastasia Filippoupoliti. Pages: 512. Published by MuseumsEtc

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Science exhibitions; Curation and Design is a new book published by MuseumsEtc. Guest edited by Anastasia Filippoupoliti, at the Democritus University of Thrace, Greece, this is the first of two new volumes examining the different ways in which science exhibitions are developed in science institutions around the world. This volume examines in detail the set up and design of a plethora of different science subjects. The second volume focuses on how the exhibitions are communicated to different audiences and how they are evaluated, and is being reviewed for *NatSCA News* Issue 21.

Science exhibitions; Curation and Design is filled with articles about different types, and styles, of exhibitions. Often books, and articles, written about best practices in museums are written by people who may have never worked in a museum before: each chapter in this book, however, is written by the individual or colleagues who work at putting the exhibition together. Real case studies provide new ideas and inspiration when developing our own exhibitions, and this book provides a close look at the processes involved and why certain decisions were made.

The book is divided into five parts, with a selection of essays in each part. Part 1 includes chapters focusing on different methods of 'making science public'. Beginning with an historic look at the science exhibit at the yearly conference held by the American Association of Medicine, which ended in 1986, this chapter illustrates different methods used by doctors showcasing their research. Interesting ideas were used, from live broadcasts of caesarean sections in the 1920s to stands with graphs and 'living demonstrators' using new artificial limbs. The following chapter discusses overcoming the potential challenges of displaying medicine to the public at the Wellcome Trust, London. Open forum discussions were developed where members of the public were invited to to discuss current scientific topics. Lead by different experts, these sessions provided the opportunity for members of the public to hear about, and challenge, some scientific topics than they would otherwise not have been able to.

'Curatorial Challenges' is the second part of this book and illustrates innovative ways of displaying more challenging science topics. Developing an interactive exhibition based on historical science objects relating to physics was one challenged for the Science Museum, London. As well as an informative brief history of science, this chapter shows how a simple grasp of the seemingly complex science of physics can create a successful, interactive, friendly exhibition. The following chapter outlines the process and delivery of an interactive exhibition at the Thackray Museum, Leeds, based on a person and not objects. This was an impressive twist; generally exhibitions are created based on the collections, but this exhibition was created around a person, with no accompanying objects. However, the focus was on Dr Waldon, who studied neurology and child development, and this exhibition successfully incorporated several interactive highlighting the different ways in which people learn. Part 2 of this book reminds us that we can look beyond the specimen, or the person, and develop something that will relate to the general public.

Members of the public may not have prior knowledge about a scientific subject, and the first chapter in Part 3, from Sharon MacDonald, at the University of Manchester, is a an appropriate introduction to this section of the book 'Cutting Edge Research Exhibited'. It is an interesting analysis of what the visitors get out of science exhibitions, and taking this into account when we are developing our own exhibitions. Leading on from this, Sharon Davies, at Arizona State University, discussed the history of

science displays in museums, and how museums are adapting to involve visitors through feedback and interactive. The third chapter in Part 3, specifically looks at an exhibition about nanotechnology in France. This is no easy feat; nanotechnology involves the science of the unseen world and with medical and technological advances, it also opens up debate about ethical and social issues. The exhibition outlines different uses of nanotechnology, and involved the public, allowing feedback from their thoughts on the uses and the future of this micro-world. Finally, Part 3 finishes with a interesting chapter discussing the idea of artists working with scientists to produce exhibitions creating a human touch on the science.

Part 4 is dedicated to 'Art and Science' projects, outlining successful projects using science to create inspiring art; and understanding the science behind the art. The first chapter outlines an exhibition which was built upon from a concept of observing the dendritic form of a horse chestnut tree. The endless ideas, from hydrological graphs, to the fragile, intricately delicate glass reconstruction of the inside of a human lung, were just a few examples of many imaginative art instillations produced for this exhibition; all from a chance and fruitful observation from a window. Detailed, yet simple, line drawings were the focus of the next chapter. Scientists and members of the public used pencil and paper to draw from the Royal College of Surgeons, Huntarian Museum collections, which allowed the collections to be looked at in much more detail than ever before. Finally Part 4 concludes with a large scale art work on the American Prairies. Giant images of the endangered American Bison, the Gray Wolf, and the Bald Eagle, were etched out from the great prairie landscape. This chapter opens up new ways of looking at collections and shows how specimens can be interpreted in different ways; often it demonstrates that we can see new things with our collections that have never been seen before.

The final section of the book, Part 5, focuses on 'Design Outlooks', and includes several case studies of good practice methods for science institutions. It begins with a chapter discussing the importance of graphic design in science exhibitions to convey the scientific information in the most clear and informative way to the public. The following chapter describes a new and interesting method of creating an exhibition, at the Liberty Science Centre, USA. This exhibition takes 'public consultation' to a new level, by creating a social network from the very beginning of the exhibition set up, the public literally had an input into what they wanted to see in the exhibition. It may appear like a lot of work, but the idea was very interesting, and had some great outcomes. Nanotechnology was the focus of the next chapter, outlining what worked well and what didn't work in this design. Storytelling was the theme of the penultimate chapter, discussing an interestingly different way of developing a science exhibition. The final chapter researched how maritime museums can, and have, played a role in science displays. This section of the book highlights a variety of different methods for creating science exhibitions; it also reminds us that we can be adventurous in developing exhibitions in our own museums.

Science exhibitions; Curation and Design is an interesting book. It can be compared to a text book, with numerous detailed case studies from science institutions around the world. Each author has included detailed background information behind their topic, and behind the process of the exhibition development. Importantly, the authors include information about what worked well and what didn't. It was interesting to read about how some case studies showed that sometimes the old ideas work perfectly well. Other chapters reminds us that there is nothing wrong with having a new and innovative method for developing an exhibition; sometimes they may be slow to take off, but there are many ways to interact with the public. I found the variety of chapters useful, and made me think more about developing future exhibitions. In particular, I hadn't thought about doing a display on nanotechnology due to the subject matter, but I will go back to the examples in this book.

We often develop exhibitions with such enthusiasm for the topic we know and love so well. This book reminds us to take a small step back and thing of new, and sometimes old, ways in which we can get the best out of our topic for the public.

Science exhibitions; Curation and Design is available from www.museumsetc.com, or contact service@museumsetc.com.

Jan Freedman. 9th December 2010.