

# **Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation**

**Kathleen McLean**

## **Participation**

Long before the internet changed the world, some museum scholars and professionals were experimenting with and creating participatory experiences with museum visitors, artists, scientists, and their diverse communities. Much of this practice came from an understanding that participation encourages engagement, stimulates the imagination, and supports the process of learning. Early interest in participatory museum experiences began in children's museums and science museums—places grounded in learning theory. And those of you who are familiar with learning theory, and who acknowledge that museums are communities of learners, recognize that participation is no lightweight idea—it is deeply embedded in the formulation and cultivation of an aesthetic experience.

Today, with the explosion of technologies that allow people to connect, communicate globally, and customize their experiences to their own preferences and needs, public expectations of participation have taken root in every fertile inch of our human culture. And museums are no exception. But museums, with their long traditions of curator-driven exhibition processes, are struggling to come to grips with the implications of our increasingly participatory culture. In the contemporary world of museums, where “high production values” and permanence are field-wide standards, museum professionals are faced with new notions of public curators, ubiquitous free content, and public expectations of continual change.

Most museum exhibitions and high profile programs grow out of curator-driven questions. Curators determine the scope of inquiry and parameters of content, and disciplinary boundaries abide: an art museum curator determines content about art, and

a history curator about history. Often, the scope is quite narrow, particularly when curators think of exhibitions as their opportunity to create three-dimensional monographs or monologues.

## **Conversation**

How can museums move from a top-down, information-delivery model of exhibition, to a bottom-up, participatory, and dialogic model? By rethinking the linear exhibition development process, by experimenting with ways to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives, and by engaging in conversation with stakeholders and visitors.

"Conversation" means "to keep company with. . .," "the act of living with. . . ."

Conversation is the most essential of human interactions. It nourishes the exchange of ideas and, with reciprocity and mutual respect, creates new knowledge and insights.

And conversation, I submit, is arguably the most powerful form of participation in which a museum can engage.

## **Prototyping**

Generating authentic conversation requires museums to be flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, open to new ideas, and supportive of risk-taking and even failure—to be environments that are more like ongoing experiments than finished products. And this brings us to the notion of "prototyping." So, what is a prototype? The dictionary defines it as an original model. In industrial design parlance, a prototype is often a full-scale functional form that is as much as possible like the proposed end product. I prefer to look back to the etymology of the word, which in Greek means "primitive form" or "first impression"—a mock-up or a quick and dirty version of an idea; something flexible and changeable; a tool for learning something about the effects of an idea or object on the end-user (and in the case of museums, the relevance of an exhibit or experience on a museum visitor).

Prototyping is not just about the object or exhibit or experience itself—it's actually a way of working, a philosophy and set of values, a process of inquiry. I didn't really fully understand this until I worked at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, as Director of the Center for Public Exhibitions and Programs. The Exploratorium's founder, Frank Oppenheimer, believed that the whole organization was a work in progress, and that the exhibits were all "working prototypes." No exhibits were ever considered "finished," which allowed room for staff to embrace experimentation in a deep and ongoing way.

Prototyping helps you test your assumptions with visitors before you go too far in the exhibit development and design process—before you are inclined to stick with your idea and design, even if it doesn't work for visitors. Are your ideas compelling? Try them out in paper form. Write your ideas as rough exhibit labels and tape them to the wall. If you can't install collection objects, use photographs. Ask visitors what they think. This experimental process can be quite informal. If visitors don't understand the intent of your labels, rewrite them and try again.

Often, museum professionals ask, "When do you start to design?" And I suggest that prototyping IS design—it is simply more incremental and inquiry-based. As you test out your ideas and exhibit techniques with visitors, you will engage them in a conversational process that will help you make better, more informed decisions and more compelling exhibitions. Just the act of working with visitors in the concept and design process will give you invaluable information. And if you can engage the services of someone familiar with formative evaluation, you will be even better prepared to ask the right kind of questions and get the answers you need.

One way to practice the art of prototyping is to start with a small display or exhibit. Make the exhibit out of paper, cardboard, and tape, in full scale. If you don't have access to an exhibit gallery, make your prototype on a table or an easel. Tell visitors what you are trying to do, and ask them help you create better exhibits. Some designers and

evaluators ask visitors if they think other visitors will understand or appreciate the exhibit, which gets interviewees personally off the hook—they don't have to admit it if they don't understand.

Again, think of prototyping as an iterative conceptual design process. Design the mock-up, talk to visitors, redesign based on visitor input. Some elements will only need one round of testing, before it is clear that visitors are engaged and understand your intentions. Other elements may need two or three or four iterations of a design before you are comfortable with the outcomes. And in the true spirit of experimentation, you will find that some ideas, no matter how many times you rework them, are never successful. In these cases, it's important to accept the failure and move on. Sometimes, these "failures" make it into the exhibition gallery despite visitor confusions. And even then, you can learn from observing visitor reactions and hearing visitor questions.

### **Prototype Killers**

Even though the prototyping process is an intuitive and logical way to experiment with making better exhibitions, in the world of museums, it is fraught with problems. If you decide to engage in this exciting and generative work, you need to be aware of some common prototype killers that lurk in the shadows of most museums.

First, there's the tyranny of process—particularly the traditional exhibition design process and the formalized label writing process. Prototyping requires an openness to discovery and the flexibility to be able to follow strange paths that might open up along the way. In more than one museum, staff members who have spent years of effort formalizing curatorial, design, and label writing processes may feel that the informality of prototyping undermines their roles and the efficiency of in-place systems.

Second, there's the specter of authority and control—it's difficult, if not impossible, to do authentic prototyping if those in charge want to limit the ideas or control the outcomes.

Third is the fantasy of perfection—so many museum professionals believe that high production values, pristine labels, refined materials, and carefully controlled finishes are what visitors expect from museums. And that is rarely the case. More often, visitors are so delighted to be asked their opinion of an exhibit or an idea that the last things on their minds are perfectly formed exhibitions. Yet, most museum staff complaints I hear about prototyping are that the process is ugly and messy, and visitors will be disappointed.

Perhaps the most slippery criticism, and the most difficult to pin down, is the argument that prototyping will disrupt the exhibition schedule and undermine the budget. In my experience, prototyping can actually facilitate quick decision-making and can help avoid costly mistakes and expensive, unnecessary, design solutions.

At the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, in their new "Gallery of Conscience," we are in the midst of a year-long process of prototyping the exhibition, "Let's Talk About This: Folk Artists Speak Out about HIV/AIDS." We began with a small number of works of folk art, selected by Gallery of Conscience Consulting Director, Suzanne Seriff, and have developed three iterations of the exhibition. With honest conversation and thoughtful participation among visitors, curators and other museum staff, scholars, community members, and folk artists around the world, the exhibition is evolving over time. For me, it is surprising, thought provoking, energizing, and challenging—all of the qualities I love in a good exhibition. And most importantly, it is a dynamic and ever-changing conversation.

The issue going forward for museums isn't whether we should provide opportunities for visitors to participate in and choreograph their experiences in museums; it's how we embrace these opportunities ourselves. We need to consider new roles for visitors as

they engage more actively in our programs and exhibitions. This is not to say that we should abandon scholarship and expertise. At the same time that visitors expect to engage more actively in their museum experiences, they also expect and want to hear from the museum experts. Visitors want to know what the experts think, why experts value some ideas and objects over others, and how that expertise can help them make meaning and find significance in the world around them (or at least at the museum).

We need to embrace the contributions of expert knowledge and at the same time expand our definitions of “expert” and “expertise” to include broader domains of experience. And we need to consider new roles for community members and visitors as they engage more actively in our programs and exhibitions. Rather than perceiving visitors as novices, we would do well to consider them “scholars” in the best sense of the word—people who engage in study and learning for the love of it. We need to find ways to bring the museum’s expert knowledge into conversation with the people who attend our museums—people who bring with them their own expert knowledge. And this means letting go of the notion that we, museum professionals, are a class apart from our visitors.

And we need to find new ways to create narratives in common, narratives that will change over time as the world around us changes. As the news each day reminds us, these are not always easy or comfortable conversations. But they situate museums at the center of public discourse. And they breathe new life into our museums.

(Parts of this report are excerpted from McLean, Kathleen, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?” pp. 70-79, in Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Kolosky, eds., *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011.)

**American Folklore Society  
Consultancy and Professional Development Program Report**

**Museum of International Folk Art, Gallery of Conscience  
Santa Fe, New Mexico**

**Prepared by Dr. Suzanne Seriff, Director, Gallery of Conscience**

Since its opening in 1953, The Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) has gained national and international recognition as an accredited museum, and as the home to the world's largest collection of folk art. The collection of more than 135,000 artifacts, and the curatorial expertise of its staff, forms the basis for exhibitions in four distinct wings of the Museum. In 2003 the Museum celebrated 50 years of documenting, collecting, preserving and interpreting the creative works of traditional artists from cultures around the world, including Hispanic, Native American and other cultures of its home state of New Mexico. "As the largest folk art museum in the world, we also have a responsibility to create a forum to discuss current social issues that folk artists are facing around the world." (Dr. Marsha Bol, MOIFA Director) In 2010, MOIFA answered this call by inaugurating the "Gallery of Conscience" (GoC) as a forum to engage and connect folk art communities to effect positive social change around contemporary social justice, human rights, health and market issues in their communities.

The inaugural Gallery of Conscience exhibition, "Empowering Women: Artisan Cooperatives That Transform Communities," focused on the work of ten women's folk art cooperatives in as many countries and explored ten ways in which these cooperatives empower women to confront key issues in their lives: domestic violence, illiteracy, healing after genocide, economic self-sufficiency, environmental hazard, lack of leadership skills, etc. This exhibit, which was curated by folklorist Dr. Suzanne Seriff, opened in July of 2010 in conjunction with the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, from which the ten artisan cooperatives were selected. The exhibit is currently on a national tour with venues scheduled at the Burke Museum in Seattle, The Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, and the Museum of Man in San Diego, among others. The second year, Dr. Seriff curated an exhibit that responded directly to the record year of natural disasters worldwide, titled "The Arts of Survival: Folk Expression in the Face of Disaster." This exhibit features the works and words of artists experiencing four 21<sup>st</sup> century disasters caused by the natural elements, Earth, Wind, Water and Fire, gone awry: the earthquake in Haiti, Hurricane

Katrina in the US Gulf, a volcanic eruption in Indonesia, and 2010's devastating floods in Pakistan. With advisory support from the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum, a traveling exhibit, "The Art of Gaman," curated by Delphine Hirasuna and exploring the arts made by Japanese Americans in U.S. Internment camps during WWII, opened for a three-month installation in the GoC in July, 2012.

After a year-long strategic planning process, the GoC made a strategic shift in 2012-2013 to begin to transition from a space for the display of an annual professionally curated exhibit, to a platform for community driven projects that fit the needs of community partners both at home and abroad (including cultural organizations and museums both nationally and internationally, a coalition of folk artists drawn from International Folk Art Market participants, state-wide New Mexican youth centers, health centers, traditional artists, poets, cultural organizations). While continuing to offer high quality issue-driven exhibits and programs, the GoC is embarking on a new experimental and prototype-based approach to exhibition design and development with a fundamental emphasis on visitor interactivity, dialogue, and collaboration.

The advantages of this new vision of the GoC as a place where visitors (including underserved community groups, and targeted local and international master traditional artists) can create, share and connect with each other around content are several. As museum scholar Nina Simon writes in her ebook, *The Participatory Museum* ([www.participatorymuseum.org](http://www.participatorymuseum.org)), such participatory experiences allow for museums to encourage interpersonal dialogue, support co-creative and collaborative practices, deliver dynamic and relevant content, nurture long-term relationships and partnerships with community organizations and leaders, and support explorations of personal relevance to both visitors and partner community organizations.

The first step toward achieving this goal was to restructure the administrative structure and oversight of the GoC. In the fall of 2012 the MOIFA supported a shift from hiring an annual guest curator to create GoC exhibitions, to a full-time development team that includes expertise in a number of roles including management, education, design, prototyping, curation, and community engagement. This year's Team is composed of three staff members from MOIFA (all of whom were given the time, space and mental energy to dedicate to this project), and three consultants (including folklorists Drs. Suzanne Seriff and Laura Marcus Green, and museum consultant, Kathleen McLean) who would

work collaboratively—and over time-- with the staff throughout the year. This “team-based” approach was chosen because it represented, for us, a more consistent and innovative structure designed to learn through doing. It was also designed to be nimble and responsive to visitor and community input, with reflection built into the process so that learning can occur with both success and failure.

The group identified skills needed for this Core Team and selected individual team members both because they held these skills and because they were excited to embark on an innovative process that began by throwing out the rule book for top-down exhibit design and curation. We call ourselves the “E Team,” short for  $E=MC^2$ : Harnessing the **Energy** of **Museums** and **Communities** Working **Together!**”

The funds for which MOIFA received a Best Practices grant from AFS’s Consultancy and Professional Development Program have allowed the GoC team to receive the necessary training to effectively implement this new prototyping concept as an important step toward building a more collaborative, participatory model of exhibition design and development. In particular, it offset the cost of hiring Kathleen McLean, of Independent Exhibitions, an internationally recognized museum consultant, whose expertise in the art and practice of participatory design techniques for effective community engagement has resulted in several award-winning publications, and numerous successful consultancies, including the following:

- Oakland Museum of California History Gallery (AAM Excellence in Exhibition Award for Community Engagement)
- Oakland Museum of California Art Gallery
- Oakland Museum of California Natural Sciences Gallery
- Dallas Museum of Art Center for Creative Connections
- National Museum of the American Indian (in progress)
- Weisman Museum of Art Target Center for Creative Collaboration
- Pew Center for Arts and Heritage Experiments in Creative Practice: "No Idea is Too Ridiculous"
- Royal Ontario Museum Prototyping Workshops

Over the last 30 years, Ms. McLean has overseen experimental exhibition projects and processes in museums of all disciplines, from art and cultural museums to children's museums and science centers. For eleven years, she was

Director of the Center for Public Exhibition and Public Programs at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, where she oversaw all prototyping efforts and set up the Exploratorium's first Visitor Research and Evaluation Department. She teaches exhibition design at several major Museum Studies programs, and has coached many museums on incorporating the prototyping process into their exhibition development work. For further information on her many writings, programs, and accomplishments, see her website, [www.ind-x.org/kathleen-mclean](http://www.ind-x.org/kathleen-mclean).

The Best Practices Grant from AFS allowed the Team to receive ongoing, hands-on, professional training in this process of participatory exhibit design and development. In particular, the Gallery of Conscience team was trained in developing an overall project schedule and creating an ongoing community-shared documentation process, identifying potential elements to prototype, working with our expanded community advisory committee to brainstorm specific interactive prototyping ideas, overseeing prototyping design and development, working with visitors to facilitate the prototyping experience, and providing a model and training for prototype evaluation.

The current project of the Gallery of Conscience, *Let's Talk About This: Folk Artists Respond to HIV/AIDS* will run from World AIDS Day, 2012, to January, 2014. *Let's Talk About This* is the platform upon which we are developing and re-defining Gallery of Conscience skills of engagement, in real time, and developing the community partnerships upon which our new collaborative model is based. While the topic of HIV/AIDS is specific and focused, the pilot programs to stimulate community participation, dialogue, and action will form the core of the GoC's toolkit of engagement for all of its subsequent programs.

The project's primary goal is to provide a community platform to engage in dialogue, education, and awareness about the serious pandemic of HIV/AIDS both internationally and in New Mexico where cultures of secrecy, shame and stigma frequently inhibit open discussion, understanding and, most importantly, timely treatment of this potentially deadly disease. This is particularly important among Hispanic and Native American populations, which rank second and third, nationally, in rates of HIV diagnosis. In New Mexico, 50% of those who test positive for the virus already present with full-blown AIDS, indicating a continued stigma against early testing.

The primary beneficiaries of *Let's Talk* are thus those underserved New

Mexicans (including intravenous drug users, sexually active teens and young adults, women and breast-feeding mothers) who are most at risk and for whom increased education and outreach are most critical. The *Let's Talk* project worked with these communities through targeted facilitate dialogue programs that were designed to use folk art as stimuli to explore ways to talk about, treat, prevent, and live healthily with HIV/AIDS. The voices of workshop participants contributed directly to the exhibit lab itself through talk-back stations, interactive activities, community art projects, and their formal and informal evaluations on each element of the exhibit.

A key component of the Gallery's effectiveness is to partner with local organizations whose missions align with those of the featured GoC exhibit. This year, in conjunction with the *Let's Talk* exhibit, the Gallery is partnering with established prevention and outreach programs especially in Hispanic, Native American and LGBTQ communities that recognize the unique capacity of the cultural arts to combine with medical outreach (including needle exchange programs, food banks, testing centers) to break cultural barriers to effective treatment and prevention, support those affected by HIV/AIDS, and increase the broad community of HIV-aware citizens. As Maria Rengane, a South African textile artist and HIV/AIDS advocate reminds us: "You must not be ashamed to speak out. When you keep quiet you sign your own death warrant."

Based on the prototype training we have received this year—and conceived in accordance with input from visitors, staff members, and community partners and workshops—the GoC has developed three separate prototypes of this fundamentally collaborative and experimental "work in progress." This improvisatory "call and response" process officially opened on December 2nd, 2012 (in observance of World AIDS Day) with a series of "idea exchange" stations in the Gallery of Conscience where we invited our local community partners and museum visitors to respond to, interact with, and contribute their ideas and their artistic expressions to the work of a dozen or more local and international folk artists who address through their work the cultural stigmas, prejudices, economic hardships, and myths which negatively impact the effective and timely treatment or prevention of HIV/AIDS in their communities. The interactive components in the exhibit were conceived—first in a two hour brainstorming session with community partners at SW CARE Center-- and more thoroughly in our first E Team prototype meeting in October during which time our E Team worked together to develop and design all components of the exhibit.

For this initial opening, in a spirit of prototyping and experimentation, we chose to tape printed label text directly onto the wall, use existing cases, furniture, and wall colors left over from a previous exhibit, and literally hand-write the exhibit title and intro label directly on the walls (we hired a hip young blackboard graphic person from Trader Joes for this task). The opening label invited visitors to come in, share their thoughts, try their hand and leave their opinion, stating, in big letters: This is an experiment. Everything here is a work in progress!”

In February, the Team gathered again for the second three day intensive workshop at which we evaluated all aspects of community/visitor response to the Gallery since its initial opening four months earlier—from formal cued interviews with visitors to docent comments, letters and meetings, to patron comments to comments from formal community-based dialogue workshop participant, to visitor-generated responses to the interactives in the GoC itself. Based on this second prototyping workshop, the Team made significant changes to the label text (shortening it by over half!), interactive prompts, artifact and interactive placement and design. Those interactives that did not seem to elicit interest or dialogue were modified or removed; artifacts based on new community relationships were added, or commissioned to be added to the GoC; and new interactives were designed to fit issue-driven conceptual needs or interests not adequately addressed in the first iteration. Some artifacts or interactives that were deemed offensive, or inappropriate by our community partners were taken down.

The third phase of the idea/art exchange is slated to open in coordination with the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market in July, which will bring five international artists and as many local artists and partners together for the first time both in the GoC and throughout the community to dialogue, perform, create and explore the topic together. This third iteration is the result of our third intensive prototyping meeting in April during which we began again with a full day evaluation of all visitor-based input, including formal cued interviews, staff and docent comments and letters, community workshop evaluations, and our own ongoing observation-based evaluations of visitor interaction with both artifacts and interactives in the GoC.

Based on this input—what visitors and community members liked and did not like; engaged with and did not engage with; understood and did not understand; requested and protested—we re-tooled both 3-D and graphic design and curatorial components. Although the team functioned as its own “designers”

throughout the prototyping process, we did bring in a graphic design person at this phase to work with us to design the graphic labels, titles, and all auxiliary materials for the exhibit (banner, pr, invitations, etc) based on the Team's collaboratively-derived prototyping, improvisatory visitor experience goals. Again, we elected a minimalist approach to design that would allow the exhibit to feel as inviting, participatory, nimble and dialogic as possible.

For most pieces of art in the GoC, visitors and community members are prompted to engage in a participatory interactive, from contributing to a community AIDS quilt initiated by an LGBTQ youth organization in Albuquerque, to adding a protest sign to a World AIDS Day march scene produced by a Mozambiquan wood sculptor, to leaving a tribute on a memorial wall in honor or in memory of a loved one living with, or dying from HIV/AIDS.

In addition to the "arts and idea exchange" exhibition lab, the prototyping process has resulted in the following generative programs:

- A series of community-based dialogue workshops that respond to the particular needs and interests of targeted community groups around the featured topic. Workshops are structured as two- three hour dialogue sessions within the GoC which engage workshop participants in a conversation café structure using both the artifacts and the interactives as stimuli to spark personal reflection, civic dialogue, and creative interaction. For those who are interested in working further with the topic and the arts, GoC staff encourages them to tailor further projects around their particular areas of interest and expression – resulting, perhaps, in arts-based projects that may include spoken word poetry, audio-based radio programs, short films, graffiti battles, quilts, photography or other programs that are determined by group interest and needs.
- A slate of public programs including films, conversation cafes, lectures and audio listening programs, all of which contain a facilitated dialogue session as the core catalyst for engagement with the art and interactives in the Gallery
- A youth-targeted radio and digital media program which combines a multi-week workshop on the history of AIDS and arts-based advocacy with youth-produced short radio programs that teach youth the skills of media

literacy, technology, and production while exploring their own relationship to the topic at hand.

In each case, these community-based programs have been designed, not as isolated instances of community outreach, but as part of the prototyping process itself—a shift which fundamentally changes the level of community involvement, balance of authority, amount of staff time required, and the look and feel of the exhibition itself, etc. Although this process is still evolving, the ultimate goal is that each of these initially isolated programs has the potential to feed back into the exhibition itself, as the space opens up for ongoing AIDS Memorial quilt making, or a listening station is added to exhibit the 3-5 minute radio shorts created by area youth around the topic, or the miniature protest signs made in response to an artifact interactive take over an entire wall of the Gallery.

For the Museum, the artists, and the community partners, this process has been both exhilarating and exasperating. Challenges have arisen in defining exactly what we mean by community involvement and what we mean by “art”; managing work flow expectations and responsibilities; communicating the value of work-in-progress to patrons that expect finished products; and re-defining “success” in new terms—based more on reaching new audiences than on pleasing old patrons, and on starting conversations, than on creating finalized exhibitions. Although the verdict is still out, we all recognize the potential this new model holds to create an entirely new, and replicable model for community engagement with the arts that finds its way back to what the artists themselves have known all along. In the words of master bead worker, Lulama Sihlabeni, of South Africa, “Folk art must speak to people—that is part of what puts the ‘folk’ in folk arts!”

And the proof, even at this stage of the game, is already present in the “pudding” of community, artist and visitor responses:

*“I saw myself here for the first time. Thank you for that...”*

*“I love that the Gallery is always changing, and is changed by the people who have responded....”*

*“The black tape (holding up the labels in one of the prototypes) at first didn’t seem appropriate, but then it felt like a flyer on the street, very current”*

*“This is a brave thing to do....”*

*“Look what I did!”*

*“How often does someone ask you what you saw in a work of art? It’s empowering!”*

*“This is a beautiful exhibit—accessible in ways museums haven’t felt before.”*

*“As our group (Native American, gay, youth activists) drove back to Albuquerque, we shared more on what the event had stimulated in each of us and enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about one another. Everyone shared how thankful they were to participate...”*