

Don't Ask for the Mona Lisa

Guidelines for academics
on how to propose, prepare,
and organise an exhibition



Edited by Heather Birchall and Amelia Yeates

Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements <i>Heather Birchall and Amelia Yeates</i>	4
Introduction <i>Heather Birchall</i>	5
Proposing, Planning, and Hanging an Exhibition <i>Heather Birchall and Laura MacCulloch</i>	6
Types of Exhibition	6
What Institution Should I Approach?	7
How to Propose an Exhibition	8
What Happens Next?	10
Roles within Museums and Galleries	11
Installing the Exhibition	12
Interpretation	17
Exhibition Opening and Events	18
Deinstallation and Evaluation	19
Shared Experiences	
Presenting Contemporary Art in Regional Art Galleries and Centres <i>Dr Outi Remes, Head of Exhibitions, South Hill Park Centre, Bracknell (2007–11)</i>	20
Curating ‘Roman to English’: a Collaborative Experience <i>Professor Catherine Karkov, University of Leeds</i>	23
An Art Historian as Guest Curator: A Personal View <i>Dr Colin Cruise, The School of Art, Aberystwyth University</i>	25
Curating ‘Madness and Modernity’ <i>Dr Leslie Topp, Co-curator of exhibition about mental illness and the visual arts in fin-de-siècle Vienna, interviewed by Michael Davies</i>	29
The Role of the Exhibition Designer <i>Ivor Heal, interviewed by Michael Davies</i>	32
Appendix	
Funding Bodies	36
Notes on Contributors	37

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Introduction

Heather Birchall

The writing and publication of these guidelines was prompted by an event held by the Committee of the Museums & Exhibition Members Group of the Association of Art Historians (AAH), at the AAH Annual Conference at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2009. The session, entitled *Curators Don't Bite*, attracted a large crowd of academics and museum professionals eager to hear about the experiences, both positive and negative, of other academics and curators who had organised exhibitions. Following the event, it was clear that there was a demand for some advice on how to propose exhibitions and, once a show had been agreed, the practicalities of working with curators and other museum staff. This publication therefore aims to provide an introduction to key aspects of exhibition curation, from the early planning stages to the design and opening of the show.

Of course, every exhibition is different and, whilst this document cannot cover every aspect of exhibition planning, it does provide assistance to those organising both small-scale and large exhibitions, as well as offering guidance on working with paintings, sculptures, and contemporary installations. Whether your exhibition is to be held at a large venue, such as Tate Britain, with a team of curators, conservators, and technicians, or a smaller institution with only one or two members of staff, the intention of the authors has been to outline the possible eventualities and responsibilities associated with exhibition planning.

The first part of this publication gives guidance on why and how to propose an exhibition, and offers general advice on exhibition planning and installation. It describes the roles performed by certain staff members in galleries and museums, and the responsibilities they carry when an exhibition is being put together. Some technical terms are highlighted in bold in the main text, and defined in the margin.

The second part comprises case studies by academics who have worked on exhibitions for both large organisations, such as Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and small venues, including the Henry Moore Institute. This section also includes an interview with an exhibition designer that sets out some of the demands of fitting the design around the show's theme, and sheds light on how to create a space that doesn't overwhelm the exhibits.

At a time when museums and galleries are constantly tightening their budgets, a page at the end of this publication includes a list of funders to be approached if the museum's budget cannot cover all the costs associated with the show, such as producing a catalogue or organising an associated study day or conference.

Although the publication is primarily aimed at academics, and also freelancers and students who may be considering putting together an exhibition proposal, we hope that it will also be useful for curators in the early stages of their careers working in a museum or gallery.

Curating ‘Madness and Modernity’

Dr Leslie Topp

Co-curator of a major exhibition about mental illness and the visual arts in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Interviewed by Michael Davies

Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900, held at the Wellcome Collection, London, between 1 April and 28 June 2009, explored the myriad connections that existed in Vienna in the years 1890 to 1914 between psychiatry and mental illness on the one hand, and progressive visual arts (including architecture, design, drawing, and painting) on the other. It was curated by Leslie Topp (Birkbeck) and Gemma Blackshaw (University of Plymouth). A revised version of the exhibition, curated by Blackshaw and Sabine Wieber (University of Glasgow), was mounted at the Wien Museum, Vienna in 2010.

Presented in six thematic sections, the exhibition made connections through surprising, but historically grounded, juxtapositions of objects: Wiener Werkstätte designs with large-scale therapeutic equipment; Egon Schiele self-portraits with images from medical journals; architectural drawings by Otto Wagner with wax heads of patients with neurological conditions, and so on. The show was comprised of about 80 objects borrowed from public and private collections and institutions in Austria, the USA, and the UK. It also included two films commissioned from artist-filmmaker David Bickerstaff.

MD: *When did you first have the idea of mounting an exhibition about Madness and Modernity?*

LT: I began thinking in a very preliminary way that it would be interesting to put together an exhibition on this theme (the links between mental illness, psychiatry, and the progressive visual arts in Vienna c.1900) around 2002. This was partly in reaction to an AAH conference session I chaired in 2001 on mental illness and the visual arts, in which Gemma Blackshaw gave a paper on Egon Schiele’s self-portraits and contemporary photographs of psychiatrically ill men. I had been working for a few years on the connections between modern architecture and psychiatry in Vienna, and it occurred to me that an exhibition would be a good way to bring these two strands of inquiry together. The idea became much more definite when Gemma got involved, and we applied in 2003 for an AHRC project grant with the exhibition as a major outcome. The grant allowed us to put together a team to work on the exhibition, including Sabine Wieber as curatorial adviser and Nicky Imrie as researcher.

MD: *Why the Wellcome? What other institutions did you think might have been interested?*

LT: The Wellcome’s mission, to explore the connections between medicine, health, art, and culture, fitted perfectly with the theme of the exhibition. We did approach several other more mainstream art institutions (including the Hayward) initially, since we felt the show was really ‘about’ art, and worried that it might be marginalised (and also that it would be very difficult to get big fine-art loans) if it was shown at a science or medicine museum. But, during the course of our work



on the exhibition, the Wellcome Trust opened its new spaces, and it became clear that they were taken seriously as an art institution, so our worries were unfounded.

MD: *What stage were you at with your idea when you first contacted the Wellcome?*

LT: We had preliminary discussions with the Wellcome in 2004, but didn't come back to them until 2005, when the plans for the exhibition were very well developed and we had a detailed proposal and loan list in place.

MD: *How did you present your ideas to the Wellcome? Which illustrations or suggestions for exhibits (if any) were the most successful in persuading the institution to come on board?*

LT: We presented our ideas in the form of an illustrated proposal, which consisted of an introduction, floor plan, and details of each section within the show. We also presented a 'wish list' that was divided into sections and gave details of the location of objects. A commentary on any contacts made so far with lenders, as well as an assessment of how likely it was that we would get the respective loans, was also provided at this early stage. I feel that the fact the proposal was well developed worked in our favour. Images of loan objects, and the clear and specific theme for the display were also important in persuading them. The Wellcome had provided us beforehand with a floor plan of the space, and we included a schematic plan for the exhibition in our proposal – at the same time making it clear that we were very open to ideas from the Wellcome curators and the exhibition designers.

MD: *How much input did you have in the design process? How did the finished exhibition compare with your initial concept?*

LT: The Wellcome solicited bids from external specialist exhibition designers (teams of 3D (architectural) and 2D (graphic) designers) for the exhibition

Madness and Modernity, Wellcome Collection, installation view (© Wellcome Library, London).

design, and we had a significant say in the selection of the team that was eventually chosen. We then worked closely in a team with the two designers (Calum Storrie and Lucienne Roberts), the senior curator of the Wellcome (James Peto), and the Wellcome's exhibition coordinator (Jane Holmes), to refine the plans for the exhibition. The finished product was close to our initial concept – the main differences were the result of not being able to secure certain important loans. Collaboration with the designers went extremely well, and we both felt that their interventions improved the exhibition in several ways.

MD: *How long did the process take from start to finish? What changes or stages were necessary along the way?*

LT: It took seven years from the initial idea to the mounting of the exhibition. We revised our plans numerous times, especially in terms of the size of the exhibition, and the number of sections and objects – these revisions reflected changes in our thinking but also represented responses to the different missions, preferences, and physical facilities of the institutions to which we proposed the exhibition. So, for instance, we de-emphasised contextual objects (e.g. therapeutic machinery) in proposals to more conventional art venues, but stressed their importance in our proposal to the Wellcome.

MD: *How did you agree the allocation of responsibilities for the project between yourselves and the Wellcome?*

LT: The senior curator drew up a contract and consulted us on it – basically we were responsible for curatorial decisions, locating loan objects, drafting loan letters, and writing wall texts, as well as for taking part in the discussions already mentioned. The Wellcome were responsible for sending out the loan letters and following up on them, negotiating with lenders about insurance, transport, marketing, media relations, and for devising public programmes. We also agreed to be available for newspaper, radio, and TV interviews, and were given media training by the Wellcome.

It's worth mentioning too that the Wellcome wasn't particularly involved in producing the catalogue for the show. We were responsible for finding a publisher and producing the text and images, and some subvention was provided by the grant (with the Wellcome also pitching in a small sum of money).

MD: *How much was the overall budget for producing the exhibition?*

LT: I don't know – we left all this to the Wellcome. Other than the background research for the exhibition, which was funded by the AHRC grant, the Wellcome paid all the costs.

MD: *How did your fee operate – was it separated between research and curating/project management?*

LT: We were paid a flat fee.

MD: *What do you feel the process has taught you about initiating and curating future projects?*

LT: One of the main lessons I derived from the process was about the importance of getting curators from your preferred host institution involved from the outset. We were in the position of approaching potential host institutions as outsiders – academics with no museum affiliations – and this resulted in the long delay we experienced in pinning down a host institution.