

## Exhibition Review

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### ***House Industries: A Type of Learning*, Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, Dearborn, Michigan, United States, 27.05.2017 - 04.09.2017**

An engaging and well-received temporary exhibition at the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation explored personal creativity and the forces that influence it. The exhibition was co-curated with the contemporary typographic design firm, House Industries - also the subject of the exhibition - and focused specifically on one of its founders, Andy Cruz - a choice that positively impacted the public reception of the exhibition.



*Image 1. House Industries: A Type of Learning at the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, 27 May -4 September, 2017. By kind permission of and © KMS Photography*

The thematic heart of the exhibition is presented early on in a placard that introduces the exhibition and highlights 'how YOU can use different objects, emotions, and experiences - no matter how commonplace they may seem - to dream up your own ideas and creations.' This aim is supported visually with a broad range of specific source materials that impacted Mr Cruz as well as a generous sampling of products (listed extensively later) that incorporate the firm's acclaimed typefaces. The result is visually dazzling and delightfully overwhelming.

The exhibition is situated within a vast 12-acre space in a 1920s-era building modelled after Philadelphia's Independence Hall. The objects in the exhibition are drawn from the extensive collections assembled by American automobile magnate Henry Ford during his

lifetime and has been promoted - along with Greenfield Village (Ford's outdoor museum of over a hundred historic buildings) and the Rouge Factory Tour (where visitors watch automobiles being assembled in one of Ford's oldest production facilities) - as 'America's greatest history attraction.' In this case, the museum's special exhibition space is suffused in light, drawing an immediate contrast with most of the other permanent exhibition spaces in the museum, and a rotating soundtrack of Cruz's favourite musical selections pulses throughout the gallery. Visitors interviewed by the reviewer commented specifically on the energy provided by these aspects of the exhibition, a reminder that humans experience the world (or exhibition) around them using multiple senses. Successful exhibition design requires attention to more than the merely visual.



*Image 2. House Industries Exhibit Shows How Love of Autos Translates into Design Inspiration. By kind permission of and © KMS Photograph*

The exhibition is notably populated with source material that both influenced Cruz in his own creative journey and which speaks to the museum's visitors as well - 'At last! Something from our own generation!', one person who appeared to be over 40 offered. The ambitious visual display includes everything from automobiles (including Ed Roth's *Mysterion*) to Heath ceramics, Eames-designed furniture to Schwinn bicycles, pop culture characters from *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, U.S. late night television host Jimmy Kimmel, to stunt performer Evel Knievel, and from printed fabrics to Goth fashion. Visitors were observed happily exploring this vibrant space, frequently stopping to discuss displays with other guests.

Written text panels and captions underscored connections between the primary themes of the exhibition. 'You can learn a lot from your interests....[L]essons from...shapes, sounds, and textures eventually influence everything we do' pronounces one such panel early in the exhibition. The 'forward leaning' message of the exhibition (empowering, enabling, energetic), its unique assignment of House Industries' Andy Cruz as both curator and subject, and the decidedly non-narrative form of the exhibition align nicely with the philosophical direction suggested by the newly re-named Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation. One very much felt in the midst of a space where a conscious attempt was being made to subvert traditional assumptions about exhibits in a history museum and to imagine an experience that was less structured, less narrative, less entrenched in the authoritative voice of the institution,



*Image 3. House Industries Font Creation on Display Inside A Type of Learning. By kind permission of and © KMS Photography*

tapping into one's personal creativity than in celebrating the work of House Industries. Thus, a mere paeon to House Industries was avoided; still, one is left wanting more.

Visitors interviewed admitted both to being happy and energized in the space but also in not entirely understanding what the point of the exhibition was. The museum supported learning in the exhibition through an impressive variety of educational efforts - offering on-site creative expression opportunities (equally popular with families and adults), staffing the exhibition area with wandering educators, arranging for daily pop-up tours, and a series of scholarly lectures featuring national experts from the design field. In addition, the new publication from House Industries, *The Process Is the Inspiration* (2017), was available for purchase to those with a deeper interest in the subject of the exhibition. Still, given the curators' creative approach to the installation, museum visitors seeking a highly structured educational experience would have been invited instead to play a greater individual role in meaning making.

That the exhibition eschews traditional methods of exhibition curation, narration and instruction in a history museum setting seems undeniable. The partnership formed between host institution and the subject of the exhibition has the potential to be complicated - the ability to maintain objectivity, the question of voice and the balance of power/control all come into question. And yet, this bold hybrid also provides the possibility of turning a fusty convention on its ear. In this case, the partnership seems to have resulted in an exhibition most were observed to enjoy considerably. While the current paradigm might well ask if a more structured attention to learning might have led to a stronger exhibition, the curation team is to be congratulated on exploring an exhibition model that leans in to the refocused goals of the institution.

and moreover, more empowering of its audience. Admittedly, this could only be done in very broad strokes given the diverse nature of the audience - mostly white, but comprising people of all ages often travelling in family groups, from nearby counties (within an 100-mile radius) but also from around the world. What matters most here was not the degree to which these changes were experienced by the audience but that this was a conscious change of position on the part of the institution.

What was less readily discerned in the exhibition was the voice of House Industries itself. Certainly it was on display visually - in brightly-coloured backcloths, as type integrated into larger designs, and in engaging interactives (one of which asked visitors to select which of various House typefaces would best be used in birthday cards sent to different family members). Still, one looked for historical background, biographical details of the principals or interviews with the creative team both to clarify the connections between the source material displayed and the firm's output and to learn how one is to practically leverage the material influences in one's own life toward personal creative end. Discussion with the museum's chief curator suggested that this was intentional, that the focus was meant more to direct attention toward

**References**

Cruz, A., Roat, R., Barber, K. and Abrams, J. J. (2017) *House Industries: The Process Is the Inspiration*, California: Watson-Guption.