

~~I AM A~~

~~HISTORIAN~~

I MAKE  
EXHIBITS

B. ERIN COLE

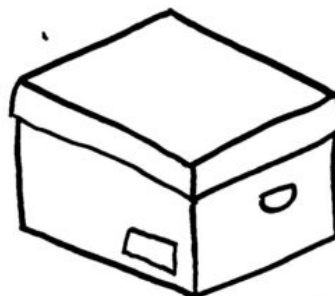


HI! I MAKE EXHIBITS FOR HISTORY MUSEUMS.  
I ALSO HAVE A PH.D. IN HISTORY.

HAVING A DOCTORATE HAS OPENED  
DOORS FOR ME, AND I USE MY  
RESEARCH + WRITING SKILLS A LOT...



reading!



archive work!

writing  
exhibit  
text!



and  
more!

**BUT!**

MOST OF THE THINGS I DO I LEARNED  
ON THE JOB. MAKING EXHIBITS TAKES  
A LOT OF OTHER SKILLS.

leading  
exhibit teams!



I am often  
the  
only content person  
on a team

collaboration!

sharing  
authority  
with  
outside  
communities!

budgeting  
+  
scheduling!

thinking about what  
visitors want!



← THIS  
is the most  
important!

# WE MAKE EXHIBITS FOR VISITORS.

(not historians,  
our museum peers,  
or ourselves.)

my teams  
ask questions  
like:

who is this  
exhibit for?

what do these  
visitors want  
+ need?

how can we  
engage them and  
meet them where they  
are?

## SO, WHO ARE VISITORS? (AND WHAT IS AN EXHIBIT, ANYWAY?)



I'm an exhibit, and  
I'm glad you asked!

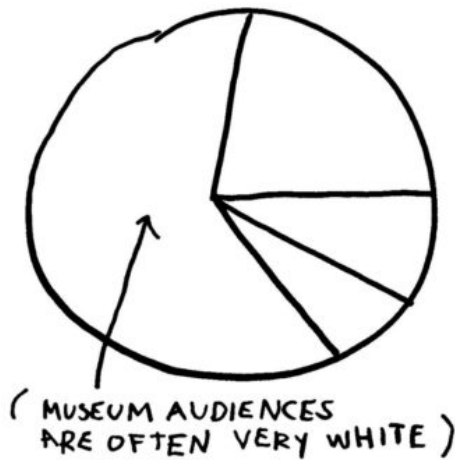
I'm a three-dimensional  
narrative environment! A story  
or argument you move through  
and interact with!

That makes me very different  
from a book or a movie or  
a website!

But I also wonder who comes  
to see me!

THERE'S A FEW WAYS MUSEUMS THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE THAT COME THROUGH THEIR DOORS.

an obvious one is **DEMOGRAPHICS**

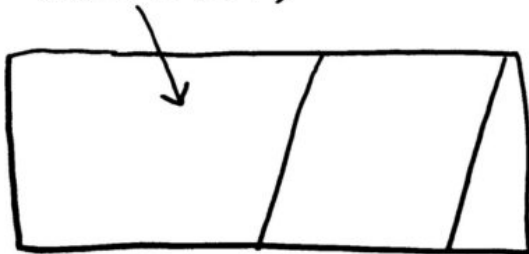


there's  
**RACE...**



**AGE....**

(WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO VISIT)



**GENDER....**



(LOCAL VISITORS = REPEAT VISITORS)

**ZIP CODE....**

and **MORE!**

DEMOGRAPHICS  
HELP US

- ☒ MARKET EXHIBITS
- ☒ KNOW WHO IS + WHO ISN'T COMING
- ☒ REPORT DATA TO FUNDERS, BOARD MEMBERS, + MORE

BUT THEY DON'T TELL US

**WHY** VISITORS ARE HERE!

SINCE I MAKE EXHIBITS, I NEED THAT WHY! WHAT DRAWS PEOPLE HERE, + WHAT DO THEY WANT OUT OF THEIR VIST?

## enter.... VISITOR TYPES!

PEOPLE COME TO MUSEUMS FOR LOTS OF REASONS.  
THE FIVE MAIN VISITOR TYPES ARE...



I love  
learning new  
things!

### EXPLORERS

curious, into  
learning new things



I love things  
my family +  
friends can  
do together!

### FACILITATORS

wants a meaningful  
social experience



I heard this  
place was  
awesome!

### EXPERIENCE SEEKERS

checking things off  
of their list



I am so  
into this  
topic!

### ENTHUSIASTS

likes history a lot



museums  
help me  
feel  
calmer!

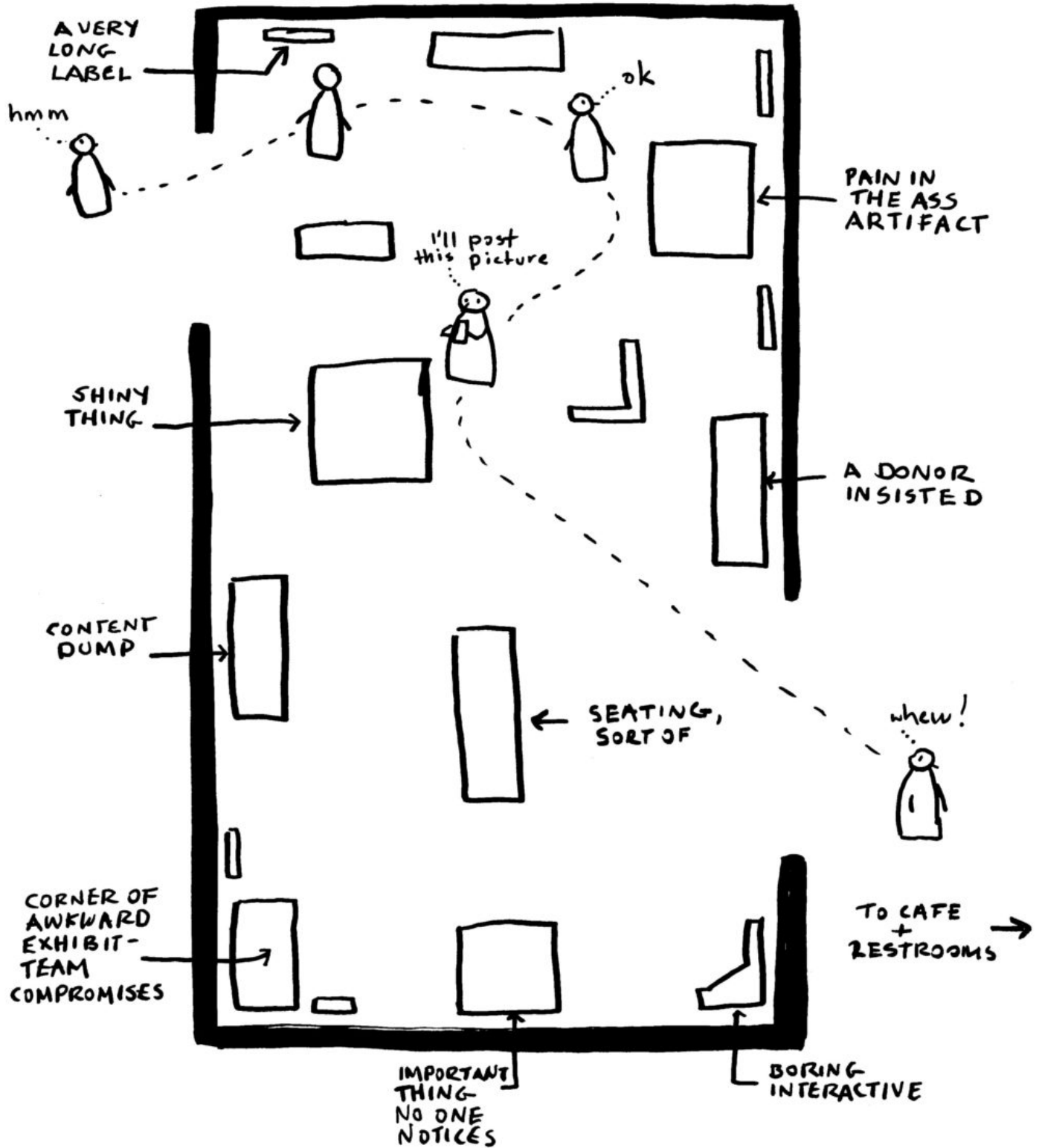
### RECHARGERS

looking to unwind  
(often avoid history museums)

see the work of JOHN FALK  
for more information!

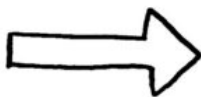
WHOEVER THEY ARE, VISITORS DO WHATEVER THEY WANT IN EXHIBITS. YOU HAVE TO EARN THEIR ATTENTION. SADLY, A LOT OF EXHIBITS AREN'T TRYING TO ENGAGE VISITORS MUCH AT ALL, UNLESS THEY'RE ENTHUSIASTS.

## A TYPICAL EXHIBIT EXPERIENCE



ENGAGING DIFFERENT TYPES OF VISITORS IS EASIER IF YOU HAVE ONE BIG IDEA THAT TIES THE EXHIBIT TOGETHER.

COMPLEXITY



ALL POTENTIAL  
EXHIBIT CONTENT



THE BIG IDEA!

DECIDING ON THE BIG IDEA IS HARD! WE WANT TO SHARE LOTS OF THINGS WITH VISITORS! BUT FOCUS MAKES OUR WORK MORE VISITOR FRIENDLY. WE CAN REACH MORE PEOPLE IF WE USE DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES TO REINFORCE THE BIG IDEA.

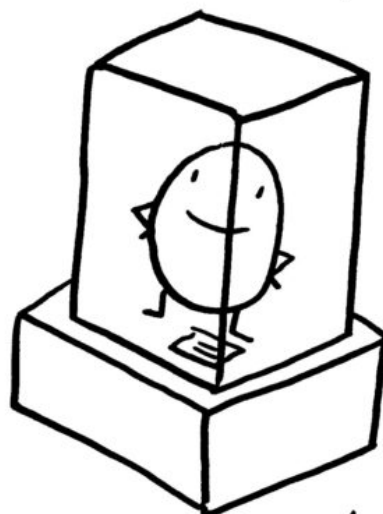
exhibit  
copy



media



artifacts



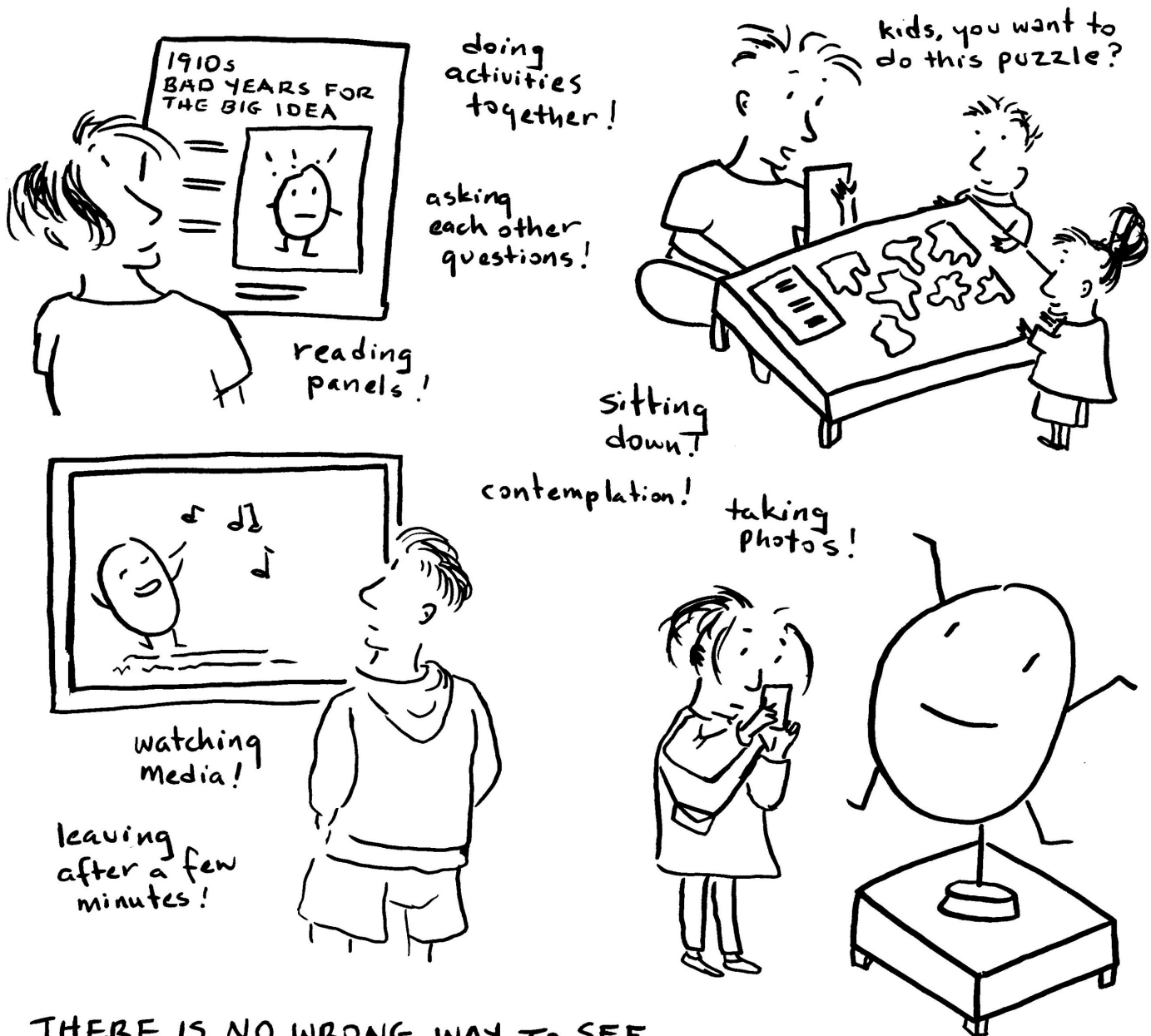
interactives



talkbacks

plus  
lighting!  
colors!

TELLING THE STORY IN MULTIPLE WAYS LETS VISITORS  
APPROACH + ENGAGE WITH THE BIG IDEA IN THEIR OWN WAY,  
TO FIT THEIR NEEDS.



THERE IS NO WRONG WAY TO SEE  
AN EXHIBIT.

IF VISITORS AREN'T ENGAGING WITH WHAT WE MADE,  
IT'S PROBABLY OUR FAULT

- ☐ ARE WE MEETING VISITORS' NEEDS?
- ☐ IS THE EXHIBIT FOCUSED ON ONE BIG IDEA?
- ☐ DOES THE EXHIBIT TELL ITS STORY IN MULTIPLE  
WAYS, FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF VISITORS?





hey! that's a lot to ask!  
— I'm just a space with some  
things in it!

YOU'RE RIGHT!  
ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT  
THINGS I'VE LEARNED  
MAKING EXHIBITS IS...

# EXHIBITS CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH!

## THEY CAN

- inspire curiosity!
- introduce new points of view!
- give context!
- give people a meaningful  
experience!

## THEY CAN'T

- please everyone!
- talk about everything!
- include every fact!

AN EXHIBIT  
IS JUST  
ONE PART  
OF A MUSEUM  
EXPERIENCE

we can use programs, lectures,  
books, social media, + more  
to build on what visitors  
got out of exhibits.

THE END!