

Back to basics

Ken Arnold and Thomas Söderqvist reveal their Dogme-style manifesto for creating engaging science, technology and medicine exhibitions

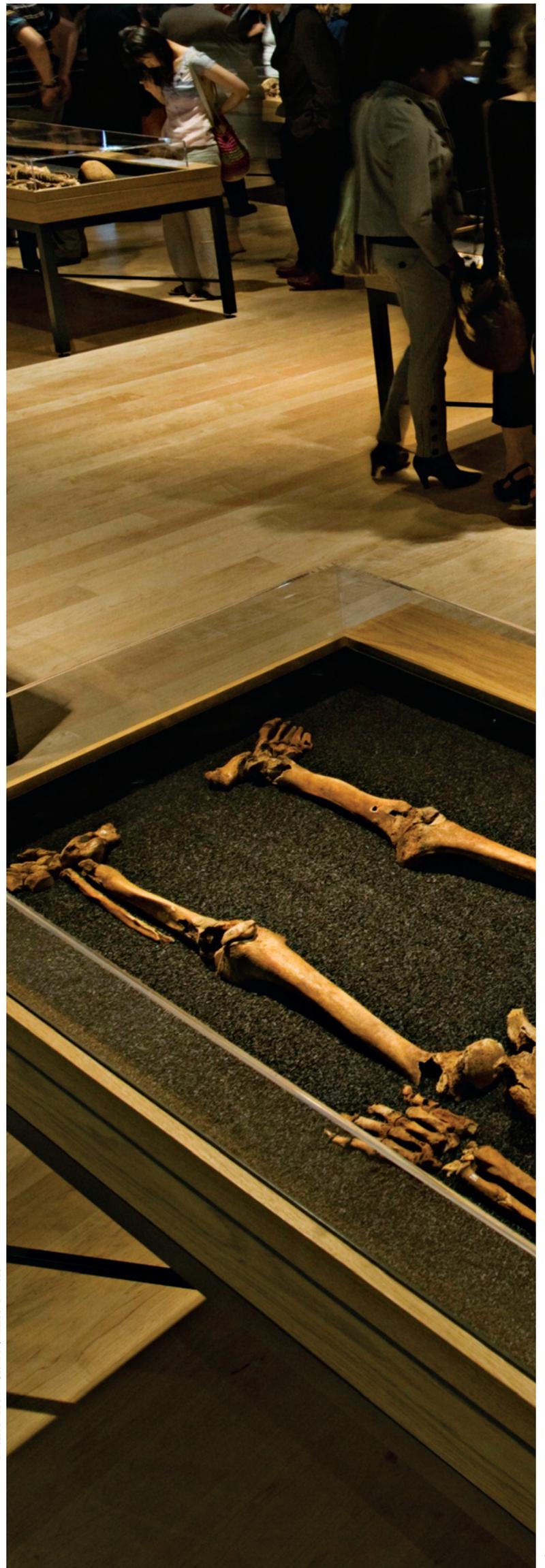
Just over 15 years ago, Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg spearheaded Dogme 95, a manifesto to purify the art of film-making. The aim was to engage audiences more profoundly and make sure they weren't distracted by over-production. The Dogme manifesto ruled out special effects, post-production changes and other tricks in order to focus on the story and the performances.

Since then, writers, theatre directors and other arts practitioners have all found inspiration in Dogme 95's back-to-basics philosophy.

Dogme has been criticised, as have some of the films made according to its rules, but as exhibition producers, this classic vow of chastity has inspired us as a way of guiding and sharpening the creative practice of making science, technology and medicine exhibitions. ▶

Human skeletons from the Wellcome Collection, London

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These rules have been written and published with almost indecent speed. They are deliberately provocative prompts for further discussion.

This manifesto is not a definitive set of working proposals, but a draft, which will no doubt be modified and sharpened through challenge and feedback. And anyone who knows the institutions we are based at will be aware that the exhibitions we have presided over have often not followed one or more of these rules.

This manifesto is almost reference-free, but this does not mean we think the ideas are purely our own. There are vast bodies of literature on science communication, exhibition making, art history and museology; we have read some of this literature and been influenced by it. We also have learned much from the museums we have visited.

Paintings by Jane Gifford on display at the Wellcome Collection's Asleep and Dreaming exhibition (2007/8)

1. Exhibitions should be research-led, not a form of dissemination

Curators should use exhibitions to find things out (for themselves and for their visitors) and not just regurgitate what is already known. Good curators are inspired and imaginative researchers who find and then build on the investigations of experts and colleagues, juxtaposing varied understandings about their chosen topic. They add their own insights and gradually come up with new ideas and perspectives.

2. A scientist should always be involved in the exhibition, a technologist if it is about technology

Don't shy away from drawing on real expertise in interpreting a topic or finding exhibits. But this is not to say that the aim of the exhibition is simply to give voice to the views of



these experts. They are not, nor should they be encouraged to see themselves as, the curators, but it is vital that their perspectives are present in the final exhibition.

3. Be clear about exhibitions being “multi-authored”

Exhibitions emerge from curatorial collaborations between experts and designers. But a show’s funders, the institutional context and other stakeholders have a bearing on the final outcome; it should be possible for exhibition visitors to find out about these influences. The project teams who make exhibitions deserve to be credited. Those responsible for the show not only need to take a bow, they also need to be held responsible for its contents and impact.

4. Use only original material

Exhibitions should engage audiences with original material rather than reproductions and props. If you cannot

Arnold and Söderqvist: our inspirational shows

Thomas Söderqvist



“The Danish Museum of Art & Design borrowed a gamma scanner (see p27) from us for its 2004 Industrial Icons show. Its display opened our eyes to the aesthetic dimension of contemporary medical technology.

My favourites from our own museum are Oldetopia and Primary Substances (2009). I’ve also been inspired by Berlin’s Neues Museum for the beautiful use of its rooms.”
Thomas Söderqvist is the professor of the history of medicine and director of the Medical Museion, Copenhagen



Ken Arnold



“Out of the Wellcome Collection’s exhibitions, I’d say my favourites are Skeletons (2008), From Atoms to Patterns (2008) and Sleeping and Dreaming (2007/8). If I’m encouraged to be less self-serving, I’d choose Eyes, Lies and Illusions (2004/5), and Spectacular Bodies from the Hayward Gallery, London, and L’ame au corps (1994) at the Grand Palais, Paris, and a show on Walker Evans’s postcard collection (2009),

at the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

One show I really admired was Traffic Art: Rickshaw Paintings from Bangladesh at the Museum of Mankind (1988-1991).”

Ken Arnold is the head of public programmes at the Wellcome Collection in London. He is a visiting professor in medical science communication and museology at the Medical Museion in Copenhagen



Top right: Thomas Söderqvist admires Berlin’s Neues Museum, shown here displaying Nefertiti. Above right: Spectacular Bodies at the Hayward Gallery, London, is among Ken Arnold’s favourite exhibitions

illustrate a topic with original artefacts, images and documents, ask yourself if an exhibition is the best way to make the point. Models, replicas and reproductions can be shown, but only if this is the point of showing them. Reproductions of artworks should not be used, unless the work’s natural medium is “facsimile” – for example, digital photographs. The use of scientific and medical images raises complicated questions, such as what is the “original” format of a microscopic image of a cell? Most scientific images today are minted as digital data, and their final appearance invariably owes much to enhancements and cropping. How this material should be displayed and labelled needs consideration. It is often better to leave it out all together.

5. Never show ready-made science

Focus on the processes of science: science in the making; ►

the triumph of discovery; the frustration and blind alleys explored along the way. Also, look at the social and cultural processes of scientific ideas becoming accepted and embedded.

6. Jealously guard a place for mystery and wonder

Exhibitions provide opportunities to explore topics in ways that bring new light to sometimes forgotten or less-well understood aspects of medicine, science, technology and their histories. But this urge to demystify subjects should not be allowed to render exhibitions earnestly didactic. Deliberately include some exhibits about which less, rather than more, is known – curious exhibits that just cannot completely be accounted for. Visitors should leave exhibitions wanting to find out more.

7. Reject most exhibition ideas

Exhibitions represent the meeting point between subjects and material culture, and can be approached from either end – themes or objects first, or a mixture of the two. But often, topics that seem promising will not be worth developing because there simply aren't good enough objects with which to explore or support them. Similarly, many areas of material culture end up just not being interesting enough to make a show about. Too often, exhibitions are made from empty ideas of stupid objects. It is worth searching for a topic and a set of objects that harmoniously amplify and mutually enrich each other.

8. Leave out as much as possible

Less is usually more in exhibitions. Visitors will remember and enjoy looking at 10 carefully chosen things more than a 100 that are reasonably well selected. The most important aspect of an exhibition is its outer boundaries, which keep out the mass of distractions that lie beyond. In the digital era, a core value of a museum exhibition is that it makes its point through displaying a few selected original objects.

9. Embrace the showbusiness of exhibitions

Audiences come to exhibitions in their leisure time and deserve to be lifted out of themselves. They will respond to the drama of the best exhibits, displays, design, writing and lighting. Make sure that all of this is done well and given the greatest polish. This will enhance the presence of the objects and the impact of the ideas. Don't be ashamed to admit that making exhibitions is, in part, a matter of putting on a show.

10. Celebrate the ephemeral quality of exhibitions

Catalogues, web-presence and filmed versions of exhibitions can lengthen the shadows cast by exhibitions, but they will never come close to keeping alive the actual experience of visiting a show. This

is an important part of the magic of exhibitions. Like good pieces of theatre, they gain much of their energy by being around for a limited time and then disappearing. The fact that they are time-limited gives their makers a degree of freedom to experiment and be daring. Grasp it!

11. Make exhibitions true to the geography of their venues

The principle is that knowledge is "situated" – the context in which we contemplate and acquire it can seem as important as the ideas or facts themselves. Exhibition makers need to think hard about how to work with the "place" of an exhibition. Consider what is lost in touring an exhibition where the subject becomes detached from the local context. The country, the city, the venue, the room, and the set and design of an exhibition, even the showcases and the orientation of individual objects – all have a bearing on the meanings that audiences derive from them.

12. Avoid artificial lighting

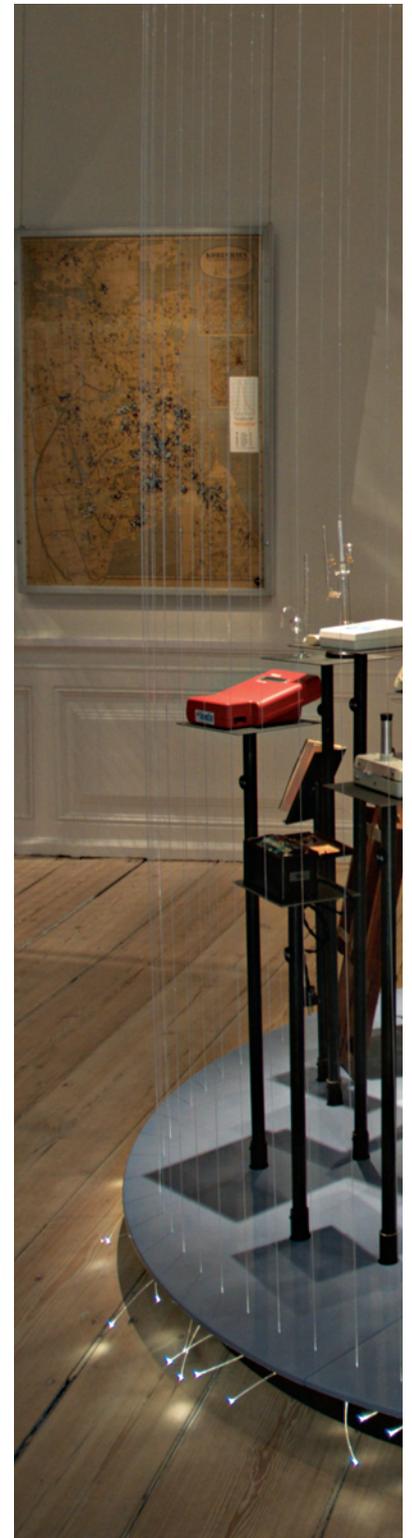
Use natural light where possible. Start with the light available and build up from it. If possible, reveal the windows and keep the doors open. Let the natural layout of the building be apparent, make it clear where you have introduced false walls. This will enable visitors to keep a sense of where they are. And don't fall into the trap of imagining that the background for an exhibition has either to be a neutral black box or a pristine white cube. Ideally, a show should look and feel very different on a midsummer morning to a winter evening.

13. Always involve more than one sense

It is impossible for visitors to turn off their non-visual senses in an exhibition – they will hear, touch and smell things no matter what. So make sure that some of the tactile, audio, or olfactory experiences of an exhibition are curated. Exhibitions work by teasing their visitors into thinking that they could get close enough to what they see to touch it, even while making sure they don't. But curators should think about how to introduce at least a few objects that visitors can touch. Never use artificial sounds or odours, but try hard to find ways to enhance the audio and olfactory qualities of the original objects, getting visitors to use their ears and noses.

14. Make exhibitions for inquisitive adults

If you aim at educationally under-achieving primary school children, it will be impossible to engage anyone else (and you are unlikely to engage even your target audience). Many children and teenagers are keenly attracted to adult culture, but very few adults see the attraction of young material. Never make exhibitions for educational purposes – other media and methods are more effective. It's also worth bearing in mind



Right: Abdul Mamoon and Syed Ahmed Hossain's painted rickshaw, shown in Traffic Art at the Museum of Mankind, London (1988-1991), one of Ken Arnold's favourite shows





that exhibitions are, by their nature, a “childish” medium, bringing out playfulness in all of us. This should be encouraged, but to focus deliberately on young audiences reaps diminishing returns.

15. Remember that visitors ultimately make their own exhibitions

Some visitors might not be interested in reading what the curators write, while others might not look at many objects. Some will be interested in aspects of a topic that the curators might not have come across. Because of this, when an exhibition opens, it is only ever the second or third draft of an idea that will, through revision, reach maybe its eighth or ninth incarnation by the time it closes. Exhibitions should be alive, and change is a vital part of life. Even in the most “stable” shows, lights will need adjusting and labels redrafting. An exhibit might even have to be removed or replaced. More radically, some exhibitions should be deliberately half-finished, or set up so that updates can be added halfway through.

16. Make exhibitions the jumping off place for further engagement

Good exhibitions are the point of departure for a longer relationship. The value of exhibitions should only partly be judged by analysing how many people come, how long they spent in a show and what they think of it. On this basis alone, most exhibitions are foolishly expensive ventures, particularly in these cash-strapped times. Don’t forget that, just occasionally, exhibitions can really change visitors’ lives and this is worth a lot. Effective exhibitions can also bring in new objects to museums, have an impact on recruitment, add to shop sales, improve the organisation’s reputation, and provide a context for corporate celebrations. There is a virtual avalanche of cultural capital that can flow from them: this should be valued from the start.

17. Don’t be afraid to bend, break or reinvent the rules

Above right:
Gamma scanner at
the *Industrial Icons*,
Danish Museum of Art
& Design, Copenhagen
(2004).

Above: instruments
for measuring bodily
functions at the
2009 *Split and Splice*
exhibition staged by
the Medical Museion,
Copenhagen.