On how to design an exhibition

An interview with exhibition designer Matthew Yokobosky

March 21, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2686 words.

Tags: Design, Beginnings, Inspiration, Process, Production.

How did you get started in exhibition design?

When I first moved to New York, around 1987, I got a job at the Whitney Museum in the film and video department because my degree was in film and design. I was very much interested in becoming a film curator at that point. In the evenings I started doing set and costume design at a place called La MaMa, an experimental theater, which is on the Lower East Side. For about two years I was doing costume and some set design for them. One of those productions won a Bessie award for Visual Design. After I won that award I went into work the next day at the Whitney, my day job, and they said, "Did you ever think about doing exhibition design?"

At that point I hadn't really thought about it because my focus was really on being a film curator. I ended up spending 12 years at the Whitney and then I came to the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. Over that 12-year period while I was curating and working on the film and video series at the Whitney I would also do side design projects. It was kind of like freelancing at your actual job. I would do exhibition design in addition to curation.

When I came to Brooklyn I had a meeting with Arnold Lehman, who was the director of the museum at the time. He wasn't so much interested in film and video, but he was very interested in exhibition design. So I made a little bit of a career switch and focused more on the design part.

David Bowie is, March 2, 2018 through July 15, 2018, installation view.(Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

I'm sure that every exhibition presents you with its own specific challenges, but do you have a general way that you approach envisioning and designing a museum exhibition?

Well, first of all, when you start a project typically you're working with a checklist. I usually ask the curator to put everything in a narrative sequence that they're envisioning the exhibition to be seen in. So much of it depends on how far out that you know that the exhibition is going to happen, how much time you have to plan.

I'd say about nine months to a year beforehand, you have a pretty good sense of which gallery it's going to land in. At that point you can start taking the checklist and the dimensions and see how it fills the space. At that point I am also looking at the experience of what happens when you walk in the room and what happens as you're walking through it. Is it going to be the kind of exhibition where you meander through and walk around sculpture? Is it a painting exhibition where all of your attention is focused on walls? It varies from show to show.

I'm very keen on thinking about how the visitor is walking through the space. That's very important to me. It's kind of like choreography. You need to think, "They're going to go *here*, and then they're going to walk *here* and they're going to see *this* and they're going to walk through this doorway and see *this*." It's almost as if you're making a small city where you have people walking through streets and different avenues, all of them having the experience of looking at something. Where do you want them to look?

There's so many factors at play in how that works. You have to understand the psychology of how people move. You almost need to be able to predict the way people will think as they view things.

I'm always surprised. I've often had people who decide to walk through exhibitions in reverse, which is funny to me. They want to see the end first. Then they'll go back to the beginning. I've had critics walk through an entire exhibition in reverse and only then see it from the beginning. You have odd things that happen like that. You do need to think about your show looking good, both forwards and backwards.

Different shows have different personalities. You have to think about the kind of mood that you're setting. I find that a lot of times when people are really excited to come and see a big exhibition, they almost want extra material right at the beginning. Sometimes you want to front-load a show so that people feel like they get enough history before they get too far into it.

David Bowie is, March 2, 2018 through July 15, 2018, installation view.(Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

You don't want to totally create a bottleneck, but sometimes you want the entrance to be a little bit full so that people feel like they're getting enough information before they go to the next gallery. I've had the experience where you want to do that elegant entrance, that one signature piece, and while it's elegant it's not always the most engaging entrance for the general public.

I've often heard people say that the best design is almost invisible—it directs your experience, but it doesn't call attention to itself. I wondered if that was particularly true with exhibition design, where you wouldn't necessarily want people to be more focused on the design of the exhibition than the actual work.

It's always a little bit tricky being an exhibition designer for a show because you do want people to focus on the art more than the structure that's holding it all together. It's a delicate balance because on one hand you do want to have it look elegant and you want the gallery to have a certain mood and feeling, but at the end of the day you need to come away from it knowing about the subject matter that you were there to see. It's a fine balance. You can definitely tip the scale very easily with the wrong color or an architecture that's too bold.

You've been working on preparing the *David Bowie is* exhibit for the Brooklyn Museum. When you're preparing for an exhibit like this, which not only features one of the great creative icons of our time, but encompasses many decades of work, how do you even approach it?

When I first found out that we were going to do the project, I spent a lot of time with the exhibition checklist, which tells you about all of the items it will include. The show had been on a tour around the world and Bowie had always hoped the tour would end in New York. It has had a long history already. I had already seen two versions of it over the years. Even though I'd seen it, it still takes a while to make sense of all the material. There are over 400 pieces in the show. I'm also a huge Bowie fan, so there was that as well.

David Bowie is, March 2, 2018 through July 15, 2018, installation view.(Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

After I'd familiarized myself with what the show would include, I started laying the work into the galleries, on the walls, et cetera, and it became more like a design experience I might have with any other show. You start seeing pieces that resonate for you for whatever reason and those kind of become touchpoints from which that you can design from.

You have to let yourself go in that zone and typically getting in that zone for me just means making sure I have the right snack and the right music playing on my headphones. Once I have a mood and a zone going and I'm focusing in on the work, you find a piece or two that might suggest wall shapes or colors or how you might want to walk through the space. I knew Bowie's work very well. There were already pieces that I knew I wanted to work with.

For something like the Bowie show, are there very specific rules about what you can and can't do with the pieces or how you show them? How much freedom do you have?

This is a show that has already been on tour around the world, there are some elements to it that have toured with it throughout the whole thing. Typically, when you're working on an art exhibition one of the documents that you get at the beginning is a conservation report. The conservation report gives you a lot of guidelines about light levels and what environment that the art pieces have to be in. Does it require a micro-climate? Does it need a mount? If it has a mount, what kind of surface does it go on? These reports involve a lot of information that needs to be absorbed and there was certainly tons of that kind of information in regards to the Bowie show. I don't want to say that it limits your freedom, but it does dictate the way that certain things are going to go. Even if you'd wanted to do it a different way, you often can't. Creating a big museum show can be like solving an elaborate puzzle or working out an elaborate algebra equation where certain variables just can't be changed.

In my fantasy version of your job, designing a show would involve lots of little dioramas and maquettes where you're moving things around like little chess pieces. In reality I'm guessing that a lot of your design work happens inside a computer?

Now it does. When I first started out doing set design and then exhibition design, I was still working on a drafting table. I started out by drawing things. If I was doing a set or an exhibition I was creating things that were like blueprints. Then for costume design I was both drawing what I thought the costume would look like as well as going in and making the patterns for them to be sewn and cut. At some point in the late '90s everything started to switch from being hand-drawn to being drawn in the computer. I worked on a program called Mini Mac, which later became Vector Works. Today, of course, all of the design work happens in the computer.

David Bowie is, March 2, 2018 through July 15, 2018, installation view.(Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

Back in the '80s we were definitely using maquettes and sizing all of the images and moving them around on walls and stuff. A lot of the work I've done here at the Brooklyn Museum has been in the computer, but occasionally you do work with a curator that wants to have a model. You have to take a minute to remember, "Oh my god. How do we make those?"

I'm curious about the relationship between an exhibition designer and the curator. I'm assuming that could either be a very symbiotic collaboration or potentially be a very fraught and complicated relationship if you aren't on the same page creatively.

Well, what's probably unusual about me is that I have also been a curator. I do understand what they're doing. I rely a lot on the curator I'm working with to both give me the history as well as the perspective on why this particular piece is important for the exhibition. I depend on their connoisseurship about this kind of art. There's just so many different types of art and periods of art history that you can't possibly be an expert on all of them, so you really do have to rely on the curator that you're working with to give you enough information to work from.

The curator's really the person that's out there doing the research and finding the art and getting the loans and weaving together all those different pieces in order to create a narrative that tells a story for the visitor. When I am asked to do the exhibition design, I'm taking all those components of art and history that the curator has researched and brought together and I weave it together to tell the visual narrative, which hopefully matches their vision.

Curators are all a little bit different. Some of them are very much interested in the writing process. Some of them are very keen to work on the writing for the labels of the didactic panels. Sometimes you work with a curator who's a little bit more intuitive and it's all about, "Oh, move that painting a half-inch left" and they need to make a lot of little subtle shifts. It becomes much more of that kind of, "I need to stand in front of it in order to see how it looks together." Some of them are more interested in being historians, some of them are more interested in purely visual aesthetics. Some bend more towards one than the other.

Are you typically the person that has to be like, "No, we can't do that. That piece can't be hung that way" or, "I'm sorry, that just looks bad"?

Well, sometimes you have to be the warden for the conservation department. You do have to sometimes say, "No. They said that you can't do that with that piece" or, "No, it has to be in this box" or, "No, you can't put more light on it." That happens a lot with color photography and works on paper because those have very strict light levels. It's a little bit like if you had a newspaper and you left it on your windowsill too long. It turns yellow. Paper and color photography have so many restrictions. That's always the work that everybody always wants to put more light on and you can't.

For people that are interested specifically in exhibition design, do most people enter this world in the guise of being an apprentice or an assistant to someone? How does it work?

Yeah. I went to the University of Pittsburgh. My senior year I did an internship at the Carnegie Museum and I was interning there for about a year. When I graduated

they offered me a job in the film and video department and that's how my career started in museums. I highly recommend doing an internship, mostly just as a way to find out what you like and what you're good at. You might surprise yourself. Back when I was in school you didn't see much offered in the way of exhibition design, but now there are lots of courses about designing art exhibitions. It's a field that has really boomed over the past couple of years, which makes me happy.

David Bowie is, March 2, 2018 through July 15, 2018, installation view.(Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

Matthew Yokobosky recommends:

Music is a big part of how I work. I would say that the music I've probably listened to the most over my whole career, the albums I've listened to the most repeatedly, are the Talking Heads' _Remain in Light_ and Grace Jones' _Nightclubbing_. I don't know why, but both of those albums just get my brain going. I'm also definitely inspired by video and film. There is a video by Philippe Decouflé, a French choreographer, called _Codex_. I can't tell you how many times I've watched that, but I find it so inspiring. In the same way, I also love Jean-Paul Goude and Grace Jones' _One Man Show_. The music is great, of course, but what a brilliant piece of filmmaking that is. Since working on the Bowie exhibit I've been revisiting everything over the past few months, but when people ask me about my favorite of his records I have to say it's probably _Scary Monsters_. Everyone should own that one.

Name
Matthew Yokobosky

Vocation
Designer
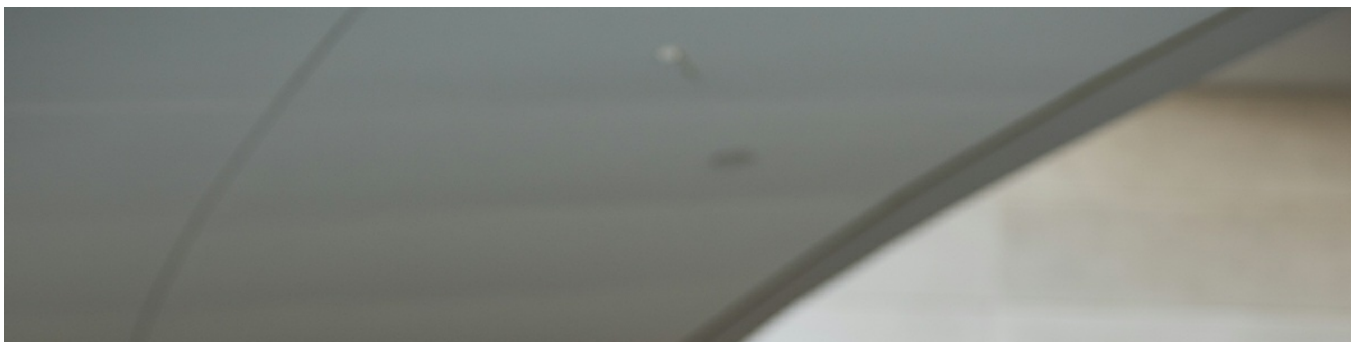
Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum/Jonathan Dorado