



CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Program Notes

Program Title: What's So Controversial About Revealing Bodies
Location: The Exploratorium
Date: June 14, 2000

Presenters: Melissa Alexander, Exhibition Curator/Project Co-Director
Darcie Fohrman, Project Co-Director and Designer
Alice Krasinski, Project Manager
Kathy McLean, Director of Public Programming and Center for Public Exhibitions
Robert Fry, Exhibit Developer

Program Overview:

The program consisted of remarks by five *Revealing Bodies* exhibition team members followed by a question and answer session.

Melissa Alexander, Exhibition Curator/Project Co-Director

Exhibit attempts to look not at how human body works, but how it is represented, and how that shapes what we know about it, our beliefs and prejudices, as well as how it shapes other parts of culture and science. This itself (a relativist point of view that questions science) was controversial at the Exploratorium—a science museum. Scientists were pushing to include proper amount of science. We were also aware of the need to recognize a rich, diverse audience from art and science experts to young children. One challenge was creating ways into difficult material for these different audiences. Another problem was how to design space that could handle both interactive exhibits and objects.

Darcie Fohrman, Project Co-Director and Designer

Decided early on not to separate interactives from objects. We had a big team, all with an art background, and we needed to hone our visions to Melissa's. The larger team came together about 1 year before opening. Challenge was to make broad concepts visual, make them concrete. We developed a storyline that kept evolving until opening, we wanted it to remain flexible this way. Had a design retreat for the whole team and extended members (e.g. from the Media Dept.). Came up with a document that guided design, color, mood, etc. to tie design to exhibit themes.

Alice Krasinski, Project Manager

We held a 2-day symposium to brainstorm the concept 4 years ago. At that time the concepts were much more radical and diverse than what we ended up doing. Melissa developed the storyline, which was sort of a new process.

Kathy McLean, Director of Public Programming and Center for Public Exhibitions

Spoke about getting institutional buy-in. Initial idea for exhibition was broad, but over the course of a year and a half it was refined with the exhibition planning group. Tension points were: marketing push for focus on family audiences, meanwhile the creative staff was used to providing quirky, eccentric programs for adults. NSF not interested but arts funders, such as NEA, came through, which was surprising to some because of the controversial nature of the show. For two years fought about whether to do popular, kid-friendly, or sophisticated show. There was a huge amount of internal processing and refinement.

Melissa Alexander

Established a new exhibition planning process, the stakeholder meeting, which made the exhibit accountable to the various departments, the board, public, press, etc. Incorporated feedback from the meetings, sometimes positive sometimes negative. There were four such meetings held. Worked closely with Marketing staff and an advertising agency.

Robert Fry, Exhibit Developer

Moved from New Mexico for the job, practicing artist. They were given a list of 30-35 possible interactives, and had one month to cull these finding out what equipment could be donated etc. and started prototyping. Had only 9 months to develop 18 interactives. This included: conception, research, prototype, visitor testing, development. Had to make them durable. Agenda early on was to focus interactives on the visitor's body, not some anonymous average human.

Q & A

Question: What criteria were used to decide what parts of the original plan to keep or not? Why for example did you eliminate some of the gender issue material?

Answer: Was it a good enough example? Strange or beautiful enough? Does it change one's thinking? Was it about representation of the body?

Question: Who were the advisors?

Answer: We had a huge group of advisors from medical sociologists, museum professionals, community representatives, radiologists, cultural anthropologist, artists, women's health historian, science museum staff, authors, etc.

Question: Was there any family or visitor input in advisory committee?

Answer: There were two kinds.

1) Worked with Director of Visitor Research and took disturbing images and talked to families. Only one person deeply objected to images of cadavers. Young people objected to nude self portrait of 70-year old male nude because of aesthetics. Some uneasy with childbirth exhibits, not yet ready to explain to their kids.

2) Worked with High School Explainers.

Had 2 sets of interviews with 40-50 kids. They objected to woman smiling giving childbirth—wasn't she in pain?

Melissa Alexander's comments on controversy around advertising campaign

Used ad firm to come up with very in-your-face ad campaign, which became controversial internally. E.g. Iconic image of a sonogram and a sketch of a fetus in a Petri dish with the text "Tissue or Timmy?" This ad upset stakeholders and staff due to public sensitivity to abortion debate. But the ad was dead-on because it raised the key message of the exhibit—the way images of the body have shaped public discourse, in this case the way medical imaging shaped women's reproductive debate. Life Magazine in 1965 featured a series of photos of the fetus. Unless one read the text closely it was not clear that these were not living babies. They were blown up to look life-size but were images of a fetus only few centimeters long. They were shown separately from the womb and the mother, which left a very powerful political image that was utilized to further the Right to Life campaign. This ad really hit the nail on the head about how loaded images can be. Board members saw the ad and flipped out, even internal staff was upset, it got people involved, asking "What is this exhibit about? What are they up to?" People were saying we will be picketed and closed down. This episode put a layer of censorship over planning team, which did not want the exhibit to open without its full form and intention. At that time *Sensation* scandal had started in New York at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, also added to anxiety. This gave us a jump start on the community advisory committee, which included board members, medical advisers, sex educator, Roman Catholic nun. We showed them the most difficult material.

Question: What was the most controversial material in the exhibit?

Answer: There were three key ones:

1) Tissue or Timmy ad.

2) Model of erect penis from the 1800s France was unfortunately not included. We wanted to include this because, like the womb shots which did make it to the exhibition, this shows the male sex organ in its reproductive state. Irony that no one flinches at seeing female nudes, such as the Venus, but the Director, who is French and for whom this is not a taboo, felt Americans were not able to handle this.

3) Eduard Pernkopf's Anatomy Book, which was a standard anatomy text written by a known Nazi and illustrated by known Nazi artists during WWII, which was/is the subject of debates in the world of medicine—should this text continue to be used as a text book? Some libraries removed it from their shelves when the history of the author came out. Naturally the question Who were the models? haunted every one. An early edition of the book shows Nazi symbols. Wanted to include because this is a perfect example of the assertion of the exhibition that no image is neutral. This started huge debate, rumors that we were planning to exhibit Nazi memorabilia. The team worked hard to create context, to keep it in the exhibit, but ultimately Kathy pulled it. So we included a new anatomy book that came highly rated by Yale, UCLA etc., and guess what? It contained Pernkopf's illustrations! It even contained a thanks to Pernkopf in the acknowledgments. Visitor comments came in both sides: How can you include this? to How can you be so wishy-washy as to not include the original?

Question: Do you have a school program?

Answer: Staff spent a long time on thinking about how to deal with families and children with this exhibit. Decided to make it PG-13 and warn anyone bringing kids into the gallery. Field trips are not allowed unless the teacher gets permission from each parent.

Question: Is there a Family or Teacher Guide?

Answer: Brought in a woman who worked at the Holocaust Museum for 2-day training to brainstorm worst case scenarios. Put together briefing book for staff and volunteers to get articulate about possible questions. Includes emergency contact, who was on team, main ideas of exhibition, ways to give feedback, special phone line set up. Hired 3 facilitators for gallery, entrance, exit and inside (?) and trained them. Put disclaimer on invite to opening, very few declined. There were some comments saying no children should be allowed in. This consultant helped dispel a lot of anxiety. The planning team had made some concessions, e.g. on cadaver images.

Question: What are kids' reactions?

Answer: One said seeing dead bodies made them sad. Other responses varied.

Question: Why was the erect penis considered more controversial than the Venus?

Answer: Good question. The sonogram was thought too feminist by some, too subjective. We are perceived as a scientific museum, there was an internal debate that there was not enough science and the exhibit was too subjective, dealing with perspectives.

We were also criticized for the artwork about a self-dissection. Many people were upset that this work was not labeled Art, some thought it was real, or were confused—is it real or not? Art is not expected in a Science museum like the Exploratorium. But this is a valid question, it is hard for people to switch from looking at real slices of the human body for example vs. this art work which parodies dissection. However, labeling this piece Art would be a missed opportunity to engage critical thinking. If you label “This is art” people will just think, OK I know what that is and walk on. We want people to stop and think.

Question: How will you evaluate the exhibit. What do you hope to find out?

Answer: No simple answer. For temporary exhibits we don't usually budget for summative evaluation, these tend to focus on the permanent collection. We did do some formative evaluation. Talking about doing an intern project. This exhibit is hard to evaluate, there were no simple learning goals, e.g. visitors will learn this or that. More interested in what kinds of questions or conversations it sparks between people.

Question: Regarding advisory boards, what would you do differently next time?

Answer: Did not use as well as we could have. Did not pick enough range, picked many who shared our ideas. Should have started earlier. Did not include board members in stakeholders meetings. Advisers were all very educated, should have had more range in education level.

Question: Are there plans to publish anything about this exhibition's planning process?

Answer: National Health Sciences Consortium plans to hold its annual meeting here, and may want to travel *Revealing Bodies*. Will probably end up writing something about it.

Question: (Posed by Exploratorium staff to audience) What did you all think of the ads? Have you seen them?

Answer: Some have seen them, found them striking, but did not really give a clear sense of exhibition theme. Seemed aimed at a savvy adult audience.

Question: With all this input from advisory groups, how can the museum keep its integrity.

Answer: I think we kept it.

Question: (Posed by Exploratorium staff to audience) Are there critiques of the show?

Answer: The general response to show among the group is very positive. It succeeded in generating critical thinking. Nine months planning a bit superficial. Post modern ideas might be lost on general public. Notion of imaging as the focus of analysis not made clear enough. Casual nature of visitors, need to tell them what you want them to focus on so they get it quicker. Need to provoke idea of image in more places throughout the show. Might have put the Time Magazine display earlier, because with that piece, one really gets the theme of the exhibition.

Question: Please talk more about the problem of exhibiting objects in same gallery as interactives?

Answer: So many possibilities, ways to organize. Physical presence of interactives need for space to interact, noise, activity competes for attention, not always successful. Venus could be much more dramatic if the big digital images were not directly behind it. Interactives take people away from the object. Hoped to get message across not only by labels but through juxtapositions.

Question: I found the space claustrophobic, why were rooms so cramped?

Answer: We talked about this problem a lot, but wanted to include a lot of material, so it got crowded. Tried to define different areas, not sure people realize there are sections. Color and lighting also makes it feel cramped. Wanted different kinds of spaces to make people aware of their own body within the space. Did not anticipate traffic flow problems. Had to use the only space available, had to leave out lots of stuff.

Announcement: Upcoming Webcast on Sat. June 24th at 11 AM

http://www.exploratorium.org/bodies/webcast_6_24.html

Called "Under the Skin" broadcast live from the Museo La Specola in Florence Italy. The team will visit this collection of late 18th century life-sized wax figures showing the human form in unbelievably lifelike detail. Called the "Medical Venuses," these figures were the result of over 200 dissections and countless hours of painstaking work by wax craftsmen. They represented the cutting edge of 3-dimensional imaging technology at the time, and are still used by medical students to study anatomy today. The team will

explore the impact these models have had on the medical world, and the development of new cutting-edge 3-D imaging, called solid imaging by 3D Systems.

Wrap up and thank you's