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DON'T FENCE ME IN

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James Carter argues the case for revising and extending the boundaries around interpretation – and getting visitors to work a little harder.

Funny things, boundaries. They're often invisible, but they define the shape of something. And that can help us feel secure, so boundaries are often something to defend or celebrate – think of ceremonies to 'beat the bounds' of a parish, or the pantomime ballet enacted each evening at the road crossing between India and Pakistan.

DEFINING BOUNDARIES

For a profession, boundaries identify what it does, and may even mark out aspects of good practice that must never be crossed. But what if a boundary becomes a constraint, something that holds you in and stops you exploring new territory? In cricket, after all, the boundary is something to aim for and surpass, and most human cultures have been driven by a desire to see what lies beyond the frontiers of the known, the familiar. So, what boundaries around interpretation might need a little revision?



Perhaps the most challenging line to cross is the idea that interpretation is about communicating a message. Many people are attracted to the profession by a sense of mission, a zeal to get others to think about something they feel passionately about. That ardour is perhaps most common in environmental work, where countryside interpretation is often linked with a desire to promote conservation values. In the cultural and historic field, the view of interpretation that fits the boundaries has been as a tool for 'teaching', with an expectation that audiences will learn something from what we do.

ABOVE RIGHT AND BELOW:
Stegastein viewpoint, Norway –
no message in sight, but a powerful
interpretive experience.

Architect: Todd Saunders, Saunders and Wilhelmsem © photo: Per Kollstad.



RIGHT:
The delights of drinking Thames Water,
from the Wellcome Collection's Dirt show.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

But the world is a different place from the one in which interpretation's boundaries were drawn. Fifty years ago, people might only have come across ideas about the environment or heritage conservation when they visited a nature reserve or a historic house; now prime-time television shows us the private lives of rare birds, or invites us to vote for which historic houses should be saved. There are many more influences on the way visitors think than there used to be, and that means they will arrive with a more complex set of expectations – perhaps even, on a good day, a more sophisticated knowledge of the underlying facts about our site. In this new landscape, interpretation's role needs to change. It is not enough simply to teach visitors something, or to hope to influence their thinking.

Some of the most stimulating projects that push at these boundaries involve the very fabric of the site itself, focusing on the whole nature of the experience it offers. The National Tourist Routes project in Norway includes some spectacular examples, including the famous Stegastein viewpoint above Aurlandfjord. I wrote about this place in my keynote paper for the 2010 AHI conference: it's an inspired piece of architectural design that offers a truly visceral, and memorable, insight into just how deep the fjord is. There is a small display of panels just next to the viewpoint, but the site's meaning is in the sense of drama you get from standing, suspended in space, above the water. To me, this is truly interpretive. It invites visitors to experience the place in a way that would not otherwise have been possible, and is far more likely to create a powerful emotional link between the audience and the landscape.

This shift in what interpretation might mean pushes at another boundary, one that defines the skills it involves. Many definitions still describe interpretation as 'a communication process', but if its role widens to encompass



Image © Wellcome Library, London.

visitor experience, it must include the skills of site design and set design. Interpretation as a professional activity has porous boundaries, which makes it difficult to codify it or to establish standards by which it might be measured and tested.

NUDGING FORWARD

Another interesting boundary is the line around what we might call instant understanding. It's a well-established principle that text in exhibitions needs to be easy to read, but does that mean the ideas it addresses must always be instantly clear? If one of interpretation's functions is to encourage audiences into new ways of seeing and thinking, isn't there a place for presentations that need a little work?

It's perhaps easier to develop projects that push this boundary in presenting contemporary art, where the subject itself is often concerned to challenge our thinking and perceptions. The Grayson Perry exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, (see page 24), is a case in point: at first it's almost shocking to find a gallery that doesn't tell you how to look at or understand the collection, and where even basic information about what the objects are takes a back seat. But with a little mental effort, you find the show is actually offering you

interesting ways to think about the key pieces on display, and to come to your own conclusions about them.

Other venues make playful use of unusual juxtapositions in planning entire exhibitions. I particularly like the work of the Wellcome Collection in London, where major exhibitions take a thought-provoking look at a particular topic through objects, documents, and historic as well as contemporary art. Their current show, *Dirt*, will have you looking at notions of racial purity as well as dust and disease. A shamelessly off-the-wall piece by artist Serena Korda is thought-provoking and amusing: you'll never look at the contents of your vacuum cleaner bag in the same way again.

BELOW:
A scene from Serena Korda's artwork,
pushing the boundaries of our attitudes
towards dirt at the Wellcome Collection
Show.

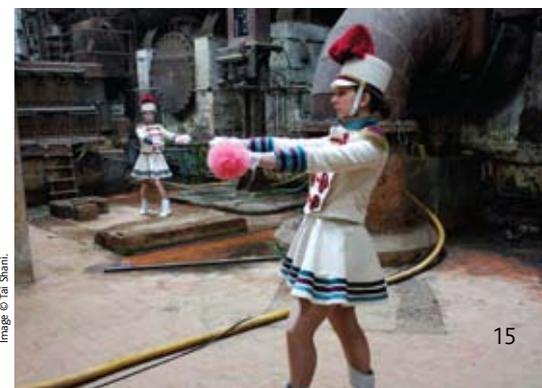


Image © The Shani.

http://bit.ly/3xT1YH

LEFT AND BELOW:

A detail from one of the panels in Glen Affric, where Gaelic is released from the sterile boundary of a straight bilingual presentation. There's a place for text that needs a little work from the reader.



NEW MEANINGS REVEALED

There's scope for asking audiences to do a little thinking outside a gallery too. I recently worked on new interpretation for Glen Affric, one of Scotland's top beauty spots and home to the largest area of native pine forest in the country. To evoke the Gaelic culture and history of the area, I worked with writer Rody Gorman to develop a section on each panel that contained a short poem in Gaelic, together with a rendition in English. Rody's work often translates Gaelic words with several English ones, reflecting different possible meanings and giving more depth than a straight translation. The end result may need a little concentration, but I believe it does more to reflect the unique perspectives of Gaelic culture, and also more to encourage an interest in the Gaelic language itself, than simply presenting two bilingual slabs of text.

BELOW:
New technologies are fascinating, but our understanding of how they will actually fit with people's use of them is in its infancy. For an amusing take on where we stand in their development, scan the QR code with a smartphone. No smartphone? Have a look at the top of the page.



WITHIN LIMITS

The media we use can present boundaries too. New technologies offer enticing ways to push at these apparent limitations, in particular to exploit the fact that many people now carry with them a small computer more powerful than anything that could have been imagined 20 years ago. QR codes are an example: a more sophisticated version of a barcode, they can be scanned by a free application on a smartphone, and they're beginning to be used in interesting ways to offer visitors content that expands on conventional media. But experimenting with these new technologies can teach us an important truth about the nature of boundaries.

In another gallery at the Wellcome Collection, there's a small display from the Wellcome Image Awards, which celebrate excellence in medical and scientific photography. Below selected photographs, a QR code leads to a video giving more information about the image or the techniques it portrays. It's a great idea, but not without its problems. The gallery generously offers free WiFi connection, but

I found the signal too weak to support the high rates of data transfer needed for really smooth video. That's just a technological boundary, and sure to be crossed soon. More significantly, I hadn't realised my smartphone would start playing a video until it began. As the soundtrack started blaring from my phone's loudspeaker, I was panic-stricken at the idea that I was about to shatter the peace of the gallery. I fumbled desperately for my headphones, trying to avoid violating that most sacred of heritage commandments: thou shalt not disturb other visitors. And that's the trouble with pushing at boundaries. As soon as you've crossed one, you find there are more just around the corner.

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