

LACMALab 2002, MAKING: A Collaborative Reinvention of the Family Museum Dynamic

Robert Sain, Director, LACMALab, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Frederick Fisher, Architect, Frederick Fisher and Partners Architects

LACMALab is the experimental unit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). It is in the business of investigating new models for presenting art and engaging audiences of all ages through commissioned artist's projects. This paper will discuss specific examples of artist's projects and will describe some of the most salient implications for the visitor, the staff, the institution, and the artists.

The context for LACMALab is especially significant since it operates within the infrastructure of one of the country's largest encyclopedic art museums with a collection of over 100,000 objects representing 4,000 years of history from every major culture. The challenge and opportunity for LACMALab is to infuse the complex, conservative, and often bureaucratic institution with notions of experimentation by inviting artists into the life of the museum. LACMALab is not structured as part of the curatorial department, even though its job is to organize exhibitions, nor is it located in the education department, even though its goal is visitor engagement. It is conceived as a public program that can move through the institution with fluidity.

LACMALab was started in the fall of 1999, and since that time has hosted four exhibitions in the 10,000 sq. ft. Boone Children's Gallery in LACMA West. Over 30 artists have been commissioned including internationally distinguished, important mid-career, and promising emerging figures, plus over 60 art school students from five art schools and four architectural firms, to create new work that tests an age-free, participatory, and non-didactic terrain for over 330,000 visitors.

The artist selection process involves extensive conversation with artists usually through studio visits. Exhibit developers never ask the question, "Which artists have a track record of working with kids?" but simply ask, "Which interesting artists are doing important work and would want to participate in a LACMALab show with the goal of public engagement for *all* ages?" Even though potential artists are identified based on their body of work, the most crucial element in a successful project is the commitment and openness of the artist in investigating new territory through a collaborative approach with LACMALab. Since all projects are new commissions, it is the artist, not their art, that is selected, and the collaborative relationship is paramount.

The dynamics of commissioning new art can be both exhilarating for some, and exasperating for others, since this entails ambiguity, the unknown, change, and revisions. After LACMALab selects an artist and the commitment is made, artists are asked to develop a proposal for their work, which is the basis for their contracts. Yet even with a contract, the museum must be open to the realities of flux inherent in any creative endeavor.

The eleven artists commissioned for our inaugural exhibition *Made in California: NOW* proved to be too much for the museum's infrastructure to support. The demands on the installation crew were taxing. Jennifer Steinkamp's swings, which triggered a computer generated lava lamp type image, had to be engineered to accommodate 300 pounds; special safety flooring was installed under the swings. Conservation was impacted with Eleanor Antin's project involving yellow rubber "ducky boots" installed on rollerblades traversing the outside pathway to the LACMA East Galleries; there, the boots became ensconced among objects from the permanent collection. Skills of the art preparators were needed to install the boots, but once they were declared "art," conservation had to agree to a special dispensation: if the boots needed cleaning, rather than the regulation photographic documentation, condition reports, analysis and recommendations, maintenance would just use soap and water. For Allan Kaprow's hugely popular *Pillow Room* installation, additional security was required to handle the throngs of visitors of all ages from teens to toddlers, who were flinging themselves into the soft pillow piles.

The design and pedagogical philosophy for all LACMALab shows is manifest in a mantra that is displayed at the entrance to exhibitions: *This is a different kind of exhibition. It is not linear or chronological. There is no beginning or end. There is no right way or wrong way to go through it. It is not about imparting information. It is about your own experience.*

Different strategies have been employed for text and information, asking the question, "When is it useful, and when is it intrusive?" For *NOW*, the entire 90-foot long concourse entry wall to the gallery had no text. The space was turned over to artist Jim Isermann, who created a massive, boldly colored, geometric "wallpaper" pattern of decals; and Jennifer Steinkamp, who devised a computer generated hallucinogenic canopy entryway for the gallery. All customary title wall information, artist's names, donors, and so forth, were incorporated onto a skateboard style floor ramp on which visitors could walk; the title *NOW* was constructed of three-foot tall letters that visitors could spin.

In his project for *SEEING*, artist Daniel Martinez took the museum to the edge by proposing to install works from the decorative arts collection in holes in the floor. Before bothering with the curators or conservators, the project team began by consulting those who actually exert ultimate control over artist's projects: not the museum director, but the fire marshal and the structural engineer. The holes would have to be covered with Plexi to comply with fire regulations, which in turn assured safety for the objects and allowed visitors to walk across the piece. When Martinez proposed to install a 19th century cut-glass punch bowl in a mirrored box in the floor on a slowly rotating lazy susan, one of the conservators proclaimed, "No curator would do this!" And that was the point. Technical issues were figured out and the piece was installed as proposed. Visitors were mesmerized by watching the slowly revolving punch bowl. It could be said that when the object was literally on its pedestal, many visitors passed right by it. While the Martinez floor piece actually involved nothing *to do*, visitors stopped in their tracks and were mesmerized by seeing the permanent collection works in a new way. The artists had expanded the very definition of "participatory."

LACMALab's most recent exhibition, *nano* stretched the museum and the visitor in relation to technology and its role in an art museum. This was an unprecedented joint venture between

LACMALab and the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) departments of Design Media, English, and Chemistry to investigate the intersection of aesthetics and nanotechnology. *nano* introduced an extremely complicated but timely subject matter not addressed by art museums. In fact, never had LACMA organized an exhibition where no one in the museum had any professional knowledge of the topic. Never had such a sophisticated computer-driven installation with the inevitable equipment breakdowns been experienced in a large-scale, participatory public space. The architects, Johnston Marklee & Associates, were pivotal to the project, designing an immersive environment where the technology disappeared and the audience could experience the manipulation of matter at the molecular level. The exhibition had to operate simultaneously in the domains of both the art world and the science world. The media reaction was mixed. A positive substantial segment on the PBS *News Hour* was broadcast nationally. The local art critic for the *Los Angeles Times* called the show “a failure on a grand scale!” Yet visitor studies conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation in conjunction with LACMA’s education department, found that the average visitor stayed over an hour, or spent more time in the exhibition than the national average for any kind of exhibition. The study also found that visitors had meaningful experiences with the installation regardless of the time spent.

MAKING was the third in the LACMALab series of all-ages interactive art projects commissioned by LACMA. This edition was proposed by Robert Sain as a multi-levelled collaboration with student teams from four of Los Angeles’ principal art schools: UCLA, Otis College of Art & Design, Art Center College of Design, and California Institute of the Arts, with the participation of University of Southern California curatorial studies students. Frederick Fisher and Partners Architects was approached to participate in a somewhat open-ended way, centered on designing the installation. Having collaborated with artists on a number of architectural projects, Fisher was aware that the architect could provide logistical and technical support to artists working outside their normal media.

The meaning of the **MAKING** project is multi-faceted. Frank Gehry referred to exhibit design as “fast food” for an architect. It is an opportunity to explore ideas and technology quickly without many of the demands of a work of architecture. Working with artists and curators always infuses architects with new ways of seeing and judging art and design. Working continuously on museums, galleries, and studios, architects need to look through the eyes of artists and curators to develop an appropriate architectural solution for each space.

Structuring the **MAKING** project was the first and most critical task. Sain gathered the academic leadership of the schools, the museum’s team, and Fisher’s architecture firm to develop a structure and parameters for the project, while maintaining as much flexibility as possible in the process, since the purpose was to foster creativity and experimentation. Fisher submitted a variety of ideas to the group about how the four teams could develop installations in one space as a starting point for the teams to decide how their projects would interrelate. As each team’s project began to crystallize, Fisher presented his ideas for the design of the overall space. One of these proposals, the inclusion of a large animated sculpture by Jonathon Borovsky, unexpectedly created a storm of negative reaction from some of the teams. In what Fisher calls the “pizza sessions,” the group of around forty students, four artist mentors, museum team members and Fisher debated for hours over pizzas the questions of Fisher’s role as architect versus that of a

curator selecting artwork for a show; the implication of juxtaposing the work of an established artist with student work; the possible benefits to a museum trustee of including this piece; and other sensitive issues. After the designs were finalized, the team moved into the physical production of the complicated installation with the museum's installation staff.

LACMALab is a rare instance of a museum engaged in the production of new art within the context of an all-ages art experience. A space has been allocated for annual experimental installations and its success is measured, in part, by the large numbers of visitors of all ages and the unusually long duration of their visits. Inclusion of collection objects is critical for reinforcing the primary missions of a museum: to collect, display and interpret works of art. An all-ages or age-free installation designed by artists encourages broader social intersections for the museum audience.