



NEW ANGLES ON INTERPRETATION

in the DAM's New Hamilton Building

DENVER
ART MUSEUM

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Photo by Jeff Wells.

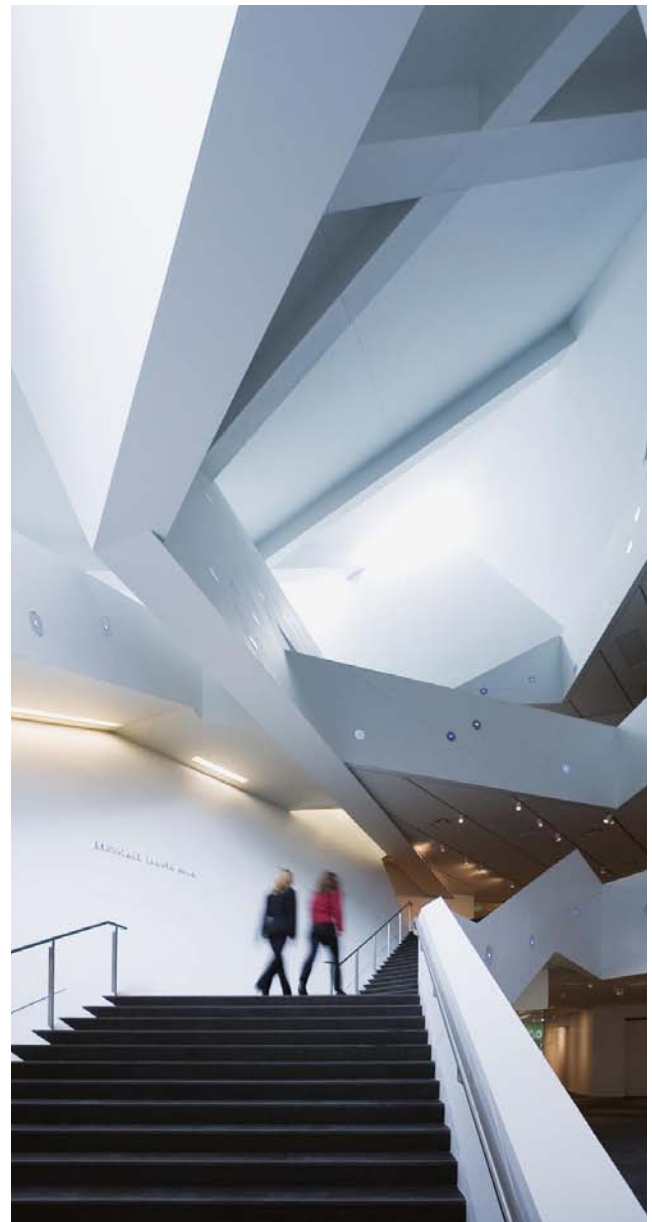
INTRODUCTION

A New Building = New Opportunities

The October 2006 opening of the Denver Art Museum's architecturally adventurous Frederic C. Hamilton Building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, gave museum educators, curators, designers, writers, and technology staff the opportunity to create new interpretive experiences for visitors as collections were reinstalled in brand-new and strikingly unusual spaces. The museum was committed to opening the building with a pioneering array of creative and engaging interpretive experiences that would provide choices for visitors, support their interactions with art, and encourage them to return again and again. To that end, the museum sought and received a generous grant from The Getty Grant Program, two grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and generous support from individual donors to develop and implement a range of in-gallery interpretive materials directed at adults.

Although the Denver Art Museum already had many interpretive activities installed throughout its existing galleries and had experimented with others during temporary exhibitions, the scope of the expansion catapulted everyone into thinking on a scale they never had before. The Hamilton Building added three new temporary exhibition spaces and four collection areas, and the number of visitors expected to walk through the expanded complex in its first year was the largest in the museum's history. With multiple exhibition teams at work simultaneously, cross-fertilization and sharing of interpretive approaches, graphic treatments, and design elements became possible. At the

same time, the museum also valued creative divergence and gave teams the freedom to individualize according to the disparate needs of each collection.



© Jeff Goldberg/Esto.



Visitors casting shadows inside the DAM.

From the start, the unique architecture created the need for different ways of thinking.

"The unusual geometry of the architecture provided us with far more unexpected opportunities to think creatively than obstacles to overcome," says Dan Kohl, the museum's director of design. "The gallery designs were all positively influenced by the architecture, which encouraged us to think about the visitor experience within a totally new spatial construct. The architecture sets up a visitor interaction where exploration = discovery...what a perfect environment for an art museum!"

"The architecture made us think more spatially than we had in the past," agrees director of education Melora McDermott-Lewis. "We began to think three dimensionally and to be aware of interesting corners and intriguing spaces that cried out to be used. In the African galleries, for example, the exhibit designers' decision to create a central mass of platforms provided opportunities we could capitalize on—including a crawl space that we turned into an area for children.

We probably wouldn't have asked them to build a cubbyhole, but the design prompted us to come up with an idea for the space."

"In the face of such strong architecture, "it became apparent very early on that we couldn't be subtle or dainty," says McDermott-Lewis. "We had to be bolder and more aggressive in our design decisions, more declarative. In order to be noticed we needed to make things big and fill the space, and I think in the end our interpretive areas are richer as a result of our having done this."

The museum was also in a position to take advantage of new technology. "One of the biggest differences between our interpretive program in the past and now is that we really are incorporating technology into our solutions," says McDermott-Lewis. "Often this dovetailed with our desire to exploit the building's architecture—there are places where the building's design lends itself to technology in seamless ways. For instance, dramatically slanting walls, places where it was hard to install art in more traditional ways, became striking places to project images or videos."

She notes that Daniel Libeskind's forward-thinking architecture seemed to call out for the museum to stretch its repertoire of interpretive devices: "We felt like we had to live up to the challenge of creating a new kind of museum." iPods are used in the western American and the African collections, and digital gallery games on Game Boys serve as an interactive for children in the modern and contemporary collection. "It makes sense for us to relate what we are doing to what visitors do in their everyday world."



Four Interpretive Explorations

Building on programs already in place in the galleries and conversations with museum visitors (in focus groups, intercept interviews, and other settings), DAM's educators settled on four areas of visitor experience to explore. They wanted to help visitors:

- Make “human connections” with the art on view by providing them access to insights about individual artists and their creative processes (**Connecting with Artists**).
- Develop personal responses to works of art and see the museum as a welcoming place to express and share these responses (**Engaging Visitor Response**).
- Enjoy and tap into their own creativity as a means of understanding works of art and the thinking and creative processes behind them (**Engaging Visitor Creativity**).
- Examine pluralistic views of art through interpretive materials that give visitors access to multiple voices and perspectives about works of art (**Incorporating Multiple Voices**).

In choosing these four themes, the museum relied on years of listening to visitors, some of which had been formalized in studies beginning with the Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project (see “Where to Get the Resources Mentioned in This Report”). Funded by The Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Interpretive Project identified key audiences—novices and more art-sophisticated visitors—and determined that many found it personally meaningful to make a “human connection” to artists and artworks and to grasp the broader context of how and why an artwork was created. Another key finding was that for many visitors a rewarding experience at the DAM is associated with a personal or emotional response to a work of art. A third finding was that visitors enjoyed hearing from experts, especially when the experts spoke of their perceptions of the art in a personal voice and when they didn't unvalidate visitors' own perspectives.

You'll notice as you read through this report that the four categories overlap: an activity designed to introduce multiple voices into the gallery may at the same time connect audiences with an artist. Visitor re-

sponse and visitor creativity are clearly linked: where some people may prefer to respond through writing, others may prefer to respond through drawing.

Serving the Visitor with Choice

Several years after the fact, DAM educators continue to cite a comment made at a visitor panel on an early-generation poetry-writing activity, where a participant said that he wanted to be “served with choice.” That is, not only should there be choices, but visitors need to know what those choices are at the right points in their visit. Also, the kinds of choices available should be determined by visitor interests as revealed by listening to and observing visitors. There's not much purpose in offering a multitude of activities if none of them relate to visitors' underlying needs and desires.

Choice also means that the galleries should present people with different ways to engage. Some people like reading, others are more hands-on. Some have the time to devote to a 14-minute video, others prefer to browse through artist quotes on a touchscreen at their own pace. Providing different ways to encourage people's interactions with art acknowledges that people engage with art in different ways.

This acknowledgment of multiple approaches goes back a long way at the DAM. Under the direction of Patterson Williams, head of the Education Department from 1979 to 2002, the museum earned a national reputation as a leader in implementing the theory of object-oriented learning, which suggests that museum visitors approach and get meaning from works of art in four ways:

- seeing and perceiving visually
- reacting—associations, thoughts, memories, feelings
- thinking—a rational thought process that considers the object in cultural context
- making judgments

(For recommended articles on object-oriented learning, see “Where to Get the Resources Mentioned in This Report.”)

The four experiential approaches described in this report and implemented in the Hamilton Building (Connecting with Artists, Engaging Visitor Response, Engaging Visitor Creativity, and Incorporating Multiple Voices) aren't intended to align precisely with the four major ways people react in museums, but they do reflect the same underlying belief that people process information and connect with art in multiple ways that vary from person to person, object to object, and even day to day. Visitors to the Hamilton Building discover a wide array of formats, content, materials, and in-gallery installation techniques that allow them to explore at their own pace based on individual learning styles, preferences, and priorities for their visit.

It was also important that, in the midst of all the choices offered, there always be an additional, unspoken choice: to do nothing comfortably. The interpretive options should never feel overwhelming or distracting to the point where they preclude a visitor's ability to simply enjoy a work of art. Places to linger and comfortable seating were also deemed essential to the overall mood that staff wanted to convey.



Visitor interacting with *Phantom Tattoo* by Gene Davis.

What This Report Does and Doesn't Cover

This report describes the methods, results, challenges, and insights gained in developing **installed interpretives** for the four collection galleries in the museum's Hamilton Building—the Bonfils-Stanton Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery, the Daniel Yohannes Family African Gallery, the Joan and

George Anderman Gallery of Oceanic Art, and Dietler Gallery of Western Art. (For a list of installed interpretives organized by collection, see appendix 2.) "Installed interpretives" are physical elements in the galleries that visitors can use at their convenience and without museum personnel present. They range from labels to artist interview videos, from touchable objects to iPods, even to entire rooms devoted to multimedia presentations. Although they may communicate information, they are intended to provide a broader experience that might also include music, emotion, writing or drawing in a journal, or a hands-on art project. In other words, interpretation encompasses information but is not limited to information.

In every gallery, installed interpretives are supplemented by **live programming**, that is, activities directed by a museum staff member or volunteer (docent tours, staffed weekend "Hotspots," and *Untitled* Friday nights once a month). This report does not describe the museum's live programs or how installed programs and hearing from visitors have sparked new forms of live programming.

This report is limited to adult experiences. Throughout you will see that many adult activities take place parallel to or in the midst of kids' activities (as in the African studio), and that some adult activities are also used by families and children (iPods, journals). But the thinking behind each activity was undertaken with adult users in mind. This report also does not describe existing interpretive activities in the museum's European and American painting and sculpture, textile art, Asian art, New World art, American Indian art, and architecture, design and graphics galleries. In some cases, the Hamilton Building's new interpretives grew out of activities already in place in those galleries; to find out more, see *Enriching Visitor Experiences: The Reinstallation of the Denver Art Museum's European and American Collections*, funded by The Getty Grant Program. For more about family activities at the Denver Art Museum, see *Family Programs at the Denver Art Museum*, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts Program for Art Museums and Communities. (Both reports can be found on the museum's website; see "Where to Get the Resources Mentioned in This Report.")



Visitors interacting with Antony Gormley's *Quantum Cloud XXXIII*.

CONNECTING WITH ARTISTS

Building on Success

DAM educators have heard for many years, in many ways, that connecting with an artist or the artist's creative process is meaningful for visitors. Wanting to get to know the artist personally and wanting to know what the artist was thinking are desires that visitors voice again and again. One participant in a visitor study recalled an especially powerful art experience: "I was just blown away by the process. His thoughts. What led him to make the great sculptures, works of art, architectural pieces . . . That's the best experience I've had."

Many of the interpretives in the Hamilton Building that aim to connect visitors with artists grew out of previous interpretive efforts in existing galleries and special exhibitions. All of the four collection areas in the new building—African, Oceanic, western American, and modern and contemporary art—feature some version of a "human connection" label based on prototypes developed for the museum's Asian art collection and refined during the reinstallation of the museum's European and American collections thanks to funding from The Getty Grant Program. (More about the European and American labels can be found in *Enriching Visitor Experiences*; see the resource section of this report.)

Supergraphics (large quotes applied directly to the walls) that appear in the African gallery and the

Duchamp focus area have also been successfully used in previous installations to bring the artist's perspective into an exhibition; in the modern and contemporary and western galleries, quotes appear on small wall labels.

"When visitors read or hear something in the artist's words, they can interpret it their way. We haven't already paraphrased or interpreted it for them," says senior educator Patterson Williams.

In the African and Oceanic collections, connecting visitors with artists dovetailed nicely with curator Moyo Okediji's concern that the interpretation "provide the art object with an individuality beyond a generic ethnic anonymity." The effort to emphasize that there are individual artists behind each work of art on view is woven throughout the interpretation, starting on the most basic level: the artist information on each object label. In many museums, African and Oceanic pieces go on display with the artist labeled "anonymous"—the DAM uses "unknown artist" or "artist not known." Master teacher Heather Nielsen explains "These artists aren't anonymous; they are known to their communities. It's just that we don't know their names, often because the person collecting the work wasn't trained to find out."

Relationships as Resources

Knowing what resources were already available and cultivating new relationships with artists provided a starting point for many projects. DAM native arts curator Moyo Okediji had shot dozens of hours of video in Nigeria of a group of mural painters whose work is in the DAM's collection. The footage was an invaluable resource that eventually ended up as a "video collage" in the African gallery. In the case of the Daniel Sprick focus area in the western art

galleries, museum staff knew that the painter had taken more than a hundred photos of a painting in progress that could be used to show the day-to-day making of a work of art in exquisite detail.

"It is our role and obligation to develop relationships with artists and ask the kind of questions our audiences would," says master teacher Heather Nielsen, who did an in-depth interview with Nigerian artist Tola Wewe when he was in Denver. A quote taken from the interview—"Your artwork is like your fingerprint"—appears on one wall of the African gallery.

Photo by Dave Krahling.



Master teacher Lisa Steffen interviews artist Daniel Sprick in his studio.

Master teacher Lisa Steffen and the western team interviewed Daniel Sprick numerous times to get the material ultimately used to create the artist's focus area. "We knew that he had documented the painting in various stages, so we invited him to give a slide show to the team, which we taped, and afterward he left us his slides of the painting in progress. So we had a wealth of visual material to work with. We had subsequent meetings that we recorded, plus phone calls that I took notes on, and finally a studio visit and formal interview that we videotaped. He gave us actual objects used in the making of the painting, which became part of our interpretive installation. We solicited visitor questions by putting a fishbowl in the gallery when the painting was previously on view, and he answered these. He made himself completely and utterly available." Five other contemporary artists took the time to be videotaped responding to

questions about how they worked; this provided the raw material for what eventually became the Select-a-Chat activity in the western gallery.

Cultivating relationships with artists also played a big role in obtaining the western studio browsing objects. Although many objects are generic versions rather than the artists' actual possessions (a slow cooker to melt wax, bug spray used while painting outdoors, latex gloves to blend paint), the museum's queries to and interviews with artists also yielded a working sketch from Woody Gwyn, an ice-cream carton lid that Tony Foster used as a portable palette, and an illustrated letter from Keith Jacobshagen.

It's not just relationships between museum personnel and artists that matter. Within the museum curators are invaluable as a source of information about artists and in connecting other staff members with artists. In-house photography and technology teams that can photograph and videotape on short notice can make a world of difference as to how the artist's words can be used. Bringing on writers, graphic designers, and technology staff early in the development process produced the best results—they could help shape the experience long before the actual method of execution was designed. "Early collaboration is essential," says technology director Bruce Wyman, "because all team members gain a deeper understanding of what's being done and why, and what the limitations or advantages are of different approaches."

How You Say It Matters

Instead of a polished artist's statement, educators and writers sought out the uncertainties and contradictions of the artistic life. This was key to connecting visitors with artists in all their messy humanness. Sometimes this involved judicious choice and editing of already existing material, and other times it meant drawing out an artist through strategic interviewing techniques.

Educators also knew they wanted a certain kind of writing style in their materials: a friendly voice, knowledgeable but not perceived as talking down to visitors and with a sense of humor at appropriate times. "A light, informal tone communicates quickly and puts people at ease, especially novices," says senior interpretive writer Lisa Levinson. "In the museum setting people are reading standing up, so it's not

the ideal reading environment. It's important to keep it short and avoid technical terms and jargon. Humor, if it's done right, makes a more lasting impression."

Ideally, the writing is in sync with the art. Levinson tried to match the tone of three handouts she wrote for the Duchamp focus area to the mindset of the famously witty artist. A final section for each handout suggests ways that visitors can connect with the artist's process by making their own Duchamp-inspired work of art. Duchamp once took an airtight vial, emptied it, then sealed it up and labeled it "50 cubic centimeters of Paris air." The "Make Your Own Art" section suggests that people find their own container and "fill it with the invisible item of your choice. Helpful hint: French intangibles always sound more artsy." (For a description of these and other interpretives, see appendix 1.)

Human Connection Labels: Refining a Successful Prototype

Various known to staff as "human connection labels," "artist insight brochures," and "pullout labels," these heavily illustrated handheld labels are written in easy-to-read chunks and rely heavily on anecdotes and the artists' own words. They resonate with the public because they provide insight into the artist as a person and into the artist's creative process. "If you have some tidbits, it . . . makes you think about maybe what the artist was thinking about," was how one visitor put it. (*Enriching Visitor Experiences* has more about human connection labels; see the resource section of this report.)

Because human connection labels had already been written for some modern works (like a Picasso and a



The trick with handheld labels is making it clear that they're not take-aways. In this case, a noticeable tab at the top made all the difference.

Georgia O'Keeffe) master teacher Sonnet Hanson and the rest of the team installing the modern and contemporary galleries concentrated on refining the design of the labels. "Through a new graphic design approach, we tried to achieve a more sophisticated look."

The new labels were also printed on a thicker material to indicate that the brochures were not meant for visitors to take with them, that they were meant to stay in the museum, "but after four hours of previews about half had disappeared," Hanson says. "We did have a written 'please read and return' message on the brochure, but it was on the last page. After trying several different designs we ended up adding a

While human connection labels look different in each collection, they all include lots of images, short blurbs, and content emphasizing the people who made or used a particular object.

PLEASE READ & RETURN

The Metalsmith's Art

Gold weights are small brass sculptures that come in a variety of shapes and styles. All were made using the "lost wax" method, a casting technique that has been used for thousands of years.

1 First, the artist carves a detailed wax sculpture with a long stem.

2 The wax is pressed into charcoal and soft clay, then heated and drained away (or lost).

3 The empty mold is placed over a cup of molten brass and coated with another layer of clay.

4 The mold is inverted, allowing the liquid metal to flow into the empty cavity created by the wax.

5 After it has cooled, the clay mold is broken and the stem is removed from the newly formed sculpture.

Cover: Photo by Elise Eberlin.

Generously supported by Ann and Gerald Saul.

Tiny Treasures

GOLD WEIGHTS

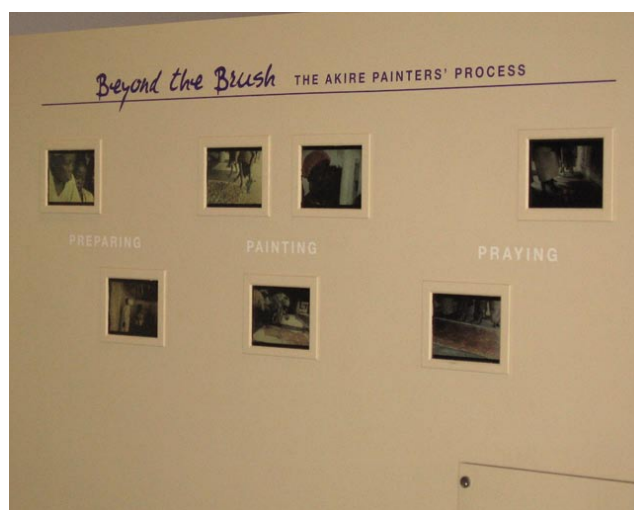
tab that attaches to and sticks out the side of the brochure. The fact that it goes outside the brochure itself seems to be the best way to communicate to people that it's meant to be read and returned. It's working—a year later we have most of the tabbed brochures we started out with."

While pullout labels connect visitors with artists by showing the artists as fellow human beings, they may also focus on the artistic process. Different collections and artists require different approaches. A brochure about Frederic Remington's bronze *The Cheyenne* in the western American art galleries compares, detail by illustrated detail, two different casts of the same sculpture (one in the DAM collection, the other at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas). "Many people come in having seen other casts of this sculpture," says master teacher Lisa Steffen. "So it's good to acknowledge that. And it's really interesting to be able to compare side by side, to see how much variability there is between two sculptures cast from the same mold. The hand of the artist is a big variable in how a cast turns out."

In the pullout labels for the African and Oceanic collections, master teacher Heather Nielsen strives both to reinforce the idea that there is an artist who made the work but also to show that the work was not done in a cultural vacuum. "I don't want to diminish the cultural context at the same time that I'm focusing on the artist. Visitors tend to want information about the culture, but we want to get them to think about individual artists. In developing interpretive materials I have a responsibility to the visitor and a responsibility to the art, and they are not always the same."

Case Study: African Video Collage

An attempt to connect visitors with artists in the African gallery literally shows visitors the process that a group of Akire muralists in Nigeria uses to create their paintings, including one on display at the museum. Viewers watch and listen as six-minute videos play on seven small monitors installed in a wall next to the artwork. The multiple small screens help visitors see the entire context of the process and the role of music, performance, and peer critique. (For a detailed description of this and other interpretives, see appendix 1.)



In videos of Akire muralists at work, visitors see important parts of their process that aren't evident in the work itself.

The video collage solves a number of concerns simultaneously. "These paintings are not supposed to be regarded simply as a visual experience," says native arts curator Moyo Okediji, who shot the footage in Nigeria. "The process of infusing these objects with sacred energy is almost as important as the objects themselves."

Master teacher Heather Nielsen continues, "With African art, it can be a challenge to get visitors to think in terms of an artist, or artists, who created the work as opposed to thinking that a culture created it. So it was very important to me to push this concept of the hand of the artist, to connect people with the artists. We knew that we could do this with Moyo's footage. The installation isn't documentary or linear; it really is more like a collage. It's meant to evoke the process. Using an outside editor, we grouped the videos into three phases—preparing, painting, and praying—that are shown continuously. Preparing means mixing paint, but also singing, which is why we have a soundtrack. Other footage shows the artists using masking tape and paintbrushes, working collaboratively, and praying. Praying shows a respected elder, a priestess, asking deities for acceptance of the work. The work isn't finished until it has been consecrated and blessed."

Although generally pleased with how the installation turned out, Nielsen notes that the placement of the video monitors was predetermined by the construc-



tion of the wall and where the studs fell. “If we had aligned our interpretive development timeline with the design and construction timeline, we might have been able to be more creative with the screens. It works as it is, but we would have preferred a more random arrangement.”

Compromise is inevitable when dealing with existing spaces. Where the electrical outlets are located, how the studs line up, the height of the ceiling, whether a wall has windows or not—all these elements impact the development of built-in interpretive areas.

Case Study: Daniel Sprick Focus Area

The Daniel Sprick focus area is one of the museum’s most ambitious installed interpretives, aimed at immersing people in the act of making of a painting and letting them peek inside an artist’s mind. It is one of three “focus” areas in the western American art galleries where multiple activities are centered on one object to help visitors get up close and personal with an artist and his process.

“From the start we knew we wanted three focus areas where we could delve into the creative process and try to, among other things, connect viewers with the artist,” says master teacher Lisa Steffen. “We wanted a representative range of mediums, time periods, and subject matter. We went with a Catlin from the 1830s as our earliest work, a Remington bronze from 1901, then the Sprick, a contemporary photorealist still life done in 2001.”



In the Sprick focus area, visitors connect with the artist through projected video (left), objects from his still life painting, and his comments about those objects found by exploring the adjacent touchscreens (above).

The large (about 5 feet square) painting itself hangs in a kind of alcove fitted with a sofa. To the viewer’s right as he or she is seated on the sofa are a booklet that focuses on different parts of the painting and two sets of question-and-answer cards on rings. The booklet has four foldout spreads, each of which includes quotes from the artist and photo details of the painting in progress.

Should the visitor choose to venture beyond this alcove, he or she will find a small room featuring a video of Sprick talking about his work, a wall where quotes are projected, a display of objects depicted in the painting, and four touchscreens with more quotes about the objects. All the “information” in the Sprick area is in the artist’s words.

“Originally we were going to run a slideshow with his voiceover, but I’m glad we ended up deciding to film him instead. During filming he said so many wonderful things about himself as a person and his philosophical approach that wouldn’t have come out if he were just narrating his slides. And the slides—they’re these extraordinary in-progress photos he took while he was making our painting—they lent themselves just as easily to print, if not better. We used them in the foldout booklet instead.

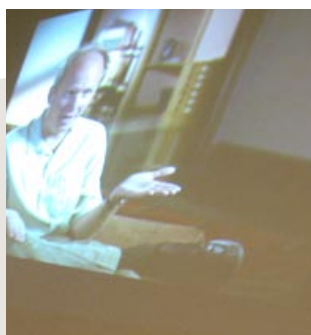
“Our initial idea about this whole space is that it would be more of an immersion and a self-guided exploration,” Steffen says. “We kept talking about it

being like getting inside the artist's mind. The painting is very mysterious, and we wanted to evoke some of that feeling in the space itself. However, we've added prompts and instructions since the opening because we've seen that visitors need more direction. The touchscreens aren't that intuitive. The prompt on the screen, 'Please touch to begin,' only appears every twenty seconds. So we added instruction on the frame of the screen ('Please touch square on screen to begin'). It's an ongoing dilemma—how to evoke something as mysterious as the process of creation and at the same time give people enough help and motivation to explore on their own."

Given the amount of choices in the Sprick area, it's easy for visitors to customize, whether they prefer to watch the entire 14-minute video, look closely at the in-progress photos in the booklet, or read just one of the question-and-answer cards. "No matter how much time you have, it's possible to deepen your experience," Steffen says.

Video of artists' answers to questions the visitor selects are projected opposite the sofa on a slanted wall.

Questions like "Do you ever get stuck?" reveal both the artist's personality and insight into art making.

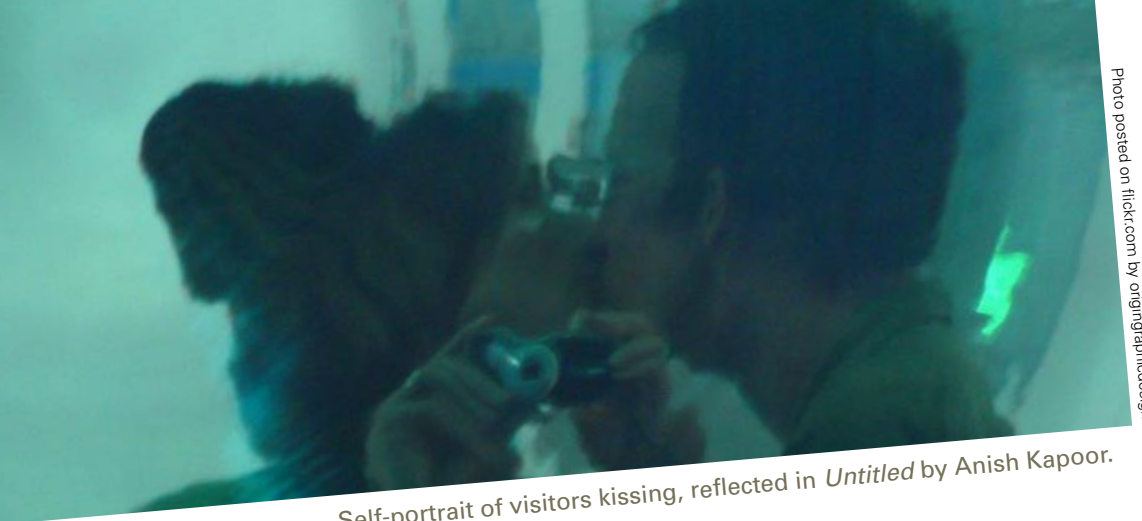


Case Study: Select-a-Chat

Select-a-Chat allows visitors to choose from five questions to ask five artists. When the visitor slides an X-shaped block over a coffee table with a graphic overlay, sensing technology activates a video of the selected artist answering the chosen question. The questions are ones that visitors (or Terry Gross of NPR's *Fresh Air*) might ask. "It's not what the museum thinks you need to know," says master teacher Lisa Steffen, "but questions that get at the personalities and range of approaches to making art. For example, 'What does it feel like to be an artist?' and 'How do you start?'"

"From the beginning we wanted to make this experiential and interactive, to let visitors make deliberate choices about what interested them," Steffen continues. "In a sense the setup simulates the experience of interviewing the artist, making the contact feel even more direct. We played with a number of technologies that felt too structured before settling on this method. I like that a person has to physically reach over and slide the X. It's true that only one person can drive, so to speak, but we often have small groups sitting together and making the choices collectively. And because the video is projected onto the wall at a reasonably large size, often there will be someone else standing to the side watching. The activity doesn't require headsets, so bystanders aren't excluded."

Bruce Wyman, DAM's director of technology, puts it all in context: "Our goal with any technology in the galleries is to make it disappear for the visitor as much as possible so they can simply concentrate on the actual experience—not spend time figuring out how to use it. With Select-a-Chat, we can describe the entire interaction in one sentence, 'X marks the spot,' and the visitor, by design, can't do anything wrong. They move the X, and it simply works as expected. In that spirit, we also create experiences that make use of the environment, encouraging visitors to explore and engage instead of mentally dismissing yet another little computer kiosk with a bunch of little buttons tucked away in a remote corner of a gallery. The gallery experiences want to be as amazing and powerful as the art around them—and the building in which they're contained."



Self-portrait of visitors kissing, reflected in *Untitled* by Anish Kapoor.

ENGAGING VISITOR RESPONSE

Valuing Visitor Responses

The museum has been exploring ways to elicit visitor responses since the mid-'80s, when it first introduced its Reactions and Dreams school tour, based on the principle of object-oriented learning. The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project, headed by Melora McDermott-Lewis and begun in 1986, also demonstrated the importance of emotional response and personal associations to novice and more sophisticated visitors. One visitor interviewed for the study said that the defining quality of art was that "It has to make me feel something." Another said that an artwork brought back "memories of childhood and the fun we used to have, and those sorts of things are I guess important to me rather than other impressions of art that other people may have." (For the full text of the study as well as articles on object-oriented learning, see "Where to Get the Resources Mentioned in This Report.")

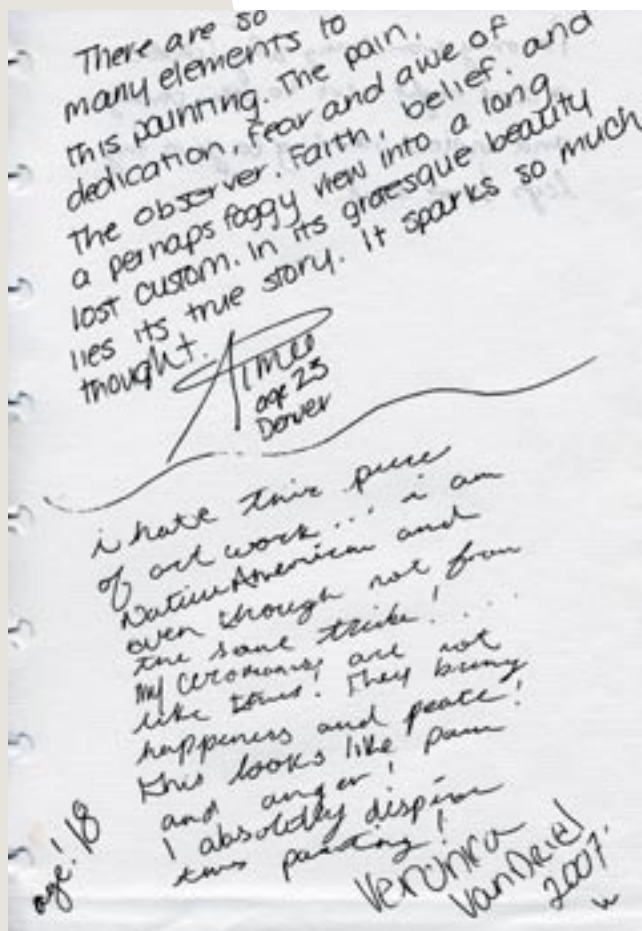
There was never a time during which DAM educators disputed these findings, but over the years they have come to embrace, encourage, and reinforce these tendencies among visitors (especially novices). Thanks largely to the Internet and the proliferation of social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube, society has shifted so that sharing personal opinions, ratings, and lists with strangers is a natural thing to do. And yet until recently, information about the artwork in museums tended to flow in only one

direction: from museum to visitor. In 1996, master teacher Gretchen DeSciose wanted to give subjective responses the museum's blessing and open up lines of communication from visitor to museum, visitor to visitor, and even, perhaps, from visitor to self. She placed a notebook in a new installation of Spanish colonial silver and invited visitors to "Tell us your silver story." This "prompt" elicited rich responses from visitors. Since then the museum has experimented with a kiosk where visitors could videotape themselves telling stories related to the art on display and a voting station where visitors chose their favorite masterpiece. For the most part, however, attempts to engage visitor response have taken the form of journals. The anonymous yet personal act of writing in a notebook seems to get more heartfelt, thoughtful responses than a (video) storytelling kiosk or live sharing.

Asking for Input

How you ask visitors for their input has a great deal to do with the input you get. The word "story"—as in "Tell us your Pacific story"—is very effective in eliciting visitor responses that are rich and meaningful to other visitors as well as to the person writing down the "story." It's worth noting, however, that a prompt this specific excludes those visitors who have never been to the South Pacific and don't have some other connection to the region (though visitors in this category can still enjoy reading others' responses).

"When Gretchen DeSciose was preparing the museum's first journal in the Spanish colonial silver gallery, we were advised by Doug Worts of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto that wording along the lines of 'Tell us what you think about this' would limit responses, as it would make people feel like they were being quizzed in school," says senior educator Patterson Williams. "The word 'story' casts people into a more personal, reflective state of mind."



In the Catlin focus area, a provocative painting plus other in-depth interpretives elicit many thoughtful journal responses with a minimal prompt. The journal cover simply says “Thoughts?” with a picture of the painting.

The act of prompt writing is a significant piece of providing choice, Williams continues. “A prompt must provide a *directed opportunity*. We had an Asian journal once with the words ‘pause,’ ‘draw,’ ‘write,’ and ‘reflect’ written on the cover in different colors and in different sizes. It was just too vague. The contributions from visitors were too short, too scribbled, and seldom related to anything on view.”

On the other hand, senior interpretive writer Lisa Levinson notes that a journal placed by a George Catlin painting in the western American art galleries simply says “Thoughts?” on the cover and yet gets incredibly on-target responses. However, the journal is but one component of a rich interpretive

space that showcases the multiplicity of viewpoints around a controversial painting (for a full description of the Catlin interpretive area, see the Catlin cubes case study later in this report). “I suspect that you can pose an interesting question either through the display or through the prompt,” she says.

A good prompt can’t be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and shouldn’t require any information but the writer’s own experience. But if there’s such a thing as the “wrong” prompt, is there also the “wrong” kind of response?

“If a visitor were to sit down and fill page after page of the Pacific journal with details of a family vacation to Hawaii, that would be a successful interaction on one level, but it would miss the aesthetic dimension of the museum experience,” Williams says. “The trick is, how do you get people both to be personal and to connect to the art that’s in front of them?”

A personal response that connects with the art may be ideal, but master teachers Heather Nielsen and Lisa Steffen, who worked on the gallery installations that contain (respectively) the Pacific story journal and a “What does the West mean to you?” journal, don’t discount the value of any thoughtful response even if it has nothing to do with the art. “If you write a story about burying your husband in the Pacific, that means we were successful in creating an environment for a deep and meaningful experience,” says Nielsen. Steffen adds that “Journals are a way for us to reinforce that inspiration comes from within—from personal associations, thoughts, and memories—as well as from without.” And although the art isn’t always specifically mentioned by visitors writing in the western journal, it seems to Steffen that the art in that room may trigger their thoughts. “Maybe it’s because people are looking at the walls around them as they ponder the answer to the question. For instance, we have a wall of portraits of American Indians in that room, and we get a lot of thoughts about how American Indians have been treated wrongly.”

Visitor-to-Visitor Communications

Early on it was clear that visitors enjoyed reading the responses of other visitors. In a journal placed by a George Catlin painting in the western galleries, one visitor actually wrote that “This painting is as interesting as the varied perspectives written on the

previous pages.” The museum recognizes reading the journals as an activity as legitimate as recording one’s own response and makes it a valid choice by not cleaning out responses too quickly. Judicious “seeding” of notebooks with responses that generate additional responses also helps, as does the necessary weeding out of graffiti.

Case Study: Guided Poetry Journals

In 2004, in anticipation of doing something similar in the new building, the museum experimented with several different types of installed, guided poetry activities in the temporary exhibition *Frederic Remington: The Color of Night*. Subsequent visitor panels brought up much bigger issues around adults and museum interactives than the journals themselves.

“We already knew this was a factor, but we heard emphatically in these panels how prevalent and deeply ingrained visitor assumptions are about ‘museum protocol’—that it keeps adults both from engaging in activities and even recognizing that activities they notice in the gallery are intended for them,” says master teacher Lisa Steffen. “We heard loud and clear that it was important for the materials and setting to entice adults to participate. A leather-bound book at an elegant desk is more ‘adult’ than laminated covers and gel pens. We also heard that it’s important to know what your choices are when you’re in a space. These findings informed not just the development of the guided poetry activity, but our thinking across all four modes of engagement—Connecting with Artists, Engaging Visitor Response, Engaging Visitor Creativity, and Incorporating Multiple Voices.” (The visitor panel study is available on the museum’s website; see the resources section.)

The guided poetry journal in the western galleries is slightly different from the other journals in the Hamilton Building in that it specifically encourages visitors to write a poem rather than just writing whatever they feel like. It contains a Mad Libs-style template with five fill-in blanks that get the creative juices flowing by asking visitors to “make up a name for an artwork in this room” and “now describe one detail.” At the end they see that their answers have formed a poem of sorts.

“We tested several prototypes for the poetry journal,” says Steffen. “One was just about filling in, Mad Libs-style. Some visitors preferred how structured that felt. We also tested a notebook that had people create an acrostic. That felt more open-ended, and some visitors preferred that. But we also heard some visitors say they wanted to feel free just to write—which is always an option since the pages are blank, but they wanted reassurance that it was okay. It’s back to that ‘serving with choice’ idea. We ended up offering the Mad Libs option as a kind of stencil or overlay and the prompt, ‘Let the template help you write a poem. Or just write something free form.’ We heard from visitors that the word ‘poetry’ is intimidating, so we were careful to keep it off the cover. There, we focused on the positive outcome of the activity by saying ‘Let the art in this room inspire you.’”

Visitor testing revealed that some people prefer the structure of a template for poetry and some prefer more open-ended writing, but more important is that adults know the activity is meant for them.



Case Study: Modern and Contemporary Question Cards

The modern and contemporary question cards grew out of extensive testing of three different kinds of labels for that collection.

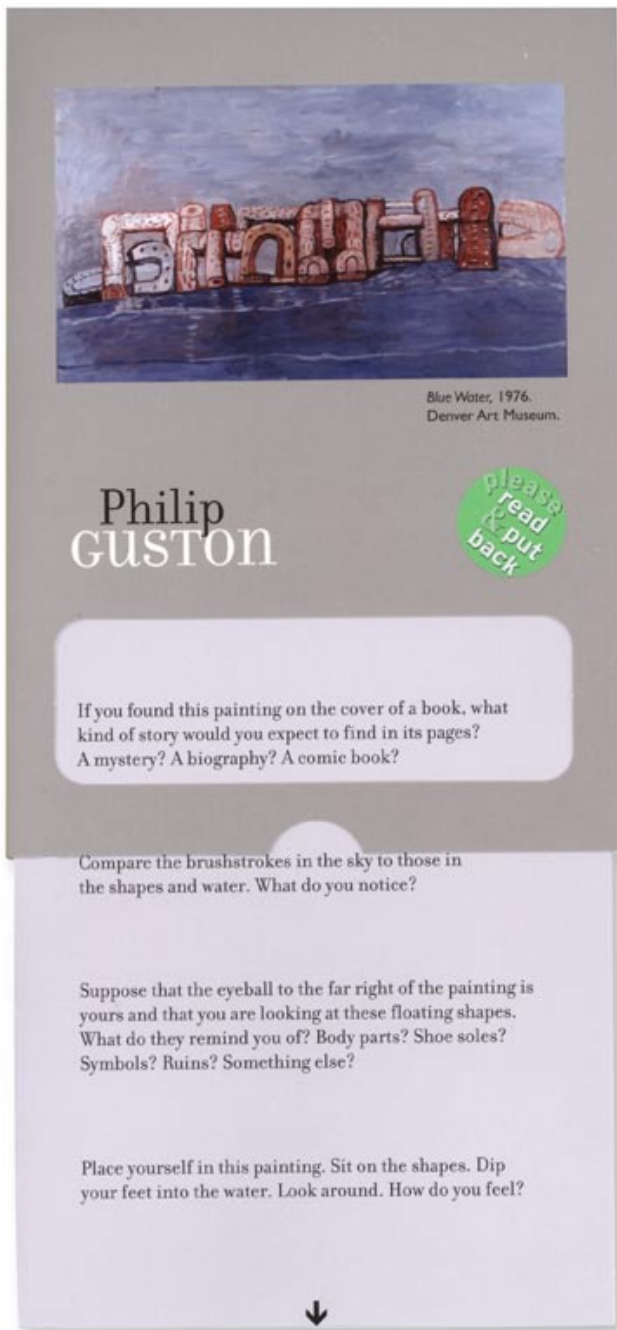
Modern and contemporary art master teacher Sonnet Hanson explains: “We wondered how we could come up with something that was not information-based that novices, especially, could use to connect with abstract and nonobjective art. We tested three kinds of labels. One presented a sort of general mindset to looking at contemporary art. The second had object-specific looking questions. There was no right or wrong, no ‘yes’ or ‘no’—it was just playing with the idea that shifting focus makes people notice things they hadn’t before. The third was more information-based, like the human connection labels.

“The first group of visitors that we tested liked the information-based label best and then the object-specific questions, and they saw the mindset label as something that might serve as an introduction to the gallery. The second group liked the object-specific questions best and then the information-based label—in other words, their preferences were reversed.

“What we got from this was that there is a segment that consistently finds each type of label helpful. Which goes back to the idea of the importance of serving visitors with choice. From this we developed both the human connection pullouts and what eventually became the question cards.”

The question labels took the form of cards that a visitor slides out of a holder to reveal, one at a time, five unusual, thought-provoking questions about a specific object, such as “If you found this painting on the cover of an album, what kind of music would you expect to hear?” and “Place yourself in this painting. Sit on the shapes. Dip your feet into the water. Look around. How do you feel?”

“We did three rounds of testing on the types of questions,” says Hanson. “We ended up with five basic categories. Some of the questions are meant to encourage people to reflect on what they’re looking at without actually writing something down. Others are more about directed looking, because we know that



Question cards invite visitors to engage with abstract and nonobjective art using what they already bring with them: personal preferences, associations, observations, and imagination.

the more people look, the more they notice. These aren't separate and distinct categories; many questions fall into multiple categories and are meant to do more than one thing."

The testing didn't stop there. Different formats were tested as well (visitors found a dial "too child-like") before the team settled on the idea of having the card slide out of a holder. The museum's findings from its visitor panel on journals proved true here, too: adult visitors preferred more sophisticated-looking materials and presentation.

Overcoming "Museum Protocol"

Surmounting the "museum protocol" problem continues to be an issue. "I enjoyed it once I sat down and did it," said one visitor who was asked to do an activity as part of an evaluation conducted by the museum. "I guess I'm just not used to, you're not accustomed to hands-on stuff in the museum, as an adult." The sentiment is an oft-heard refrain. Adult visitors just don't expect to find activities geared toward them in a museum and aren't quite sure what to do when they discover them.

So far, the museum's efforts have been directed toward making activities noticeable through design and graphics, writing specific prompts and using language that is adult-oriented, and using more elegant, "adult" materials. There are early indications that creating more adult-looking journals has had a measure of success in attracting the intended audience, but there are continuing practical concerns. If you invest in expensive materials—like leather notebook covers—how do you keep them from getting sullied with graffiti? And how do you provide elegant writing instruments while respecting conservation concerns?

Another possible solution, which the museum has not explored much, is creating private and semi-private settings for response (something that came out of the Remington guided poetry visitor panels; see the resources section of this report). The guided poetry panels also indicated that all journals and brochures should have greater visibility, but designers and educators have yet to figure out the perfect way to address this issue. Despite the museum's efforts to use design and graphics to call attention to visitor response materials that sit on tables, visitors still miss



Preliminary visitor testing results suggest that these leather journal covers and pens attached with silk cord qualify as "adult-looking," thus helping adult visitors overcome the presumption that only kids do things like write in a museum.

these activities. In some cases, cards and labels are farther away from the artwork than is ideal. Sonnet Hanson, master teacher for modern and contemporary art, notes that "post-opening testing has shown that the incidence of people noticing the human connection labels and question cards is low. We experimented with pulling the tables they're on out into the flow of traffic more, which helped. The next step would be to experiment with some kind of stand right next to the work. But if you get too close to the artwork, do you distract from the aesthetic experience? We haven't hit on the right solution yet, but I'm sure there are a number of effective ways to do it."



The DAM has heard from visitors (and seen in observation) that it helps to have a person on hand to invite visitors to write in a journal, handle a touchable object, or reinforce that a creative activity is meant for adults.

The Human Touch

The museum conceives of its visitor programs as a continuum between installed (the subject of this report) and live (programs that involve interaction with a human being). Installed programs that people can do on their own whenever they are in the museum play an essential role in this continuum, but over and over again the museum has heard from visitors (and seen in observation) that it helps to have a human being standing by to invite visitors to write in a journal, handle a touchable object, or reinforce that a creative activity is meant for adults. Not only can this surmount the “museum protocol” problem—the inherent hesitation adult visitors have to touch or write something in a museum—it also helps visitors notice some of the less visible choices. “It’s more of an attraction,” one visitor explained. On the other hand, installed interactives that depend on having a human presence can’t be considered truly successful.

In preparation for the opening weeks of the new building, when large crowds were anticipated, the museum originated a new “ambassadors” program to bring in a huge new group of people to help the

public have a positive experience with the building. Ambassadors would have a short term of service, be easy to train, and be responsive to—and representative of—a more diverse audience in terms of age, gender, and cultural diversity. With the opening behind them, the ambassadors have now merged with the museum’s visitor service volunteers. They staff the front desk, greet people, and help visitors find their way around. They are also being assigned to some of the more heavily used interactives to assist people and invite them to participate, and to clean up and restock supplies. The volunteers don’t receive any specific content training (like docents do); they’re just there to lend a hand.

“We have always assumed that at the times of the heaviest use we’d need human help at the interactives,” says senior educator Patterson Williams. “While people do just fine on their own, we heard again and again in visitor panels—and we’ve certainly observed it for ourselves—that an extra welcome, a special invitation, makes a big difference.”



Visitor artwork posted in the African studio.

ENGAGING VISITOR CREATIVITY

Putting Creative Activities in the Galleries

Many art museums—including the Denver Art Museum—acknowledge the creative impulses of adults (and children) by offering classes in oil painting or printmaking or pottery. Typically these activities take place in classrooms or education areas outside of the galleries. While some museums, including the Denver Art Museum, have put artmaking activities for kids and families inside the galleries

(either through dedicated artmaking stations or backpacks that families take with them into the museum), a less-explored avenue is carving out space within the galleries for adults to express their creativity. The DAM has experimented with a few ways to do this in its new Hamilton Building.

One resource for the museum's current thinking about adult creativity is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. The former head of the psychology department at the University of Chicago, Csikszentmihalyi proposes that being surprised by something every day, making time for reflection and relaxation, and increasing the complexity of what you enjoy are all things that enhance a person's quality of life. More specifically, he sees museums as well-positioned to provide these life-enhancing experiences.

"Csikszentmihalyi's book resonated with a number of us in the DAM Education Department because he ponders not just the transformative creativity of exceptional artists, scientists and thinkers—what he calls 'big-C' Creativity—but also how we all can be more 'little-c' creative in our own lives," says senior educator Patterson Williams. "Museums have always been about outstanding art or, if you will, Creativity. How then do we think about creativity? Except for offering studio art classes, museums largely have not dealt with everyday creativity. Art history, we've got that. Great art, we've got that. But what if we moved into a full exploration of creativity? What would it mean to have a museum that was about culture and creativity rather than art history? What would that look like?"

Putting creative activities for adults in the galleries and making them part and parcel of the museum experience, rather than segregating them in a base-

Photo posted on flickr.com by Brett O'Connor.



Visitor self-portrait in Tatsuo Miyajima's *ENGI*.

ment or a classroom, reinforces the idea that there are multiple good ways to engage with art. It entails a change in protocol: visiting a museum doesn't mean your hands are behind your back all the time. It gives visitors a chance to pause and do something with their hands and serves as a way to punctuate one's time in the museum and consider the physicality of art, in addition to its more cerebral aspects.

Multiple Outcomes Are Okay

Maybe a visitor will discover an unexpected flair for drawing. Maybe a visitor already is an art student or artist who will welcome the chance for a little creative dabbling. That's just fine, but for the most part, engaging visitor creativity is not about producing museum-worthy works of art. Engaging visitor creativity *might* mean:

- creating a souvenir
- leaving your mark (posting your work for others to see)
- engaging in the creative process of arranging or selecting
- enhanced social interaction between/among kids and adults
- a greater connection to the work on view through a hands-on activity
- an opportunity for visual, tactile personal expression

Posted examples of artwork obviously created by adults can encourage other adults to participate.



Enticing Adults to Participate

As was discussed in the section on guided poetry journals, the perception remains that if an activity involves doing something with your hands, then it must be for kids. "As we get older, it's really hard to pull yourself out of your comfort zone and just play," noted one visitor. There's also a segment of the adult population that sees stopping to *make* art as taking time away from the main reason they came to the museum: to *look* at art. These folks may never want to sit still for a hands-on activity.

But during panels and interviews, many visitors say that when they're asked to do an activity as part of an evaluation, they enjoy it. More than that, it deepens the experience they have with the art. "You can read the plaque and visually take in the painting, but this made you . . . connect on a different sort of level," said one panel participant. So the DAM is still struggling to make it easier for adults to understand that what's being offered is for them.

Materials

Visitors have been vocal in saying not to choose materials that look like they belong in a child's playroom or classroom. One visitor who was interviewed explained the problem with materials like brightly colored gel pens: "There might be a lot of adults that would *want* to do this [activity], but they wouldn't want to be *caught* doing it." Using more sophisticated-looking materials can help ease this problem. In the African studio area, the team experimented with setting out paper in muted colors to attract adults (visitors associate primary colors with children). Participants in a visitor panel said that switching to thinner colored pencils would give the area more of an adult feel.

Product

Adults seem to like to create something with a real-life use. In the western postcard activity, adults not only create an actual postcard, they can buy stamps and mail it right in the gallery. "When we experimented with this activity in a temporary exhibition, it was well-used by adults," says master teacher Lisa Steffen. "We had a hunch that having a place to mail the card was important to adult participation—maybe because they create a product they can use, it feels more like time well spent."



Although there's a lower table nearby for children, the tall stools and high table at this station send the message that this artmaking space is also intended for adults.

Examples

Examples of artwork obviously created by adults (not kids) can be posted prominently. Summative evaluation in the summer of 2007 brought up the idea of not just showing artwork by adults but showing adults engaged in the activity or holding up something they'd made.

Design

This entails not only using more sophisticated furniture and colors, but also going so far as to create two different sets of tables and stools in different sizes (as the team did in the African studio) to indicate that both adults and kids are welcome. It may also mean carving out private spaces, something that adults request. The graphic design of materials and instructions is targeted to adults.

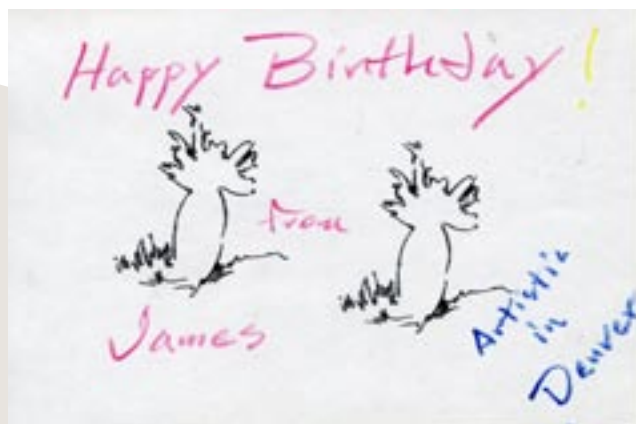
Language

Instructions, prompts, and other text in areas intended for adult activities are written at an adult level. Visitors have said they want to know what the point of an activity is and how it connects to the art on view.

Ease of use

Many adults are intimidated or don't fancy themselves artistic and need a little push to get started. The DAM teams favor creative activities that are simple to do and make it easy to produce a successful result. Rubber stamps and stencils are intuitive, no-experience-needed methods used in the western and African studios.

At the same time, however, if an activity does not have sufficient complexity—if it doesn't fit the Csikszentmihalyi model for a "flow" experience—then visitors may dismiss it as not worth their time. "The nice thing about the postcard activity is that visitors can—and do—customize it depending on their skill level," says master teacher Lisa Steffen. "Some people simply arrange a few stamps, others draw elaborate landscapes in colored pencils."



Two postcards show how visitors use creative "helpers," in this case rubber stamps, to create simple or elaborate compositions.

Overt messages

Such as this sign, in the western studio:

The Studio is a different kind of place for adults

and any accompanying

children
friends
blind dates
coworkers
in-laws

who want to

make their own souvenirs
watch interactive interviews
touch without fear
open unknown drawers
find strangely shaped rooms
discover artist secrets

Predictably, while this message appears on a large sign prominently placed at the entrance to the space, visitors still say they didn't see it. "Although signs tend to be the default solution, we've found that even the biggest, brightest sign in the world won't solve some problems," says senior interpretive writer Lisa Levinson. "That's why it's important to take a look at nonverbal signals—they can shout louder than any sign." And now the department is talking about how they might go even further—and make a stab at changing the way adults think about the museum in general.

Overall museum message

Based on the results of visitor panels conducted in July and August 2007, DAM educators are considering the idea of sending an overall message to visitors that "this museum is a different kind of place" where adults (not just kids) will find things to do in the galleries. This message would not take the place of signage in the galleries but would be in addition to it and might be delivered by security officers, the person who sells you your ticket or scans your membership card, or in some other as-yet-to-be-determined way.



It helps to overtly state that something is for adults, but nonverbal messages sent by design and materials are also important.

Challenges and Opportunities

Any kind of artmaking in the galleries raises questions about protecting the art and keeping materials neat and restocked, regardless of what age group the activity is geared toward. Most of the "challenges" listed here apply across the board, but a few are specific to fostering a creative atmosphere for adults.

Protecting the art

A major challenge is how to balance artmaking in the gallery with the need to protect the art on display. Conservation concerns limit the type of media that can be used (wet, sticky, and sharp items are a problem, as is anything that leaves a permanent mark), mandates that media be confined to certain areas, and requires that museums think about how to distinguish areas where artmaking is allowed from areas where it isn't. "You can't assume all colored pencils are the same," says master teacher Lisa Steffen. "Some are more permanent than others, so we have our Conservation Department test them and we go with their preference."



Staff used the unusual architecture to create artmaking spaces adjacent to but separate from the galleries.

Creating an adult environment

Staff have also observed that if kids are present in an area, adults yield the activities to them even if the activities were designed for adults (or for all ages). No one's solved this problem yet, but it's interesting to note that when the audience is heavily adult, like during the museum's Friday night *Untitled* events, the dynamic shifts, and adults participate enthusiastically. Not wanting to discourage kids either, educators are still grappling with the implications of this observation.

Staffing and maintenance

Another challenge is how to effectively communicate the intended (and appropriate) use of installed activities without having to staff these areas all the time. Observation has shown that it helps to have a person around to invite visitors to participate and to maintain the area, but even if it were practical to do this, it creates a different kind of experience than if the activity is unstructured and self-guided.

Some activities are higher maintenance than others, which can stretch resources thin. In addition, the museum has to decide when to change out activities and how to adapt if a gallery installation changes. It's a good idea to plan ahead for flexibility, even in "permanent" exhibitions.

Isolating spaces for artmaking

Because of its unusual architecture, the Hamilton Building solved some of the problems of isolating spaces for artmaking—the museum staff found it could naturally take advantage of spaces that were created and set apart by the building's sharply sloping walls and ceiling. "The architecture provides unique and unexpected spaces of every size and shape imaginable," says Dan Kohl, director of design. "The DAM staff was clever in thinking how to best use the spaces to accommodate the program and interpretive goals of the museum. Since most of the spaces flow together, each space inherently had the advantage of leveraging off the adjacent spaces, programs, and artworks."



Photo posted on flickr.com by Robert Linder.

Visitor interacting with *Untitled (for A.C.)* by Dan Flavin.

INCORPORATING MULTIPLE VOICES

“It Depends on Who You Ask”

Unlike the other three modes of engagement explored in the Hamilton Building—Connecting with Artists, Engaging Visitor Response, and Engaging Visitor Creativity—this one didn’t arise directly from listening to visitors but in part from staff members’ experience. “When we research a work of art we encounter various, sometimes opposing opinions among curators and experts. We also see that there are different kinds of experts—including visitors—who can create thoughtful contrasts to art historical interpretations,” says master teacher Lisa Steffen.

Yet overwhelmingly, the only voice that visitors encounter in a museum is the voice of the art historian. The DAM teams wanted to bring a variety of voices and perspectives into the visitor experience. The subtext of this effort is that there is no single right answer or way to interpret an art object. This belief, of course, dovetails with the museum’s efforts to engage visitor response and to provide multiple ways for visitors to experience art in the museum setting. It also overlaps with the museum’s efforts to connect visitors with artists, since that endeavor often involves bringing the voice of the artist (via labels, wall quotes, or videos) into the gallery.

The installation teams began to consider creating “dialogues” around selected works of art (as opposed

to the monologue that characterizes most labels). What if the DAM became a forum for voices rather than being the sole authority?

Case Study: Conversation Labels

Once you decide that the expert voice isn’t the only voice, the possibilities are endless. In 2002, DAM staff working on a retrospective exhibition of the modern and contemporary collection solicited comments on the art from people ranging from a 10-year-old and a security officer to an art collector and a museum curator.

In the western American art galleries, the team created a series of conversation labels that take the form of a conversation among curatorial staff Mindy Besaw, Ann Daley, and Joan Troccoli about the works on view (in this case, works on paper).

“This was not an unexpected voice but an unexpected way for curators to be talking about art,” says master teacher Lisa Steffen, “It’s the tone that’s unexpected. They’re very informal. You get a sense of these people as human beings, not just art historians.”

A snippet of conversation gives an idea of the tone:

Mindy Besaw: *Linoleum and woodblock prints both involve working in relief...the parts you carve out remain white in the print and the parts you don’t touch print black. It’s almost a different thought process from drawing or painting. Plus what’s on the left in the block will be on the right in the print.*

Joan Troccoli: *You have to be thinking totally backward.*

Ann Daley: *Sort of like Ginger Rogers. You must get used to it. It’s like driving through the rearview mirror.*



Conversation labels in the western gallery allow visitors to “eavesdrop” on an informal chat by curators.

Steffen’s not sure she would classify the experiment as successful—yet. The approach is good for conveying the curators’ interest and excitement in the subject matter and information they know from talking to artists. It can be a good way to unravel meaning. But it’s less suited for complicated explanations of how something was made. “If we did it again, I’d be more picky about matching the medium to the message,” says senior interpretive writer Lisa Levinson.

Another factor is having the right mix of personnel. “The three people we used had a long history of working together and easily fell into a conversational tone. That wouldn’t be the case with every group,” Steffen says.

Case Study: Catlin Cubes

George Catlin’s *The Cutting Scene, Mandan O-kee-pa Ceremony* is considered to be one of the most controversial paintings in the DAM collection. Even “experts” don’t share the same opinions about Catlin’s depiction of a Mandan religious ceremony in the 1830s, and visitors who come upon the painting cold are unlikely to correctly guess what’s going on. Aware of the painting’s long history of sparking strong reactions, DAM staff wanted to come up with a way to engage viewers in the dialogue.

First off, though, visitors needed to know what they were looking at. Four human connection labels were designed to discuss different topics related to the painting and its subject matter (such as “Why does this painting look sketchy and unfinished?” and “The O-kee-pa ceremony”). Visitors may read the handheld labels first or they may be drawn to a wall of cubes, each of which contains a question (for example, “Was Catlin a racist?” and “How do American Indians feel about Catlin today?”), an image (such as a detail from the painting or a photograph of a person quoted), and on its other four sides opinion quotes or sometimes a fact to put it all in context. Putting the opinions on the sides of a cube avoids creating any hierarchy and allows visitors to consider each opinion one at a time. Having contextual information in the form of pull-outs nearby gives visitors information about a complicated subject and complex artist. “We’re aware that not everyone is going to want to delve in at length, so we also try to provide opportunities for ‘quick hits’” says master teacher Lisa Steffen. “In this case, a short label directly next to the painting explains very briefly what you’re looking at.”

The Catlin area—which is generally regarded as a very successful interpretive area—has come a long way from how it was first envisioned four years before the new building opened. DAM staff initially fig-

ured that they'd add a video or audio station where visitors could listen to different expert opinions and then record their own thoughts. But three years before the opening, budget overruns forced them to scrap the video. The team decided to stay with the same approach but in a low-tech version: visitors would read expert comments, then post their own reactions. The team readied a prototype for testing: a piece of paper with nine squares, six of which contained quotes from experts and one with blank space for visitors to provide their own thoughts. There were also two made-up, handwritten "visitor" quotes for visitors to model their response on.

The results of the prototype testing were humbling. Even though the expert blurbs were short, visitors found the complex ideas too hard to sort through. To them, it looked like a lot to read. They also felt uncomfortable posting their opinions alongside those of experts. Panelists were very sensitive to the difference between expert and visitor perspectives. Comments by experts were considered "information," while comments by visitors were classified as "opinions." As one panel participant put it, "my opinion isn't worth much"; but if the comment was made by a curator, "then you have a genuine insight." It became clear that it wasn't going to work to provide a spectrum of multiple voices while at the same time asking for visitor response.

At this stage in the game, staff expressed frustration that although incorporating multiple voices felt like an incredibly rich area to explore, perhaps it was not going to be possible to achieve it without the presence of a human being in the gallery.

Then—a breakthrough. Designer Amy Schell, writer Lisa Levinson, and master teacher Lisa Steffen hit upon the idea of cubes. 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 quotes into main ideas: each side of the cube presents a different aspect of the controversy. The beauty of the solution, according to Steffen, 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 this painting."



Putting opinions about George Catlin's *The Cutting Scene, Mandan O-kee-pa Ceremony* (above) on the sides of a cube avoids creating any hierarchy and allows visitors to consider each opinion one at a time.

Photo by Jeff Wells.



The response component turned into a separate journal placed on a small table nearby. “We realized that the goals of visitor response and multiple voices aren’t exactly the same,” Levinson says. “Multiple voice is about there being no single interpretation. Response is about encouraging visitors to develop their own opinions and feel like their opinions have a place in the museum. The average visitor doesn’t have an informed relationship with the object, so they felt it was unfair to place their responses parallel to those of experts.”

The different “voices” in the Catlin cubes include curators, Native American historians, anthropologists, and Catlin himself. The team struck gold when, at the suggestion of native arts curator Nancy Blomberg, they contacted the Mandan tribal council and received a response from Calvin Grinnell. It turned out that not only was he the cultural preservation resource specialist for the Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara Nation, he was also one of the few people alive who had participated in an O-kee-pa ceremony. Grinnell spent an entire day with the team discussing Catlin’s painting, and his quotes became part of the cubes and informed the text in the human connection labels.

A few more words about format. Visitors have no trouble figuring out how to use this interactive. Visitors also tend to return the cubes with the question side out, and if the question is not immediately visible, most turn the cube to read the question first once they understand the system. Also, adults seem to have no qualms participating, even though in testing a few people expressed concerns that the cubes might resemble children’s building blocks or toys.

Case Study: iPods

iPods installed in the western and African galleries provide an unexpected way to bring different voices and perspectives into the museum. The African installation team worked with a local radio station to help choose the music and used local musicians as a resource. Together, they came up with playlists that featured not only traditional selections but modern tracks and recordings by African musicians living in the Denver area.

The different types of music themselves function as different voices or “lenses” through which to view the art. In the western galleries, visitors choose from playlists labeled “epic,” “contemplative,” “happy,” and “high and lonesome.” Despite the variety, all the choices were selected to have what a number of visitor panel participants identified as an important feature: they integrate with “reasonable harmony” with the artwork on view. That is, there’s a perceived relationship between the music and the art, whether it be the genre of music, where it was made, who made it, or how it captures a particular mood.

When the museum first tested the concept of music in the gallery, visitors were lukewarm. Whether they were given a PDA, notebook computer, or iPod, visitors expected the devices to have information, not music. They also assumed that you’d carry the device with you. They were not entirely comfortable with iPods, a relatively new technology at the time. (See appendix 3 for the educators’ informal write-up of the small-scale visitor testing of these different devices.)

Still, the teams felt strongly that they wanted music in the galleries. “To quote a participant in one of our visitor panels, ‘African art is dancing art.’ Most of the objects on display exist in the context of music—they are used in ceremonies or processions where there is music,” Nielsen says.



Songs on the iPods don’t relate directly to the art, but in testing visitors sought a “reasonable harmony” between what they see and what they hear.



A local radio station helped select music for the iPods in the African gallery, where many of the objects were made to be experienced with music.

The teams opted to stick with iPods out of hope that iPods would signal “music” more readily than other devices would. They suspected that the iPods would be popular with younger audiences, especially teens, whom they hoped to attract. But they were also making an informed bet that the technology would take off—a step that’s not uncommon with technology projects. Despite testing that showed that visitors weren’t fully comfortable with iPods, “We knew the mp3 player market was exploding,” says technology director Bruce Wyman. “And we knew that iPods were not only at the forefront of that market, they were also the easiest-to-use device out there.”

“We persevered, knowing that no matter what we did we wouldn’t please everyone,” Nielsen says. “Now we see that these are much-used areas, even by older adults whom we feared we might be excluding.”

Right now, iPods are permanently attached to seating. DAM educators agree that a mobile music experience might be a better fit to visitor expectations, and it would create a more organic, personal experience of listening and looking. However, logistics demanded that a mobile device be offered museumwide. Because of the time and money involved, this larger institutional commitment was impractical.

And while mobility is desirable, attaching the western iPods near little writing desks holding write-your-own poetry journals and the “What does the West mean to you?” journal yielded an unexpected, interesting result. Although the journals and the iPods weren’t designed specifically to be used together, several participants at a visitor panel assumed that this was the case. A few said they enjoyed listening to the music, which helped them articulate their feelings about the art. One said “the music turns on a different part of the brain.” Master teacher Lisa Steffen muses that “Perhaps putting on the headphones casts them into a reflective mood, or creates an illusion of privacy that unlocks their creative urges.”



In the western gallery visitors can combine two reflective and personal activities. Some find that listening to music can enhance their experience of writing in a journal.



Visitors often tap into their own emotions when they pick a category—such as happy, inspired, or cynical—and draw a card with a quote about the West.



Moods and Emotions

In the western American galleries, the iPod playlists are organized according to mood. Visitors can choose to listen to music that's "high and lonesome," or they can opt for something "happy" or "epic."

"The idea is, you select music through the lens of an emotion. It might be how you're feeling or it might be the feeling you think goes with the art you see. Each mood has a range of musical types, from classical to bluegrass" says master teacher Lisa Steffen. "We worked with an American Indian radio programmer to come up with contemporary and traditional selections and songs in each category. There are surprises no matter which category you choose."

The quote cards in the western galleries also use mood as a filter. A visitor chooses among seven different moods ranging from inspired to cynical to proud. "We tried to pick moods that people might be experiencing as they walked through the museum. This is the one component in the galleries that's not directly related to the art but instead contributes to the idea of a sense of place, which was also one of the western team's goals," Steffen explains.

"It's not just novices who have an emotional response to art," says senior interpretive writer Lisa Levinson. "Many visitors' immediate reactions are emotional,

especially if they're strong responses. But it's an aspect of art appreciation that's tricky to validate in an installed interpretive—we seldom get to work this into a label."

Levinson says it took a long time to choose the seven emotions, and "then once we decided on the emotion it took time to come up with one word to represent that emotion. We chose 'forlorn,' for example, because we hoped it would have the connotation of 'beautiful sadness'—not heart-wrenching grief."

On the back of the card is a quote from an artist, writer, pioneer or other westerner that fits the mood selected. The people quoted—like Will Rogers or Laura Ingalls Wilder—bring yet another set of unexpected voices into the museum. The process of choosing something as personal as a mood, combined with the element of chance involved (there are about seven different quotes in each category), can make people feel a surprisingly deep resonance with the card they pull. One staff member who had just moved to Denver and was wondering whether she'd made the right choice was thrilled to turn over her card and read this quote from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: "And here I am in Colorado! I kept thinking gleefully. Damn! damn! damn! I'm making it!"



Photo posted on flickr.com by Rob Saldaña.

Visitor taking a break on *Scottish Angus Cow and Calf* by Dan Ostermiller.

EVALUATION

Listening to Visitors

Although the DAM teams based many interpretive activities on successful prototypes they had used in the existing galleries and during temporary exhibitions, the sheer size of the expansion, the expected surge in visitor numbers, and the reliance on innovative technologies meant that the stakes were high. Well in advance of the building's opening, the installation teams conducted concept testing in the form of observations of visitor behavior in the galleries, exit and intercept interviews, and visitor panels and focus groups. As projects moved beyond the conceptual stage, teams tested prototypes, actual content, and instructions, and held "EMT" (emergency master teacher) meetings to help each other work through problems quickly. And they designed specific methods for "structured listening" that would help them refine ideas before they committed too much effort to final design and construction.

Structured Listening

"We all listen all the time. We overhear and observe things," says senior educator Patterson Williams, who serves as the Education Department's in-house evaluation coach. Williams helps educators decide whether or not to test, what's the best testing tool, how to analyze and act on the results, and when to bring in the pros. "Structured listening means we do it with a little more rigor. We identify what we want to know and then we apply a rational and sociologically sound approach."

Director of Education Melora McDermott-Lewis agrees that it's important to listen to visitors. "It keeps you honest. We all have a picture in our heads of who our visitor is, and if you go three or four years without talking to a visitor that picture gets further away from reality."

Through a series of workshops with Randi Korn and Associates, DAM staff found that when time was tight, small-sample testing produced valid results that they could move on quickly. It was better to get feedback from five to ten visitors than to bypass testing altogether because it would take too much time to set up panels.

"Small sample testing is anything less than a hundred people," says Williams. Sometimes it's considerably less. "Even samples of between five and thirty people have allowed staff to conduct studies and move forward in a timely manner. We look for strong trends and do a wise follow-up as a way to incorporate something beyond our own opinions and thoughts. A strong trend means more than 80 percent or less than 10 percent. At times it's difficult to explain to other team members why their decisions should be affected by such a small sample. Mostly this is useful not in developing ideas from the ground up but in refining a concept you are already going with—making wording or format changes, for example."

Consultant Daryl Fischer of MUSYNERGY helped the Education Department develop "Food for Thought", a method for writing up and implementing results of small-sample testing. (See appendix 3 for an example of a Food for Thought.) "The lighthearted title is a reminder that we've only gone so far in listening to visitors—far enough to take a better next step but not so far that we feel we have the final answer," says Williams. These short, informal reports are written



Learning why visitors passed by this exhibit (shown after retrofit), will make future use of the space more successful.

in bullet-point format and include a description of the methodology, general “takeaways” and observations, and actionable next steps. They provide a written record that’s useful to refer to later or share with another team that’s tackling a similar issue at a different time in the process. Each Food for Thought also includes a section called “Things to Explore and Discuss.” Filled with the kind of unforeseen and/or complex issues that are frequently raised by evaluations, this section is crucial in helping the department keep track of larger or unresolved problems.

You Can’t Please All People All the Time

In one large (318-participant) study done for the DAM by Randi Korn and Associates during the temporary exhibition *El Greco to Picasso* in 2003–2004, responses to a series of experimental “question labels” initially appeared to be lackluster. On average, participants scored the texts between 3.9 and 5.2 out of 7 on a range of different scales, such as “The label helped me get more out of the art,” and “The questions were interesting.” However, when DAM staff scrutinized the results, they realized that of the percentage of people who were polled, a substantial number (about 30–40 percent) *really* liked them—that is, they gave them scores of 6 or 7.

“What this told us is that though there was a group of people we wouldn’t reach, we would be very successful with another group, and we decided that was okay,” says Director of Education Melora McDermott-Lewis. “Because we are striving to provide choices to visitors whose needs and learning styles vary greatly, the ‘average’ result isn’t the most useful indicator of whether we should proceed or not. We heard similar results with iPods, with poetry, and with the modern and contemporary labels. When some folks are uninterested in what we’re doing, but others are having really meaningful experiences with it, we think it’s still worth doing.”

Making a Quick Fix = Long-Term Learning

The Marcel Duchamp focus area had been carefully conceived and constructed in an open, angled space off the third-floor lobby. Duchamp’s *Boîte (Box)*, a portable mini-museum that displays 68 miniature reproductions of the artist’s life’s work, had been placed front and center on a custom-made pedestal. The wall texts were edited and in place, the chess game was set up—and people were walking right by the area without going in.

“When we noticed that people were missing this area,” says Sonnet Hanson, master teacher for modern and contemporary art, “we set up two visitor panels, where we heard that people didn’t identify the space as exhibit space—they thought it was a classroom or just leftover space. The object and the case containing it blocked the space and discouraged people from entering. But people told us that once we recruited them to go in they liked what they found. So we didn’t want to give up on the area.”

The immediate fix was to move the object farther back and add large, colorful wall graphics to attract people’s attention. A written invitation to “take one home” was added above boxes containing three different brochures.

The larger lessons learned were to ask visitors what the problem was, to think creatively about ways to define spaces that aren’t conventionally enclosed by walls, and perhaps to start with bigger graphics than you might think necessary. “Next time we are programming this or a similar space, we can look to the visitor feedback we got here to inform our choices,” Hanson says.

Advantages of Simultaneous Testing

There were a number of instances where different teams were testing similar concepts but in different ways. Educators working on the western American art and the modern and contemporary art teams were both trying out the idea of combining multiple voices (quotes from experts and others who had unique perspectives on the artwork) with responses from visitors. The western team had created a grid that had expert quotes and blank spaces for visitors to add their own thoughts; the modern and contemporary team was testing a sequential list of images and quotes with room for visitor response.

Visitor reactions were similar in each case: visitors were uncomfortable adding their thoughts to those of “experts.”

“We couldn’t chalk up the results to the specifics of the material or the way the expert voices were presented,” says Lisa Steffen, master teacher for western art. “Visitors were struggling with something much more basic, which led to our realizing that incorporat-

ing multiple voices and eliciting visitor response were actually two separate and distinct goals that might not mix well. It was very useful to be able to step back from our specific projects and see the potential underlying issues.”

It was also useful for visitors to be able to compare approaches. The African and western teams did combined visitor testing on what kind of music to put on the iPods that would be placed in each of those collections. Both lists contained unexpected music that people reacted against (the African playlist contained jazz, the western playlist contained an R.E.M. song). As they struggled to articulate why, they came up with the concept of “reasonable harmony”—that is, the idea that the music should have a “reasonable” relationship to the art on view.

“I don’t know if they—and we—would have arrived at this realization as quickly if there hadn’t been more than one approach to consider. The act of thinking through and comparing multiple possibilities helped them, and us, to focus on essential issues rather than details of execution,” Steffen says.

Combining External and Internal Resources

The museum relied on outside experts to conduct focus groups, help develop strategies for future research, and train museum staff to conduct research on their own.

“If all our structured listening was done by outside consultants there’d be some benefits, but we’d lose two critical elements,” says senior educator Patterson Williams. “When in-house staff does the research they internalize the results—it becomes part of their own reflective process and they become better educators. And second, the cost of using outside experts would have been prohibitive given the amount of research we wanted to do. We wanted to hear about lots of small things that could impact future projects in myriad ways—everything from how a visitor might use an iPod to wording in labels. We also needed to be nimble and move quickly.”

In addition to having in-house staff trained in the basics of visitor research, educators found it helpful to learn interviewing techniques that worked both with

visitors and with artists and to employ the services of an in-house writer/editor.

Sometimes, however, it was worthwhile to bring in outside experts to conduct evaluation. Decisions that required the investment of a great deal of time and money or areas where the museum was looking at across-the-board experiences called for research conducted and interpreted by experts. "We also like to have experts double-check our decisions," says Williams. "They are indispensable in helping us take a broad look at groups of activities that we've designed and installed but could still refine. For this we need a larger-scale study.

"The combination of small-sample, in-house research with larger-scale, outside research affirms that we trust our own experience but that we do listen to visitors first and we don't trust ourselves so completely that we're not open to more objective perspectives on our work," Williams sums up.

Photo posted on flickr.com by Djsopa



Visitor interacting with *Spiritual Messenger* by Francis Nnaggenda.

During July and August 2007 (the first summer after the Hamilton Building opened in October 2006), Randi Korn and Associates conducted 60 onsite interviews and twenty follow-up phone interviews with drop-in visitors to DAM to examine their experiences with some of the new adult artmaking and response activities. Overall, the response was positive, though there was a segment that didn't see the value in these activities: "It took too much time...I just wanted to look at the art." The majority, however, enjoyed the activities once they tried them—so issues remain about how to help adults notice them, see them as intended for adults, know how to use them, and feel comfortable engaging without a human invitation.

Asking the Big Questions

Because so few museums are doing what Denver is doing in terms of adult response and creative activities in the galleries, there's no existing standard by which to measure success. There are always going to be people who are too pressed for time to stop and engage in these kinds of activities, so what's a reasonable percentage to aim for? Does stopping to engage in a response or creative activity increase a visitor's overall level of satisfaction with his or her visit? These are questions to investigate in the future.

Sonnet Hanson, master teacher for modern and contemporary art, observes that for various reasons (budget, staffing, the varying nature of collections, different approaches among teams) there's an uneven distribution of adult interpreters in the galleries. Some galleries are denser than others. Do visitors notice this? How consciously do they notice it? What do they make of it—do they infer that some collections require, or lend themselves to, more interpretation than others?

Master teacher Heather Nielsen wonders about the cumulative effect of a visit to the museum. "What happens when you walk out of the building and you've had a memorable experience in western, and one in African, and another in modern and contemporary? What does that do in the long run to people's perceptions of creativity, of art, of what it means to be human? That's the point of this, after all. That's what we ultimately want to know."