



American  
Alliance of  
Museums

NAME  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
FOR MUSEUM EXHIBITION

FALL 2019

VOL

38

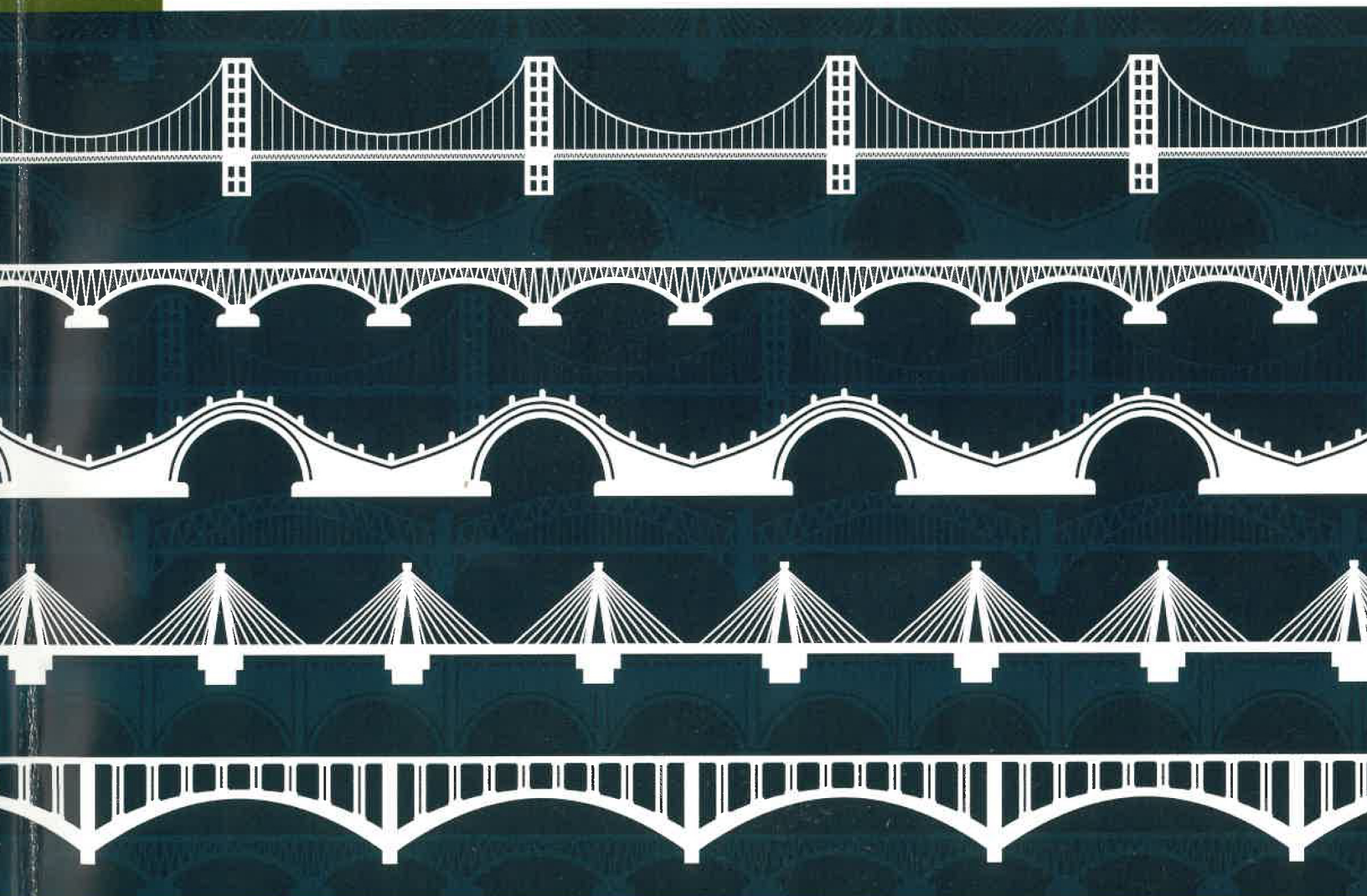
ISSUE

2

USD 15

# exhibition

A JOURNAL OF EXHIBITION THEORY & PRACTICE FOR MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS



Bridging Divides

INSTITUTION Staten Island Museum

LOCATION Staten Island, New York

## Packing a Lot into a Small Space



The mission of the Staten Island Museum is to explore the “dynamic connections between natural science, art and history,” and its recently opened exhibition, *Field Notes: Seed Stories and the Power of Plants* does just that. As the introductory label states, this temporary installation not only captures 138 years of collecting and studying Staten Island’s diverse flora, but aligns this seminal work with that of many others: local gardeners, plant biologists and artists, as well as the nurturers and propagators of heirloom seeds for future growth and harvests.

*Field Notes* brings all this to life in one gallery which tells multiple and varied stories. Through video and audio, photograms and illustrations, and an amazing

display from the museum’s local botanical collection (fig. 1) – which includes specimens gathered since the mid-19th century, as well as some wonderful “field notes” from one of the museum’s founders – visitors can explore four projects that highlight the cultural, artistic, and scientific impact of collecting plant life. These projects include the photograms of local flora by contemporary Staten Island artist, Gale Wisdom; documentary videos by Jay Weichun of Staten Islanders who grow crops in backyards and unused places; and seed histories, seed-packet art, and the work of the Greenbelt Native Plant Center whose mission is “to provide native plants and seeds from local plant populations in support of the restoration and management of many of the City’s most valuable natural areas.”

Fig. 1. Displays from the museum’s Staten Island herbarium collection.

Several interactive exhibits, including tactile seed, art-making and scientific observation activities, along with diverse displays – such as pressed botanical specimens and contemporary works of art – are all easily accessible in this one gallery. Truly something is here for everyone: the naturalist, farmer and part-time gardener as well as the artist, humanist, and history buff.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM



Fig. 2. View into an interactivity exhibit on the Hudson Valley Seed Company.

I was especially drawn to the amazing exhibit of “seed-packet art.” A semi-enclosed “room” created in the middle of the gallery houses an intimate display of the commissioned art of the Hudson Valley Seed Company (HVSC) along with information about the HVSC, which, the exhibition states, “combines the science of organic cultivation with the history of seeds and the power of art” (figs. 2 & 3). What began as a “seed library” in upstate New York turned into a national heirloom seed-awareness program. The diversity of the artworks, each representative of a seed’s history, heritage, and myths, is captured in very striking and poetic

illustrations. I was also intrigued by the photograms (a silhouette photograph made by placing an object directly on sensitized paper and exposing it to light) created by Staten Island artist Gale Wisdom. Wisdom gathers roadside “weeds,” such as wild onion, asters, and witchgrass, and arranges beautiful “bouquets” to create her photograms. Through this moving work, one senses both the immediacy and fragility of her subjects (fig. 4).

For visitors to this small yet precious exhibition, there is a lot to learn, to look at, and to experience...pick up a specimen of seeds, roots, or leaves to



Fig. 4. Overview of gallery with a display of photograms on far wall.



Fig. 3. Display of seeds and original “seed-packet art.”

investigate under a macro zoom lens, design your own seed packet, or relax in a wheelbarrow chair as you ponder the diversity of contemporary artworks, the specimens that adorn the walls and cases, and the history that unfolds...there is so much wonder packed into *Field Notes* (fig. 5).

**Jo Ann Secor** is a Principal and Director of Interpretive Services at SKOLNICK Architecture + Design in New York City.



Fig. 5. Video viewing area with wheelbarrow seating.

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action?

Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newslines! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: [NAMENewslines@gmail.com](mailto:NAMENewslines@gmail.com).