

**Please Touch!; Tapping into experience  
at the Cleveland Art Museum**

*They are so natural, ubiquitous and indispensable to us today that it takes considerable effort to think ourselves back to a world without them, and to think through the shadows cast by the massive and dazzling familiarity of this truly uncanny social technology. Our world is unthinkable without this extraordinary invention (Preziosi, 1996).*

In the above epigraph, the author points toward the consumptive nature of a product of convenience and the degree of reliance prescribed to it. For some, it may become so integrated into the fabric of the day to day and to so fully embody a communicative function—equal parts entertainment and educational—so as to become second nature or vital. Messages are bandied about and meanings are shared with this “uncanny social technology” developed centuries ago.

Centuries ago?

What Preziosi describes above—he also calls this the “brain of the earth’s body”—is not the cell phone, the iPad or a social media platform, but the museum. Technology, interactivity, communication, education and entertainment are all functions of museums and have been since their inception. As modern-day museums internationally push forward to increasingly incorporate mobile apparatus innovations and hi-tech, interactive components, the visitor experience may similarly be pushed forward.

Using active engagement, participatory involvement and various avenues by which visitors can discover a multiplicity of meanings, museums have embraced digital tools as storytelling devices. Increasingly, the museum mission mindset is mirroring, or attempting to

mirror, that of other education and entertainment spaces (institutes of higher learning, live theatrical performance, sporting events) of active audience engagement. The visitors' expectation is that of free-wheeling and unfettered access to information (Bruce, 2006). And, it's best if they are entertained. For museum professionals, curating collections and designing exhibitions, this is "an attempt to reinvent the museum, to bring it into the twenty-first century as a place that can compete with other recreational venues for leisure time, a place more identified with providing opportunities for celebration than for contemplation" (Bruce, p. 130) Audiences, then, expect to be involved, to participate, and to do so primarily by having a voice in the dialogue about how their experience will unfold (Simon, 2010).

There is, then, the perception of autonomy and free will in navigating such venues. The idea of a personally designed experience might be found reassuring or even empowering, ascribing personal agency to each visitor's unique way of encountering the museum space. (Though this paper looks at the museum space or visual art exhibition venues, such audiencing strategies are employed in myriad public spaces including national parks, airports, and retail shopping centers). But, is that sense of agency a reality and does everyone have equal access to its possibility? If the visitor's experience is transformed, is it in a meaningful way? Or, is it all window dressing in which the museum's message is transformed but its mission remains the same? Two thoughtful responses by museum education professionals, Kris Wetterlund of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Mike Murawski of the St. Louis Museum point toward differing attitudes and, perhaps conflicts, that have arisen with the introduction of one particular digital tool—the iPad—into the museum-going experience:

*Most important, all of the museum visitors were engaged during the iPad portion of the tour. All visitors indicated understanding how the iPad content related to*

*the tour content, and all thought it added to their understanding of the works of art. Visitors responded to short videos illustrating artistic processes or techniques with an audible 'ah ha!' (Wetterlund, 2011)*

*Was it this simple to deepen the level of understanding and engagement on my tours? I remember leaving this tour with a lot of excitement about using the iPad in the galleries, but questions about whether the focus was truly on the objects ... or was the focus too much on the technology? (Murawski, 2012).*

Traditionally, comparisons have been made between museum going and the shopping experience or museum going and that of being in an airport and, perhaps not surprisingly, museum going and religious or transcendent experience (Falk & Dierking, 2011). Bennett (1988) invokes Barthes and Foucault in his exploration of the museum as a space of control and power, likening the space to a disciplinary technology. More contemporarily, that experience is likened to having an encounter at Disney World or in Las Vegas (Bruce).

Wherever and however it may unfold, meaning making or messages are at the core of the museum's function. And much of what museology points toward when considering meaning making draws heavily from communication theory. Silverman (1995) points to a host of academics and curatorial professionals (Cameron, 1968; Hamm 1983; Knez & Wright, 1970; Sharpe, 1976; Zuefle, 1997) who link communication theory to museum practice; uses and gratifications and other media effects are commonly referenced in museum practice. Exhibitions using objects and text and other support material are embedded with and in meaning creation and curators, exhibition designers, museum directors are power brokers (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) tasked with communicating the story of objects. This begins to intersect with Laswell's (1948)

communication chestnut, “Who says what in which channel to whom to what effect” notion and the prescient McLuhan observation, “the medium is the message” (1964). And, much in the same way that technological intervention and new media have problematized the communications field, so to have such interventions and mediations (and their rapid introduction into the sphere of art-going practices) troubled the discipline.

### **Whose Muse?**

With rapid adoption of digital technologies in museum settings, the medium/message has changed and so has the discipline’s guiding theories. Prominent in this discussion is the notion of audience participation. The interactive experience model (Falk & Dierking, 2001) places the individual in the center of three linked spheres: social context, physical context, and personal context. It is within a series of “critical intersections of the three contexts” (Falk & Dierking, p. 6) that define viewer/visitor experience. Simon (2010) echoes this, “rather than delivering the same content to everyone, a participatory institution collects and shares diverse, personalized, and changing content co-produced with visitors.” As with new media, new museum approaches work toward autonomy; the “next move” unfolding now is toward equality of access, omnidirectionality or many-to-many conversations.

Toward this practice, museums are using social media, the internet, and all manner of mobile devices to share their collections on site and off. Browsing guides or tour books are quaint; today’s museum visitor is equipped with iPad and/or multimedia portable devices. Crowd sourcing has been used to curate and compile materials at many high profile museums, including the Brooklyn Art Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The museum’s exhibition design experience, then, has transformed viewer into participant and undoubtedly ushered in a new era (and a new type) of viewership. “The line

between propose and impose is a thin one,” writes Thackara (McCullough, 2004) of design experience. This is a proposition of a sort of autonomy and in all respects seems a democratic or populist approach, removing the stigma of elitism that has dogged museums and other art/leisure venues. But there are tensions apparent: a push and pull between freedom and structure, creativity and control, public trust and authority. There’s also the question of resources:

The dream of technology is based on a democratic principle of open access to information, but the new museum must answer questions of cost effectiveness: how much technology is enough; how much too much? (Bruce, p. 143).

And, it might be added, can museums ignore the desire of its constituency to be entertained, increasingly by digital devices or layers of mediation? In some ways, museums have become more identified with providing opportunities for celebration than for contemplation “and the thrust of today’s museum is to attain attraction status, to be a destination and to appeal to a new audience” (Bruce, 130 ).

This transformation in which a consumer holds sway has also ushered in some reconsiderations of what a museum is and what it should do and there are tensions in this re-imagining. Whose museum is it? Who has authority? A 2008 survey by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found public trust of museums as a source of information at 78%. So who or what is being trusted here? Technology? Designers? Museum directors or, those more involved with audiences, the docents? Artists? Our selves?

A test case or perhaps more aptly, a laboratory, has recently opened that will allow for the investigation of such questions. The Cleveland Museum of Art offers a method to begin this investigation.

### **Digital First**

In late January, the Cleveland Museum of Art launched what is widely considered the most comprehensive program in the nation to adopt and adapt digital technology for educational use in its galleries and various exhibition spaces. ArtLens is a mobile application for iPad. Users who own iPads—and visitors who don't can rent them—will step into a digital world that locates them within the museum using cell phone technology and tells them what objects are nearby. The visitor can discover a wealth of information, presented in multi-media format, that allows for further discovery of the object. If they so choose to include the object in their personalized and customized highlight tour, they can walk to the location and use the built-in camera lens in the iPad to scan it and discover further information about its history, construction, methods. That personalized/customized tour begins with the centerpiece of Gallery One, a 40-foot-long wall of interactive screens. This is the largest multi-touch microtile screen—think of these as tiny, touch sensitive TVs—in the United States. It is a visual swirl of images, that flow like a river of datastream across the bank of screens and documents 3,500 of the museum's objects.

A visitor might touch the screen image of a Chuck Close painting and enlarge it to grand scale, or shrink it to a postage-stamp size rendering. A visitor might swipe through the maze of images—the screen, as do most all others in Gallery One relies on the haptic—until something strikes his/her fancy. Or, they might build a collection thematically, say of American artists painting portraits in the 1990s or all photographs of horses. Possibilities and potential seem limitless, though far less than 10 percent of the museum's collection is digitally available via the Gallery One wall of images. Visitors can assemble “favorite” certain works on screen then build a collection of images to visit which can be downloaded onto the iPads using the ArtLens application, which, in turn will locate and direct the patron to the object. And, as mentioned, the

visitor can go to that object, scan it and discover more within reason; there are nine hours in total of such multi-media “extras.”

To make another digression or return, the words of Bruce seem apropos here: how much technology is enough; how much too much? At a cost of more than ten millions of dollars, is the technology worthwhile? The museum’s director, David Franklin, said at the outset of the museum’s digital first approach, “We didn’t want to create a tech ghetto.” And the designer of Gallery One, Jake Barton, said “We wanted to make the tech predicated on the art itself” (Kuang, 2013). How are audiences embracing the new experience?

### **Focus on ArtLens and Gallery One**

An assessment of visitor experiences with Gallery One and ArtLens will be gathered via a series of focus groups (three as detailed below) using directed or structured conversations. Smith and Wolf (1996) point to three main factors shaping the museum visitor’s experience: the exhibits, the presentation/exhibit interpretation and the visitor’s themselves. To this, Babon (2006) adds another factor, that of “place expectations” or sorts of pre-conceived notions of what one may encounter. Then, there are the myriad reasons people may attend a museum. Falk identifies five broad types: the professional/hobbyist, the recharger, the experience seeker, the facilitator and the explorer. So, research may encounter a broad variance of opinion, or, perhaps broad unanimity. Finally, Falk who has done pioneering work in museum audience research calls for gathering data in pre- and post- interviews (2000). (He also calls, on occasion, for interviews done onsite to gauge viewer experience.) The varied methods of holding interviews or focus groups—with varying times between pre-interview, post-interview depends largely on who is being interviewed and what the desired data is (Falk, 2011). In other words, what’s the question(s)?

In the case of the three survey group participants at the Cleveland Art Museum, the question relates strictly to viewer experience and interface with technologies and about such qualitative concerns as “choice,” “control,” “ease,” “freedom.” Measurable outcomes centered on knowledge gathering or knowledge recall (post interview) are not the focus of these conversations, though those may be deemed appropriate at a later date.

Three groups of first-time visitors to the Gallery One/ArtLens are desired as members for pre-visit focus groups. These pre-visit groups of eight members—Lindlof and Taylor advise for between 6-12 persons (Lindlof & Taylor 2002)—would convene to discuss their usual art-viewing or museum-going practices and the ways in which the digital or mediated intervention might shape or reconstitute their experience. In this way, what Carey calls the “group effect” (Carey, 1994) could provide insight of both a qualitative and quantitative nature (in this case, a scripted question might pose “How often would you say you visit museums each year?”). The effect Carey mentions allows for less filtering of comments or what Lindlof and Taylor call a “cascading” or “chaining” effect by which “talk links to or tumbles out of the topics and expressions preceding it.” (2002, p. 182). There are other pragmatic decisions that point toward a focus group as a viable method of inquiry in this instance: focus groups can be effective and efficient in terms of time and money spent; the forum allows for an “in their own words” approach not possible with many survey instruments in which forced answers or unclear questions can cloud outcomes. In short, a more in-depth answer will likely be elicited by a skilled moderator than would be possible by using a survey format.

Each of the three groups would reconvene post-visit within 3-5 days. This would allow for viewers to reflect on their visiting experience rather than gathering first impressions. Again, a moderator would facilitate a guided conversation with participants (in this case, a scripted

question might pose “How easy was the ArtLens to use?” or “What do you remember most from using ArtLens?”). A simple questionnaire would be completed by participants with basic demographic information. The focus groups would be assembled using membership information in two instances; a stratified, age segmented population of individuals 40 and under and another group of age 40 plus. In this fashion, the responses of a younger segment of art enthusiasts (as indicated by museum membership) could be evaluated against those of an older-skewing population; in this case, perhaps deep pocketed donors. Finally a third group would be assembled onsite from a group of museum visitors selected at random. In each case, the museum can incentivize the respondents by offering scaled museum memberships. And, in each case, if logistics allow, the researcher(s) will use the museum recital hall or lecture hall facilities to conduct the panels. In the event of a scheduling/space conflict, the panels will take place at Focus Groups of Cleveland.

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