The Evolution of Exhibit Labels

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Abstract

Over the last thirty years, museums around the world have witnessed radical innovations in the development and evolution of exhibit labels. Despite these developments, absent in Anglophone museology literature is a sustained discussion about how the best practices and typologies of labels function in the modern museum setting, and specifically, how labels have changed or evolved over time. This paper sets out to stimulate this discussion, illustrating the relevance of the developments in exhibit labelling in the context of two current Canadian exhibitions: the Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey exhibit at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art and the Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker installation at the University of Toronto Art Centre.

Exhibitions that grapple with new ways of presenting interpretive labels must function as much more than just disconnected assortments of text panels. They must find nuanced possibilities of presenting new label types and practices that meet visitors’ ever-changing needs and concerns.

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, museums around the world have witnessed radical innovations in the development and evolution of exhibit labels. With the rise of New Museology and the democratization of the modern museum setting, the exhibit label has become a powerful communication tool. Despite these developments, absent in Anglophone museum studies literature is a sustained discussion about how the best
practices and typologies of labels function in the modern museum setting, and specifically, how labels have changed or evolved over time. This paper is intended to stimulate this discussion. As such, it will consist of three separate yet interconnected sections. First, a brief examination of the major historical movements and trends in the development of exhibit labels since the late 1970s will be provided. The second section will explore the best practices for labelling exhibits, followed by an analysis of various interpretive label typologies. The final, and most important section, will examine two current exhibition case-studies: the Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey exhibit at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art and the Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker installation at the University of Toronto Art Centre. I will scrutinize how each of these exhibitions compares and contrasts the best practices and typologies of labelling in light of the discussion in section two. The intent of this paper is not to assess and evaluate the success of recent developments in labelling from the standpoint of visitorship or audience responses. Rather, my interest lies in conceptualizing how museum labels have developed and evolved over the last thirty years at making labels consumable by making them more accessible (Faron, 2003). However, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the changes within the field of exhibit labelling began to affect the fundamental make-up of museum exhibition and interpretation.

Prior to the 1970s, museums featured labels and didactic panels that were text-heavy, static in type, and difficult to read. In many instances, curators and exhibition design team specialists spent a great deal of time choosing objects for exhibition, often leaving labels as hurried afterthoughts (Fruitman & DuBro, 1979). Moreover, labels were usually written by curators – subject matter specialists with little or no training as writers. As a result, interpretive labels were frequently subjective and authoritative, written in specialized, technical jargon that was insurmountable for average visitors, and in many cases, habitually ignored. Paulette McManus (1989), a Communications Consultant in Hertfordshire, England notes in her article, “Oh, Yes, They Do: How Museum Visitors Read Labels and Interact With Exhibit Texts”, that the generally accepted idea that “people don’t read labels” was a sentiment frequently voiced at gatherings of museum professionals. As well, during the late 19th century, many museum practitioners disparaged the role of exhibit labels. They believed in the value of the uninterpreted “non-verbal language of real things” (Schouten, 1987, as cited in McManus 1989). Exhibit labels were almost always lengthy and written in small typeface, overshadowing the objects being described. In many cases, labels were written in a one-to-
many form of communication, leaving little room for visitor appreciation, interaction, dialogue, and personal edification. Throughout the 1970s, poor labelling caused many museums and cultural institutions around the world to function as nothing more than mere warehouses for beautiful objects.

However, as Serrell (1996) asserts in Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, “notable improvements in interpretive labels have occurred in exhibitions in all types of museums since the 1970s” (p. xii). Audience evaluation introduced the process of “dialogue” into the museum-visitor relationship. As museums began to respond to audiences in earnest, the “labels voice”, the intent of the label, was redirected to include the visitor (Faron, 2003). Thus, labels have evolved from a textbook-like, scientific tone to one that is casual, friendly and conversational, and engages a flow of communication that is objective and open to nuanced interpretations (Faron, 2003).

But what is the inside story? How have interpretive labels been transformed from text-laden, overwhelming, often ignored and abstract panels into highly sought after interactive, colourful, and didactic tools for communication?

The evolution of exhibit or interpretive labels can be seen as the end result of two divergent yet interconnected factors: the increasing democratization of the modern museum, and the rise of New Museology beginning in the middle to late 1980s. Breaking away from “museology”, which was based primarily on the specific relation of man to reality, New Museology regarded museums as social institutions with political agendas (Teather, 1991). Built on the work of Georges Henri Riviere, founding father of the eco-museum movement, and a number of French and French-Canadian museologists, New Museology advocated that museums integrate the needs of more diverse social groups into their mandates. “The New Museology specifically questions traditional museum approaches to issues of value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity” (Stam, 1993, p.1). Therefore, from the 1980s onward, museums became more democratic, cohesive and integrated institutions, dedicated to the educational and intellectual service of society, and to the development of a global heritage. As a result of the increasing democratization of museums and the simultaneous growth of New Museology and with it, the nuanced importance of communication and education, interpretive labels have come to assume a new role in the modern museum setting. For a generation surrounded by services such as free online encyclopedias in which high-quality information, hierarchically arranged, is on offer 24 hours a day, labels function as powerful tools for communication and the dissemination of knowledge (Faron, 2003). Today, exhibit labels have become much more than “object-identifiers”. They are much shorter in length than they were in the past, and are often enhanced by bold fonts, colour photography and illustrations, and even – on some larger panels – film and video (Faron, 2003). Interpretive labels are multi-layered distribution
systems that can excite visitors about unknown people, places and things. They can call an audience to action, or create new relationships between divergent communities or groups.

But who determines the rules for the language of exhibit label writing? In what ways, if any, can labels forge connections between displays and experiences? How much information is necessary or proper in a given institution? When does interpretation diminish the fundamental nature of an exhibit and place limits on independent judgment and appreciation – qualities which have come to be regarded as central to the educational mandate of museums?

**Current labelling best practices: a brief purview**

Before examining some of the current best practices and typologies in the field of label design that may provide answers to these questions, it is important to note that, as a communication device, the exhibit label is not perfect. Even if educational, cultural, physical and language barriers are set aside, the average museum visitor is apt to encounter at least some obstacles in the comprehension of labels – whether in the form of ambient noise, font size, type design or even label colour (Faron, 2003, p. 31). Nevertheless, as exhibit labels have continued to evolve through the latter half of the 20th century, so too have the methods, practices, values, and typologies associated in their making. As Serrell (1996) asserts, in the last decade scores of articles about labels have been written for museum publications. Discussions, workshops and symposiums around the globe have taught museum workers the importance of the label as an effective and affective communication tool. As well, museum professionals, education staff, and interpreters have learned how to write labels that are shorter, labels that ask questions, and most importantly, labels that foster dialogue and individual meaning-making (Serrell, 1996). For example, in 2004, the American Association of Museums (AAM) organized a conference wherein museum professionals around the world were invited to submit exemplary samples of exhibition writing. The resulting 114 submissions were juried by a panel representing AAM's standing professional committees for audience research and evaluation (CARE), education (EdCom), exhibit design (NAME), and curators (CurCom). Winning entries were displayed at the 2004 AAM annual meeting, along with books and articles about the best practices in exhibition writing (Peterson, 2005).

As the work of Serrell and the numerous submissions to the 2004 AAM conference illustrate, among all museums there are many similarities and shared issues about labels, including size, length, and number of ideas presented, as well as visual resonance, design and intrinsic rewards (Serrell, 1996; Peterson, 2005). However, many museum practitioners believe that what is good for another museum could not possibly be effective in their institution because of intrinsic differences. Nevertheless, there are a number of general best practices that can help museum professionals, interpreters, and label design
specialists in any museum recognize quality and make intelligent decisions about how to create better labels and more effective exhibitions (Serrell, 1996). First, labels must relate to the main idea of the exhibition with clear objectives and focused goals. Some exhibit developers are not thoroughly selective when choosing content for an exhibition, and instead try to tell every story (Serrell, 1996). Interpretive labels are easier to write and make more sense to visitors if the exhibition has a main idea that is unified through a series of focused goals or objectives. As noted by Peterson (2005), “one of the signs of good writing is the ability to find just the right details that tell the story” (p. 42). Moreover, good labels are guided by a strong, cohesive exhibit plan — a theme, story or communication goal — that sets the tone and limits the content (Serrell, 1996). In addition to being guided by a concise exhibit plan with clear goals, label designers must also know and address their audience (Serrell, 1996).

Prior to the 1970s, museum visitors were seen as a diverse group of relatively well-educated, mostly middle-class people seeking a culturally oriented, leisurely social outing. However, the latter half of the 20th century has witnessed an alteration of this trend as museums have become increasingly accessible to ethnic and social minorities. Nevertheless, museum visitors — regardless of their diversity — still have many expectations and needs in common (Serrell, 1996). In order to meet these needs, label designers should carefully analyze museum target audiences through a comprehensive review of visitor surveys, typologies, and focus groups. With the added assistance of educational staff, labels can thus be designed that are cognizant of visitors’ reading levels, educational background, cultural, religious and language barriers, and most importantly, age. “Text should meet visitors’ needs” (Mileham, 2006, p. 19).

Effective labels are brief, simple, clear, and direct. As Sorsby and Horne’s 1980 readability study illustrates, “on average about three-quarters of visitors to museums will be unable to pay attention to at least two-thirds of the labels because the vocabulary and sentence structure are too difficult” (p. 158). Research shows that people’s interest in museum objects is generally diminished by the use of labels that are “too wordy, too worthy or too woolly to do their job of communicating” (Mileham, 2006, p. 18). Thus, labels must synthesize and divide information into smaller, more readable parts. Sometimes a chart or other illustration can replace a label (Fruitman & DuBuro, 1979). Rhetorical questions, statistics or anecdotes can help to enliven labels that are dull and text-heavy. Labels should also use non-exclusionary vocabulary that is understandable to all of the reading public (Williams, 1960). Finally, supplements can help avoid long labels; and handouts, posters, and pamphlets provide visitors with take-away information (Fruitman & DuBro, 1979). As Peterson (2005) asserts, if label length, clarity and readability are just right, visitors can concentrate more on gallery experience. Labels should only use sophisticated concepts when supporting the exhibit’s main idea, always seeking to please the commonest of
common denominators, and providing a range of exhibition experiences in a broadly accessible way (Serrell, 1996).

**Labelling typologies**

In addition to a variety of best practices, the field of interpretive labelling is also informed by label typology. “Every label in an exhibition has a specific purpose that needs to make sense within the organization as a whole” (Serrell, 1996, p. 21). Given the way visitors move through gallery spaces – often in curvilinear paths – labels must also function independently. There are, therefore, many different types of labels, including title labels, master labels, introductory labels, identification labels, subject labels, donor labels and object labels (Miller, 1990). The most important types of interpretive labels are introductory, group and section labels. These labels help organize information and present the exhibition’s rationale for looking the way it does (Serrell, 1996). Moreover, each specific type of label should be distinguished and unified by consistent typeface, and progressive size and colour combinations (Serrell, 1996). Not every museum employs every type of label, and the number of different types of labels will be driven by communication size, goals, budget and other factors. Museums should use no more than 10 different types of labels (Miller, 1990). “Good exhibitions will successfully combine several different types of labels, using them in a consistent manner” (Serrell, 1996, p. 35). Ultimately, there is no universal terminology in museums to identify types of labels. However, regardless of the names they are given, labels should be developed as an integrated system from the title label to group or section labels, and they should all work together (Serrell, 1996).

Although the evolution of exhibit labelling over the past thirty years has given rise to a number of best practices and typologies, it must be noted that the above discussion is but a mere purview of these developments. The field of exhibit labelling is vast and ever-changing; new developments, technologies, ideas, strategies and insights are continually increasing, and expanding the horizon of exhibit labelling in new and exciting ways.

**Best practices and typologies in the real-word: a case-study analysis**

As the above discussion illustrates, there are a number of recurrent themes implicit in the design of effective interpretive labels. But how do these best practices and typologies play out in the real-world of exhibit design? In what ways, if any, can contemporary exhibits explore and expand upon the best practices and typologies for text design? In the analysis that follows, these questions will be considered with regard to two current Canadian exhibitions - the Bigger Better More: The Art of Viola Frey exhibit at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art and the Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker installation at the University of Toronto Art Centre.

**Bigger Better More: The Art of Viola Frey**

In September 2009, Toronto’s Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art opened Bigger, Better,
More: The Art of Viola Frey, the first comprehensive assessment of Frey’s career and legacy since her death in 2004 (Gardiner Museum, n.d.). Born and raised in Oakland, California, Viola Frey (1933-2004) worked in many modes. Her work implements aspects of funk art and elements of social critique that explore the dichotomy of male-female relationships. “Bright, almost garish colors and heavily textured surfaces are an indispensable part of her work, heightening the sense of urgency and tension each piece imparts” (Gardiner Museum, n.d.). The groundbreaking Bigger, Better, More exhibition features twenty-two works in a variety of media from leading public and private collections in the United States, including the Artists’ Legacy Foundation, the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Bigger, Better, More exhibition uses a number of interpretive labels. As a whole, this exhibition makes use of four different label types: title, introductory, identification and object labels. How do these labels conform to, or deviate from, best practices in interpretive labelling? It must be noted that the gallery as a whole conforms to Serrell’s (1996) contention that effective exhibitions should use no more than 10 label types in a consistent manner. With the use of only four types of labels that are evenly employed throughout the gallery, the Bigger, Better, More exhibition provides visitors with clear expectations of what types of labels they will encounter, and how these labels will deliver information. Moreover, upon entering the gallery, visitors are confronted by a large, black-and-white title label that fills almost the entirety of a bright, white, 8-foot wall. In accordance with best practices, this title label is clear, concise and direct, and expands upon the best practices associated with title design. In addition to connecting with the main idea of the exhibition, the enormous size of this label underscores the theme of “big” upon which this exhibition rests, arousing visitors’ interest and curiosity. The text panel provides visitors with a brief biography of Viola Frey that chronicles her life and times as well as some of her recent work in museums around the world. It provides visitors with some insight into the life and inspirations behind the artwork of Frey, placing the installations in the gallery within an easily understandable historical and artistic context. However, this label departs from best practices of text design by virtue of difficult language, small typeface, poor understanding of target audiences, and verbose “chunks” of text-heavy information.

For each of the installations within the gallery there are two labels: object and identification labels. The object labels are quite simple and consist of the artist’s name, geographic location pertaining to development of the work, date and donor information. Identification labels provide the name of the object or piece on display, a description of the materials used, and a brief paragraph describing the methods, techniques, and artistic, historical, and social relevance of each installation. Working in unison, these panels provide excellent additional information for visitors.
While the subject labels are clear and concise, they are written in extremely small font. They are text-heavy, dull, and in many ways overly complex for visitors with no prior knowledge or background in art education. Moreover, there is no attempt to synthesize this dense material or break up its repetitive and dull monotony with illustrations, charts, diagrams or rhetorical questions that can assist visitors in developing their own interpretations of the art on display.

Overall, it is evident that while many of the labels within the Bigger, Better, More exhibit conform to and expand upon best practices for interpretive labelling – such as the use of a large, evocative title label and introductory labels that situate the artwork within a historical context – many of the labels within this exhibit fall short of labelling best practices. Certainly, even though traditional art museums minimize didactic information, keeping it at arms length from the objects (Pekarik 2004), this exhibition must be praised for moving beyond these traditional approaches. However, most of the didactic text panels within this exhibit are extremely wordy and have not taken into account visitors’ reading levels, educational and academic backgrounds, cultural, religious and language barriers and most importantly, age (Milcham 2004). Further, many of these labels are exclusionary and authoritative. By using exclusionary language such as “us” and “we”, the labels do not provide room for individual interpretation.

Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker

Another example of a current Canadian exhibition that at once adheres to, while also deviating from labelling typologies and best practices is the Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker installation at the University of Toronto Art Centre. This exhibit was launched in September of 2009 with the support of the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Chipstone Foundation. Comprised of 22 works, Furniture Meets its Maker is a boundary crossing exhibit that opens up the category of furniture to an unprecedented range of psychological and conceptual content (The University of Toronto, n.d.). Using a variety of furniture, found objects and sculptural techniques, this exhibit displays a series of abstract works that are quite distinct from craft and that are not quite classifiable as design. According to Glenn Adamson, the curator of Furniture Meets its Maker, Peteran has taken the category of furniture, or more precisely, that which he calls the “furnitural,” as a found object in its own right – a thing to be operated upon conceptually, while at the same time left in place (Designboom, n.d.).

Much like the Bigger, Better, More exhibit, Furniture Meets its Maker conforms to the best practices of labelling by using four different types of labels (title, introductory, object and identification) that are – in most cases – applied evenly and consistently throughout the gallery. Moreover, the label typologies in this gallery work in unison, and are guided by a strong, cohesive exhibit plan that sets the tone and
limits their content (Serrell, 1996). Entering the exhibition space, visitors first encounter the title label. In addition to meeting best practices by being concise and direct, this label also uses stylistic elements to expand upon these practices. Through the use of medium-sized, extra shiny black print on an even larger, and even brighter white wall – amidst the dimly lit galleries to the right and left – the extremely high-gloss letters in this title label dazzlingly jump off the wall, suggesting the spectacular nature of the art about to be showcased. Then, upon entering the gallery, visitors see the introductory label. Whereas the introductory label in the Bigger, Better, More exhibit departed from best practices of text design as a result of difficult language, small typeface, poor understanding of target audiences and text-saturated content the introductory label in the Furniture Meets its Maker exhibit adheres more rigorously to best practices for label design. It does not simply present a biographical overview of the author in an attempt to provide a historical context for the art on display, but alerts visitors to how Peteran goes about creating his art: with detailed – yet concise – descriptions of how his work may or may not fit into established contemporary genres of art. As well, this label uses direct quotes from Peteran himself, making the information presented objective and first-hand, rather than subjective and second-hand. Furthermore, the text in this label is not only broken down into short, coherent sentences and paragraphs, it is also written in an inclusive tone that is easily understandable for most audiences, even those with no art education. In accordance with best practices, this exhibit is cognizant of its audience’s needs and shared understandings, and it speaks directly to its visitors (Peterson, 2005).

In addition to title and introductory labels, this gallery also makes use of object and identification labels. Some of the displays have object labels, while others feature identification labels. In keeping with best practices, the object labels are brief and concise, providing title, artist name, dates and donor information. Furthermore, even though these inserts precisely fit the category of “tomb-stone” labels (Pekarik, 2004) most commonly seen in art galleries, the labels in fact expand on best practices, as the creativity of their placement in close proximity to the objects on display make them seem fundamentally interesting. In contrast, the identification labels provide title, artist name, date and donor information as well as a brief description of the impetus behind object creation which is prefaced by a one sentence quote from Peteran himself. While the words of Peteran are effective in imbuing the objects with “aura”, authenticity, and added meaning, the labels in the exhibit as a whole seem disjointed. Why is it that some pieces only have brief object labels, while others feature lengthy identification labels? Nevertheless, unlike the Bigger, Better, More exhibit that featured object and identification labels written in small, tightly-spaced font, these labels are written in a larger typeface that is legible and easy to read, and does an effective job of synthesizing content-rich information.
With regard to interpretation, the panels throughout the Furniture Meets its Maker exhibit conform quite effectively to best practices. In addition to relating the objects to the main theme of the exhibition, the language used in the labels is inclusive, and there are no difficult words upon which visitors with lower reading comprehension may stumble. As well, the labels lack a sense of institutional voice and in many cases provide visitors with a variety of opinions and ideas about Peteran’s work; this allows for textual gaps whereby visitors can create their own individual interpretation of the art on display. The use of words such as “may” or “can” allows the labels to stand out as informative and educational opinions rather than definitive pronouncements.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a brief examination of the major historical movements and trends in the development of exhibit labels since the late 1970s. Couched within a larger historical discussion of the democratization of the modern museum setting and the simultaneous rise of New Museology, this paper not only illustrates that interpretive labels have indeed evolved over the last thirty years, but it also points to the fact that this evolution has resulted in the development of a number of labelling best practices and typologies. Nevertheless, despite the dramatic evolution of exhibit labels over the last thirty years, the practice of label writing has retained many of the tried, tested and true methods, underscoring the fact that earlier museum practices still have some sway in the modern museum setting of today. However, on the whole, as the comparative analysis of the Bigger, Better, More exhibit and the Furniture Meets its Maker installation have exemplified, it is evident that interpretive labels are beginning to explore and expand upon best practices and to create labels that are different yet effective. It is precisely these differences that need more attention in museology. There is much to be learned not only from following labelling best practices and typologies, but also in deviating from them. Exhibitions that grapple with new ways of presenting interpretive labels must ensure that these labels function as much more than mere disconnected assortments of text panels. They must find nuanced possibilities of presenting innovative label types and practices that meet visitors’ constantly evolving needs and concerns. Ultimately, the future of exhibit labelling must involve reaching out to more people with more diverse demographic characteristics. Only then will museums be truly educational and effective social institutions (Serrell, 1996). Good labels as well as open-minded professionals are essential in this effort.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Chris Castle, University of Toronto, MMST Professor and editor of Museum Education Monitor (MEM), for preliminary research guidance. Also, special thanks to Diane Wolfe, Director of Education & Programs at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, and to Matthew Brower, curator at the University of Toronto Art Centre.
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