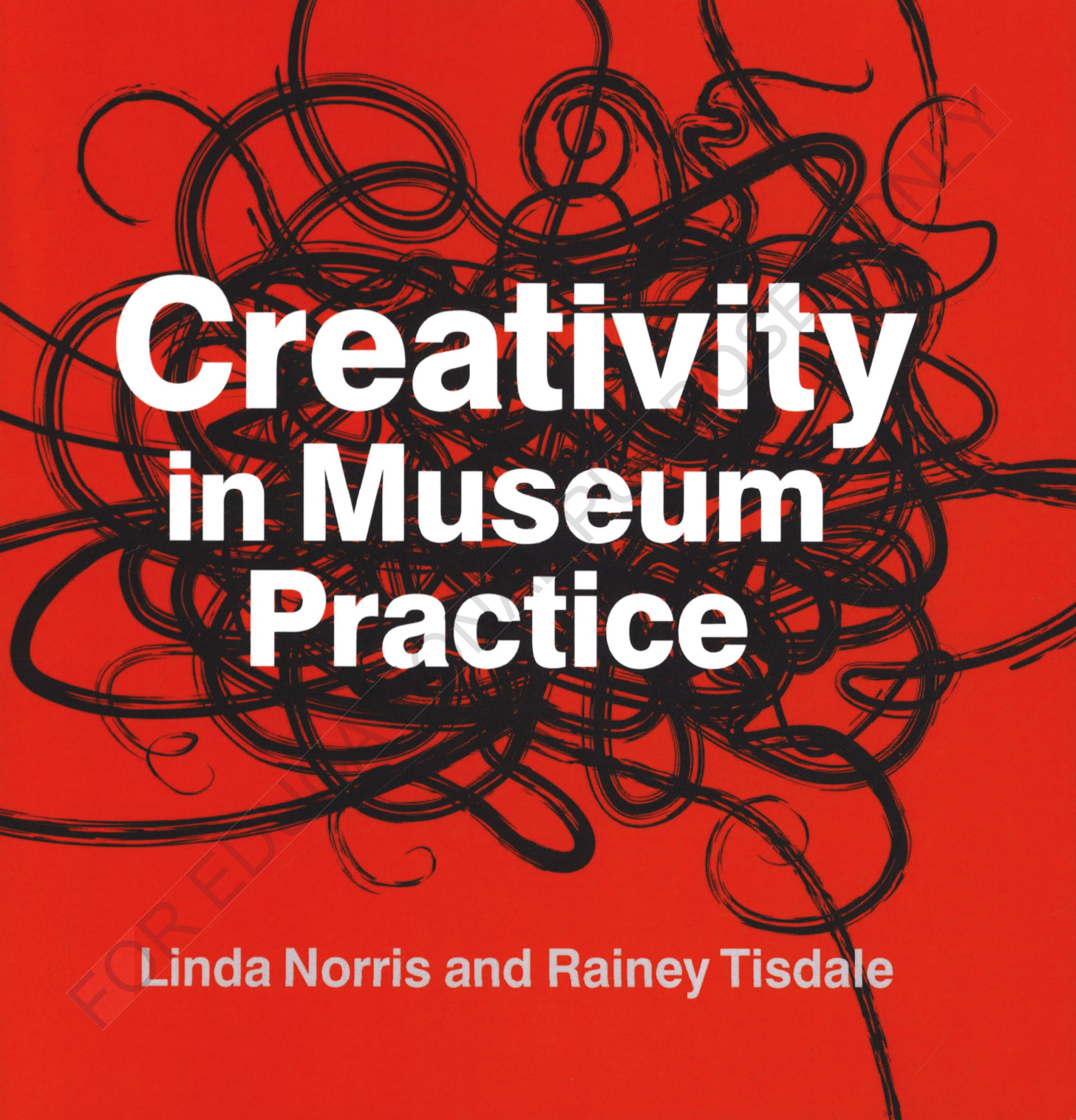
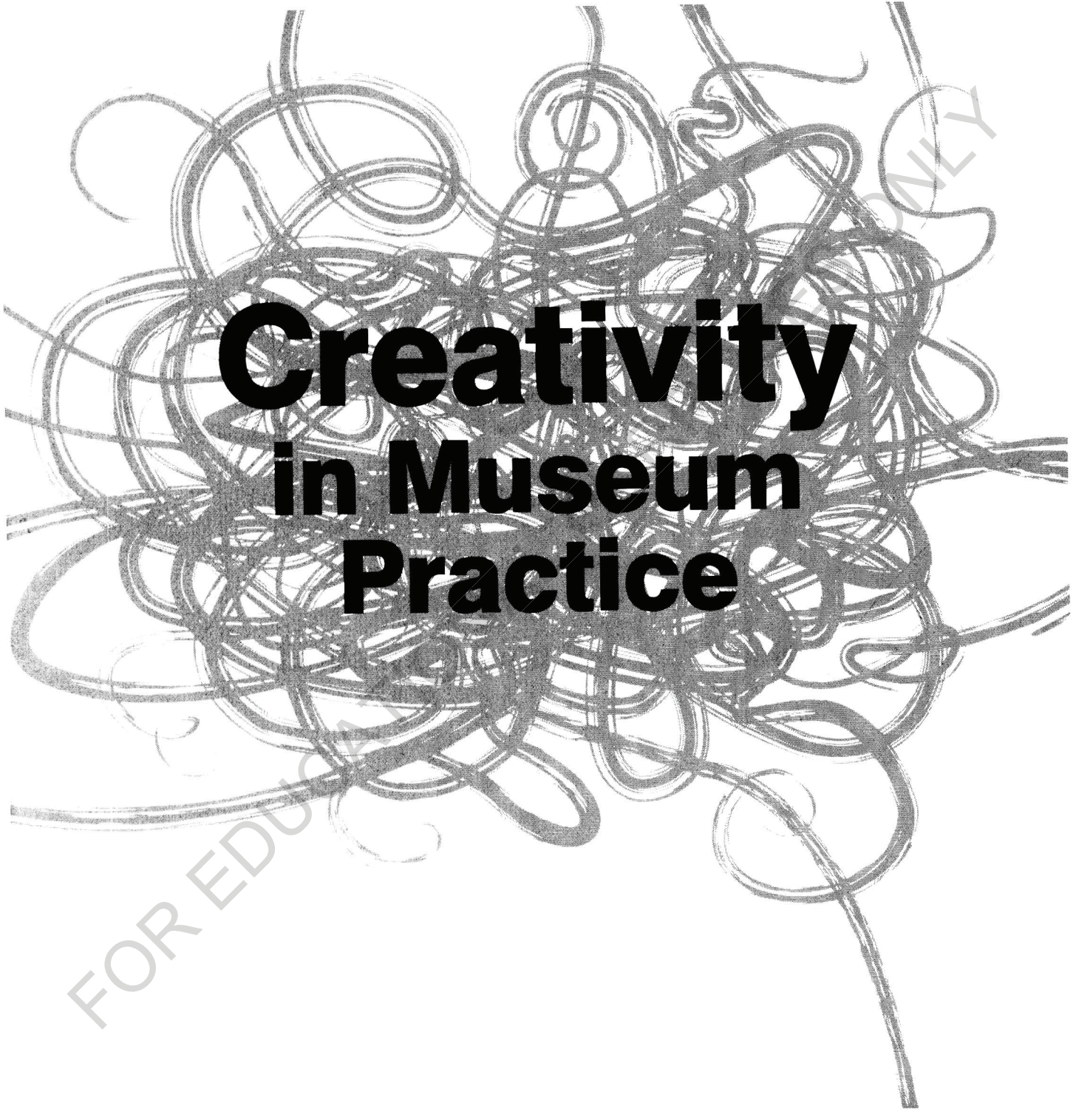


The background of the entire image is a solid, vibrant red. Overlaid on this background are numerous thick, black, hand-drawn scribbles. These scribbles are chaotic and energetic, forming a dense, tangled mass in the center of the image. They consist of many loops, swirls, and overlapping lines, creating a sense of movement and spontaneity. The text is centered over this scribbled area.

Creativity in Museum Practice

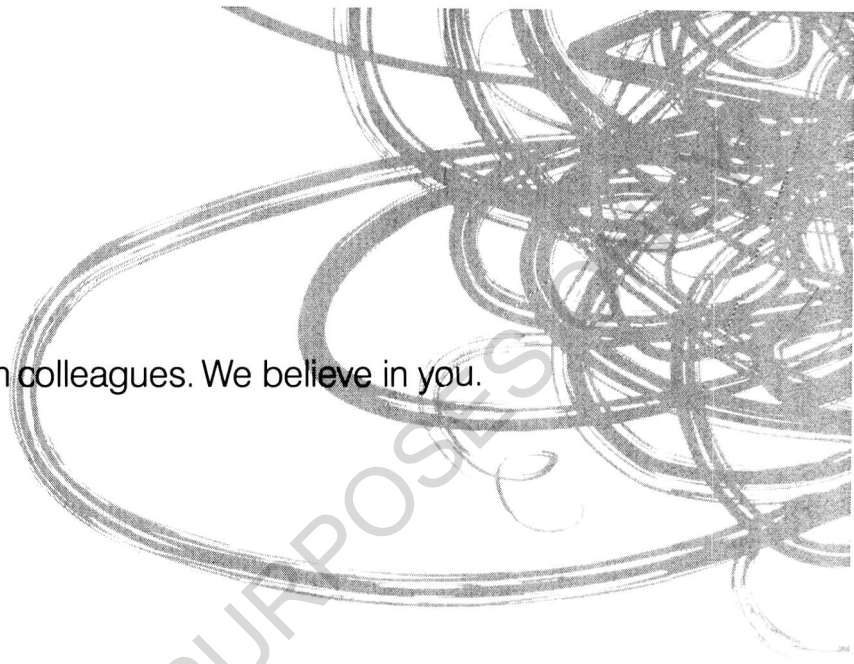
Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



Creativity in Museum Practice

To our museum colleagues. We believe in you.



FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES



Creativity in Museum Practice

Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale



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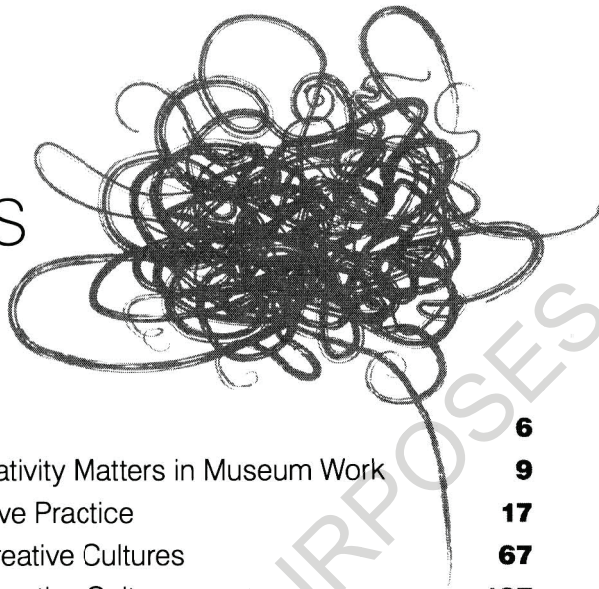
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Our families (who
started us on the
path of curiosity-
driven explorers)

Friends and Family

Drew & Anna and
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continued with us
on that curiosity-
driven path)

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who helped us make
the manuscript
so much stronger .

The Crash Course
in Creativity team

Our M&C Peeps

All the people who
sent us interesting
things to read

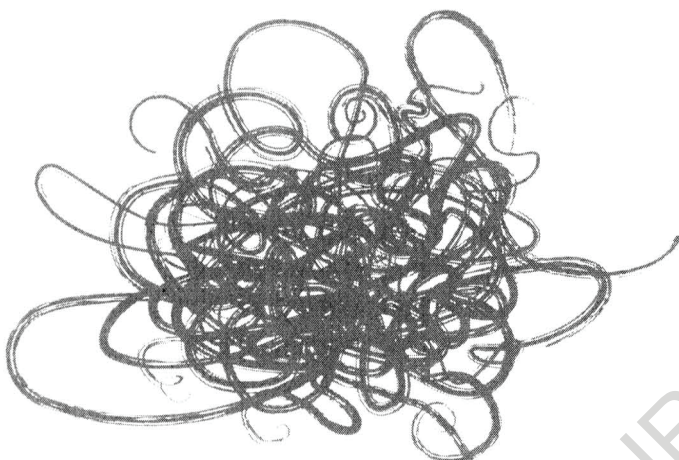
Museums—near and far, large and small—that inspired us

Our Inspirations

Our Creativity Heroes—
all the people we've
encountered,
famous and not,
who approach
their lives with a
creative spirit

The Fulbright Program,
which broadened our view

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Introduction Why Creativity
Matters in
Museum Work

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There is a scene in the 1984 cult classic heavy metal band mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* where lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel (played by Christopher Guest) is showing director Marty DiBergi (played by Rob Reiner) the tools of his trade, his guitar collection, with all the intensity of a veteran curator. He tells DiBergi about each piece: what makes it special and how he uses it to make great music. They get to a Marshall amplifier, and Tufnel explains that it's an exceptional amp because the volume knob doesn't just go to ten, it goes to eleven. When you are performing live and you need that extra kick, you can turn it all the way up to eleven and really knock the socks off the audience. DiBergi tries to reason with Tufnel that you can have amps with a volume knob that goes to ten that make the same amount of noise, but Tufnel won't have it. He knows he has a magic amp.

Wouldn't it be amazing if museums had a magic amp, one that made our work reverberate and resound through the stadium of public life with all the power and gusto of an electric guitar cranked up to eleven? In fact we have such a magic amp: it is creativity.

On the walls and in the storage of museums, large and small, art and history, science and archaeology, are tangible signs of human creativity. Whether it's inventing the more perfect fishing jig, illustrating a scientific principle, or seeing the world the way no artist had before—it's all evidence of our human impulse to solve problems and create new ideas. For centuries now museums have been spending countless hours and enormous resources collecting and preserving this evidence of human creativity. But are they ignoring the creative capacity sitting right in front of them, in their own workers? We believe the daily creative life of museum workers behind the scenes both needs and deserves more attention in order for museums to reach their full potential.

"Creativity" is a word that gets thrown around a lot these days, and it means different things to different people. So what exactly do we mean by creativity in museum practice? For the purposes of this book, creative museums—and creative museum workers—produce new ideas and new ways of seeing things that add value either internally (to the staff and to operations behind the scenes) or externally (to a public audience). Creative museum practice includes idea generation in any museum department (inventing bold new interpretive methods, management techniques, or even

fundraising strategies), creative problem solving (finding a graceful way to move past entrenched challenges), and—what most people think of first—artistic creativity (making the museum aesthetically appealing).

Let's unpack this definition a little. First, note the words "new" and "value." Creativity is about moving humankind forward, building on what has come before. An idea does not have to be mind-blowingly transformative to be creative, but it does have to be at least a little new, even if it is simply an established idea applied in a new way at your organization, or a new combination of two previous concepts. And it is not enough to have a new idea if it doesn't add value—problem-solving value, social value, intellectual value, aesthetic value. Second, this definition encompasses both back and front of the house: staff and the public. The creative impulse is often not as evident in our offices as it is in our galleries. It's time to change that. We need to build creative cultures in our conference rooms, our collections storage areas, our staff lounges, and our boardrooms to support our missions more fully and move our institutions forward. And third, this definition doesn't just refer to artistic creativity; it conceives of creativity broadly, across all museum sizes, disciplines, and departments. In other words, we're not letting anyone off the hook. There was a time when a lot of museums—history, natural history, archaeology—assumed that creativity is only for contemporary art museums, or when museum development officers or registrars or administrators might have argued that creativity is only for exhibition designers, or when tiny volunteer-run museums felt they could leave it to the big guys. That time has passed.

This book explores how to unleash the creative potential of all museum workers and all museums in the service of a more creative society. We wrote it because we believe that each of you—whether you're a curator, a marketing manager, an educator, or a security guard; whether you're just starting out in your career or running the show—has a deep well of creative energy, an amp that goes to eleven, just waiting to be tapped. And once you figure out how to tap it, you establish a win-win situation with far-reaching effects: your own work gets stronger and more rewarding, and your museum becomes a significantly more interesting place to spend forty hours of each week—not just for you, but also for your co-workers. Your colleagues throughout the field stand to benefit, too, as they look to your work for inspiration. But most importantly, society wins, because creative

museums help kids, parents, teachers, workers, seniors, civic leaders—everyone—uncover their own creative passions and use them to solve nagging problems, make discoveries, invent useful and beautiful new things, build fulfilling careers, and connect more meaningfully with each other.

Over the past five to ten years there has been a wealth of new literature on the importance of creativity—to the for-profit sector, to education, to fuel economic growth. We started paying attention to this literature and looking for ways to connect it to our museum work. The more we read, the more excited we got about the potential for our colleagues to develop enriching work lives and better serve the public through creative practice. The more we read, the more we understood that creativity is not a lightning bolt that strikes a few lucky people randomly, seemingly from nowhere; it has a method, and it is a practice. Museums need creativity now more than ever—so many museums are taking three steps forward and two steps back as they struggle with really hard, entrenched problems: how to serve a broader and more diverse audience, how to build capacity, how to encourage meaningful participation, how to care for ever-expanding collections, how to articulate public value. Moreover, while the growing professionalization of our field has been beneficial in many ways, it has increased the pressure for museums to conform, to aim for a well-defined standard practice with less room for breaking new ground. So we embarked on this project together—to figure out what it would mean to infuse our field with creativity at every level, and to develop a toolkit that would allow each of you to join us in building museums that are creative from the inside out.

Creativity is likely to emerge as one of the defining trends of the twenty-first century, not just for museums but across our society. On one hand, the Information Revolution has brought about a sweeping democratization of creativity as new tools for cross-pollinating knowledge and sharing ideas become widely available to millions of people. On the other hand, that same Information Revolution is changing the world around us so rapidly in so many other ways that the standard operating manuals no longer apply. Globalization, new technology, and a culture that both connects and disconnects us at the same time present a wide array of shifting challenges—to individuals and institutions—requiring flexibility and constant improvisation. Some business leaders now believe the tried and true strategic planning process is useless—five year plans become obsolete almost from the moment they are printed.¹

Consequently, as Tim Brown puts it in *Change by Design*, “innovation has become nothing less than a survival strategy.”² Since creativity is such a powerful tool in responding quickly and effectively to changing realities, it has become an essential skill for the twenty-first-century workforce, and every corporate CEO and college president is currently trying to figure out how to encourage more of it. In the face of these societal transformations, because museums steward vast collections of creative inspiration and are wired to nurture creative thinking through free-choice learning, they are uniquely positioned to become the creative beating hearts of their communities—to fulfill a vital role in helping public audiences tap their creative potential, individually and collectively.

What exactly does it mean to be a creative beating heart of your community? For some museums, it means that nurturing creativity in members of the public is your *raison d'être*, your guiding mission. But even when encouraging creativity is not your museum's explicit mission, it can still be woven through everything that you do, the way we currently weave lifelong learning through all museum work. In this sense creative practice becomes both a value and a life skill to model to your audience, whether your museum exists to illuminate archaeology, decorative arts, or Jurassic technology. Our society needs museums to help members of the public learn how to be creative, lifelong learners because our formal education system is largely failing at this task. But we cannot truly understand how to facilitate creativity in our audiences until we learn how to be creative ourselves behind the scenes.

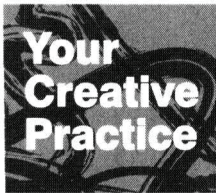
Behind the scenes at a creative museum, everywhere you look people are learning and exploring, taking in new information from many different sources to help them do their jobs better. They have spent time figuring out what the optimal conditions are for maintaining their creative practice, individually and as a team, and they structure their day accordingly—whether it's solo reflection, small group problem solving, or staff-wide exploration. The staff of a creative museum—paid and volunteer—experiments and supports each other in taking creative risks. Ideas—whether they are about brand new projects or ways to make old projects more effective—are a valued commodity to be nurtured and celebrated throughout the museum. And the space there behind the scenes is just as interesting as the space for the public, with stuff to look at, explore with, and use. Make no mistake, creative practice is a lot of hard work, and creative workers still experience setbacks—it's not

that everything about the museum is suddenly perfect. But they are engaged in rewarding, meaningful work that leads to self-actualization, and they have many tools to overcome those setbacks and solve problems that get in their way. Therefore, a creative museum is an energizing and supportive environment in which to continuously improve skills and experience forward momentum.

Imagine if every museum were such a creative museum, a unique, special place—wholly different from every other museum on the planet yet united in waving the creativity flag high. Imagine if the museum brand stood for creativity. Does this vision sound impossible to attain? We don't think it is. In fact, we think it is the museum field's greatest hope for demonstrating value to society. In the twenty-first century, museums can provide the spark, the connection, the burst of new ideas—for the public and for ourselves—to create museums that not just survive, but thrive. Now we can be connecting places where our public audience's creative impulse can be nurtured and encouraged. We can work with our limited resources—but with increased creative teamwork—to become the creative beating heart of our communities; indeed, the heart of an entire creative society.

What to Expect from This Book

This book is one part manifesto to three parts tool kit. In reading it you will come to understand the case for creativity, but more importantly, you will learn how to do it. Creativity does involve a lot of doing and a lot of practice. Your creative muscles are like any other muscle—the more you use them, the stronger they get. To help you move from thinking to doing, set apart from the main text throughout each chapter you will find two different types of sidebars:



Your Creative Practice: stories from colleagues across the field, in their own words, about what has worked—for themselves and for their museums.



Try This: concrete no-cost or low-cost activities you can experiment with to jumpstart your creative practice.

Use these sidebars (and the Get Going Game, p. 213) to envision and plan your first steps forward and revisit them whenever you need inspiration for what to do next.

This book is structured around different contexts for creativity: individual, institutional, field-wide, and community-wide. You will learn how to develop your own creative muscles, but more importantly, you will also explore how to embed creative practice throughout the organization you work with—an effort that can be undertaken no matter where you fall on the organizational chart. But it doesn't stop there—you will also have a chance to consider the field-wide infrastructure that lifts all museum boats at once, and the end goal: strengthening creativity in our public audiences. Ultimately, creativity needs to shift from individual practice to institutional culture to field-wide value to do the most good for the public—an entire network of creative people can generate exponentially more creative energy than one person working in isolation.

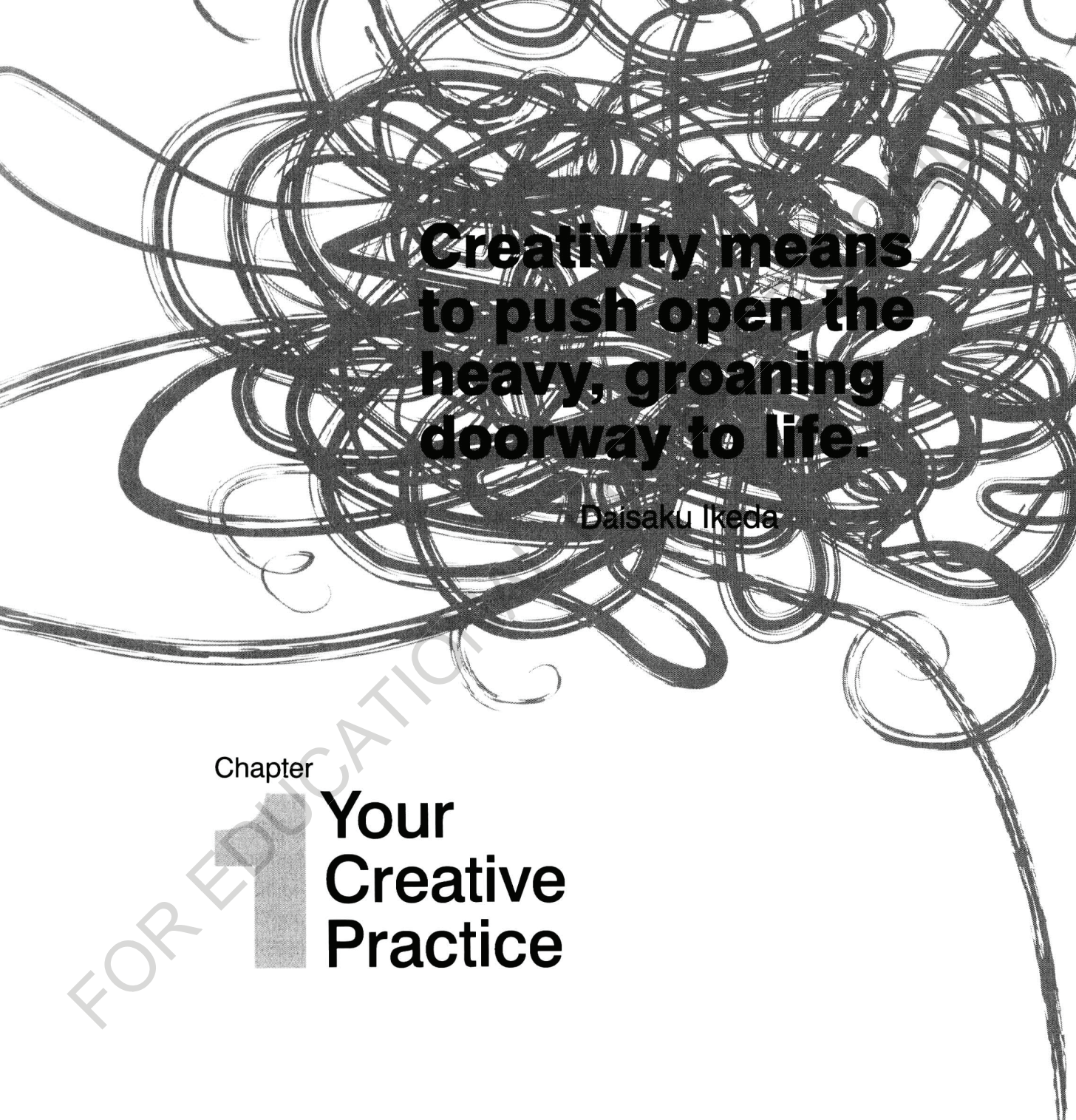
Introduction

You should expect that reading this book will prompt you to consider your own tolerance level for risk and change. Creativity nearly always involves failure and the willingness to learn from failure. Creative people almost never get it right the first time. But when they do finally get it right, they get it really, really right. The creative path is a lot less familiar and safe than the same-old, same-old, the-way-we-have-always-done-it path. But the creative path can *transform* institutions; in fact, we have seen it do so. Moreover, we have yet to come across a creative museum that is closing its doors. All the evidence suggests that creativity makes for a stronger institution. To their communities and to their supporters, museums increasingly need to demonstrate value. And in today's rapidly shifting world, there is not much value in playing it safe and doing things the same old way they've always been done.

What you should not expect is that this book will give you the ideas. Creativity is not about copying whole-cloth from your colleagues—that doesn't get us very far as a field. You have to practice coming up with the ideas yourself, the proverbial learning how to fish. So instead, this book offers a lot of strategies for finding your own new ideas and solutions, and for putting those ideas to work through a process of experimentation, refinement, and reflection. You can use the tools provided here to chart your own creative path, a path of learning and growth, a path that takes you to new and interesting places.

You can consume this book the conventional way, from cover to cover, if that suits you best, but there are other equally valid approaches. You could read a section each morning before you start work, and then consider how it applies to your own situation throughout the course of the day. Or you might think about your own biggest creativity challenges and prioritize those sections, experimenting with the corresponding Try This activities before you move on. You might read it together with your colleagues, book group style, discussing a chapter at a time. Or, you might open it to any page and just try something. Reading this book will not turn you into the Picasso or the Einstein of the museum world overnight, nor will it turn your institution into the Walker Art Center or the Exploratorium overnight either. But over time a series of small changes will indeed lead you to meaningful, rewarding creative successes.

All we want you to do is try something. And then try something else. The change starts with you. Turn yourself up to eleven.



**Creativity means
to push open the
heavy, groaning
doorway to life.**

Daisaku Ikeda

Chapter



Your Creative Practice

FOR EDUCATION

Over the past five to ten years there has been an outpouring of new thinking about creativity. From neuroscience research on creativity and the brain, to the pioneering human-centered design at IDEO and Stanford's d.school, to blog posts and TED Talks on remixing ideas and building a culture of experimentation. This work is starting to be embraced by many for-profit companies, and by many segments of society at large. Meanwhile, there has been some attention to creativity in our field—it was the theme of the 2012 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conference and the topic of a *Journal of Museum Education* issue in 2005 and an *Exhibitionist* issue in 1999—but for the most part all this new thinking about creative practice as a way of working has not yet broadly infiltrated the museum community. Museum workers do not share a common vocabulary for discussing what creativity means in our field, nor a common set of best practices for doing it, the way we do for other issues—like museum ethics, community engagement, or risk management—that affect our everyday work. This chapter is about developing that common language, and about each of you understanding the role creativity can play in your own life.

The principles of creative practice outlined in this chapter apply to both museum workers and museum audiences. In fact, they apply to all human beings across the planet, because humans are by nature creative animals. Some of this theory relates to individuals as they seek to enable and enhance the creative potential of their own brains. And some of it sets up a topic to be explored in more detail in the next chapter: How can each of us help build creative institutional cultures where, instead of stifling new ideas, workers feed off each other's creativity?

For museum workers, an important element of creative practice is learning to deviate from the pack—effectively and mindfully—to develop your own special way of helping your museum bring people and objects together. Museums operate in a rule-bound field, which results in many institutions that look and feel the same—institutions that stick to the recipe, that copy instead of elaborate. In our vision for creative museums, each institution is like no other place on earth. Therefore, this chapter is less about the fine details—what color you should paint your walls, for example—and more about the big picture. We want to set you off in the right direction for your creative practice but leave enough wiggle room for you to find your own way of being creative in your own unique work situation. With that in mind, let's take a walk through some creativity theory.