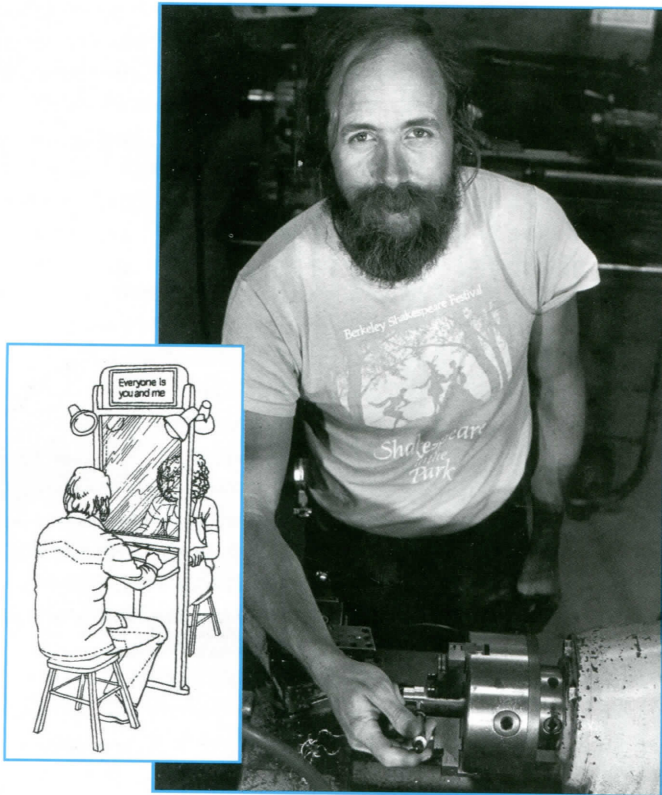


# ASTC Exhibition Services:

## Advancing the Science Center Movement

By Wendy Pollock



**Everyone Is You and Me**, shown in its *Cookbook* “recipe” (inset) was one of a dozen classic Exploratorium exhibits in *Looking at the Light*, a traveling exhibition that helped to introduce hands-on activities to science museums. Right, exhibit designer Tom Tompkins served as a traveling guide for the exhibition. Images © Exploratorium, [www.exploratorium.edu](http://www.exploratorium.edu)

**W**ith its playful enticements to take another look, *Everyone Is You and Me* is one of the classic exhibits found in science centers worldwide. It wasn't always so.

In the early 1980s, through a partnership with ASTC and with support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), staffers from San Francisco's Exploratorium took *Looking at the Light*, an exhibition comprising this exhibit and a dozen others about light and color, on the road, spreading word to other young science museums about the Exploratorium's distinctive philosophy and approach to exhibit development.

As the exhibition arrived at each site, an Exploratorium staffer would arrive as well, to demonstrate how the exhibits worked and talk with host museum staff (and sometimes the board and funders) about the pleasures and intrigues of hands-on exhibits. In at least one case, such an event helped clinch the board's

decision to transform a traditional museum into a new-style science center. Added to the Exploratorium's many other strategies for spreading the word, the traveling exhibition gave exhibit designers a chance to tinker with and get to know intimately exhibits they might have seen only as line drawings in the museum's popular *Cookbook* series, launched in 1975.

### Spreading the culture of hands-on

In the years that followed, through a series of similar partnerships with member museums and other organizations, ASTC pursued its mission of advancing the culture and practice of science centers in North America and beyond, often through the medium of traveling exhibitions. The dual aspects of this acculturation process—traveling exhibitions and professional develop-

ment—derived in some measure from the origins of ASTC itself, which was founded in 1973 by people who valued mutual support and experiential learning, as well as from the vision of early supporters at NSF, which provided core grants for activities that promoted the science center movement.

A 1975 NSF grant “to support the realization of ideas for experimental projects of general interest to science museums” was followed in 1977 by a five-year grant that supported “better utilization of resources by conducting mutually beneficial programs which would be impossible for most science centers to undertake on their own.” The latter specified that grantees would “develop quality traveling exhibits and accompanying educational programs on science and technology.” That grant expired in the early 1980s, but the tradition continued.

One result of an ASTC collaboration

with the American Psychological Association and the Ontario Science Centre, beginning in 1983, was the award-winning exhibition *Psychology*. Its complement of professional development activities ranged from on-site orientations for local school teachers to what would become a long-running series of lectures at the ASTC Annual Conference on psychological research. Both the exhibition itself and the set of discovery boxes left at each host museum helped establish psychology as part of the standard science center repertoire.

In the years that followed, mentoring and apprenticeship were an integral part of several ASTC projects. Among them was the ASTC Traveling Exhibition Training Program, also funded by NSF. Starting in 1988, the program engaged experienced developers from the Science Museum of Minnesota, Boston Children's Museum, Monterey Bay Aquarium, and other centers (under the sage oversight of former Oregon Museum of Science and Industry exhibit designer Shab Levy) in coaching novice staff from other museums in their first exhibit development projects. ASTC managed tours of the resulting exhibitions, which eventually reached 45 museums nationwide.

### Cutting-edge topics and techniques

In partnership with member museums and other organizations, ASTC also led the way in developing exhibitions about new science and new technology, often using novel exhibit approaches.

*Chips & Changes*, which opened in 1984 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Intel Corporation, and other industry supporters, introduced the "microelectronic revolution" with its display of more than 40 separate computerized devices. The attendant maintenance challenge (especially in the pre-Internet and even pre-word processor days) pushed ASTC to develop higher standards for documentation and technical support.

Soon, some of the larger science centers were banding together to develop more costly, large-scale exhibitions. But

ASTC continued to work in collaboration with smaller museums, helping to disseminate small and midscale science-rich exhibitions that nearly always were funded by NSF. In the typical process, NSF provided funds to a museum for research and development, the museum built an exhibition, and ASTC, with its experience and economies of scale, managed the tour to a dozen or more museums, delivering educational materials and sometimes staff development as well. This system satisfied NSF's requirement that the innovations it supported be disseminated widely and leave a lasting impact on the field.

Eventually, the tours even began to return some revenue to the museums that initiated the projects, funding further exhibition development. In this way, more than 70 NSF-funded exhibitions will have traveled through ASTC to cities and towns in North America and beyond from 1981 through 2009. Some memorable examples include *Structures*, from the Franklin Institute; a series of exhibitions, including *Raceways* and *Salad Dressing Physics*, developed by Bernie Zubrowski of the Boston Children's Museum and distinguished by their use of everyday materials; the New York Hall of Science's *Hidden Kingdoms*, about microbiology; and a series of astronomy exhibitions from the Space Science Institute and the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

In the late 1980s, ASTC took the lead again by initiating development of the first U.S. exhibition about global warming. *Greenhouse Earth* was developed in collaboration with Sheila Grinell (the author's predecessor at ASTC) and the Franklin Institute and opened in early 1992; its accompanying film, *Uncertainties in Global Warming Research*, won a CINE Golden Eagle Award in 1993.

Another area where ASTC took the lead was in promoting concern about accessibility in exhibition design. In 1998, NEC Foundation of America provided support for a workshop on universal design; several years later, NEC supported development of accessibility features in *Wild Music*, a collaboration among ASTC, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the Science Museum

of Minnesota. (The exhibition is still traveling; see *ASTC Dimensions*, July/August 2007).

In 2006, the National Science Board honored ASTC with a Public Service Award for its "major influence on informal science learning" by "enabling scientists and engineers to reach the public through traveling exhibitions, educational programs, and youth initiatives."

### Going virtual

As new technologies appeared and use of the Internet expanded, the role of ASTC's exhibitions program evolved. In 1996, ASTC led a collaborative experiment with an "electronic library of traveling exhibitions," funded by NSF's former Networking Infrastructure for Education program. A group that included the Exploratorium and the Brooklyn Children's Museum created online representations of two exhibitions—*Turbulent Landscapes* and *Wild About Plants*—and the research behind them, and together explored the possibilities and challenges of introducing this new line of work into the flow of exhibition development.

These and further online experiments would eventually inform ASTC's development, again with NSF support, of ExhibitFiles, a community web site with a growing collection of user-contributed case studies and reviews. Opened in April 2007, ExhibitFiles now has more than 1,300 members worldwide. Some of the old ASTC traveling exhibitions are documented there, and others will join the collection over coming months.

Thus is preserved a lasting ASTC contribution to the field, even as the association discontinues its traveling exhibition management service. Today, ASTC's collaborative mission continues in new strategies for building the exhibits field and spreading word about the spirit that animates the science center movement worldwide. ■

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