

# Working with Artists in the History of Science and Medicine

MARTHA FLEMING handout for the Wellcome New Exhibition Workshop 7/10/04

martha@marthafleming.net

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*"In a sense, and to a limited extent, we expect visitors to become scientists. [Yet] it is of no concern to us if visitors to art galleries have made no progress as painters..."* Jim Bennett in *Museums of Modern Science* (2000)

## SCIENCE, PUBLICS AND ARTISTS: A FEW DISTINCTIONS

- difference between teaching science, teaching the history of science, and teaching people to *think* about science needs to be clarified so that it can be integrated smoothly in exhibition-making
- in the past 15 years, this confusion has polarised into the distracting and counter-productive objects-vs-interactives debate: artists can help dissolve this deadlock
- core problem of 'hard fact' info-science exhibition-making versus complexity and ambiguity evoked by artworks: we need to have both at once with intelligent inter-referentiality: trust both your artist and your audience

## SCIENCE, HISTORY AND ART: A FEW MORE DISTINCTIONS

- I. professional inter-relations between medical practitioners and artists *through* history (from grave robbing to engravers, incl illuminators, pathology atlases, plastic surgery, teaching models)
- II. extension of these practices into *sci-art* (artists and scientists seeking each other out to work together on extending contemporary practices in both areas at once)
- III. artists working *with* and *addressing* history of science and medicine itself (exploring philosophical problems raised in the crucible of historiography on one hand and representation on the other)

## ARTISTS WORKING IN/WITH MUSEOLOGICAL CONVENTIONS: FURTHER DISTINCTIONS

*each of these has very different conditions of production, aesthetic registers and effects*

- I. artists making parody museums or archives in their studios or other spaces (galleries, books, web)
- II. artists exhibiting their work in non-art museums to 'displace' the social or narrative content of subject-specific museums rhetorically
- III. artists working with museums to effect collection interpretation as curators with a difference

## CURATING AND ARTMAKING: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

*"exhibitions ... need to be more clearly perceived as an art form rather than just a communicative strategy."* Ken Arnold in *Museums of Modern Science* (2000)

- though they employ different methodologies and experience different constraints, both are intellectual pursuits which centre around objects and ideas, interrogating the history of ideas self-reflexively through objects and environments and having communication as their ultimate goal
- these are complementary practices and each has networks and skills to complement the other: it's worth thinking about this in long term, deep structure ways, factoring in at the ground floor possible relationships in research, exhibition making and general intellectual growth
- each has methods that are either intangible or so obvious as to be invisible to the practitioner: respecting the former and making the latter clear from the outset is essential to any collaborative project

## SOME DIFFERENT EXISTING MODELS OF INVOLVING ARTISTS IN EXHIBITIONS

- I. *including existent work in exhibitions* you are working on ("loans in"): this makes perfect sense if the piece is perfect for the show, not just a bolt-on to tick an access/education/kudos box; it needs to be something fully integral for you as curator with the entire exhibition and its development
- II. *involving the artist in structuring the exhibition* intellectually, choosing objects, and/or designing it: as with any other professional colleague, due credit and agreed fees are in order -- a consultation is a consultation and not just an informal picking of the brain (remember, you have a salary, s/he may not); this call on artists' skills is made to the place where ideas and objects already meet in their research, their minds and their well-developed practice
- III. *commissioning new work for the show*: this is best done when you know the artist well (develop those relationships!), the issues are already part of your professional discussions, the artist is clearly building on earlier work you have seen delivered, you have a long enough lead time, and they are given wide powers. Absolutely key is both sides taking time to map out for each other the critical path of their practice and find ways to incorporate each others' very real pragmatic needs.

## ... AND A FEW NEW ONES

- identify subjects that have historically been considered difficult to construct exhibitions around and create visual exegeses for -- then invite artists to work with you on developing them
- regularly consult artist colleagues as you would other scholars, curators and museum people
- listen to what artists say they would like to do even if it doesn't appear to fit in to anything you're working on at the time: they could be right and trying to lead you somewhere new and exciting
- when planning infrastructural upgrades, management work-flows, and critical paths for exhibition making fold in advice on needs and practice from artists and lessons from working with them

## SOME NOTES: HOW TO FIND AND WORK WITH ARTISTS FOR BENEFITS MUTUAL & PUBLIC

- who's using your institution? who's coming to your shows and consulting your library, who's referencing your work (overtly or not) in interviews in art magazines and elsewhere? whose artwork has interested you or changed your thoughts about your own work?
- work with artists as respectfully as with any other professional colleagues, keep up to date with artists and their work, meet people, don't just monitor the 'product'
- develop long-term relationships and networks over time
- time and money are essential: this is not cheap intellectual sub-contracting
- not all artists automatically know what they are doing just because they are famous
- not all good artists will necessarily automatically work well with you or your institution: be flexible and informative as you would with any new colleague; develop induction manuals etc for them
- are you asking your artist the right question? some artists work better to a brief, others prefer to collaborate, and still others to be left alone: don't try to standardise a relationship
- co-author a brief with the artist: your artist is not just another interactive designer
- work on a clear list of practical needs and expectations on both sides from the outset of a project, making time and space for each others' procedures and methods in an agreed critical path
- think about what you have to offer (infrastructure, collections, funds, publishing, library, image resources, networks, etc) and then offer it as you would to any other colleagues you respect
- curating, especially at larger institution level, is subject to museological best practice models which often hamper its effectiveness as much as help; artmaking is unused to having these strictures passed on and, like curating, can fail under the weight -- try to help each other resist
- evaluation methods are presently too crude to deal with the benefits of artworks -- which essentially invite people to think rather than telling them what to think: there has to be leeway