Redefining Successful Interpretation in Art Museums

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Daryl Fischer and Lisa Levinson

Abstract   This article aims to capture the spirit and content of a lively exchange among museum staff members at the Denver Art Museum. It began as a conference call and continued as an online dialogue about how definitions of success have evolved with advances in technology and changing expectations of visitors. Together we explored how DAM staff encourage more active participation in the museum and the creative tension that ensues between visitor co-creation and institutional control. Woven throughout this conversation are examples that demonstrate the need to move fluidly between high tech and low tech interpretives, onsite and online experiences, and the impact of environments that break down museum stereotypes. It is our hope that this discussion will spark similar dialogues among colleagues in individual institutions and in the profession at large. Readers are encouraged to respond through the blog at *Curator's* new website: http://www.curatorjournal.org.

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All photos in this article are courtesy of the Denver Art Museum.

Last summer Daryl Fischer received an email from Zahava Doering saying that an evaluation report of a Denver Art Museum in-gallery activity had sparked her interest in publishing an article about cutting-edge gallery experiences, particularly in art museums. Fischer immediately thought of the Denver Art Museum (DAM) because of the innovation that continues to come out of their education department.

Fischer pitched the idea of a collective conversation with DAM educators. The discussion began with a conference call that included Fischer and seven members of the education department. During the conversation, Fischer typed notes, then organized the key threads into a written document to share with everyone who participated. All responded with thought provoking comments, questions, and responses, and the dialogue got richer and richer.

One of the threads that wove throughout the conference calls and written conversation was the idea of redefining success in terms of what works for museum visitors. In that sense, this article is an update on the work that's been going on in Denver since 1990 with the publication of *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project,* the report that described a two-year project funded by the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts. In developing a framework for reaching novice visitors and creating 13 interpretive projects, museum staff relied on experimentation and evaluation, which are still cornerstones of their process (McDermott-Lewis 1990). At that time, interpretive experiments focused on ways of conveying information, and success was measured by visitors' acquisition of knowledge or visual skills. The museum's most recent publication, *New Angles on Interpretation*, written in 2007 after the opening of the museum's new Hamilton Building, suggests that serving visitors with choices has become a primary goal (Denver Art Museum 2007). More choices lead to more active

To prevent the written conversation from becoming a logistical nightmare, Fischer posted a master document to GoogleDocs. Working from a single online document made it possible to keep track of a dialogue that had the spirit of an informal chat among colleagues. The authors have tried to maintain that tone in this article.

Participants in the conference calls and online discussion were: Sonnet Hanson, head of adult and college programs; Lindsey Housel, manager of adult and college programs; Lisa Levinson, senior interpretive writer; Melora McDermott-Lewis, director of education; Heather Nielsen, master teacher for Native arts; Lisa Steffen, master teacher for western American art; Patty Williams, master teacher for Asian and textile art; Bruce Wyman, director of technology. Daryl Fischer served as moderator and provocateur.

participation in museum experiences for visitors and
more of a facilitative role for museum staff members.
Choice has changed the way the Denver Art Museum
defines success. An interpretive activity doesn't have to
be accessed by a majority of museum visitors in order
to be considered successful.

Talking About Visitor Experiences

Daryl Fischer: In our conversations I've noticed that
you've created your own vocabulary to describe the
kinds of experiences you'd like visitors to have. It's
like a lexicon of familiar words that are given new
meaning, and new words that you've coined to talk
about visitor experiences—for example, programs like
"Untitled" or "Detours," and interpretive approaches
like "sneaky teaching" and "easy moments of
creativity," going all the way back to "object-oriented
learning," a term Patty introduced decades ago when I
was at the DAM (see Williams 1992).

Heather Nielsen: I know we often talk about
"learning," but I feel like we've been grappling with
this word. It seems to be only one aspect of what we
do. I think we opened the discussion to include
personal response, and so on.

Lisa Steffen: Isn't "meaningful experiences" closer?

DF: Or maybe "personally meaningful experiences"?

LS: Yes.

DF: As Lindsey had said, the goal is to "help visitors
to engage with art without knowing they're engaging."

HN: Not sure I agree with this. We often use the
words "sneaky teaching" to suggest how we
communicate ideas in fun and delightful ways—for
example, through a poster-making activity during
which visitors grapple with the same choices artists
make while creating similar works of art. But I think
visitors want to be engaged and to know they're
engaged. Otherwise they're bored.

LS: We're not engaging visitors against their will, but maybe we try to make it feel more like their agenda than ours?

Lindsey Housel: I agree that our adult audience wants to engage—in fact, they demand and require it, but what they don't want is top-down interpretation or the kind of engagement that museums have typically offered in the past. They want to have multiple choices, and they want their "learning" and engagement to be personal, but outward-facing personal.

DF: "Outward-facing personal" is a thought-provoking phrase, but I want to be sure I understand—what do you mean by that?

LH: Yes, confusing! Ha! Outward-facing personal means that adult visitors want the evidence of their museum experiences to be on display. On Facebook, for example, there is a lot of personal information aggregated onto the profile, and it's all on view for others to see, so it's personal, but it's there for others to browse and comment on. So yeah, what I was trying to say wasn't that we don't want visitors to know they are engaging, but instead we want them to have control over that engagement, and we want the kind of content that they choose from to be unexpected and nontraditional. This is not only true for young adults, but also for some other visitors as well.

DF: Lindsey, you've mentioned that Detours, offered during your Untitled program on the last Friday evening of each month, help people express their direct experiences with art. How did you choose this metaphor and what does it suggest?

One of the DAM's Detours was led by a jazz trumpeter who improvised in front of various works of art, riffing off of the qualities and characteristics he noticed in paintings.

LH: Detours are tours of our collection given by experts in fields other than art—neurologists, cartographers, musicians—through the lens of their own expertise. The "detour" metaphor suggests a gentle slowing down, an unexpected message that tells you, hey, there's something new going on here that requires your attention.

His choices, his melodies, and phrasing got some interesting conversations going that might not have happened otherwise about details in the artwork. Another engaging and delightful Detour was conducted by a perfumer who created scents inspired by color field paintings. Visitors made connections between scents and paintings that helped people talk about art in a rich, personally meaningful way.

DF: Detour is an interesting choice of words—were you thinking of "de-tour" in the sense of not your standard tour, or "detour" in the sense of a long or roundabout route to see something unusual?

Sonnet Hanson: Both. Definitely thinking about undoing the quintessential museum experience—the tour focused on art historical information—as well as an indirect, roundabout, scenic, slow way to a destination, in this case, personally meaningful experiences with art. I like the way Lindsey talks about it as something that makes one slow down and become aware. I think people found it fascinating to approach a work of art from a synaesthetic point of view—what would this painting smell like? What would it sound like? And what in the painting is leading me to say *x*? I find it intriguing that purposely installing a lens through which to approach the art actually makes it easier to engage with and talk about art.

DF: Many museum professionals steeped in the Kantian-modernist tradition of aesthetics have advocated for unmediated experiences with works of art. But it sounds like you're finding that some kinds of mediation can actually improve the museum experience for visitors.

SH: Yes, having a voice that's not an art expert frees visitors to talk about their own personal responses to a work of art. It reduces the intimidation factor that some feel when talking about works of art—particularly with strangers—and opens up the discussion in unexpected ways. The challenge for me here, though, is that Detours are still essentially one-way, "we tell you" experiences . . . or can be if the leader doesn't continually solicit interaction and fold in comments from visitors.

DF: Melora also mentioned your "front porch" metaphor, Lindsey. What's that about?

LH: The front porch metaphor grew out of my master's thesis research. I was studying environment-and-behavior relationships and became interested in the gradients of private, semi-private, semi-public, and public spaces developed by Oscar Newman (1996)

and Christopher Alexander (1977). The inside of a house is uniquely representative of a person's identity and would be considered semi-private space (bathrooms and bedrooms are totally private). The sidewalk and the street are more public. Truly public space is under the control of no one and spaces like that can be dangerous (think of a dark alley). Now think of a front porch that sits on a neighborhood street. That's where we want to be—we want to be true to ourselves and our home, but also a lively, inviting place that is part of the neighborhood (read: audience and creative community) and reflects the neighborhood. When we are in program development, the front porch metaphor helps me stay true to the museum mission but also responsible to our community and audience.

Evaluation and Iteration

DF: In discussing some of the new programs you've developed, we became aware of how you've continued to keep pushing the envelope. It looks like the process goes something like this in a continuous cycle: innovation = experimentation → evaluation → iteration.

Experimentation: trying out new concepts or ways of doing something.

Iteration: repetition of a procedure, typically as a means of obtaining successively closer approximations to the solution of a problem.

Melora McDermott-Lewis: Evaluation has been key from the start, whether building staff capacities in listening to visitors or working with local and national consultants. For example, Ross Loomis of the Colorado State University faculty was involved in the 1990 interpretive project. Randi Korn has conducted formal studies and advised us on our own internal studies, and Daryl, you've helped us to debrief from visitor panels.

What's interesting in this to me is that we are not always evaluating success based on a pre-determined endpoint—good experiences for visitors, yes, but the evaluations are also helping us set new directions. Scientific research in a lab is often intended to prove or disprove a hypothesis, whereas we're interested in more open-ended kinds of audience research.

HN: An example would be an evaluation we did for the new building about the use of music. In conversations with Randi Korn and Associates about front-end evaluation, I don't think I was prepared to set a list of objectives; I just wanted to get a sense of the range of possible reactions to the idea. This helped free me from feeling bound to define specific objectives and goals before ever having talked to visitors.

MML: That way we're not pre-determining what we think should be meaningful, but exploring what resonates and is meaningful to our visitors.

HN: Evaluation is absolutely key in this. After a series of workshops with Randi Korn and Associates,[1] we found that when time was tight, even small-sample testing produces valid results that we can move on quickly. It's better to get feedback from five to 10 visitors than to skip testing because it would take too much time. I like to think of these small-sample studies as helping us make informed decisions.

Patty Williams: With small samples, we look for strong trends—that is, anything more than 80 percent or less than 10 percent. It lets us go far enough to take a better next step, but not so far that we feel we have the final answer.

HN: I think it was so important to free ourselves from feeling like evaluation has to be this complicated, time-consuming thing. The other crucial part of these small evaluations was coming up with a way to record them that is easy to read, share, and digest. Which of course you helped us develop, Daryl.

DF: I remember the "Food for Thought" guidelines you presented at a Visitor Studies Conference (Nielsen 2005).

HN: Yeah, it was important to us that "Food for Thought" be short and informal; the thoughts are often just bullet points. They're easy to refer to later or share with another educator tackling a similar issue at a different time.

The DAM's poetry-writing activities consist of a notebook that has a template with five fill-in blanks. Below each blank is a sentence guiding visitors to do something like "Make up a name for an artwork in this room," and "Give two words that describe it." When they take away the template, visitors find that their answers form a painless and surprisingly decent poem.

After hearing from visitors, educators used more adult-looking materials in a poetry-writing activity, such as a leather notebook and a good-quality pen.

PW: Now in terms of how iteration fits in this equation, as the DAM keeps experimenting, what we learn often morphs an interpretive into something else. Sometimes it starts where there's a little vacuum, maybe some free space, and we're given an opportunity to try something new. As other staff members get used to the activity, and see the response from visitors, it morphs into something that has much wider support within the institution, which may mean that it's given a more prominent place.

LS: Maybe our poetry-writing activities would be an example? They started as a coffee table activity that hardly got noticed in a Frederic Remington exhibit. In visitor evaluations we found that many folks who were asked to do the activity reported it deepened their experience with the art. But they also told us they probably wouldn't have tried it on their own. So we really tried to identify why these adults wouldn't spontaneously participate in these activities. For the next iteration of the poetry-writing activity, in the permanent western art gallery, we made improvements that included more adult-looking materials, a more comfortable setting (sofa-like seating with integrated writing surfaces), and eliminating the word "poetry" (which many people found intimidating) from the notebook cover. It gets good adult use. But the next iteration, an architecture poetry area in the atrium, really took us a big step further by offering a whole activity area, not just a journal with some seating.

Lowering the Barriers to Adult Participation

In an atrium space dedicated to an architecture poetry-writing activity, the design

Lisa Levinson: This would be a good place to define the hurdles for adult participation. These hurdles seem to apply to many interactive adult activities in the galleries. Part of what we learned

LIFT OFF

Moving through space
Continually varying
As if I'm floating on air!
Echoes
Dynamic and uplifting

–Darrell Mount, retired pastor

department put huge, visitor-written poems in vinyl on the walls, ceilings, and windows.

through our evaluation for the first iteration of the poetry activity was that the darn things had to 1) draw attention to themselves, not just sit quietly on a table; 2) be clear what

Each poem was signed in a way that made it clear the activity was for adults ("by retired pastor"). The designers also created striking ergonomic spaces for visitors to write and post their poems, a variety of different places to sit, and carpeting to define and add comfort to the space.

the activity was about immediately; 3) look "adult."[2] In the case of the atrium poetry activity (the final iteration), it felt to me like we had finally gotten close to cracking the code on these three problems we knew were a barrier. But for the main part, the problems weren't solved by the education department, they were solved through exhibit design. It was key that the design department wrestled the reins out of our hands for this particular iteration.

DF: It sounds like you've made good progress in "cracking the code" of how to get adults to engage.

LS: It's a *very* iterative process, we've gained some important insights, but I wouldn't call it cracked yet.

DF: What are the biggest challenges and questions that still remain in terms of lowering the barriers to participation?

LS: For one thing, it's really hard to think up activities that: 1) produce a memento of the museum visit; 2) have a personally meaningful connection to the art; 3) make it easy to be successful; 4) have an adult look; 5) are open-ended; 6) are somewhat intuitive; 7) are low maintenance and self-directed; 8) use conservation-safe supplies. A postcard-making activity in a John Singer Sargent exhibition (and later in the permanent western galleries) was a good example. It helped show us the value of a purposeful product (a postcard that could be mailed right there in the gallery), easy creativity (rubber stamps are fun helpers that allow people to spend little or lots of time and come away with a great product), and making the activity work for kids as well as the adults it's designed for.

DF: It sounds like breaking the barrier of "museum decorum" is another big part of the challenge.

The Side Trip space was filled with worn-out rugs, Victorian-style lamps, and comfy couches and reclining chairs found at flea markets. Wallpaper masked the museum's white walls. Signs were handwritten on cardboard or masking tape. The level of informality signaled that visitors could let their guard down, and the comfortable seating begged people to stay. Low lighting and rock music reinforced the "adultness" of the space.

One activity in the Side Trip was a poster-making area. The DAM provided pens, tools, and laminated details of posters that visitors could collage on a template, copy on a copy machine, and then take home or leave on display.

LH: A great example of that is the Side Trip, which was a separate educational space for an exhibition of psychedelic posters. We went to extreme lengths to avoid typical museum style. Our director of design, Dan Kohl, designed the space to approximate a 1960s San Francisco Haight-Ashbury apartment. Taken as a whole, the space was intimate and laid back. It evoked the spirit of the Sixties, which sparked memories for those who lived it and extended the fantasy of those who didn't. Visitors lounged, talked, laughed, reminisced, sometimes danced, and tried new things (like making a poster).

Visitors engaged for extended periods in the Side Trip as a whole—making posters, sharing their rock concert experiences in journals and rolodexes, flipping through record albums, creating their own light shows, and so on. The average time spent in the Side Trip was over 40 minutes, as compared with 1 hour and 8 minutes total time spent in the exhibit. The physical atmosphere changed people's perception of the museum environment; it was mentioned by 57 percent of respondents to the summative evaluation conducted by BBC Research and Consulting.[3]

Based on copy machine count, 37,000 posters were made, about a third of which were left on display and rotated as the area filled up.

DF: As Patty said, this was clearly not a place where you were expected to sit up straight and be educated!

LS: I know one thing we'll do in the future is try to let design and atmosphere speak more loudly to invite and communicate who the activity is for (versus something that requires you to read a "label," no matter how clever, to find out how fun it is).

LH: What we've learned with installed interpretive elements crosses over to our live programming.

The DAM describes its Untitled events as: "Less like a field trip and more like a night out. Live music, unusual tours, offbeat encounters with art, cash bar . . . and a dose of the unexpected."

"Untitled" is the name of our Friday-night programming aimed at young adults. I would say the Untitled "icebreakers" are certainly an outgrowth of our strand of encouraging adult participation in creative activities in the galleries. Icebreakers (which is what we call them internally) are the first thing people see when they walk in the front doors during Untitled. They're meant to be easy moments of creativity—usually a kind of artmaking in which visitors customize something that already exists (like a blank coaster, coffee cozy, or rubber duck). Alone, these objects are already "finished," but with one pass of a pen or a stamp they can be customized by the person making it. Visitors can take home what they make as a souvenir. The purpose of icebreakers is twofold: First, they set the tone for the evening by suggesting that this visit will be different than other visits. Second, they signal that the night's offerings will be playful, creative, and encourage visitor participation and creation.

Connecting with Artists

DF: So, inspiring visitor creativity is one dominant theme—what are some of the other interpretive themes and platforms that you've been developing lately? How have they evolved?

LS: Connection with artists is a big thread.

DF: What do you see as the most successful examples of this?

In the Select-A-Chat installation, visitors slide a coaster on a modified coffee table to choose questions they'd like to ask a particular artist. A larger-than-life video of the artist's response appears on the wall in front of them.

LS: "Select-A-Chat" is one of my faves. It's an installation where we tried to simulate the feeling of interviewing an artist by having visitors pick a question and an artist they'd like to hear from, then watch a video of the artist responding. We thought the act of choosing was key in helping visitors connect—it means they make deliberate choices about what interests them. The questions get at artists' personalities and their range of approaches to making art, for instance: "What does it feel like to be an artist?" and "How do you start?" The artist's video response is then projected onto the wall at a large scale.

PW: For capturing the artist's voice, technology is the solution; otherwise you're just writing quotes on the wall. Seeing the artist, hearing her speak, is way, way different than reading words. These are some of the things we've known from talking with visitors for years. Our technology solutions have really evolved over time, thanks greatly to our technology guru Bruce Wyman coming on board. In the past we'd interview an artist and have a small video screen on a stand next to three paintings. In the new iterations, it's the same artist, the same works of art, but the image of the artist is lifesize or even larger.

HN: Don't you think, Patty, that tech has also allowed us to let visitors have control over asking questions? They are not just passively watching but actually choosing the information they want to hear.

Bruce Wyman: It's a matter of creating a more interactive experience as well as giving the video more prominence in space. We also work very hard to make the technologies a part of the experience by using real world objects. In Select-A-Chat, visitors select an artist by moving a coaster on a coffee table in a lounge area. The experience isn't abstracted through a computer screen; instead, the visitor interacts in ways that feel obvious and natural so there's less to figure out. The artist is part of that paradigm; we give them a physical presence so they command attention as a partner in the experience with the visitor.

Creating Deeper Levels of Engagement

MML: To return, Daryl, to your question about interpretive themes, we've been talking about visitors' personal and affective responses to artworks for a long time, but I don't think we fully embraced them at first. I think we initially saw it as an interesting phenomenon, but we didn't really grapple with it until later with inspiration from Doug Worts, who was doing interesting work at the Art Gallery of Ontario.[4]

DF: So is personal response bringing the visitor into a conversation with the museum?

LL: The ways we try to elicit personal response in most of our currently installed interpretives (journals, poetry activities, rolodexes, posting areas, and so on) is not quite a dialogue, because although visitors are talking, we don't answer back. But it *has* set the stage for the upcoming experiments Lindsey and Sonnet are doing with young adults that absolutely envision dialogue—and take it even further.

MML: While it's not a dialogue per se, I don't think we should underestimate the value of visitors hearing from other visitors, such as the play between comments we sometimes see in the journals or saw on the bulletin boards.

The objectives for the DAM's new IMLS grant are to build sustainable relationships with young adults by creating a digital-presence-and-programming space that:
• **invites and showcases creative projects inspired by the museum and its collections;**
• **supports cross-platform interactions;**
• **highlights programs of particular interest to this audience;**
• **helps the DAM develop models for future institution-wide Web presence development;**
• **develops relationships with individuals and groups in Denver's creative community and thereby engages their networks;**
• **creates platforms for visitors to be creative using the DAM's collection and program as a catalyst;**
• **creates platforms that connect visitors with the museum and its stories in an authentic, transparent way;**
• **fosters exchange, dialogue, and sets up a framework in which conversations beyond the museum's expectations or control will happen.**

DF: For years you've offered many creative writing experiences throughout the museum. Lindsey and Sonnet, has this prepared you (and the institution as a whole) for your experiments with engaging visitors in digital dialogue?

LH: I think we are blessed to be in the position of having already internalized the importance of personal response in "analog" versions like journals. We use Facebook and Twitter as a kind of online journal space, with prompts in the form of status updates, comments, or tweets, and then visitors respond on our wall or on Twitter.

DF: How will this digital dialogue continue to evolve?

LH: We've recently received a grant with the goal of cultivating young adult museum advocates. We think of the word *advocate* as possibly suggesting a deeper level of investment or personal relevance than visitors or members might have. Advocates want to share their experiences with others because of their personal resonance. With the support of this grant, we're aiming to create opportunities for this sort of meaningful encounters for the next generation of museum supporters.

DF: For museum encounters to be meaningful, we can't shy away from difficult topics. Are there any examples yet of sparking conversations that were beyond your expectations or control?

LL: My impression is that we haven't had many, if any, at least not online, and I think the reason for that is that we're still not quite comfortable with *really* putting ourselves out there. One reason for this: I think we tend to be concerned that we not cross certain lines. True transparency would mean revealing controversial issues. We know just from our low-tech journals that controversy is what really inspires dialogue, but I think we're still uncomfortable with controversy about the museum itself, and even on some level about the art—for instance, a group of us didn't even try to put in place what we thought would be a very good, easy response question and voting activity for a contemporary art exhibition, in which visitors would determine which artwork was the most popular and which was the least.

HN: We are just now beginning to think about museum-wide "pull back the curtain moments" revealing our process and our passions. This may be another way of thinking of making the human connection, but I feel it is also a way to build advocates. Visitors see that you are willing to reveal your inner guts. That makes them much more willing to participate.

DF: What kinds of things are you thinking about revealing?

Embrace! **was a temporary exhibition of the work of 17 internationally known artists who were asked to create site-specific installations designed to fit within the sloping walls and irregular gallery spaces of the Hamilton Building.**

HN: Sonnet did incredible work around our *Embrace!* exhibition. Because the artists were on site creating their artwork, she was able to let visitors literally experience the artists working through live, onsite artist talks and later through time-lapse videos. The museum looked "messy" (meant positively) and in motion . . . thus to my mind making it look accessible.

DF: Heather mentioned lifting the curtain on what goes on behind the scenes; is this part of your thinking about authenticity and transparency? And have you taken any steps in this direction?

LH: Yes, absolutely part of our thinking. Very important to this younger audience to be transparent, open, and authentic. We accomplish this right now through social media tools where we post comments, pictures, videos, and speak with the audience in a very conversational-informal tone about day-to-day things that are happening at the museum and in the office.

Asked to share examples of some of their favorite museum blogs that show transparency and authenticity, staff mentioned the Brooklyn Museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.[7]

Our blog at untitled.denverartmuseum.org/blog is all about revealing our thoughts in relationship to DAM content and happenings, but also about local arts and culture happenings. Currently, Sonnet and I populate the blog but we're hoping to have guest bloggers from other departments and the community more often.

BW: Being online or on the Web is a smaller subset of the overall digital presence of the museum. Real and virtual worlds should blend to the point where they're just different lenses into the museum experience. For example, something created in the gallery should

instantly be part of the online experience. The old definitions don't apply anymore. Moving back and forth between these modes is second nature for people today. "Talking" to someone can mean in person, on the phone, by email, or through social networking. It's all just talking. The primary focus is on the experience; technology is secondary. The goal is always to integrate interpretation into the visitor experience without making it an issue of tech versus non-tech.

DF: Melora, you said you're seeing more and more cross-pollination in the work you're doing with live programs, installations, and technology. Is this primarily shifting the focus from real space to virtual space?

MML: Not sure that we're shifting focus—more that we're beginning to integrate the virtual into our conception of live programming and installed interpretation.

SH: I'd probably say that it's not so much a shift from one to the other; it's the realization that both real *and* virtual spaces hold incredible potential for rich visitor experience. A lot of what we're reading and learning about indicates that a museum's Web presence needs to be conceived of as another programming space of equal value. Museum blogger Nina Simon talks about visitor interaction with these two platforms not as linear—for example, "let's visit the website to plan our visit to the museum," followed by a visit to the site—but rather as a seamless back-and-forth between the programs, content, and opportunities to be creative that are offered onsite and online. Which goes back to another important point we've been hearing: this seamless relationship suggests that the same rich experiences should be available in both places. A cool website doesn't suffice; we need to deliver onsite as well.

HN: I think it is the other way around for us at the DAM—cool onsite experiences are not enough, you have to deliver on the website as well.

LL: Because the DAM has always prioritized onsite experiences for visitors, we're currently catching up with the virtual possibilities. It's vast, unexplored terrain for us.

SH: The bottom line is that sometimes it's low tech; sometimes it's high; sometimes onsite; sometimes online. The real question is which platform or medium is most appropriate: live, installed low tech, installed high tech, or online. It's all about crossing media, continually developing new skills in working on multiple platforms.

MML: Dead on. Bruce will often say the same thing.

BW: Sometimes a low-tech solution, like a journal, is more appropriate; for instance, a pen and a leather-bound journal may create a better experience than typing on a computer. So my staff and I try to play the role of technology skeptics as well as technology advocates.

Cultivating Co-creators

LH: I would add that deepening engagement means looking at visitors not only as advocates and passionate participants but also as co-creators and collaborators.

DAM staff have been following Nina Simon's blog and the development of her new book, and keeping an eye on the work of marketing researchers and strategists James Chung and Susie Wilkening (see Reach Advisors 2008). Both suggest how important it is for museums to fundamentally shift their ways of engaging with all

These terms are adopted from Nina Simon, who has a great post on her blog about "co-creators" and "collaborators."[5] It's one thing to create experiences and programs that are well-attended and popular, and it's another to create platforms for people to create relevant and personally meaningful experiences. I hate to segment audiences by age, but in this case it might make sense. Gen X's and Y's definitions of personally meaningful experiences may be similar to those of previous audiences (social, aesthetic, educational, introspective) but the way in which those meanings are reached may be different. Through Untitled we've seen how important it is for individuals and groups to be actively engaged in creating and curating their own experiences. Museums can't just take note of this, we have to respond to it.

visitors (not just Gen X and Y) who are seeking out experiences according to a different set of criteria.

DF: Right, so after paying attention to the current demographic research, how are you responding?

LH: It means showing up where young people already are, being a part of what they do, and internalizing their patterns of behavior around the arts, creative expression, and consumption. The blogs we're following and the reading we're doing suggest that young people are finding and actually creating their own activities, programs, and happenings, and in some cases forgoing museums altogether. We notice that the people who are most active in the community and who tend to participate in the more underground DIY (read: not institution-generated) happenings come out to Untitled when we partner with the small businesses or artists who are most active in town.

DF: What types of businesses are these? And what kinds of community outreach are you doing or considering?

LH: They are creative enterprises, like DIY craft or knitting shops, poetry slam organizations, film groups, fashion houses and boutiques, local magazines, galleries, print shops, and a local theater company. We show up to their events, talk to them where they are, then brainstorm together how they could fit with Untitled. We are planning to expand outreach to other small local businesses and university groups and individual artists in the future.

HN: It is interesting to note that this idea of co-creation is not so different from how we, and museums in general, have thought about working with other targeted audiences, like Hispanics and African Americans. You have to both invite them to the museum and show up in their neighborhoods before they will want to be part of your institution.

Marlene Chambers, former director of publications at the DAM, championed constructivist ideas in such articles as "Real Pearls at the

SH: I think from my perspective, this change from one-way communication to dialogue and co-constructed content is an extension of the "constructivism" idea we've been interested in for so long.[6] Ultimately, creating personal meaning is inevitable. The new ways people have of

Post-Modern Museum Potluck: Constructivism and Inclusiveness'' in *Presence of Mind: Museums and the Spirit of Learning*, **edited by Bonnie Pitman and published by AAM in 1999.**

communicating, sharing information, and making decisions about how they spend their time all have great implications for museums. Young adults, who are the early adopters of social media, demonstrate a fundamental shift in how our visitors behave. Unless museums begin to embrace two-way communication and co-creation, they will become increasingly irrelevant as the young adult audience ages.

BW: Over the last five to eight years, as content creation has blossomed, the tools that facilitate it have become widely available. For example, iMovie comes installed on any new Mac. This and similar software is usable by the average person, not just techies. Soon, doing basic sound or video editing should be part of the basic skill set, like using Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. I'd like to see museum staff members become more comfortable with this technology.

MML: It's not only a matter of building staff capacity in terms of using technology; it's also a question of how to create interpretive material in the oral, visual, and virtual realms. Staff need to develop that capacity as well. Sometimes that means thinking in six dimensions.

LL: Yes, we need to figure out how to create blog posts that generate interesting responses; we want to see if we can increase the usage of our cell phone audio tours; and we don't know if our YouTube videos are attracting as many hits as they could.

Iteration in Permanent Exhibitions

DF: Many of your experiments in collaborative interpretation, two-way communication, and serving visitors with choice have been applied in temporary exhibits. Now that you're renovating the American Indian collection, how will everything you've learned to date inform that?

HN: I feel we are taking the best of what we have done, and seeing if it has a place in this context. Much like the Side Trip, the renovated galleries will house a combined studio, workshop, lounge area, and demo area all in one.

Visitors will be able to make art, browse books, play family games, and handle touchable objects.

In the European and American collection's Discovery Library, visitors can dress up like people in their favorite paintings or settle into a comfy couch and flip through a book. If they pull open a drawer they are rewarded with an intimate look at a light-sensitive drawing.

LS: It expands upon our discovery libraries where visitors are invited to relax and explore by adding the opportunity for them to try their hand at making something in the same space.

MML: Interestingly, the space it will occupy was once the home of one of our earliest video lounges—where comfy furniture plus the ability for visitors to select their own videocassettes was once considered cutting edge. We've come a long way since then!

LS: Connecting with artists is a big theme in this installation. Individual artists will be highlighted in several ways: for instance, in the gallery we'll have a life-size video for artist Mateo Romero. Visitors to American Indian collections often see the objects as having been made by cultures as opposed to individual artists, so it was crucial to us, whenever possible, to emphasize named artists as creators of American Indian art.

HN: We are planning to permeate the studio space with artist voices and processes. Projected on the wall will be quotes from local artists. In the bookshelf, there will be these small moments of discovery: bookmarks from artists saying why they loved a particular book. One wall is our inspiration wall, with inspiration boards (literally clipboards) that will hold three to five things that inspired an artist.

DF: This is a good example of taking what you learned in the Side Trip, a temporary exhibit, and applying it in a permanent exhibit. It sounds like the American Indian studio space will have a comfortable, low-key ambiance. Though it isn't linked to any period in time, it's interesting how this space almost seems to be looking backwards, with low-tech interactives like bookmarks and clipboards, instead of looking toward the future with use of technology.

LL: Definitely. I think the Gen Xs and Gen Ys, at least, tend to flit back and forth between both worlds: they embrace an analog or retro aesthetic along with a passion for new technology. In the American Indian studio space, we are trying to make visitors comfortable by creating a slightly messy, non-museum-y space. We keep looking for ways to incorporate only elements that would be found in a real home or studio. So no vinyl applied to the wall, no Sintra wall panels. We're projecting artist quotes, but they'll look and sound like a slide projector is creating them. Handwritten signs are attached to clipboards. Artist inspirations (postcards, fabric samples, you name it) will be jumbled together on a bulletin-board-like wall.

The first iterations of the "multiple perspective cubes" were developed for a George Catlin painting in the western galleries. One side of each acrylic cube presents a question (for example, "Was Catlin a racist?") and another side has an image. Its other four sides have short blurbs responding to the topic question—either opinions from experts or a fact to put the issue in context.

HN: The idea of "multiple perspectives," a theme we developed in the installations for our new Hamilton Building, is being explored further in American Indian. We are taking the multiple perspectives cubes that help visitors connect with a George Catlin painting in the western gallery, and focusing on a new issue: "What is American Indian art?" It will take some prototyping and experimentation to make it work for visitors. The collection demands dialogue, and these cubes have been so successful in helping visitors see the multiple sides of a work of art.

DF: So the cube format helps visitors to literally and figuratively see different sides of an issue?

LL: Yes—and with a cube, only one-sixth of the text is visible at any given moment, so the amount of writing looks less intimidating. The format also provides an easy way to chunk a complicated topic into main ideas and let people choose what they're interested in (much like a high-tech interpretive would). It also allows visitors to spend a lot or a little time, which is another example of serving them with choice. Part of the beauty of the solution is that even if you don't read a word of the cubes themselves, you walk away with the idea that there are a lot of different opinions about the painting.

DF: What an elegant solution! In fact, these are all great examples of iterative work on interpretive devices—be they low-tech or high-tech, in-gallery or online—from those working in the trenches. Patty and Melora, as the two people who have led the DAM's education department for the last three decades, what would you say to those charged with shaping the vision for museum interpretation in the future?

MML: Two final thoughts: First, don't forget the evaluation part of the experiment-evaluate-iterate continuum. Structured visitor feedback is key to our practice, but so is a curiosity about (or passion for) understanding what's going on with visitors. Over the years I've seen random visitor comments or observations prompt whole new lines of inquiry about what we're doing. Second, make time for in-house conversation and reflection. The conference calls and electronic dialogue that generated this article have reminded me of how important these two things have been, and should continue to be, in developing new interpretive directions.

PW: Looking at this dialogue and thinking back over my years at the DAM, here is how I see the progression. Even though there are certainly broader uses of the word "learning" in twenty-first-century lingo—critical thinking, problem solving, and so on—the word still has too many limitations. In some ways "learning" is still used narrowly to refer to acquisition of information or learning a skill through practice. In the 1980s the latter seemed more pertinent to us. We wanted people to practice looking at art, responding to it, and get good at those visual skills. But we have become less interested in "learning" as we've begun to focus on the importance of direct sensory experience. We now realize that making sure folks gain knowledge can get in the way of this personal experience.

Shifting to the word "experience" has helped us to redefine success for much of our work. I hope that the next years will help us continue to articulate the human gain that happens when people have personal experiences with works of art. And I hope we can continue to advocate for the importance of this with our colleagues throughout the museum and the profession at large.

Notes

1. Randi Korn and Associates, workshops conducted with the Denver Art Museum, June 2, 2004, and August 25, 2004.

2. See the report *Visitor Panel Study of Poetry Writing Activities in the Special Exhibition Frederic Remington: The Color of Night*. Accessed April 8, 2010 at http://www.denverartmuseum.org/discover_the_dam/museum_resources.

3. *The Psychedelic Experience,* an unpublished report by BBC Research and Consulting, September 2009.

4. See, for example, Clarkson and Worts (2005).

5. Accessed April 8, 2010 at http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/09/frameworks-and-lessons-from-public.html.

6. See Lisa Roberts (1997, 133ff). She describes the ideas of philosopher Nelson Goodman and psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner (1986, 95-98). Also see George Hein (1998), especially chapters 8 and 9.

7. See http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/; http://www.imamuseum.org/blog/; http://blogs.walkerart.org/; http://blog.sfmoma.org/.

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