

Cramming Aesthetics, Art Appreciation & Education into a Fun Museum Experience

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The Indianapolis Museum of Art's Education Division was presented with a unique and challenging opportunity by the museum's director: create an engaging, fun, innovative summer exhibition, combining art and nature. A team of educators accepted this challenge and the exhibition, *Nature Holds My Camera: The Video Art of Sam Easterson (NHMC)*, was born. Working closely with the artist¹, the team assembled and began planning the project.

The team innovated the typical approach to exhibition development and created a model that ultimately led to the project's success. The creative and collaborative organizational approach emerged from several factors — IMA had less than a year to create an exhibition from scratch, a limited budget, and in early stages of planning, limited institutional support from fellow IMA departments. Conversely, *NHMC* gave Education staff the opportunity to conceive, curate and manage an exhibition an opportunity almost always exclusive to the curatorial department. So, we all had something to prove.

In some ways, *NHMC* had to adhere to the traditional planning process. This included a cross-departmental, institutional-wide exhibition team that would meet on a regular basis. Although this process typically works well, it did not immediately apply to the development of *NHMC*. Early meetings were met with little enthusiasm. The success of the project relied heavily on the support of all internal departments and with little time to create this exhibition, the Education team initially faced apprehension, opposition and hesitation from colleagues that were already focusing time and resources on other projects. Outside the traditional exhibition framework, educators began campaigning for *NHMC* by meeting with individual members of departments to sell the concept. This approach built support and ownership from essential IMA staff. In turn, these individuals became advocates for the exhibition. As the community

of supporters grew, so did our strength as an exhibition team. The traditional exhibition meetings now ran smoothly and new ideas or challenges were met with a positive response.

In previous exhibitions at the IMA, exhibition designers and graphic designers worked separately in their areas. In the case of *NHMC*, both the exhibition and graphic designers worked hand-in-hand to create the physical exhibition space and more. The outcome of this collaboration transcended good design. It allowed the team to thread the design into all areas of the exhibition process including the activity guide, web site,² behind-the-scenes videos, and merchandising. This concept is not new to the exhibition process, but at the IMA, it was the first time that the design and graphic departments had collaborated in this manner from the very beginning. The goal for *NHMC* was to create an engaging visitor experience, but to also redefine areas of the exhibition development process. The planning of this exhibition resulted in opportunities for the staff involved to contribute more meaningfully and feel a sense of pride in that work. In essence, the Education Division both challenged and empowered colleagues to rise to the occasion, but most dramatically, affected the institutional approach to the exhibition process and resulted in a successful and engaging exhibition.

As with many effective exhibitions, the organization of themes in *NHMC* was central to its success. The show was divided thematically through a video review process led by IMA educators. Easterson's body of work was reviewed with an emphasis on emerging themes. Rather than impose a curatorial point of view, they opted to allow the work to reveal common threads that later developed into the exhibition outline. The themes became the narrative elements of the exhibition.

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine³ informed the

progression of content in *NHMC*. *VTS* is an inquiry based process of investigating and better understanding art. Informed by these ideas, it made the most sense to offer visitors an increasingly complex experience, creating opportunities for success and aesthetic growth by introducing relevant and appropriately challenging ideas throughout the exhibition by strategically sequencing the video works.

At the entrance of the exhibition, visitors first encountered a video loop featuring an armadillo. This video was selected for the entry because of its popularity among viewers and its fun, light-hearted spirit. The work and its placement at the gallery entrance was an invitation to laugh, explore and consider a new point of view.

After entering the gallery, visitors were surrounded by larger-than-life projections in a long, dark room. Four projections alternated allowing each work the space and time to be enjoyed with its audio, without being diluted by multiple projections running over one another. This room contained two themes, the first was “In Motion” which, as the name implies, provided a variety of animal and insect perspectives on the world in motion. Next was, “Taking Action.” This section challenged visitors to move from passively watching to actively thinking. Here, the videos illustrated a variety of provocations. Instead of walking in to a scene already in action, they would see a creature at rest and be offered the opportunity to investigate the stimuli that created motion.

It should also be noted that this space was meant to be fun: outfitted with comfortable bean bag chairs that created a familiar, unassuming environment where visitors, particularly families, found it easy to spend much longer periods of time than in more traditional gallery spaces.

The next thematic area featured a more aesthetic topic with a creative twist; “Reflections and Shadows.” Here, viewers were confronted with a large mirror opposite the video projection, adding their own reflection to video

that included animals encountering their reflections or shadows in nature. Not only could visitors observe these visual elements, but if desired, they could further consider the effect of light in the works through a simple prompt on the wall: “*Have you ever played with light?*” Similar prompts that provided a chance for both fun and learning were placed throughout the exhibition.

A unique opportunity followed this room. Visitors would find their way to a video in the “Storytellers” area that was produced in collaboration with Easterson and offered his audio commentary over two contrasting video loops featuring sheep. One was from a very early project and the second from a much more recent one. The two works juxtaposed, provided viewers with a glimpse into the lessons he learned as an artist, and a human being, about art and nature.

Next, visitors found a new challenge based on perspective. A large projection featured a cricket, spider and scorpion and on a small monitor were grand landscape views often seen by birds. The artist offered this unique display as a way to overturn the inequity in these two views, giving the detailed perspectives the hierarchical upper hand.

The final indoor space offered visitors a chance to interact in a much more tangible way. Throughout the exhibition wall graphics posed questions, declared ideas and provided images of animals, plants and insects that related to the videos being screened in each room. A printed exhibition guide offered visitors an opportunity to take it a step further and respond to more directed questions and activities. In the final exhibition space visitors could engage each other and the artist through live, in-gallery blogging.⁴ Three computer workstations provided viewers prompts to respond to different elements of the exhibition and ask questions of the artist. Easterson responded to dozens of questions throughout the run of the exhibition, engaging in debates about the authenticity of his work, his point of view and fielding requests for new animal cams of every variety. It was this interactive component that most greatly contributed to a growth of community.

The final and perhaps most notable aspect of this exhibition project was the inclusion of site-specific video work featuring the Eastern Mole, an animal living on IMA property. In order to provide visitors a truly immersive experience with nature, Easterson devised the outdoor video transmission system that would allow viewers to see recorded footage in IMA's Art and Nature Park⁵ on a handheld video receiver. IMA exhibition organizers responded to his inclusion of this element by developing an Art and Nature Pack that included art supplies, binoculars, magnifiers, a compass and other tools that would support the investigation of art and the natural world.

The result of all of these components was a rare look into the world of plants and animals outside of the human experience, an opportunity to step outside of ourselves

and consider a range of perspectives. Easterson's work was the foundation of *NHMC* but also the most questionable element for many. While a certain group of viewers were delighted by the approachable content, more experienced art viewers found the content to lack depth, or expertise. The notion that a person could put a camera on an animal and call the resulting video art was not accepted by all. This conflict is one that Easterson experiences as widely. At IMA, we decided not to make a determination, but instead put the work up, offer a variety of points of view and let viewers make up their own mind. The visitor blog would indicate that they reached a variety of opinions, but this still did not satisfy all of our critics. In the end, though, we were satisfied, because we achieved all of the goals we set out to meet. We offered an exhibition that was fun, complex, challenging, inviting and a totally outside of IMA's typical approach.

1 Sam Easterson was selected as the featured artist after review of his works that can be viewed at <http://www.eco-sensing.com>

2 www.natureholdsmycamera.com

3 www.vue.org

4 <http://www.natureholdsmycamera.com/blog.php>

5 Find out more about the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art and Nature Park: <http://www.imamuseum.org/explore/naturepark>