Photo Figures for Part III

Exhibit Labels

An Interpretive Approach

Third Edition

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Douglas squirrel

The typewritten text of John Muir's vivid quote gives it the voice of a personal diary.

Although the vocabulary is a bit high, it might make a squirrel-hater laugh.

Lonnie Holley (b. 1950)
Busted Without Arms, 2016

Dress form, gun grip display,
model handguns

Courtesy of the artist and the Arnett Collection, Atlanta, GA

I have used mannequins in my art since the early 1980s. A few years ago, I came across some old dress forms and also found a Pachmayr handgun display. I loved the way the guns had no barrels (like the one used in *In the Grip of Power*). I made this after years of news stories about black people being killed, only to learn that they weren't armed. One man ran away and was shot from behind. One man was selling cigarettes on the side of the street. It was more than I could handle. A few years ago, I visited Mother Bethel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina. They were redoing their grounds, and I met a deacon there. He gave me some materials from the construction site, and I made art out of it. Six months after my visit, a young man killed nine people there. Sometimes my art comes in the aftermath of pain.

Busted without arms

The artist tells a first-person story, in plain and personal language, that describes his inspiration and process. Because he speaks specifically about the artwork that's right before us, our eyes go back and forth from the art to the words as he brings his story home.

Keep it up?

Multiple first-person perspectives were invited from a diversity of people about whether the Roosevelt statue should remain outside the American Museum of Natural History. While some suggested interpretive recontextualization, the decision was made to remove it.

Reconsidering colonialism

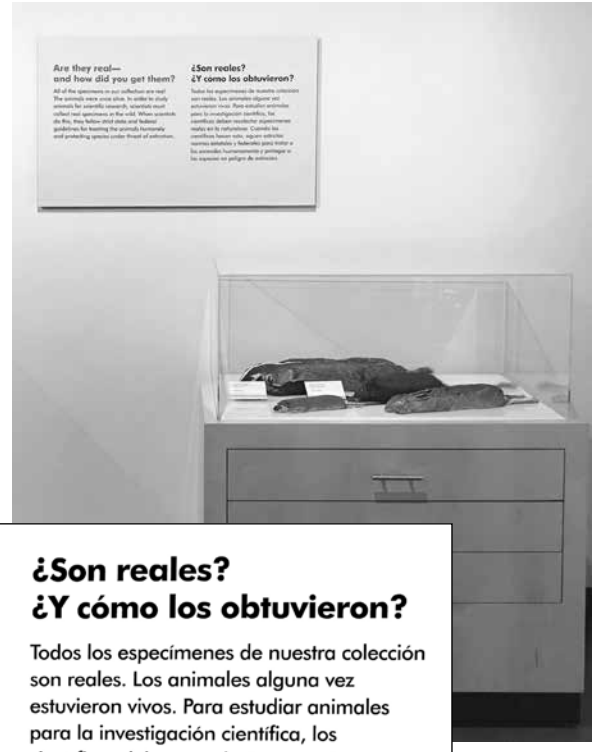
New text affixed to the glass calls out historical inaccuracies and clichés depicted in this 1939 diorama.

Old displays that depict colonialism and white superiority need to be reinterpreted.

What we got from Indians

We don't do this anymore, right?

There's no big idea. There's no logical organization of types of labels. But most of all, the content is condescending.



**Are they real—
and how did you get them?**

All of the specimens in our collection are real. The animals were once alive. In order to study animals for scientific research, scientists must collect real specimens in the wild. When scientists do this, they follow strict state and federal guidelines for treating the animals humanely and protecting species under threat of extinction.

**¿Son reales?
¿Y cómo los obtuvieron?**

Todos los especímenes de nuestra colección son reales. Los animales alguna vez estuvieron vivos. Para estudiar animales para la investigación científica, los científicos deben recolectar especímenes reales en la naturaleza. Cuando los científicos hacen esto, siguen estrictas normas estatales y federales para tratar a los animales humanamente y proteger a las especies en peligro de extinción.

¿Son reales?

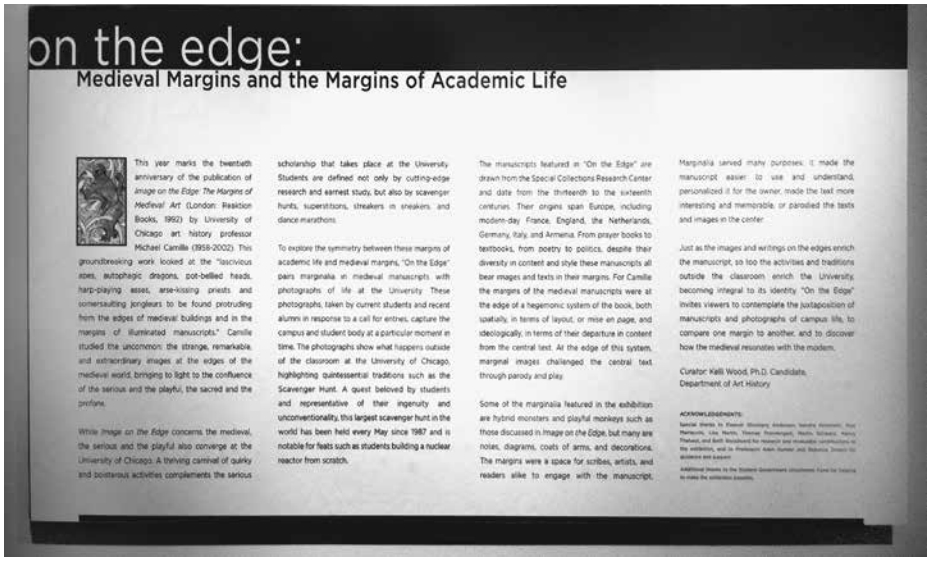
The difference in length of these two labels is typical: Spanish translations of English require more words.

Research has shown that people in Spanish-speaking groups are likely to use both the English and Spanish versions of the labels rather than just one or the other.

Too many words

You don't have to read the words in these labels to know that there are too many.

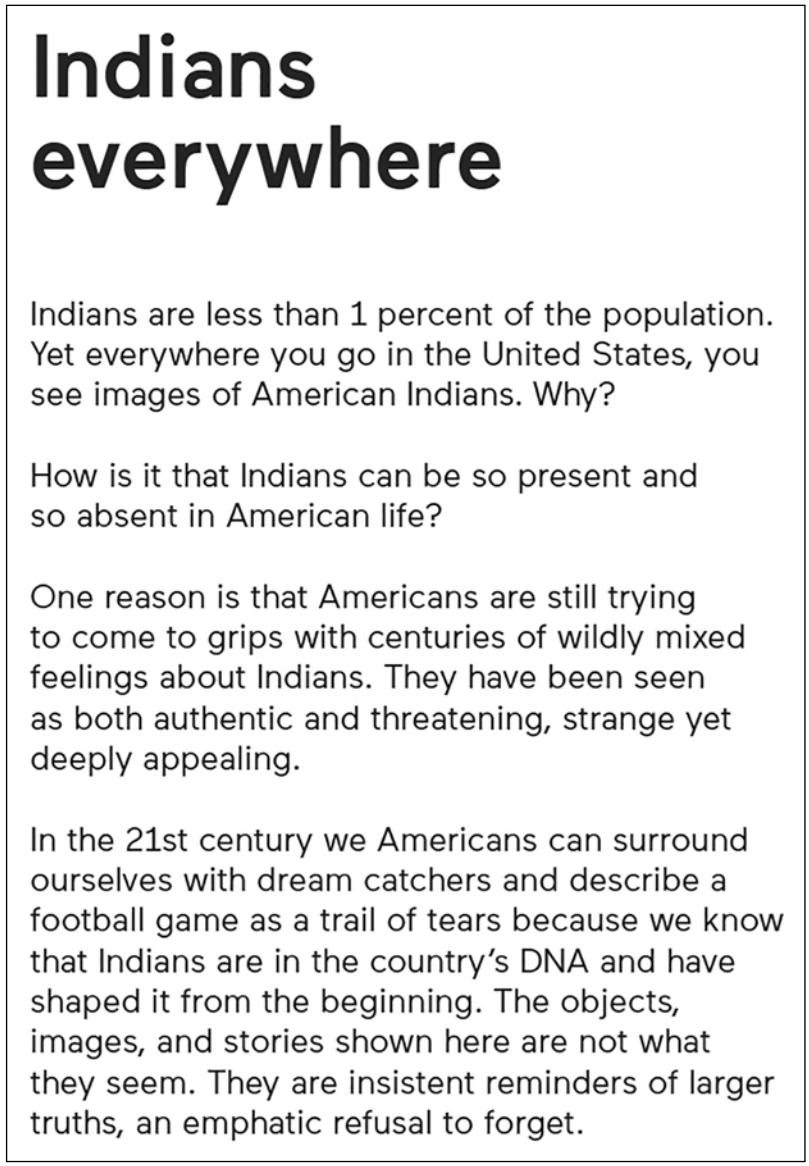
Why do some art historians and geologists need to say so much? Writers can avoid this when they have a clear and focused big idea, a respect for visitors' limited time and energy, and some self-control.



Indians everywhere

The fact that this introductory label begins with short paragraphs makes it easier to start reading; the engaging style then pulls the reader along.

Called "irresistibly readable texts" by art critic Peter Schjeldahl, the exhibit's labels are conversational in style.



Indians everywhere

Indians are less than 1 percent of the population. Yet everywhere you go in the United States, you see images of American Indians. Why?

How is it that Indians can be so present and so absent in American life?

One reason is that Americans are still trying to come to grips with centuries of wildly mixed feelings about Indians. They have been seen as both authentic and threatening, strange yet deeply appealing.

In the 21st century we Americans can surround ourselves with dream catchers and describe a football game as a trail of tears because we know that Indians are in the country's DNA and have shaped it from the beginning. The objects, images, and stories shown here are not what they seem. They are insistent reminders of larger truths, an emphatic refusal to forget.

Officer of the Hussars, 2007
Oil on canvas; frame with gilding

Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

This painting is inspired by a long history of European paintings showing military heroes on horseback. It draws attention because of its size, colors, and decorative details, but also because powerful, heroic images of black men are rare in Western art history.

Museum purchase, Friends of African and African American Art

Kehinde Wiley

Alongside Kehinde Wiley's 2007 Officer of the Hussars, interpretive text shows the iconic European painting he "appropriated." It's good to show an image of the referenced work for visitors not familiar with it.

Critics now celebrate Wiley for "reshaping the monumental," not just appropriating it. A step in the right direction for a more current and equitable point of view?

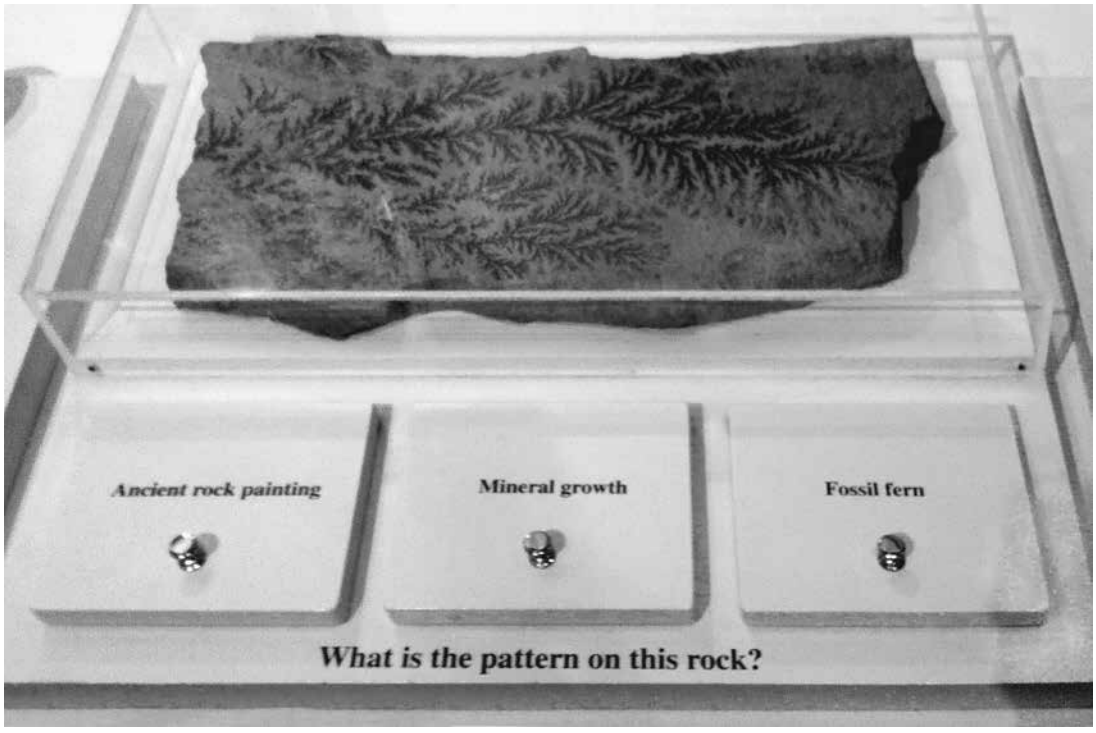
Théodore Gericault, **Officer of the Hussars**, 1812, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

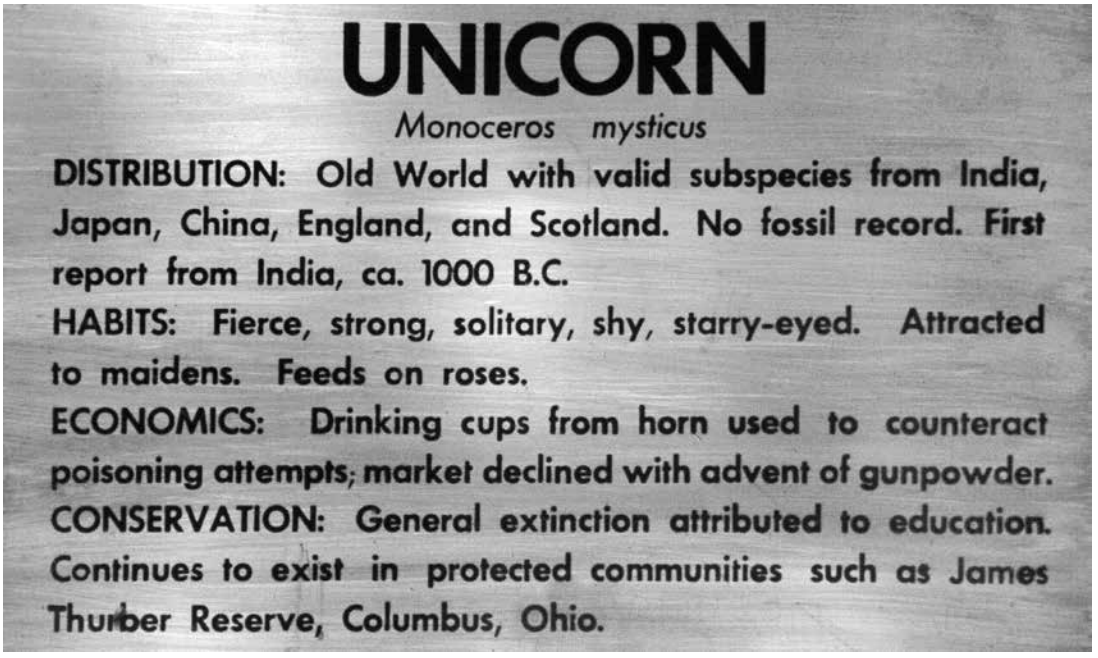
In this instance, Wiley appropriated Gericault's painting for his own artwork.

Question flip labels

Flip labels are frequently used as interactive elements in all kinds of exhibitions. A question is posed, and visitors lift the flap to see the answer. Did they guess correctly?

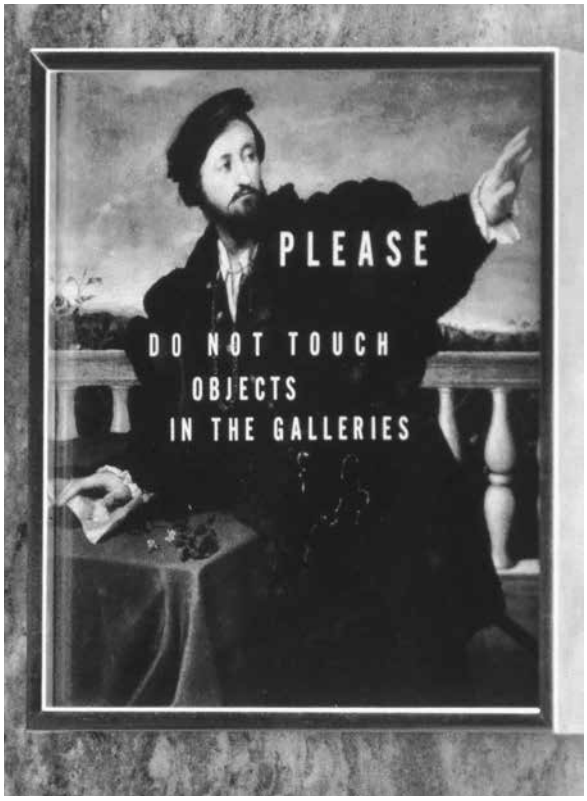
When writing question flip labels, consider the chances of most visitors getting the answer right. If your goal is to trick people into guessing wrong, think again. How do you feel when you get fooled?





Unicorn

Labels that attempt to be whimsical can be funny if visitors are in the know. But humor can be harmful if it makes them feel stupid.



OK to touch?

When the sign starts with "Please," most visitors stop reading because they think the words "Don't Touch" are coming next. Better to say "OK to touch" if they can.