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A Vision for phæno's Exhibitions

by Joe Ansel

phæno's exhibitions provide experiences which incline our visitors to freely frame their own questions. Best are questions which are specific, important and enjoyable to each visitor. Of course the exhibitions do more than this, but they must not do less.

phæno should encourage interest more than it provides information. Every day students and workers constantly struggle to answer someone else's questions or solve someone else's problems. phæno provides respite from this drudgery and gives one license, and some handy tools, to experience and explore the world around and within us.

Thus my personal vision for phæno's exhibitions centers not on the exhibits, but rather on those who use them. Our exhibition succeeds when it helps some percentage of our visitors appreciate, experience or understand their world better. Our exhibition even succeeds when visitors simply have fun in a place filled with scripted bits of scientific beauty. For how can they fail to grow in some small, but fruitful, way near a rainbow of their own making or at any one of phæno's other exhibits?

phæno's exhibitions do not tell a story. In today's world, this is a courageous position to take, but it is correct for phæno. Practically speaking, labeling a gallery--for example, "Mathematics"--drives away some who would otherwise enjoy the exhibits within. Labels simplify and reduce. Labels also reflect and therefore impose the views and agenda of the label-maker; an extreme example of this is commercial advertising. In phæno, visitors create their own path or story. To help the visitor do so, a multitude of themes lie implicit within phæno's 250 exhibits and while we have not made these overly explicit, we do refer to them in "area signs," wall projections and in other ways.

Thus we gently encourage visitors to organize the exhibition in their own way. Organizing the world according to your own principals, assuming such are substantially correct or at least appropriate for your age and education, insures deeper knowledge. In phæno, facts are less important. Such organizing prompts a personalized understanding, which also provides intellectual pleasure and encourages further inquiry. In this way phæno's exhibitions are wonderfully accessible, but not simplistic.

A vision achieved was really only a goal in disguise. It is difficult to produce exhibitions which are enjoyable and change us for the better, but such was one vision of Frank Oppenheimer and it is now mine. How have we followed such a vision in phæno?

We have worked to integrate the exhibition and Zaha Hadid's astounding building. For example, we allow the building to stand-alone; that is we rarely connect exhibits to the building except where appropriate. And we have not built "architecture" within the building—there are few booth-like structures within the place, and thus the exhibitions rarely compete with the architecture. While the building is a static landscape, the exhibits are generally freestanding elements which can be re-arranged or even eventually replaced. Thus the

exhibits populate the landscape and provide change within in the space. Finally, our exhibits share some design elements with the building, specifically certain angular forms, but other elements of design—mass, materials, texture and colors---dramatically diverge. The exhibits are in the space, not of the space.

In the exhibitions, functional was a key concern, thus do not expect “high design” which sacrifices function. Nevertheless I am very pleased with many visual elements in the exhibition design, including a basic table design which includes a four legged, rectangular table and even a more appealing five-legged round table. We have also designed a large, dramatic table which we call the “Z” table. Another very successful exhibition element is a tilted rectangular block. We have arranged and connected these blocks together in various ways to create disparate forms, some of which are striking. Finally we have also designed our own little stool—which is distinctive--because so many stools are unstable, do not provide a step for children or are otherwise less than adequate. These functional, but expressive, furniture designs have their own language and well support the phenomena they present.

phæno includes considerable interactive art. While the public rarely distinguishes this art from the exhibits, such works often become the public’s favorite pieces. These artworks have their own aesthetic and provide much spice to the overall exhibition. And the continuing involvement of artist’s may well add an ongoing creative element to phæno.

And what of the phenomena itself? Most must be seen, touched, heard or even smelled to be understood, otherwise why would we need the exhibits? Nevertheless we have selected phenomena which is:

- 1) **Sometimes beautiful**, such as our lovely fluid flow exhibit using iridescent soap films.
- 2) **Dramatic**, like Ned Kahn’s five meter high Fire Tornado
- 3) **Ridden** or otherwise involves the user’s body, such as the Sit-On Gyroscope
- 4) **Counter-intuitive** such as our Bernoulli Levitator.
- 5) **Revealing**, such as the “Horsetail” exhibit.

Finally, phæno’s exhibitions are designed to change--to develop and grow. My vision certainly includes their eventual replacement--hopefully with improved pieces as advances in the exhibition field then allow. For phæno is more than its building, exhibitions and staff, it is a cultural resource now and for the future.