how VISITORS changed our museum
Transforming the Gallery of California Art at the Oakland Museum of California
how we changed our museum
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When I joined the Oakland Museum of California about four and a half years ago, I was attracted to the position for two main reasons. First, I knew the Museum as an incredible resource here in my own hometown, one with a rich history as a “museum of the people” with a strong commitment to education and community engagement. Second, it was undergoing a renovation and, having worked with two other major capital projects at other museums, I knew that these kinds of projects present extraordinary opportunities for an institution to re-introduce itself to its public, and to grow, expand, and improve in all facets of its programs and activities. Little did I know the full extent of what this project would entail or how it would challenge me, my colleagues, and every aspect of the organization.

When I first began here, we couldn’t quite capture the right word for what we were doing—except that they all began with “re.” Remodel? Not quite right—sounds like the kitchen. Renovation? Suited more for an old farmhouse. Reinstallation? Who knows what that means. Reinvention? Well, only if we’re tossing our history aside.

As we moved further into the process, however, I began to see that this project involved much more than the physical change of expanding the galleries, enhancing the infrastructure, and improving our visitor amenities. This project touches every aspect of the Museum—from the way we work together as staff, with our visitors, with our community—and ultimately the vision of this institution. We are transforming. And, as the dictionary so aptly notes, this means changing our composition and structure; our outward appearance; and most fundamentally, our character and condition.

Here is a bit of background on the Museum and the roots from which this transformation has grown. The Oakland Museum of California opened in 1969 in its landmark building, marking the unification of three organizations that date back to the early part of the 20th century. These three civic institutions—the Oakland Public Museum, the Oakland Art Gallery, and the Snow Museum of Natural History—were all created for the public good, not an outgrowth of a private collector or the grand gesture of an individual philanthropist. Each museum focused on a distinct discipline, they shared a long-standing tradition of education and community connection and presented innovative and occasionally groundbreaking work in exhibitions and collections.

With the alliance of the three institutions, the Museum leadership determined to focus on the theme of California, thereby distinguishing it from the other museums in the Bay Area and creating—a unique among museums nationally—a multidisciplinary institution, focused on its own region and place and making the links between California’s natural, cultural, and creative heritage. Most importantly, the new Oakland Museum, created as it was in the midst of the social upheavals of the 1960s, reaffirmed in the actual physical
It was at this moment, close to forty years
after the Museum officially began the
transformation project began. Indeed, the first
broad goal of the project was articulated
several years before with the language in
the 2002 bond that provided the initial
funding for the Art Gallery. As the executive
director of the Museum, residents and taxpayers of the City of Oakland
were very familiar with the idea of a
museum that honors, respects, and welcomes
California’s natural environment,
expression and the development of new
curatorial and collection priorities. The
Museum’s new Art Gallery translated to new ways of
working and involvement of visitors. The process
that we’ve undertaken strives to recognize our
visitors as part of the dialogue—they edu-
cate us, they tell their own stories, they come
with existing ideas of what they want to learn, and the
information they share is every bit as
important as the information we present.
One of the goals of the Irvine Foundation’s
AIF project is to build capacity for institutions
to adapt to the inevitable and accelerat-
ing changes that define our world. For
the Oakland Museum of California, the adapta-
tion began immediately as the processes
that were guiding the “Irvine project,” as we
call it, became less relevant. We began
with the directive to design new ways of working
in the History Gallery and with a number of the
same key players. Now in the midst of two
projects, portfolios for the Natural Sciences, we are implementing the lessons
learned from earlier phases of our work.
We are also taking some of these same processes
and learning to other areas of the Museum
and working on a second AIF grant award
that focuses on audience development,
technology, and new models of
programming. While we have strengthened
guaranteed muscle in some areas of the Museum,
I hope that our successors will look back at
this moment and see it as the same kind of
revolution in the concept of a museum that
took place in 1969.

As the executive director, I wasn’t involved
with every meeting, discussion, or decision
necessarily, as described in these pages. Nonetheless, I’ve
experienced enormous personal learning, and I
believe the Oakland Museum of California
will never be the same. In forty years,
my hope is that our successors will look back at
this moment and see it as the same kind of
revolution in the concept of a museum
that took place in 1969.
How Visitors Changed Our Museum focuses on how we kept the visitor experience at the forefront of our thinking as we transformed the Oakland Museum’s Gallery of California Art for the 21st century. This thinking was informed over the years by our experiences in deepening the Museum’s public dimension through multiple projects, including a National Endowment for the Humanities self-study, community-based collaborations for programs and exhibitions, education programs serving widely diverse audiences, activities with our advisory councils, a family-learning initiative, and visitor research in temporary exhibitions.

From the beginning, Museum staff committed to putting visitors at the center of their thinking in reimagining the galleries, but we all had different conceptions of what that meant for changes to the exhibits. The Museum received an Arts Innovation Fund (AIF) grant from the James Irvine Foundation in 2006, followed by an additional grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2007, securing the resources we needed to conduct extensive visitor research with the stated goal: To create a more welcoming, comfortable, and lively Gallery of California Art, where diverse families and community audiences will be attracted in greater numbers, find new ways to participate in museum learning, and return often to explore and be inspired by the art and artists of California.

Introduction
BARBARA HENRY, CHIEF CURATOR OF EDUCATION

With this substantial financial support based in the Education Department, we were able to form an interpretive team of staff educators that also included an Arts Innovation project coordinator, research assistants, and Kathleen McLean of Independent Exhibitions as the principal consultant. This team led the visitor research and prototyping activities that informed collaborative efforts with the curators, registrars, and other staff in developing new types of interpretive elements to support the project goal.

We wanted to transform the Art Gallery into a dynamic place for experiencing art where visitors are inspired to make their own meanings and personal experiences with the artworks on view. We used the metaphor of the Gallery as “our house” where visitors feel welcome and comfortable engaging in creative experiences. We wanted to realize the Museum’s potential of being a place “for me, my family, and my community” as championed by members of our advisory councils.

We developed Gallery interpretive objectives based on what we had learned from and about visitors in conducting our education programs and community-based exhibitions and in gathering input from our advisory councils over many years. We found that programming was a productive way to experiment with new interpretive strategies. The Education Department’s “Philosophy of Interpretation,” which was adopted by the Museum for its overall transformation, guided these efforts.

“...we live nearby and are members and we’re starting in the habit of just coming to hang out here.”

—VISITOR COMMENT 2010
This research project was galvanized further by the James Irvine Foundation's working paper, "Critical Issues Facing the Arts in California." In creating a museum for the 21st century, we realized we needed to consider the Art Gallery in the context of our changing society, particularly in relation to developments in technology and the state's changing demographics. We recognized that technology has altered how people access and interact with information and culture on an on-demand basis with the expectations of personalized experiences, and we saw the need for visitors to share their perspectives and connect with others.

With our team in place and institutional visitor-centered goals and objectives identified, we conducted a range of research and prototyping activities that involved more than 3,300 visitors and community members over a period of three years. These included:

- A baseline survey of visitor comfort and satisfaction levels
- Research and evaluation activities that included testing ideas for new gallery interpretive experiences with diverse audiences to assess visitors' interest and knowledge levels
- Dialogue sessions with the Museum’s community advisory councils to gather feedback on label content, use of technology, color and design, translations, and to test prototype interpretive experiences
- Community teen sessions to assess comfort level and interest in the former Art Gallery

We also conducted creative convenings focused on language, technology, co-creation practices, and adult programs. Participants included artists, writers, musicians, technol- ogy specialists, dancers, comedians, and psychologists, to name a few. Staff worked with the Dallas Museum of Art, Denver Art Museum, and Detroit Institute of Arts, all noted for their innovations in new types of art gallery interpretation and experiences. We invited accessibility experts and well-respected colleagues to critique our Gallery.

Once the Gallery reopened in May 2010, Randi Korn & Associates (RK&A) conducted remedial and summative evaluations, including interviews about specific interpretive elements, exit interviews, and tracking and timing observations. In addition, the Money Group conducted a follow-up exit survey, and staff held critique sessions with our advisory councils and a teen group.

With many types of staff—including educators, curators, registrars, preparators, media specialists, designers, and others—all contributing to the visitor experience, this research project demanded new ways for staff to collaborate across functions. We needed to break down barriers between what were sometimes perceived as conflicting priorities and find new ways to experiment together. This required learning how to manage professional values and responsibilities, such as increased visitor accessibility with the preservation of artworks. Education and Art Department staff members participated in sub-teams formed through-out the different phases of the project, from conceptual design to iterative prototyping and finally production. This research necessitated a considerable shift in staff culture and practice for the main Art Gallery, which had previously lacked any interpretation except for object identification labels.

Staff comfort levels varied with the new practice of testing an interpretive element as a rough prototype in the Gallery rather than as a fin- ished product. During challenging times, we kept reminding ourselves we were seeking new pathways to innovation in support of our project objectives.

“The curators, designers, and educators shared a goal of providing interpretive experiences throughout the Gallery that were seamlessly integrated into exhibit design and curatorial content. We were careful to use technology sparingly as an interpretive tool to support the experience of art or access to an artist. We wanted to avoid jarring the visitor out of an aesthetic experience, which can happen in galleries where this integration is not fully realized.”

—Stijn Schiffeleers, Digital Media Assistant

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In the introduction, we set the stage for the document by introducing the Art Gallery and discussing the importance of visitor experience. We highlight the significance of visitor feedback and the impact it has on the Gallery's development. We also introduce the concept of visitor-saturation point and the importance of visitor comfort in contributing to their overall experience.

The main body of the document delves into the specific strategies employed to enhance the visitor experience. We discuss the inclusion of seating and interpretive elements, which have contributed to visitors spending more time in the Gallery than any other exhibition. We also explore the use of moveable seating units and the strategic placement of seating areas to accommodate different visitor needs and preferences.

We interviewed visitors to gain insights into their experiences and discover ways to improve the Gallery's offerings. We highlight the importance of visitor feedback in shaping future strategies and the role of the Art Gallery in promoting meaningful museum experiences. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of visitor feedback in shaping the future of the Art Gallery and the broader museum community.
Getting started

Based on this early research, we developed new approaches to the look and feel of the Gallery of California Art. We decided to organize the artworks thematically, rather than chronologically, around the subjects of California Land, California People, and California Creativity. We thought this would provide a more comfortable way for visitors without an art background to experience the artworks. We also hoped this new conceptual framework might invite new associations and interpretations.

We made a plan to include objects from the History and Natural Sciences collections in the Art Gallery when they provided context for works of art. Interpretive elements would be incorporated among the artworks rather than in a separate “education” area. We wanted to create a welcoming culture for a wider spectrum of visitors.

We received the Irvine Arts Innovation grant approximately four years before opening, which placed an even higher priority on developing visitor-centered interpretive elements. As the Irvine Arts Innovation project coordinator, Mary Faria became the point person for evaluation in early 2007, organizing prototyping and testing of content for Gallery activities that educators had developed both prior to and after the receipt of Irvine funding. Educators had been creating a master list of potential Gallery activities based on years of research and experience with family and public programs in the galleries. The full range of the prototyping and evaluation process involved: selecting or designing content, building prototypes, designing instruments, collecting visitor responses (data), coding and analyzing data, writing summaries, and then further revising and testing iterations of the prototypes. We designed all of our informal testing to shape the development of activities that would best meet our learning objectives and become fully integrated into the design of the Art Gallery, making the experience of art meaningful and enjoyable for visitors.

We focused on finding out how visitors fell about the Museum, how they engaged with works of art, and what questions and ideas they had about our prototype activities. We set about learning how to incorporate visitor research and evaluation into the ongoing process of interpretation and design. Funding for consultants enabled us to contract with the national visitor evaluation firm, Randi Korn & Associates (RKA), who designed some of our first interview instruments for random cued testing with visitors. We also consulted with local evaluation experts from the Exploratorium, who coached us in every aspect of this process.

We built a team of on-call data collectors who were initially trained by our consultants and subsequently trained by staff who had gained evaluation skills. We devised a coding system for the data using the learning objectives to prioritize our experiential goals for visitors. For each instrument regardless of its focus and use it to assess the strengths and weaknesses we wanted visitors to have. Usability was gradually woven into the testing design in later stages. However, our initial focus was on testing and developing activities that were conceptual—ones that could link findings from different instruments to one set of criteria. We needed to assess not only whether a particular activity was “increasing observation skills for experiencing art from multiple perspectives” (coded as L2), but how much it did this, and how its success compared to that of other activities. We recorded each instance in which a visitor mentioned L2 the moment during an interview.

To determine the criteria for each code, several staff members individually used the objectives to code the same sample data, then met to compare notes and discuss ambiguities. Through this process, we developed coding criteria that could be applied uniformly by any staff member, identifying key phrases that were central to each objective. When visitors mentioned looking more closely, noticing something different, or paying attention to a particular aspect of the work, each instance was coded L2. With this collaborative framework as a base, we were able to culc comparable quantitative data from each instrument regardless of its focus and use it to assess the strengths of each activity for the overall project. This process established a collective understanding among Museum staff.

—Emily Pinkowitz, Project Assistant 2007–08

(See Appendix B for “Art Gallery Renovation Evaluation Coding Key and Criteria.”)
intuitive usability, determining whether visitors knew how to use the components with few instructions or explanations. Ultimately, the activities that we developed into interpretive elements in the Gallery were those that:

• Visitors found engaging and enjoyable
• Provided visitors with heightened experiences of looking closely at the artworks (versus those that were merely enjoyable in and of themselves but did not encourage a deeper connection with the artwork)
• Evidence showed fulfilling at least one of our learning objectives, either for the majority of visitors sampled or for a significant small number of visitors who represented a cross-section of learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.)

If, in our target samples of twelve to twenty-five interviews or surveys, we found that even a small number of visitors found an activity enjoyable and valuable because it heightened their visual awareness, we considered it for a Gallery interpretive element. Heightening an experience of looking closely was a goal for all visitors, even (or especially) for those whose primary learning mode is not visual. We also kept activities that did not have a direct connection to learning objectives if visitor comments indicated that individuals were having an experience of the Gallery that was welcoming or if the activity invited participation from a widely diverse audience. These were two important Art Gallery interpretive goals for the renovation.

“Because I’m a writer, I like words everywhere.”

“It’s good to have verbal, kinetic, and visual info spaced out . . . [good to have] an audio focus versus a visual [or] intellectual focus.”

“I saw more when listening to music.”

—VISITOR COMMENTS 2009

Learning Objectives for Interpretive Resources in the Gallery of California Art

• To foster skills for diverse learners to experience and interpret art in a variety of ways
• To increase observation skills for experiencing art from multiple perspectives
• To increase awareness of how art is made and the creative impulse in California
• To develop greater understanding of how California art reflects the human experience in our diverse history and natural environment

Building Prototypes

When we started prototyping in early 2007, members of the interpretive team had some experience with developing educational activities as temporary exhibition elements but little or no experience with creating and testing prototypes. Our principal consultant, Kathleen McLean, guided our efforts to identify activities we believed were the best candidates to meet our learning objectives and be genuinely engaging for visitors. We always prioritized prototyping activities that were open-ended and that we had the resources to change in-house based on visitor feedback.

We built most prototypes ourselves: painting pedestals, fashioning comment boards, creating hands-on materials, and finding work and storage space as best we could. In the culture of presenting seamless perfection common to museums in general—and particularly art museums—some of the best encouragement we received from our primary consultant was, “Don’t be afraid to be ‘rough and ready’!” With this, we launched over two years of testing using chart paper, foam core, cardboard, wire, duct tape, pencils, and markers to test and develop content that would ultimately inform hands-on physical or digital gallery experiences.

If you want to create prototypes . . .

• Share with staff and visitors what prototyping and evaluation is all about. Stress that the goal of evaluation is to encourage feedback without grading or criticizing an idea or experience.
• Involve the registrar and prep crew staff in the process of testing and evaluation as early and as much as possible. Their expertise informs the choice and handling of objects for testing and can speed up the process.
• Prioritize prototyping those elements about which you have the most questions, are the most abstract, or for which you think you need visitor input to make the elements work. You can’t test everything.
• Don’t be afraid to be “rough and ready” or “cheap and cheerful”—just start!
• As iterations move from one to the next, informed by what you learn through testing, have a team member or contractor who can devote time to building revised prototypes in-house. This allows for the quickest turnaround and promotes a culture of prototyping within the institution. If it’s not possible to do this in-house, hire contractors or on-call specialists to produce materials on a schedule that coordinates with testing dates.
Visitor Responses to Question Prompts Posted About David Ireland’s Harp in the Art Lab, Gallery of California Art
November–December 2007

QUESTION PROMPT:
Why is this in the Museum?
Visitor responses:
• For all of us without the creativity to create to enjoy. Thanks.
• To open your mind to see a known object in a different concept.
• Materials to twist space thinking!
• To get people to think what is art and to leave their comments.

QUESTION PROMPT:
Is this art?
Visitor responses:
• Maybe? Whether something falls into the category “art” is less important than its purpose and outcome.
• I don’t get this question.
• Everything is art.
• As we discover new ways to reproduce thoughts and feelings about science, we create art.
• Everything is art.
• I don’t get this question.

VISIONARY RESPONSES:
1. “It forced me to slow down. … I wouldn’t have given it a second chance because I don’t like abstract art, but I looked a lot more than I would have.” —VISITOR COMMENT 2009
2. “It was high was a priority in all our formative evaluation of interpretive elements. Within the first year of testing, we created an experimental space called Art Lab in the Art Gallery and began paper prototyping of a wide range of experiences that would provide content for the remaining two years of testing and development. In one iteration in the Art Lab, boards printed with provocative questions surrounded a conceptual art sculpture by David Ireland titled Harp. Visitors responded on sticky notes with a wide range of comments and questions of their own.”

Visitor encounters with abstract artworks
Facilitating opportunities to make personal meaning of artworks for visitors who had little knowledge of art but whose interest level was high was a priority in all our formative evaluation of interpretive elements. Within the first year of testing, we created an experimental space called Art Lab in the Art Gallery and began paper prototyping of a wide range of experiences that would provide content for the remaining two years of testing and development. In one iteration in the Art Lab, boards printed with provocative questions surrounded a conceptual art sculpture by David Ireland titled Harp. Visitors responded on sticky notes with a wide range of comments and questions of their own.

During the testing with Harp, in late 2007, OMCA hosted a workshop for classroom teachers in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Using artworks with narrative imagery, this valuable approach supports the viewer who is new to looking at and thinking about art by finding entry points through developing the “story.” Based on research by Abigail Housen, this is Stage 1—Accountive in her theory of aesthetic development. We realized sometimes “making story” in response to Harp, which has no narrative, individuals were finding other ways to respond to it. Rather than using the VTS inquiry script, we crafted questions specific to Harp as a way of experimenting with which questions might engage new viewers in an encounter with an unknown artwork, however briefly. While this was not the deep and probing approach promoted by VTS, it did succeed in providing ways for viewers to slow down enough to take a long look and allow legitimate questions or new associations about abstract art to surface. Because visitors bring a wealth of life experience to encounters with art, we were discovering entry points that might best assist individuals to explore or simply acknowledge confusion or mixed feelings.

We were trying to open the way for visitors to allow themselves to question rather than automatically reject. A shift from rejecting or ignoring a work of abstract art to allowing curiosity about it to surface may mean the beginning of a new relationship with art. This encounter may serve as an introduction, if not to abstract art itself, then to a new way of looking at and considering the art. This is a shift we seek to continue developing, along with creating activities that encourage visitors across a wide range of experiences to look at art in new ways.
A variety of approaches to evaluation

Our research-based approach, with visitor testing at the center, helped strengthen the collaboration between Museum educators and art curators. Because art curators and educators traditionally have different perspectives and agendas about gallery design, visitor research data served as a bridge to make informed decisions. Research data often confirmed what might support visitor comfort and confidence levels as well as increase people’s willingness to explore and enjoy art. Educators and curators increasingly listened to visitors in order to shape details of the Gallery layout and interpretive elements to best communicate conceptual messages and make activities easy and enjoyable to use.

We employed a variety of evaluation approaches to better understand:
• Effectiveness of conceptual content (meeting our learning objectives)
• Effectiveness of design and usability (making elements that were intuitive or easy to use)
• Preferences of visitors (making elements that were interesting or enjoyable)

With the guidance of our evaluation coaches, we designed instruments that elicited responses about conceptual content using questions such as:
• How much would you say this activity helped you think about art in a new way?
• If you were to tell a friend what this activity was about, what might you tell him/her?

To determine effective instructional design, we asked, “Were the directions for each of the activity stations clear?” To determine visitor preferences, we used number scales to measure “How enjoyable was this activity?” and used surveys to determine visitor preference regarding placement of specific objects, sequences of steps, or types of information desired. For design and usability, we often observed and noted visitor behavior. (See Appendix C for “Sample Evaluation Instruments.”)

We developed an archiving structure for naming all files related to testing each activity based on the content or working title of the activity. Team meeting notes, decision logs, materials used to develop the activity, and all associated instruments and data were named and stored for easy retrieval according to these standards. Summaries were regularly written and reviewed by the interpretive team, with key points for development shared with curators.

Where evaluations took place

We were strategic and opportunistic in finding places and things to evaluate. We used the Art Gallery while it was open. When it closed for renovation, we continued prototyping with artworks that were similar to our permanent collection in temporary exhibitions. For instance, in Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury, we tried activities with artworks by Lorser Feitelson and Karl Benjamin, two artists from the OMCA collection. We also used posters or reproductions of artworks in the collection when necessary.

While the Art Gallery was closed, a highly visible space near a Museum entrance, named the Transformation Lab, became available for ongoing prototyping. Having this space allowed for continuing, iterative testing over the course of nine months. We developed content and evolved design elements for two major Gallery interpretive elements, Art 360 and Is it art? Lounge during this period. Details of testing and development for these interpretive elements can be found in the chapters “One Work of Art—Many Experiences: The Art 360 Gallery” on page 51 and the “Is it art? Lounge” on page 71.
When gathering data from visitors . . .

- Get an evaluation coach to hone each test’s focus, methodology, and language on the instrument or interview if you are not familiar with the evaluation process. The way a question is phrased has a strong impact on the feedback you receive.

- Limit what you want to know from each test event to one or two objectives. The data you receive from visitors can become muddled if you look at too many variables at once.

- Clearly identify the specific objectives of each test. Are you testing for development of content that communicates concepts? Or do you aim to make final content easy to use?

- Keep objects familiar and concrete when inviting visitors to consider new, abstract ideas about those objects.

- Try to keep each instrument to five to eight questions and interview time to about ten minutes or less. When recruiting visitors, be forthright about the length of the interview so visitors can know what to expect if they agree to participate.

- Educators often initiate evaluation, but beware. Shake off the “educator” stance when doing interviews. So as not to bias the visitor, don’t give information about the overall scope and purpose of the evaluation beyond: “We’re developing something new, and your input would be valuable.”

- Keep your focus on the test. Don’t answer visitor questions about exhibition content or other unrelated topics until the evaluation is completed.

- Provide young children with an activity, such as a puzzle or drawing materials, while parents, caretakers, or older children participate in the interview.

- Give the visitor a bright sticker that is visible to other staff if more than one evaluation is happening at the same time. This will indicate that this individual has already participated in (or declined) an interview, so he or she won’t be asked again.

Conclusion

We were continually surprised, inspired, and enlightened by visitors’ responses to our prototype interpretive elements. Ultimately, their feedback shaped both the content and design of the Gallery experience.

When developing content for testing, our recommendations are to focus on activities that provide visitors with opportunities to:

- Look closely at artworks (e.g., be guided by audio narratives, sketch or write responses, search, match—anything that requires looking at the artwork, rather than being satisfied with the activity itself).

- Look at artworks in new ways (e.g., provide context through broad historical, interdisciplinary, or personal perspectives via text, audio, or video elements)

- Voice opinions about art (e.g., write comments and post them, vote, record audio or video responses—all generate a presence of “visitor voice” in the Gallery)

- Share experiences with family and friends (e.g., search, draw, choose or vote, listen to ambient sound, use multiple headphones, touch, build, match, and keep any products they made whenever possible).

- See and hear responses of other visitors and Museum staff that promote dialogue about art (e.g., read comments on boards or in journals, listen to recorded conversations by visitors or curators).

RK&A’s summative report of the Gallery of California Art* from the summer of 2010 found that some interpretive elements successfully provided visitors with a new way to experience art, and that, “Four-fifths of interviewees described leaving the Gallery with positive thoughts and feelings, including feeling welcome in OMCA, wanting to return and bring others, and being inspired to create art.” Efforts to provide ways to engage all visitors—regardless of how experienced they are with looking at and thinking about art—will continue as we use audience feedback to shape the Gallery experience.

In order to continue exploring the interests and issues of teenagers, education staff organized Cool Remixed: Bay Area Art and Culture Now, the first teen exhibition on view in the Museum’s prestigious Great Hall. Cool Remixed was created to serve as a cultural and historic counterpoint to the traveling exhibition Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury, organized by the Orange County Museum of Art. Cool Remixed was also the laboratory in which we could experiment with community co-creation and collaborative processes that could inform the redesign of the galleries.

We invited five youth organizations, including a local high school, to participate as partners and co-creators of the exhibition, which felt like the best way for us to facilitate ownership and be transparent in our process. The partnering organizations brought creativity, new ideas, fresh approaches, and talent to the table. The result was a contemporary spin on the idea of what is cool now that reflected the aesthetics and diversity of youth in the San Francisco Bay Area. Each group produced an installation or individual artworks for the exhibition. Everything from section titles to the curatorial statement was inspired or created by youth. Lyrics from popular songs of different genres were selected to represent

No surprises
Like many museums today, OMCA wants to find better ways to engage with teenagers and understand their perspective. As part of our transformation process, we designed several activities to get the ball rolling. First, we conducted a focus group with youth ages thirteen to twenty in the Gallery of California Art before it was de-installed. Not surprisingly, most of the teenagers felt that the Gallery was not welcoming or comfortable for a variety of reasons. There were few places to sit. It was too quiet in the Gallery, and they felt they couldn’t talk at a “normal” level with each other about the art. The all-white Gallery walls were “strange”; they couldn’t think of any other places that had all-white walls. One young woman said it reminded her of a hospital.

No surprises
Listening to Teens
EVELYN ORANTES,
CULTURAL ARTS DEVELOPER

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From their perspective, the three things you need to attract youth to museums are music, food, and hands-on activities.

DJ station
Another experiment was the “School of Remixing,” which consisted of a turntable station that was facilitated by a DJ from one of our partnering youth organizations. The youth DJ was on hand to teach visitors basic DJing skills and to serve as an interpreter of youth culture, bringing the exhibit context to life. People of all ages were drawn to the station and some of the DJ’s best students were visitors with lots of grey hair. In addition to her responsibilities in the exhibition, she helped promote the exhibition and related programs through her social networks. We also invited one of the partnering organizations to create a teen lounge that replaced the traditional resource area we often design for our exhibitions. Teenagers developed activities for their peers to use, videos, zines, provocative short stories, and poetry.

Load hours
On Wednesday afternoons from 3 to 5 p.m., we experimented with Load Hours—a time in the Cool Remixed exhibition when teenagers and other visitors could participate in a less-hushed Museum experience. During these hours we played with different types of programming to turn up the volume in the Gallery. The programs ranged from lower-key events like open mic to having each participating organization host a particular week and showcase their talented teen performers. Members of senior staff and the Education Department facilitated special training to prepare our guards for this change of behavior in the galleries.

Feedback
We invited teens back to a second focus group during the run of the Cool Remixed exhibition and asked them to comment on how we incorporated their feedback. During this exhibition experience, the teens felt like the exhibition space was “comfortable” and a place where “you can express yourself without being judged.” Cool Remixed was described as being creative, colorful, a good hangout space, and a place where they could meet students from different schools. The youth also enjoyed having programming as part of the exhibition experience.

After reopening the Art Gallery, we held one last youth focus group to see how well we were able to incorporate what we learned into our Gallery. Staff observed that with the new media there were more natural, ambient sounds that may make youth feel like they could talk in a normal voice in the Gallery. We recruited a group of youth from the local YMCA to come experience the renovated Art Gallery. The feedback was positive, and this time their comments focused more on the artwork in the Gallery. What was striking was that no one mentioned anything about not having enough seating, and they were pleased with the colors on the walls, noting that “this made the Museum different from other museums.” What remained a major piece of feedback was sound in the galleries. When asked what would encourage them to come back and invite friends, music was at the top of the list. From their perspective, the three things you need to attract youth to museums are music, food, and hands-on activities.

Conclusion
The insights we gained from the initial youth focus groups mirrored the information we received from our other advisory councils and became the tipping point that fueled the interpretive team to advocate for seating, places to lounge, and color in the design of the new Art Gallery. Cool Remixed allowed the interpretive team to have a space to play with these ideas and prototype them with an audience that we wanted to engage and celebrate. These ideas evolved to become part of the new Gallery of California Art. Two lounges, plenty of seating, and brightly colored walls represent the voices of our visitors in the Gallery and serve as a reminder of the role visitors played in transforming our Museum.
I love how interactive everything is.
It asks a lot of questions of the viewer.
And that, in my opinion, is art.

VISITOR COMMENT
From very early phases in the planning, education staff wanted to create an approach to labels that would best promote an experience of art for visitors rather than primarily serve traditional curatorial objectives of exhibiting art. We tested a range of approaches to content and to an overall system for labels in the Art Gallery by gathering data from visitors about readability and general understandability of content, by conducting informal focus group sessions with community advisors about content and translation approaches, and by seeking advice from visitor studies experts. All of our research was analyzed by educators and reviewed by collaborative teams of educators and art curators. It was then implemented with the goal of engaging a wider range of diverse visitors in “conversation” with the artists who produced the art and with the curators responsible for selecting and organizing the artworks.

Early research
In 2003, a small Art Lab space in the Gallery of California Art was devoted to interpretive prototyping before the Gallery closed in December 2007. For the first three years, two small exhibits of eighteen Dorothea Lange photographs taken from the 1920s to the 1960s were displayed with a variety of extended labels. Some labels had references from literature such as a quote by John Steinbeck paired with photos of the Depression. Others contained content information and a question to encourage a closer look at the photo. The following is an example of a label that included both Lange’s notes about a photograph of Maynard Dixon and curatorial comments:

“[Maynard had] a remarkable facility and an extraordinary visual memory beyond anything I have ever encountered... That very narrow, flexible hand of his could put anything he wanted on a piece of paper.”
—DOROTHEA LANGE

Lange married western painter Maynard Dixon (1875–1946) in 1920. Dixon was an established artist specializing in images of the southwest, particularly Native Americans. Dixon and Lange divorced in 1933.

Inviting Visitors into the Conversation About Art: Labels
MARY T. FARA, ARTS INNOVATION PROJECT COORDINATOR

Stepping into [an] art exhibition can be like stepping into the middle of a conversation that began without you and is being conducted in a secret language.

JANIE CORTEZ, ARTIST AND GUEST WRITER
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OF CALIFORNIA ART
A label for a photograph showing braceros had a quote from a community member as well as a statement to encourage visitors to look more closely at the work:

“We found out that war broke out when they attacked Pearl Harbor... and the United States started sending their hardworking people to war. The agricultural fields were without people, so they put in the newspapers that they were hiring.”

—JOSE CRUZ, WHO CAME TO THE UNITED STATES AS A BRACERO AT THE AGE OF 18.

Note the tags worn by the men as identifying work permits.

From a two-day intercept survey by a museum studies graduate student, we learned that 88% of visitors who read some of the labels found the labels helped improve their understanding of Lange; 5% considered the labels too simplistic or aimed at children.

As a part of this prototype, visitors could fill out comment cards that posed questions, such as: “Do these written labels help you understand Dorothea Lange’s photographs better than with no label?” or “What did you learn about Dorothea Lange that you did not know before you visited this exhibition?” From forty-five cards, 85% of the respondents viewed the labels as either helpful or adding to the experience. Visitors stated:

Yes! I spent more time studying the photos, the backgrounds, faces, postures—details—that I would have without the prompting of the labels.

For the photos with strong emotional content, the literary quotes are very effective.

Absolutely. Yes. I always like a certain amount of contextualization—the who, what, when, etc.—and then the interpretation can flow as a point of departure from the labels.

Yes. It provides some context to what I’m viewing and insight into the soul and heart of the artist as a person, which continues to make me think about the importance of art in general.

There were two visitor cards that stated, “I think you tell too much,” and “These are fine for kids, not adults.”

Shaping the label content for the renovated Gallery

We wanted visitors to feel welcome, and we provided label information designed to help them make their own meaning and have their own experience rather than art-historical information that would lead them to a “correct” understanding or experience.

Working from a hierarchy of five label types created by the original design firm of Gallagher and Associates, we developed a system for all exhibit text. We identified the following labels:

• A Panels, written by art curators, to orient visitors to the Gallery’s three largest, organizing themes (Land, People, Creativity)
• B Panels, also written by art curators, to introduce visitors to thematic connections among artworks in subsections (bays) of the Gallery
• C Panels, mostly written by our guest writer Jaime Cortez, with a few written by art curators, to make connections among subgroupings of artworks within bays
• D Labels, written by Jaime Cortez with a few written by art curators, to provide extended text about individual artworks, most often including historical context, technical process, and artist’s voice or perspective
• E Labels, generated by art curators and an exhibition assistant, to provide basic identification information for an individual artwork (with groupings of object information on “gang” labels) (See Appendix D for “Wall Text Content Generation Guidelines.”)

To this label hierarchy we added:

• Bubble Labels, each to provide the personal perspective of one of fourteen different authors, including Jaime Cortez, our guest writer, written in first-person voice, signed, and appearing in comics-style dialogue bubbles. These would accompany other labels and offer other perspectives on the works.
We sought guidance from our community advisory councils in early 2007. The council members gave us two major directives:

• For a specific artwork, include content combining historical context, artist’s inspiration or perspective, and technical process information. (This confirmed visitor preferences expressed during preliminary testing.)

• Translate only the largest orientation panels for the three theme-based sections of the Gallery, presenting a welcome message to local English-, Spanish-, and Chinese-speaking communities, leaving translation of other wall text to alternative forms such as print or digital.

We also organized a creative convening we called Conversations About Language—an informal round-table discussion—in January 2007, facilitated by our principal consultant, Kathleen McLean. Those who attended gave their perspectives that served as touchstones for label development over the next two years. Based on what we learned, we ultimately incorporated into our label guidelines reminders to use language that welcomes visitors into our “home,” encourages visitors to value their own responses, and portrays artists as human beings.

The Denver Art Museum provided inspiration for alternative graphic presentations for labels in the Gallery, such as a reproduction of an email between a curator and an artist containing the seed conversation as an introductory panel to a temporary exhibition. This informed our Bubble Label concept (first-person perspective signed by the author in the form of a comics-style dialogue bubble).

We began by developing the content of the larger panels so that visitors could navigate the Gallery and understand the rationale for groupings of artworks. We sought advice from museum consultant Beverly Serrell in this effort. Via a set of staff workshops, we coached them through the process of articulating the Big Ideas that were already driving the organization of the Gallery.

We set about organizing content for the labels approximately one year before opening. In 2006, curators had written content for most labels in the Gallery using generally accessible language. However, with receipt of the Irvine grant, we began to test this content with visitors and found that, even though curators had avoided heavy art-historical terms, some text was still confusing. Random cue interviews revealed that direct connection to the works on view was not made explicit and metaphors that seemed obvious to staff were not understandable to visitors.

This early visitor feedback helped identify the need for critical changes. In 2007, we began to consult community advisors and visitor studies experts who informed our strategic approach to communicating the overall organization of the Gallery and helped us articulate guidelines for the team of writers generating content driven by visitor observations.

Testing revealed that visitors did not understand that the large A Panel was an orientation to an entire theme-based section of the Gallery. Often, visitors assumed it referred only to the artworks immediately adjacent to the prototype panel. Visitors also found the term “Real Estate” confusing in this context; they interpreted it to mean housing and relevant only to an urban landscape.

Visitor input

The voices of experts seem so monolithic and then when they disagree, you realize that there are cracks in the material and you have some room... having those disagreements gives me as a participant... a sense that maybe I can add to it. Maybe I can figure out something here.
—Kathleen McLean, Arts Innovation principal consultant, at the Conversations About Language convening

I never want to be told in a didactic way what a piece means, but I'd really love to know what the artist's intentions are. To me, that's a totally different thing.
—James Kass, youth Speaks director, at the Conversations About Language convening
The Big Idea
What is a Big Idea? It is one complete, non-compound, active sentence that identifies a subject, an action (the verb), and a consequence (“so what?”).
Who is it for? It is primarily a guide for the exhibition or program development team, not the visitors or participants.
What does it do for the team? It defines and limits the content, gives direction and momentum to the concepts, and frees the team to creatively express the idea in as many modalities as are conceivable and are spatially, financially, and temporally possible.
It’s not about simplicity. It’s about clarity.
—Beverly Serrell

The purpose of our label program
With the goal of welcoming visitors into the space as well as into the “conversation” about art, we were determined to create labels that would:
• Help visitors navigate the space and see connections between the artworks
• Help visitors make deeper meaning for more personal experiences of art
• Encourage visitors to understand curators as individuals who make informed choices based on personal viewpoints and creative visions
• Help visitors understand the role of choice and perspective of curators, resulting in the particular selections and juxtapositions they view in the Gallery
• Provide a wide range of perspectives about artworks that evoke a presence of diverse voices

With these intentions, supported by our overall body of research, we arrived at clear objectives for our label program.

In order to satisfy visitor questions such as . . .

Provide organizing themes in the Gallery as a whole as in smaller subsections of the Gallery
Why are these artworks together in this area in this arrangement?
Why are these artworks grouped together in these smaller rooms?

Provide insight into curatorial choices by speaking in first person and signing selected labels (transparency)
Why is this even here in the Museum?
Whose point of view is this?

Provide historical context, input from artists, and technical process information for individual artworks
What is this in front of me?
What motivated the artist to make this? How was it made?

Provide encouragement for various ways of looking at and experiencing art by evoking the presence of diverse voices
But why does this matter? Where are the other perspectives?
Is there a right way I’m supposed to look at this artwork?

To create labels that . . .
Provide organizing themes in the Gallery as a whole as in smaller subsections of the Gallery

Provide insight into curatorial choices by speaking in first person and signing selected labels (transparency)

Provide historical context, input from artists, and technical process information for individual artworks

Provide encouragement for various ways of looking at and experiencing art by evoking the presence of diverse voices

Working with Beverly Serrell, educators and art curators articulated the Big Idea for the Art Gallery as “What is California art?” Over a period of several months in 2008, staff developed a related Big Idea for every major section and subdivision of the Gallery. These served as a type of thesis statement for communicating to visitors the vision and intention for each of these areas through the labels.
From the above-described research, we identified the following key learnings:

- Organize thematic sections of the overall Gallery and thematic connections in subsections by articulating the Big Idea(s). (These help clarify our intentions for themes and relationships among the works of art.)
- Limit the narrative on each of the three thematic orientation wall panels (A Panels) to fifty words and explicitly state that these panels relate to thematic groupings of multiple artworks (rather than to the two works immediately adjacent to the panel) using conversational language.
- Translate the largest orientation wall panels, providing a welcome message to local communities through presentation in English, Spanish, and Chinese, using the most appropriate terminology for the intended communities and avoiding literal translations. (The Museum overall decided to incorporate three languages into the Art, History, and Natural Sciences Galleries, with each Gallery using a somewhat different approach. For the Art Gallery, we decided to incorporate translation in directional signage, A Panels, and all interactive media. For details about the translations included in the Gallery, see the “Translations Traducciones 翻譯” chapter of this book on page 45.)
- State titles and describe relationships among artworks using conversational language in approximately 80–120 words for introductory panels to mini-exhibitions (B Panels) and subgroupings within these (C Panels), (e.g., speak to why the works being together; describe the essence of an art movement or how the named movement evolved, without assuming viewers understand references to such movements).
- Provide a combination of historical context, artist’s inspiration or perspective, and technical process information on labels about an individual artwork (D Labels) in approximately 60–80 words. Provide an image of the artist to promote understanding of diversity and humanize the artists.
- Provide a range of perspectives (voices) about one artwork in approximately 60–120 words that encourage a variety of ways to think about and experience art.
- Use language that communicates complex ideas in simple terms (as if explaining to a family member); speak to a wide audience, from a middle-school student to a university professor.

Content from the art curators
The art curators generated content for the A Panels and B Panels, whose primary purpose was to explain the juxtapositions of artworks throughout the Gallery. We wanted to represent a range of artists and subject matter so that diverse visitors “see themselves” in the Gallery. In 2008, we also agreed that the Big Ideas would authentically drive label content. The label writing process was grounded in the art selections curators and educators made together, and single artworks or groupings were chosen to have extended label text. Based on these challenges and opportunities each group or panel presented, we began to assign the label type and label writer to the target artworks.

Writing the final content for the A Panels and B Panels began in May 2009, one year before opening. There were fourteen writers (internal and external), two editors on contract, and review teams consisting of an OMCA consultant, four educators, and five art curators. The writers included OMCA history and natural sciences curators, the staff conservator and registrar, current and retired OMCA art curators, OMCA advisory council members, an artist’s family member, and the guest artist/writer on contract.
Content from other OMCA staff

History and natural sciences curators were invited to choose artworks of interest to them to write label content from the perspective of another discipline. The artworks bearing these labels ranged from works by Miné Okubo (created while she was in an internment camp for Japanese American citizens during World War II) to depictions of California fowl by Smith of Visalia installed in the self-taught artists section of the Gallery to a 19th-century painting of salmon by Samuel Marsden Brookes. These labels were all written in a personal voice, often in first person, and were always signed and in bubble format. Additionally, the museum’s chief conservator wrote about the visible stages of restoration seen in an artwork, and the art registrar wrote about the reverse side of a painting by Yun Gee that showed some initial painting by the artist.

As art registrar, I keep track of the art and its condition. I can sometimes learn more about the history of an artwork from its back or bottom than its front. Here you can see that the artist reused an old piece of paperboard he had previously painted on. The brown residue at the edges reveals that a backing sheet once covered this other painting.

Artists have always used whatever they have at hand, sometimes reusing the same materials. In this instance, the painting on the back appears unfinished. Though I can’t say why, I can record this information so that future generations can ask, “Why did he do that?”

—Joy Tahan, Registrar, Art Department

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Content from non-staff writers

Writers from the community included Jennifer Bates, an artist and member of the OMCA Native American Advisory Council, and Amy Jakus-Hudson, daughter of artist Robert Hudson whose artwork is featured in the gallery. Since early in the planning for the Art Gallery, we had thought of having a featured artist or voice from the community to write labels. We received further encouragement for this idea in January 2007 from artists and writers during the creative convening on language.

To prototype our guest writer program, we invited artist Jaime Cortez, who had worked with OMCA as a curator and writer for our Days of the Dead exhibitions—a long-standing exhibition and program with deep roots in the local community. We began a trial period with Jaime in the summer of 2009, generating sample labels for works we selected across the Gallery, ranging from 19th-century photography to modernist sculptural works and mid-century abstract painting. Based on the prototype work, we contracted with Jaime to generate content for selected C Panels (subgroupings) and D Labels (single artworks) using guidelines informed by research about answering visitor questions and using source materials from curators. After Jaime’s labels were rigorously reviewed by curators and educators for content accuracy and adherence to the content guidelines, we also asked him to generate personal commentary on his choice of artworks; ones that would offer him creative opportunities to respond. These would become Bubble Labels. Jaime’s demonstrated ability to write in a conversational, poetic and engaging manner for past Days of the Dead exhibitions proved transferable to works in the main Art Gallery. This was the beginning of an approach to label writing that we intend to continue, inviting and contracting with a range of artists, writers, and others to write unique and creative labels for artworks that stimulate visitors’ thinking about art in new ways.

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Label guidelines
As the project coordinator, I drafted guidelines specific to each type of label in the hierarchy to assure that we would consistently meet visitors’ most important needs as identified by the research, regardless of perspective or the entry point chosen by the range of writers. We began with labels for abstract works, realizing they would present the biggest challenge in communicating complex ideas in simple terms. Beverly sent us handwritten edits and gave us examples of alternative wording that might clarify meanings for visitors.

Labels were sorted into those that would appear as standard D Labels versus those that would convey a personal, creative voice and appear as signed Bubble Labels.

The editing process
Beverly Serrell acted as a content advisor and editor from October through December 2009, commenting on approach and wording for a sampling of label types. We began with labels for abstract works, realizing they would present the biggest challenge in communicating complex ideas in simple terms. Beverly sent us handwritten edits and gave us examples of alternative wording that might clarify meanings for visitors.

Label and Bubble Label content went through a similarly rigorous review, and the chief curator of education gave final approval for content of these labels.

Thus, labels of all types by all writers ultimately underwent a thorough review and revision process:

- Writers were given guidelines.
- Content was generated.
- Content was reviewed and edited by the project coordinator for close adherence to guidelines and style guide standards.
- Content was submitted for educator or art curator review.
- Content was revised by writers or by the project coordinator as the editor.
- Content was re-submitted for final approval or revision.

Internal protocols
During this period with Beverly as our mentor-editor, educators reviewed the suggested edits and decided whether they were relevant and useful in every case. As the project coordinator, I was designated to synthesize the edits for A, B, and C Panels (all addressing groupings of artworks) and present them to each writer for revision, after which they were submitted for approval to the Art Core Team, a deciding body of art curators and educators. The D Label and Bubble Label content went through a similarly rigorous review, and the chief curator of education gave final approval for content of these labels.

Thus, labels of all types by all writers ultimately underwent a thorough review and revision process:

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- Content was submitted for educator or art curator review.
- Content was revised by writers or by the project coordinator as the editor.
- Content was re-submitted for final approval or revision.

• Content was submitted to the copyeditor, retyped and reviewed by the project coordinator.
• Content was submitted for final approval by the Art Core Team before production.

Labels as a dynamic feature in the Gallery
Since the Gallery opened in May 2010, visitors have said that the labels are easy to read, memorable, and convey a sense of “different voices” in the Gallery. RK&A’s Summary of Exit Interviews (2010) reports that “Most interviewees noted that the . . . multiple voices added depth and meaning to their experience with the art and helped them feel as if they are part of a dialogue about art—rather than just a passive viewer and recipient of content.”

In the future, an even wider variety of guest writers may add multiple dimensions to artworks and to the Gallery as a whole. Frequently changing labels for specific artworks may focus on personal perspectives of guest artists or guest scientists as they comment across artistic styles and media. We have built capacity to produce labels in-house as part of the overall transformation effort, making quick changes and flexibility more possible than ever before, and we will experiment with this in future iterations.

The label program will continue to expand and experiment with new forms that include visitor voices and respond to real visitor questions. This rigorous process demands creativity, strategy, and vigilance from all writers, reviewers, and editors. However, it is well worth the effort for the opportunities it affords visitors. Strategies informed by research for meeting visitor needs, combined with a creative vision for providing new and poetic associations between text and artworks, can reach a wide range of viewers, whether new to—or experienced with—looking at and thinking about art.

D Label draft text by guest writer
Man Ray
1890–1976
Rayograph
1943
Solarized gelatin silver print
Museum Donors Acquisition Fund
A72.214

Man Ray made this image without a camera by placing and composing objects directly on the surface of light-sensitive paper. Through this early photo technique, the artist conjured a ghostly effect. Everyday objects become simultaneously familiar and abstract, connecting this piece to the work of artists exploring new art strategies in the first half of the 20th century.

Beverly Serrell’s comment: This generalized says more about the writer than the artwork.

Beverly Serrell’s comment: ‘This generalization says more about the writer than the artwork.”

Final version
Man Ray
1890–1976
Rayograph
1943
Solarized gelatin silver print
Museum Donors Acquisition Fund
A72.214

Man Ray made this image without a camera by placing and composing objects directly on the surface of light-sensitive paper. Through this early photo technique, the artist conjured a ghostly effect.

Everyday objects become simultaneously familiar and abstract, connecting this piece to the work of artists exploring new art strategies during the first half of the 20th century.
Recommendations When Developing Label Content and Design

• Care about your readers. Write in a tone much like speaking to a cherished family member. Speak in a way that is meant to share basic information and invite readers to think and observe for themselves.
• Assume readers are intelligent people who want to use their “dream mind” as well as their “puzzle mind.” Give them touchstones of information to serve as springboards—places from which to gain orientation before they set off on a personal adventure with the artworks.
• Be curious about what your readers might think and observe. Find out what that is. Let that inform how you write about artworks.
• Remember that multiple voices are good. Define where that inform how you write about artworks. Think and observe for themselves.
• Be curious about what your readers might think and observe. Find out what that is. Let that inform how you write about artworks.

Many languages

Before the transformation of the Gallery of California Art, the Museum regularly provided multilingual translations in Spanish and Chinese—the largest non-English speaking communities in the Bay Area—for special exhibitions, but did not include translations in its collections galleries. The Museum provided translations in other languages depending upon the content of special exhibitions. Approaches to our multilingual materials were based on advice from members of our Latino Advisory Council, the Asian Pacific Advisory Council, and other community members and consultants who collaborate with staff on various projects.

As we began planning for the new Gallery of California Art, we wanted to expand our multilingual offerings. We conducted research to explore new approaches to providing translations, reviewing a variety of websites and translations in other languages depending upon the content of special exhibitions. The research revealed the variety of ways museums are delivering translations: cell phone tours, handheld multimedia devices, podcasts, computer terminals, and websites, along with more traditional practices of docent tours, labels, and print materials. We were interested in exploring the use of wireless technology for delivering translations, but the Museum’s concrete building interfered with access.

How much should we translate in a 30,000 square foot gallery?

We posed this question to members of our community advisory councils in a special session on Art Gallery labels and translations. We showed them the actual size of the labels so they could see the amount of space they take up and tested several design layouts and formats. Our advisors recommended that we translate only the main labels explaining the Gallery’s three themes, California Land, California People, and California Creativity, because this showed that the Museum was taking strides to welcome Spanish and Chinese speakers and acknowledge the diversity of its visitors. We also discussed offering other types of translations through docent tours and handheld devices or websites over time. We decided for the opening we would translate three Gallery theme labels, introductory information about the Museum’s concrete building interfered with access.

“Many languages

Before the transformation of the Gallery of California Art, the Museum regularly pro-
vided multilingual translations in Spanish and Chinese—the largest non-English speaking communities in the Bay Area—for special exhibitions, but did not include translations in its collections galleries. The Museum provided translations in other languages depending upon the content of special exhibitions. Approaches to our multilingual materials were based on advice from members of our Latino Advisory Council, the Asian Pacific Advisory Council, and other community members and consultants who collaborate with staff on various projects.

As we began planning for the new Gallery of California Art, we wanted to expand our multi-
lingual offerings. We conducted research to explore new approaches to providing trans-
lations, reviewing a variety of websites and translations in other languages depending upon the content of special exhibitions. The research revealed the variety of ways museums are delivering translations: cell phone tours, handheld multimedia devices, podcasts, computer terminals, and websites, along with more traditional practices of docent tours, labels, and print materials. We were interested in exploring the use of wireless technology for delivering translations, but the Museum’s concrete building interfered with access.

How much should we translate in a 30,000 square foot gallery?

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**Translators**

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**LISA SILBERSTEIN, EXHIBITION COORDINATOR FOR THE ART INSTALLATION PROJECT**

**KAREN S. NELSON, INTERPRETER SPECIALIST/ARTS**: We posed this question to members of our community advisory councils in a special session on Art Gallery labels and translations. We showed them the actual size of the labels so they could see the amount of space they take up and tested several design layouts and formats. Our advisors recommend-
edit again. Multiple reviews take longer but are worth the time in the interest of getting to the point in brief, effective language that reflects accurate and accessible information.

• Empty a copystand to use your self-authored style guide to standardize all final matters of punctuation, capitalization, etc.; and credit lines for images in the final product.

• Communicate graphically. Graphic solutions often make all the difference. Graphic elements that define the size and shape as well as convey significance or presence with words (floating or solid?) part of the wall surface or standing out from the surface etc.) all communicate meaning as much as the words themselves.

• Overseas the placement of labels and all interpretive elements in both the design and installation phases to make sure enough space is allocated for them.

—Mary T. Farea, Arts Innovation Project Coordinator
Choosing a translation company

To determine which translation company to use, OMCA gathered input from two focus groups of community-based advisors, one with Spanish language speakers and one with Chinese language speakers. The groups reviewed three sets of Gallery labels translated by three different translation companies, to determine which came closest to the meaning of the English and which tone was most appropriate for our Bay Area audience. Advisors were asked individually and as a group which company they preferred and why they thought it would best serve the Museum audience.

Translation recommendations

The following are some of the key recommendations that emerged from these focus groups and informed our translation guidelines.

The translations should:

• Contain active, direct, positive language
• Be sensitive to the political impact of vocabulary
• Use simple, but inspirational language (simple, yet poetic)
• Use accessible language to express and convey complex ideas
• Avoid gender bias
• Avoid use of archaic language (use common, current terms)
• Maintain a consistent voice (the same translator from the same translation firm)

One very important recommendation was to translate for meaning rather than for a literal representation. The guidelines included recommendations for design, preparation of the English text, and special notes about how to manage the process.

The translation process

The translation company was easy to work with and accommodated our schedule, which often involved short deadlines and fast turnaround times. They made suggestions to assist us in getting the translations that we wanted, were very accessible, and consistently made sure that we were satisfied with their work.

Although the company we used has its own internal reviewer, we decided to hire two external reviewers to look over the translations to ensure consistency. This was important because there is no guarantee that a translation company will use the same translator throughout a project. Our external reviewers were either people with whom Museum staff had worked previously or individuals who were recommended by translators known by Museum staff. This additional review phase added significant time to the total production schedule; however, it provided an added assurance that our translations were closest to the original meaning and would meet the needs of our visitors.

Versioning Is Not Translation

Another aspect of translation that emerged in our process and intrigued us was the idea of “versioning.” Versioning is using and changing the text to consider how people from different backgrounds process information and put it into their own cultural context—what visitors bring to the experience. This new concept excited us all, but we realized it was beyond the scope of our project. We are interested in exploring this further and the related question of how do visitors bring their culturally diverse backgrounds to the interpretation of art.
Breaking down the hierarchy: designing text in three languages

Our design intent was to present all three language versions in a balanced, equal fashion instead of giving the usual preference to English. We wanted to display the three primary texts adjacent to one another, as opposed to one primary text with two secondary translations. Gordon Chun, the graphic designer, achieved this by creating a cluster of the texts that allowed each to have its own primacy in the composition. The English at the top left gave it a conventional “firstness.” The Chinese was set in vertical format, clearly distinguishing it from the two Latin alphabet languages. The Chinese also started at the top right, which is the conventional starting point for that language. The Spanish holds the central position in the cluster, and its first line appears at eye-level for the average visitor. The languages are also in different colors to clearly distinguish them.

Museum staff chose to provide translations in Traditional Chinese rather than the Simplified form. Traditional Chinese characters are more complete, having more strokes, whereas Simplified is more abbreviated. According to members of the Museum’s Asian Pacific Advisory Council, Traditional Chinese is used by ethnic Chinese who are outside of mainland China, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Simplified Chinese was chosen as the official style in China during the Communist rule and is used in all public communications and is taught in schools in China. As June Yee, one council member advised, “For the Chinese people and their descendants who lived outside the mainland during the Communist ‘closed door’ policy, the Traditional style is still in use. As China becomes more connected with the world and as more mainland Chinese people immigrate to the West, in time this will change. My guess is in one or two generations, the Traditional style will be less common even outside of China. By then, I think OMCA will have another reinstallation, and the Chinese writings shall probably be in the Simplified style.”
Our goals
In the new Gallery, we wanted to create opportunities to welcome visitors with all learning styles (such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and others) and help them feel comfortable when looking at art. We hoped to provide entry points through which visitors could discover their own personal response to an artwork and know it to be as meaningful and valid as any other.

All stages of our testing and designing the installation that became “one work of art—many experiences” were driven by the priority to include visitors who don’t have a lot of knowledge of art but have a high interest level. At the same time, we wanted the space to engage a wide spectrum of visitors and to create a space for families to touch things, have experiences together, and build confidence in looking skills they could use throughout the Gallery. Last but not least, we wanted experienced viewers to enjoy discovering how audio or tactile activities could heighten or shift their visual experience of an artwork in unexpected ways.

“one work of art—many experiences”
The Art 360 Gallery

MARY T. FARIA, ARTS INNOVATION PROJECT COORDINATOR
KAREN G. NELSON, INTERPRETIVE SPECIALIST/ART


“I have the experience with this sculpture of not knowing where to start.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2009

The interpretive team’s collective prior knowledge influenced our choice of activities to test for different modalities. Educational research such as Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, Harvard’s Project Zero strategies using games and multiple entry points, visits to inspirational institutions such as the Denver Art Museum and Art Institute of Chicago, as well as years of experience with visitor responses to activities in OMCA exhibitions and programs all informed the choice of which activities to develop through testing. First we needed to decide what we wanted to do, articulate the desired outcome, then devise an activity and test it. Through their feedback, visitors would help us determine the best possible pathway to that experience for them.
Exploring the jade pagoda
We started testing this interpretive element in spring 2008. Because the Art Gallery was closed for renovation, we installed six rough-and-ready cardboard activity stations adjacent to a large jade pagoda—a sculptural work in the OMCA Natural Sciences collection. This piece offered many detailed features for a focus on looking closely and had ample background information available to use for development of related activities. Also, the piece was located in a protective glass enclosure and situated in a hallway with low visitor traffic, a place that allowed visitor engagement without obstructing other Museum activities.

Each of the six stations contained a different activity: a scrapbook about the history of the object, a colored light that visitors could turn on and off to see how the light might change the way they saw the piece, a journal or drawing station prompting visitors to have a visual or sensory experience didn’t contribute to an enhanced understanding of culture. To test further for how to facilitate understanding about cultural significance, we provided contextual information, asked questions, and tested the ability to view from all sides. We wondered if visitors were taking away any appreciation of cultural meanings that had been carved in China with handmade tools in the early 20th century. Besides testing content that encouraged looking more closely through a variety of lenses, we questioned visitors about how their experience may have included enhanced understanding of the cultural significance of the object. We struggled with our questions and instruments and realized that signage alone (light, spotlight, searching with a flashlight for animals and other features, etc.) helped them make meaning for themselves.

As interpretive specialists for the art department, Karen Nelson wanted to create a hands-on interpretive installation in the front of the Gallery where visitors would gain tools for looking at and engaging with artworks. The concept began with a working title of Art Discovery Center (ADC), and was initially intended to be a resource area with drawers and kiosk-like stations for technology or other tools and activities. With the guidance of Kathleen McLean, the interpretive team decided to avoid making a single interpretive station set about exploring a variety of ideas, settling on “6 Ways to Explore a Work of Art.”

The overarching concept
The fundamental objectives would remain focused on encouraging visitors to look closely and make meaning for themselves. With handmade tools in the early 20th century, besides testing content that encouraged looking more closely through a variety of lenses, we questioned visitors about how their experience may have included enhanced understanding of cultural significance. Ultimately, we came to understand that gauging appreciation of culture was an enormous and multidimensional task beyond the scope of this interpretive installation and that our fundamental objectives would remain focused on encouraging visitors to look closely and make meaning for themselves. We started testing this interpretive element in spring 2008. Because the Art Gallery was closed for renovation, we installed six rough-and-ready cardboard activity stations adjacent to a large jade pagoda—a sculptural work in the OMCA Natural Sciences collection. This piece offered many detailed features for a focus on looking closely and had ample background information available to use for development of related activities. Also, the piece was located in a protective glass enclosure and situated in a hallway with low visitor traffic, a place that allowed visitor engagement without obstructing other Museum activities.

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We generated a list of possibilities with twenty-one sculptures and seven furniture pieces. We also considered pairing an artwork and historical artifact for comparison and contrast or bringing in an artist to create an artwork specific to the space. Ultimately, we selected Double Time by Robert Hudson because it is in the OMCA collection, which meant we could use the actual artwork in testing. Robert Hudson lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, so we visited his studio to shoot video footage of the environment where he works and interview him about Double Time and his process in its creation.

The concept for this interpretive installation remained constant in all phases of testing—to encourage looking closer and promote visitor comfort with experiencing one artwork in a variety of ways in order to construct personal meaning.

“…” It’s like origami . . . with steel.”
—COMMENT BY WELDER ABOUT ROBERT HUDSON’S SCULPTURE, DOUBLE TIME, 1963

Robert Hudson, whose sculpture Double Time is featured in our Art 360 gallery, is a prominent Bay Area sculptor whose work has been influential among artists since the 1960s. Double Time is a rich and eloquent work that offers many avenues for inquiry: its title and flowing forms suggest music, its painted forms defy gravity and the limitations of the heavy metal from which it is formed, and its movement on the turntable displays the complexity of thought that Robert Hudson brought to the sculpture to make it “work” from every angle.

Viewing the actual sculpture from many angles, studying the tactile qualities of its materials, and hearing the artist speak of his methods, intentions, and influences all add to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the work. These fragments are like stanzas in a poem that the poet likes but has not yet placed in their final form to create a finished work. Hudson works like a composer or a poet but “writes” his piece in steel and paint. Hudson is a quiet man; he lets his work do most of the talking. He and his wife Mavis enjoy camping in the California and Nevada deserts, where he finds all sorts of rusted metal and objects to use in future sculptures. He reports that he always has sculpture on his mind, and when he is not actually welding pieces of metal in the process of creating a new sculpture, he is dreaming of his next work.

—Phil Linhares, Chief Curator of Art

Testing the activities
Over a nine-month period, we tested thirteen different elements with Double Time in a variety of combinations as well as tested whether visitors understood that these activities were meant to convey different ways of experiencing art. Instructions at activity stations went through iterations emphasizing content (Light, Scrapbook, Journal), action to direct investigation (Wonder, Express, Build, etc.), and finally, a description of a simple action or experience (Touch, Listen, Look, etc.). The title for this area developed into “6 ways to experience one artwork.”

Elements we tested:
1. Red and blue colored glasses to change the colors and draw attention to the 2D/3D illusions in the painted surfaces of the sculpture
2. A monochromatic model of the sculpture focusing on forms and shapes
3. Music of the early 1960s (e.g., Coltrane, Brubeck) employing double-time speed
4. A flashlight to spot specific features of the sculpture
5. A booklet containing statements by two welders at our construction site about how the steel sculpture may have been constructed
6. A magnet board for arranging pre-printed words to provide a game-like way of posting responses without generating text
7. A tungsten reflector light operated by visitors to observe different lighting effects
8. A buildable model of the sculpture to focus on shape and structure
9. A paper to record impressions and responses to other visitors
10. A video of the artist in his studio talking about his creative process and how he constructed parts of Double Time
11. An audio narrative by the artist describing his creative process, early inspiration and influences, and how he constructed specific features of the sculpture
12. A running loop of digital images of the sculpture from every possible angle to heighten awareness of the 2D/3D illusions in the painted surfaces and structural features of the sculpture
13. Touchable steel pieces with surfaces similar to selected areas of the sculpture to provide a kinesthetic sense of the art materials

“…” What is it? What is the point? What gave him the idea? What was he thinking? How was the artist motivated? Lots of questions were answered by the stations.”
—VISITOR COMMENTS 2009
We asked a range of questions in interviews aimed at understanding the overall effects of the activities, and later for designing the delivery of those activities. We also identified preferences for signage by prompting visitors to leave running lists of suggestions for everything from naming the space to recording what they needed to know in order to use any given station.

The following is a range of sample questions that we found effective in eliciting visitor feedback to inform the content and design for all the stations:

• Does this help you look at art in a new way?
• What was your favorite activity here and why?
• Which activities, to you, are best experienced together?
• Was it clear what to do at each station? What more did you need to know?
• Was there anything confusing in the video/audio?
• Was the video/audio too long, too short, just right?
• Do you prefer to watch a video of the artist or listen to his narrative about the artwork while you look at the sculpture in front of you?
• What do you think this entire setup is trying to convey?
• How would you design this experience?
• On a scale of 1–6, where would you place your experience with looking at and thinking about art? Can you say a bit about why you give it that number?

Testing the Gallery name

Finally, we tested the proposed title of the Gallery space, Art 360, asking visitors what they might expect to encounter in such a space. A significant number of visitors responded that they would expect to experience something that might provide a variety of ways to look at art. Based on this response, we went forward with Art 360 as the name of the space and with “one work of art—many experiences” appearing in English, Spanish, and Chinese as the title of the first interpretive installation.
The final design

With Hudson’s sculpture, Double Time, at center, the final iteration of “one work of art—many experiences” contains four stations featuring five activities:

- A short audio narrative (approximately one and one-half minutes) by the artist describing how he made various physical features of the sculpture
- Touchable metal samples with a variety of surfaces similar to those actually in the sculpture
- Colored-lens glasses to heighten awareness of the 2D-3D dynamics of the piece and, at the same station, music of the period (Coltrane and Brubeck) that demonstrates the musical speed of double time.
- A buildable model of the sculpture reproducing the shapes in one uniform color so as to focus attention on the forms and the structure of the piece
- Double Time With Hudson’s sculpture, the final design of surfaces similar to those actually in the sculpture, but the movement of the work itself slowly so all sides could be seen. (We probably would not have had the courage to do this on our own.) The fabricator constructed this as well as a coved wall for the corner, so visitors now see the sculpture with a seamless background. The activities around the artwork give visitors ideas about how to approach a work of art? The RK&A report noted that, “Several interviewees conjectured that their experience of Art 360 would mean more or get inside the head of the other artists represented in the Gallery.”

We combined the glasses and music based on indications that the combination of these activities heightened visual experience of the work. We physically separated the three-minute video of the artist talking about making Double Time from the stations, once we realized that visitors looked more closely while listening to the audio narrative rather than watching the video—they preferred not having the video in direct relationship to the artwork at the center. We included in the design of the space a metal comment board with magnets as a place for visitors to post comments, responding to prompts such as, “Share your thoughts about this sculpture.” “What is your favorite part of this sculpture?” or “What is your favorite activity here?”

Conclusion

From the remedial and summative evaluations conducted by RK&A in summer 2010, it is clear that visitors appreciate the opportunities afforded by this interpretive installation. Some visitor comments about signage for two of the stations have helped us rewrite activity labels after the Gallery reopened. Families and other visitors to the space a metal comment board with magnets to contain a line about a family or other shared experience. The RK&A report notes that “visitors experience the comment board as ‘welcoming’ and ‘inclusive,’ encouraging them to ‘reflect’ and ‘think about the art.’”

Some visitors perceive the space “for kids only,” or state either they “were not attracted to the sculpture’s use of bright, primary colors,” or “did not find Robert Hudson’s piece to be . . . interesting or provocative.” This information may guide the choice of artwork for the future.

In locating this installation at the front of the Gallery, we planned that it would heighten the visitor’s aesthetic experience and extend into an increased engagement with other artworks in the Gallery. Will visitors be more aware of the ways to think about and access a work of art? The RK&A report noted that, “Many interviewees said that they especially like the range of the activities offered, which invite visitors to experience the artwork from multiple perspectives using multiple senses.” It went on to note that, “Several interviewees conjectured that their experiences of Art 360 would mean more or get inside the head of the other artists represented in the Gallery.”

We worked with the artist Robert Hudson on the design of the space. He and his daughter, Amy Jukes-Hudson, visited the Museum when the space was being designed. Because of space limitations, the sculpture needed to be placed against a wall. Hudson suggested that we put the works on a wall that would turn slowly so all sides could be seen. (We probably would not have had the courage to do this on our own.) The fabricator constructed this as well as a coved wall for the corner, so visitors now see the sculpture with a seamless background. The activities around the artwork give visitors ideas about how to approach a work of art. We will strive to help visitors build confidence in looking at and thinking about art in general, and we will encourage visitors to understand that there is no single or right way to experience any artwork.

“Building, listening, and seeing—Awesome!”

“... microscopic [buildable sculpture] because it is the most interactive and fun activity in this exhibit.”

“I made my own ‘double time’ in art class inspired by you.”

“Share your thoughts about this sculpture. Building, listening, and seeing—Awesome!”

Seeing Ourselves in the Gallery of California Art
KAREN G. NELSON, INTERPRETIVE SPECIALIST/ART

Self-portraits
The You Are Here digital interactive is one of the most successful interpretive elements in the new Gallery of California Art. This interactive grew out of considering how visitors could “see” themselves in the Gallery and how visitor awareness of the creative process could be increased. Visitors draw themselves using fingers on a digital touch screen. Their saved drawings are then displayed on a digital screen on the California Portrait Wall, amid a collection of twenty-four artworks hung salon style.

Early research
We developed this digital drawing element by testing a variety of unmediated activities in a twenty-foot square Art Lab space in the Gallery of California Art for three months before the Gallery closed in December 2007. We began this testing with a small exhibit called Abstracting the Figure that was designed to show different levels of realism that artists use when they draw a person. We displayed four artworks from the collection that showed some abstraction of a human figure. As prompts for visitors, large panels on a separate wall posed questions that focused on the artistic process (“Why do artists use different kinds of lines?”), personal opinion (“Why do you think artists draw people in different ways?”), and creative expression (“Can you draw a person using only 3 lines?”).

After one month, we did not see a significant number of responses so we revised some of the activity prompts and added a mirror with the heading, “Look in the mirror and draw yourself here.” This exercise attracted a greater range of responses from visitors and revealed that the activity needed to be personally relevant to be engaging; written responses totaled 205, with 662 drawn responses. Because of the popularity of drawing, we decided this was an important activity to include in the reinstalled Art Gallery, especially with California People as one of the Gallery’s themes.

These opportunities for drawing and looking encouraged visitors to participate in activities that related to the Art Gallery objectives of:

• Fostering skills for diverse learners to experience and interpret art in a variety of ways (“I think it is pretty fun. I like to draw, art appeals to me.”)
• Increasing observation skills for experiencing art from multiple perspectives (“I think red is an important color because it pops up in unexpected places and adds brightness and color to the painting. In some ways, it is a shocking color, but it works in the painting.”)
• Fostering intergenerational learning (“I like how the kids get to draw on paper and add their ideas.”)

“There’s looking at art and there’s having the opportunity to go beyond touching it to maybe get behind the thinking process of the artist . . . and I like that.”

—VISITOR COMMENT 2010
Additionally, visitors noted that they liked looking at other visitors’ drawings and comments. (“Display of visitors’ work is always interesting and engaging.”)

Responses to the Abstracting the Figure unmediated activities also revealed much about the way visitors connect to the art. Many visitors felt comfortable noticing particular details in a piece (a specific color or figure) and commenting on the emotional impact of the work (“It is dark gray and has a sad, dreamy look”). They recognized that artists made intentional choices about the images they created and understood that this was a product of their particular perspectives. Far fewer were interested in judging the work’s merit (whether it is objectively good art), in analyzing the artistic technique used to render the work, in speculating about the symbolism in the work, or in commenting on the historical significance of the piece.

Because Abstracting the Figure was up for three months, the questions or prompts could be changed and refined often. For instance, the prompt “Can you draw a person using only 3 lines?” was modified to, “Can you draw a person using only 5 lines? How about 3? 1?” This seemed to be a popular challenge and encouraged many wonderful contour drawings from visitors. The prompts were printed on paper and attached to the large panels with removable adhesive so the questions could be easily replaced.

One concern for both curators and educators was how to encourage visitors’ personal expression through drawing without having hundreds of pieces of paper all over a section of the Museum. As we explored an effective way to make this happen, we considered various online drawing sites, such as http://sketch.odopod.com (accessed on August 4, 2009). We then asked the media developers, BBI Engineering, Inc., to produce software customized to the Museum’s design and functionality guidelines developed by the OMCA art media producer. Staff tested several iterations of the screen layout to evaluate ease of use and clarity of language. Instructions were translated into Spanish and traditional Chinese because these are the two dominant languages in the San Francisco Bay Area after English.

Upkeep
Colorful sticky pads were provided for visitors to write on and place on the large panels. Although drawing on paper was a popular activity, one of the main challenges during the prototype testing was Art Gallery maintenance that was done up to twice a day in the Art Lab area, including clearing clutter off the table, checking pencil leads in pencils, checking the supply of paper, sharpening pencils, and organizing comments. This encouraged us to consider a digital solution for the final interactive.

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The current You Are Here digital interactive has a mirror on top and a drawing surface below it. Visitors draw themselves on the screen using their fingers; they can then see their drawings on the salon-style hanging of portraits on two framed digital screens as part of the California Portrait Wall. By adding the digital screens, visitors can literally see themselves in the Gallery. Visitors can save their drawings to the Museum computer as well as send the drawings to themselves via email.

In addition to the opportunity to make a digital drawing, visitors can also review a digital library of past drawings on an adjacent screen. When they select a drawing, the screen in front of them shows the physical marks the visitor made in the same order he or she added them to the portrait. Almost 75% of visitors in a small survey in 2007 said they were very interested in seeing the responses and comments of other visitors. These side-by-side screens for drawing and observing are also useful for the social experience of visitors who often come in pairs or small groups.

In his review of the Museum, art critic Kenneth Baker wrote:

California People has a wall full of portraits as its centerpiece—paintings and photographs from every historical corner of the museum collection. Two video screens hang among them, displaying at random self-portraits that visitors have made—and inviting others to add theirs—at an interactive terminal just to the side.

Old-school museum-goers may dismiss this feature and others like it within the museum as pandering gimmickry. But it may give people who find it engaging a taste of the difficulty of self-portraiture that they might never have otherwise.

—San Francisco Chronicle, May 1, 2010

The goal for the You Are Here drawing activity is to have visitors regard the Gallery of California Art as a lively place for them and their families. Visitors can look more closely at themselves as they draw as well as at the portraits from the collection that are near the drawing screen. You Are Here has been popular, with more than 200 drawings per week and sometimes lines of visitors waiting their turn to draw. The saved visitor portraits are beautiful and at home among the prized artworks—very few look “childlike” and most seem lively and fresh. This connects to the Gallery objective of increasing awareness of how art is made and the creative impulse in California.

Because of the simplicity of the physical mechanism to draw and save a portrait, visitors feel comfortable about trying it and feel successful in their creations. Therefore, we do not plan to change the exhibit’s basic design and process. What can change is that this digital interactive is currently only physically in the Art Gallery. Future plans include replicating this or a similar experience on the Museum website so participants can use their home computers and contribute to an online gallery.

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ArtSpeak, the hands-on interpretive video, offers visitors a chance to listen to commentary by California artists represented in the OMCA collection. Situated near the front of the Gallery of California Art, the video animates the surrounding artworks with artists’ voices and highlights the range of artists represented in the Gallery. The video footage was developed from full-length interviews with California artists conducted by the Museum in 2003 with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. With over eighty hours of interviews with forty California artists, our challenge was to take this mound of footage and use it to create an engaging experience for visitors that welcomes them to the Gallery and showcases the diversity of artists represented.

ArtSpeak: Hands-on Interpretive Video

MIRIAM LAKES, ARTS INNOVATION PROJECT ASSISTANT
EVELYN ORANTES, CULTURAL ARTS DEVELOPER

Initial evaluation

Visitors evaluated the first prototype of the piece in the small Art Lab space in the Gallery of California Art before the Gallery closed. The first prototype included a video of artist Carmen Lomas Garza with footage from her interview and images of her artwork that played in a continuous loop. The video was located near a print by Garza. Additionally, similar videos of three other artists played on one monitor at the front of the Gallery, again near the display of artworks by those artists. We designed a survey for visitors to give feedback on what they would like to hear the artists talk about, the length and quality of the video, and whether or not the video changed the way they looked at artworks and thought about California artists as a whole.

Overall, visitors said they wanted to hear about why the artists make the work (their inspiration), and how the artists make the work (their process). Visitors also reported that the length of the videos (three to five minutes) was just right, which indicated to us that the final versions should not exceed this length. This small amount of visitor feedback helped inform the remainder of our work in developing this interpretive video, and it suggests that even a minimal amount of prototyping can be very helpful in designing for visitors.
Developing the interpretive video

With information from visitors about what they most wanted to hear from the artists, educators and curators together reviewed the written transcripts of the videos looking for the following themes: inspiration, creative process, and interesting anecdotes in support of the Gallery’s Big Ideas. We reviewed over 400 pages of typed transcripts, adding quotes that seemed interesting to paper. We then watched the original interviews, spending most of our time looking at the portions we had highlighted in the transcripts. We realized that a limiting factor was the way in which the artists spoke—if the artist did not appear engaging, the subject matter, no matter how interesting, lost its ability to hold our attention. As we watched all the videos, we observed that questions and themes began to surface from the artists’ comments: what they hope visitors will see in their work, their first experiences with art, and why they feel they need to create an artist is that I try to create interesting, lost its ability to hold our attention. We continued to tag the quotes as we went along, narrowing down our categories and eliminating some in order to focus on the principal areas of visitor interest. In keeping with our use of multiple languages in the new Gallery, the attract screen has various tag words that are displayed continuously in English, Spanish, and Chinese. This not only helps to make the screen seem fuller and more visually appealing but also emphasizes that the activity is intended for a diverse audience. The video experience at the entrance to the Gallery should serve to welcome visitors with the immediate presence of diverse people, multiple languages, and evocative suggestions for possible ways to look at art.

We also came up with three questions that would encompass the twenty tag words developed from the visitor interests expressed in the following evaluations:

How do I look at art?
Who is an artist?
What is art?

I found it very rewarding to work on this interpretive element. Reading and watching the interviews gave me new insight into the artists. More importantly, while it’s not a “must see” exhibit in the Gallery, it helps to make the Museum more of a home for our visitors. Audience members use ArtSpeak quite frequently as they sit back and relax in this area of the Gallery. ArtSpeak provides visitors with an interesting and informative teaching element.

CATHERINE WAGNER (photographer):
“...but something that has always kind of rattled in the back of my head late at night is will they understand?”

Re-evaluating for content

At this point, we revisited the goals of the project with the entire interpretive team and created a document to guide the remaining development:

Our document helped to re-emphasize and remind us of the original interests of visitors. We continued to tag the quotes as we went along, narrowing down our categories and eliminating some in order to focus on the principal areas of visitor interest. In keeping with our use of multiple languages in the new Gallery, the attract screen has various tag words that are displayed continuously in English, Spanish, and Chinese. This not only helps to make the screen seem fuller and more visually appealing but also emphasizes that the activity is intended for a diverse audience. The final version of the interpretive video is located in the orientation area at the front of the Gallery. Created as a scaled activity, visitors can choose from tag words or phrases such as “art,” “beauty,” “voice,” “what is art?” by touching the square with that text on it. The exhibit is designed in such a way that we can add new video content and switch out tag words over time.

Summative evaluation and where we go from here

We have not formally evaluated ArtSpeak nor do we know that it is in the Gallery. However, we do recognize the ability to look at how many visitors are using the interactive daily as well as in what language they choose to watch the videos. Future iterations of ArtSpeak that include new video clips will be tested with visitors to help us determine the level of understanding of the strength of the video footage, and whether visitors leave with a sense of the diversity of California artists in the OMCA collection.

What we have learned from visitors from the earlier evaluation is that they are most interested in videos in the Gallery that accompany collection objects. Thus, integrating the videos within different areas of the Gallery rather than in the large orientation area might lead to more visitor use of the exhibit. We may feature the video on the Museum’s website to see if the piece is successful as a web element. More importantly, while it’s not a “must see” exhibit in the Gallery, it helps to make the Museum more of a home for our visitors. Audience members use ArtSpeak quite frequently as they sit back and relax in this area of the Gallery. ArtSpeak provides visitors with an interesting and informative teaching element.

—Julie Mafli, Associate Curator of Crafts and Decorative Arts

We learned that our testing was more successful when we asked broader questions. For example, we asked: “If you were to describe this activity to a friend, what would you tell him or her?” These kinds of questions elicited visitors’ experiences with the activity as well as their understanding of the broader concepts presented in the material. Additionally, questions that target understanding of broader themes and concepts are best addressed with an interview rather than a written survey. We found surveys more effective for targeting less conceptual, more specific pieces of information related to clarity of language or the design of a specific element.
The Is it art? Lounge is one of two “loaded” lounges developed for the new Gallery of California Art. Loaded lounges are places that not only invite visitors to stop, sit down, and rest for a while but that are also “loaded” with surprising and provocative interpretive elements that encourage conversations among visitors. The Is it art? Lounge is an experimental space designed to change over time. Furniture is upholstered in raw linen and the walls are clad in a recycled paper composite board, evoking an informal studio-like feeling.

Background

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) has a tradition of incorporating resource areas in temporary exhibitions. These spaces provide visitors with opportunities to further explore the exhibition’s themes through a variety of materials and activities and are often designed to look like living rooms, dining areas, and other social gathering places. The priority given to resource areas has a complex history at the Museum. Depending upon the allocation of space by specific exhibition teams, resource areas have ranged from large comfortable environments with multiple seating areas and activities to small cramped spaces with a table and some chairs.

The transformation efforts offered the art and education staff a chance to do something new, rather than labeling spaces as either curatorial or educational. We collaborated to create spaces that married art and education, with an emphasis on visitor experience at the forefront of all our designs. This collaboration, although challenging at times, has created valuable new connections and models within the Gallery and also within the Museum’s structure as a whole.

The Is it art? Lounge

MIRIAM LAKES, ARTS INNOVATION PROJECT ASSISTANT

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The concept
OMCA art curators and members of the interpretive team agreed that the Art of Our Time (contemporary art) section of the new Gallery of California Art offered a good location for one of the new loaded lounges. The Gallery label for Art of Our Time states:

What is California art? The definition has expanded with the growing complexity of our society. Art changes as artists explore new ideas, materials, and techniques. California is ever-changing and provides an especially rich climate for exploration. Some artists respond to social and political upheavals around them. Still others look inward, exploring dreams and disappointments. Artists today continually question how art is defined and challenge how we define ourselves in the contemporary world.

The challenge
Beyond the limits of the academic art world resides the majority of the greater San Francisco Bay Area communities and our main target audience: visitors who are new to looking at and thinking about art. We wanted to create a space in the contemporary art section of the Gallery that addressed a recurring visitor question central to the artworks in this area: “What makes that art? My five-year-old could do that.” While some might disparage this familiar perspective, we took its origins to heart and recognized its underlying angst. We set out to create a loaded lounge for visitors that invited them to participate in an extended conversation about art and would allow them to leave with a sense that their opinions are part of the greater conversation.

We aimed for a balance between presenting information and leaving room for visitors to discover and explore art on their own. We wanted to reveal the curatorial process of selecting artworks for this section of the Gallery and convey the multiple ways of thinking about the definition of art, even within the context of one small lounge space. We envisioned the lounge as a dinner party where multiple conversations are taking place about art and where visitors are as much a part of the conversation as the other guests.

Selecting the objects
We started by prototyping an object comparison activity that asked visitors to look at three different collection objects and talk with us about which ones they thought were art. Because so many of the surrounding artworks use ordinary objects in some way, we selected three cups, each representing one of our three definitions—intention, uniqueness, and beauty. The objects were similar in shape and size and they were all obviously cups. An object as familiar as a cup provides a comfort level and a feeling of confidence that allows visitors to focus on the larger more abstract idea. Images of these three objects became the first activity in the prototype lounge—the cup board.

The interpretive team identified three basic criteria used to define an object as art. Fine-tuning these ideas led to the development of the first prototypes for this lounge:

- Artist intention (if an artist makes something to be art, then it is art)
- Uniqueness (handmade and not mass produced)
- Beauty (having aesthetic value)

The process of selecting objects allowed for a new collaboration between members of the interpretive team and the art registration staff. As part of exploring new models in our Museum, members of the interpretive team were the curators of the lounge, selecting objects for the space. Because our registrars know collections in a very deep way, we approached them for object suggestions and found their recommendations invaluable.

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Building prototypes—constructing from concepts

Once we selected the cups, we designed a basic prototype exhibit that was rough, unglamorous, and not something you would expect to find in an art gallery. Visitors surmised with their level of openness and expressions of enthusiasm for this rough and ready style of experimentation. The first version of the cup board consisted of images of three cups: a melted teacup from the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake (History collection), a mass-produced Heath Ceramics cup (History collection), and a ceramic and wood cup by artist Kenneth Price (Art collection). Above the cups were the words: “Is it art?”

A flap below each image contained object information as well as a question to help visitors relate the object back to the question: “Is it art?” We started with simple text and edited it as we worked with our evaluation coach to revise questions for the evaluation instrument. This process significantly helped us to simplify and refine the content and text. We learned that a prototype can never be too simple: if it’s too complex, it’s hard to figure out where the conceptual problems are. If you start with something very simple, you can keep adding complexity until it loses coherence, and then you know you’ve gone too far.

Refining evaluation techniques

We initially evaluated prototypes for enjoyment of the activity (scale of fun on a scale of 1-6), whether or not the activity helped them to think about art in a new way (and if so, how?), whether or not visitors felt entitled to their own opinions about art (yes/no), and visitor expectations about the activity. Responses led us to understand that we needed to refine the evaluation process itself. The prototyping and evaluation processes went hand in hand, and the ability to change our prototype as well as our evaluation instrument significantly helped us to simplify and refine the content and text. We learned that what objects we selected was just as important as the use of language in creating a successful presentation of more abstract concepts.

We found that this kind of question led visitors to understand that we wanted them to think about art in a new way. In most cases, they were accommodating us, and we needed to probe further for their own authentic responses. We changed the question to: “If you were to tell a friend about what this activity was about, what might you tell them or not? Anything else?”

This kind of question reaches people’s understanding of the content presented without cuing them to our goals. What we learned: We need to pose questions in ways that support visitors to articulate what they understand about an activity without being directly asked to do so.

From design to evaluation and back again

The design of the Is it art? Lounge evolved almost in opposition to the philosophy that visitors did not understand something, we reworked the cup board and tested again. Initially we asked visitors to think about the roles of beauty, intention, and uniqueness in art, but after the first round of prototyping we realized this was a lot of information to ask visitors to digest in just one element. We decided the next iteration of the board should isolate the role of intention in art. This became the guiding principle for the lounge itself—the role of intention—and it was at this point that the final concept of the lounge was formalized:

Q: IS IT ART?
A: Is it art if the artist intended it to be art?

Although we removed text about the roles of beauty and uniqueness in art, visitor comments during prototyping reassured us that these two concepts fell under the broader category of intention. We learned through trial and error what visitors needed to understand the concept of intention. The prototyping and evaluation process went hand in hand, and the ability to change our prototype as well as our instruments on a day-to-day basis allowed us to experiment and become familiar with appropriate language for both the activity and the evaluation.

After extensive evaluation with the cup board, we learned that what objects we selected was just as important as the use of language in creating a successful presentation of more abstract concepts. We experimented with using different cups at different points in the testing. At one point, we had two ceramic cups that were identical except in color—we hoped to use these as examples of a difference in opinion about one object (we labeled one “This is art” and the other “This is not art”). However, this confused visitors, who had to select three different looking cups. This allowed visitors to create parallel comparisons among the three objects. Additionally, having three visually different cups lessened the need for text to explain that each cup represents a unique concept.

Keeping It Simple

In the evaluation effort to develop a lounge based on the question “Is it art?” in the Contemporary Art section of the Gallery, we spent over six months testing for content and design. With advice from Nina Hido, our evaluation coach from the Exploratorium, we articulated questions that communicated the points we wanted to make about the role of intention in art making. From our repeated observations of how visitors related to prompts about objects as well as from interviews, we recognized that it was critical to keep objects familiar and concrete when we invited people to consider new, abstract ideas about these items.

For this reason, we decided to use something as simple as cups as a way to engage visitors to respond to ideas as complex as the role of artist intention in determining whether a given object may be considered art.

Using simple objects to involve visitors in complex ideas allowed them to notice the various elements of the overall installation (objects and signage) rather than get caught up in the beauty or intrigue of the objects themselves. They could then “get” the intended take-away meanings of the exhibit—that there are multiple perspectives about art objects, that curators often consider artist intention as a defining factor in determining the status of any object as art, and that viewers are entitled to form their own opinions.
The development of the lounge was based on our experiments with the cupboard. Our decision to focus on intention shaped all the additional elements for the lounge—we designed each activity to help visitors think about the role of intention in art. The entire lounge went through a process of prototyping and evaluation with visitors over the course of four months. Successful elements of the lounge continued to evolve based on visitor feedback, and less successful elements were reworked or eliminated. Our aim was to present one complex concept through multiple activities.

Evaluation of the lounge needed to focus on visitors’ understanding of the space as a whole, as well as on the success of individual activities. We were able to target understanding of the broader concept of the lounge with the same question we used for the cupboard, asking visitors to describe the overall lounge to a friend. A majority of visitors cited areas of the lounge that were based around objects, emphasizing the need to include interesting collection objects and for the activities to be focused on the objects themselves.

The cups
The cups remained a key element within the lounge because they provided the fundamental and basic information that was reiterated in the additional lounge elements. As the design of the lounge evolved, we integrated the layers of information into a digital element installed beneath the three collection objects, encouraging visitors to go back and forth between the objects and the ideas.

Voting activity
In the first iteration of the prototype lounge, we placed images of objects from the History, Natural Sciences, and Art collections that were all similar in shape. We learned we needed to make them as similar in size as possible so that they seemed comparable: Native American baskets, bird nests, and a fiber art piece by Gyongy Laky. The definition of intention appeared next to them on the wall with label information about each object. To the words “Is it art?” were placed at the top. This installation served as a visual entry point for visitors. Their first interaction with the prototype lounge often involved closer inspection of the images and conversations among visitor groups about their impressions of the objects.

Although this installation did not involve a specific activity, the question “Is it art?” seemed to provoke a fair amount of conversation. In another area of the lounge, a separate voting activity evolved, and a high level of visitor participation indicated that visitors enjoyed voting on whether or not they thought a collection item was art. We then integrated this voting activity into the wall installation so visitors could vote on whether or not the Laky piece was art. This elicited even more conversation from visitors as they talked about what made the Laky piece art, referring to the surrounding nests and baskets that had similar shapes and materials.
Feather bowl and comment book
We originally chose Untitled by Debbie Mink as a possible object for the lounge because of its unusual use of materials and color and its appeal to visitors as a fun and quirky artwork. We tested it as an object of conversation, positioning an image of it on a small table where visitors could leave comments in a response journal about whether or not they thought it was art. Visitor participation was high, and younger children seemed especially interested. Because the pink bowl was so popular with visitors, we decided to keep it in the lounge as a conversation piece with an accompanying response journal. We juxtaposed it with a pink troll doll to add an element of humor and surprise. These are in a low case with the phrase “Is it art?” printed in three languages around the base. Visitor comments in the first few months since opening have indicated what we previously thought—the piece appeals to visitors and inspires them to join in the conversation.

Visitor voices audio
Because we wanted the lounge to serve as a place where visitors felt both comfortable and inspired to engage in conversation with one another, we decided to incorporate an actual conversation. We interviewed over 200 visitors and collected enough visitor comments to illustrate both the evolution of the lounge and the range of opinions held by our visitors about what makes something art. These visitor responses spoke directly to the ideas shaping the lounge and demonstrated the diversity of opinions people have on the topic. Inspired by these comments, we created the first version of a visitor voices audio experience by recording and piecing together different statements from both visitors and artists. We worked to lengthen the script and create coherent conversations out of the quotes we had collected.

What we learned: Visitor comments from evaluation can have a life beyond being data—they can be integrated into the final design of a space to give visitor voices a presence in the Museum.

The current audio script consists of three separate conversations about the role of intention in art that we recorded in-house with four actors. Visitors can listen in on the conversations through headphones hung above the couches. We are now reworking and re-recording the piece based on visitor comments from the summative evaluation of the Gallery.

Excerpt from Visitor Voices Audio Script
VISITOR 1: “Well, I remember visiting the Modern Art Museum in San Francisco 10 years ago. I remember seeing a mop in a bucket. I was thinking, ‘That’s not art,’ but the person set it up like that. It made me question what is art and remember it and talk about it 10 years after the fact.”
VISITOR 2: “And what do you think now? Do you think it was art? I’m an artist, and I think intention is everything. The fact that I’m making something that is supposed to be art, then it obviously is art.”
VISITOR 1: “So if you make something, and say it’s art, even if I don’t like it, it’s art? I don’t know if that works for me. If it’s not in a museum or a gallery, it’s not really art.”
The interviews of visitors who used the space show they understand the concept of the lounge. The number of votes tallied during the opening weekend alone demonstrates that visitors are participating in the exhibit. The exit interviews showed that around one-third of all visitors commented that they enjoyed the lounge. While some visitors appreciated that the lounge is a place for their opinions about the artworks among visiting groups. What is interesting to note—does it indicate that we would like to hear the Museum curators debate the topic rather than their fellow visitors. This contrast in visitors’ opinions is one step in the right direction. They also value other people’s opinions about what art is instead of their own.*

The report also mentions visitors’ thoughts about the amount of information provided in the lounge. While some visitors appreciate that the lounge was created in the Gallery’s Turn of the 20th Century section that features artworks from the Craftsman era in California as well as paintings and photographs from the era. We explored various concepts for the lounge, including references to the philosophies of the Craftsman era and the related appreciation for beauty and comfort of handmade furniture. Tedd Colt, a local master craftsman, collaborated with us to conceptualize the space and identify the range of furniture to include. He then created all of the furniture that has the look and feel of a domestic living room comfortable for reading, including a reproduction of a mahogany table and chairs from the Gamble House in Pasadena and reproductions of a child’s table and chairs, based on designs from the Swedishborgian Church in San Francisco.

Summative evaluation and where we go from here

Summative evaluation of the Is it art? Lounge by Randi Korn & Associates indicates that visitors are responding positively to the lounge. Visitors commented that they enjoyed the interactive experiences, and it was observed that the lounge promoted conversations about the artworks among visiting groups. What really emerges from the report is that the lounge must be measured by the ultimate success of future iterations of the space. The success of future iterations of the lounge must be measured by the ultimate visitor input in the development of future exhibits and also to see visitors as our allies throughout the process.

The conversation continues

‘Is it art? My five-year-old could make that.’ As long as visitors ask this and similar questions, the conversation of what makes something art remains a provocative topic for us to explore. We will continue to look to visitors to inform our future design and development efforts for this space. The success of future iterations of the lounge must be measured by the ultimate exhibit judges: the visitors themselves.

The concept

Besides the Is it art? Lounge, another ‘loaded’ lounge was created in the Gallery’s Turn of the 20th Century section that features artworks from the Craftsman era in California as well as paintings and photographs from the era. We explored various concepts for the lounge, including references to the philosophies of the Craftsman era and the related appreciation for nature and the beauty of handmade objects as a response to industrialized urban life. We also considered using the lounge to make connections to the turn of the 21st century, with a focus on the current interest in creating handmade, do-it-yourself (DIY) objects in reaction to the far-reaching virtual world of technology. We explored contemporary parallels with the search for spiritual well-being that existed during the Craftsman era.

Ultimately, we decided to create a lounge where visitors could relax and experience the beauty and comfort of handmade furniture that represents the aesthetic and spiritual values of the Craftsman era. Tedd Colt, a local master craftsman, collaborated with us to conceptualize the space and identify the range of furniture to include. He then created all of the furniture that has the look and feel of a domestic living room comfortable for reading, including a reproduction of a mahogany table and chairs from the Gamble House in Pasadena and reproductions of a child’s table and chairs, based on designs from the Swedishborgian Church in San Francisco.

‘Is it art?’ Lounge

The interviews of visitors who used the space show they understand the concept of the lounge. The number of votes tallied during the opening weekend alone demonstrates that visitors are participating in the exhibit. The exit interviews showed that around one-third of all visitors commented that they enjoyed the lounge. While some visitors appreciated that the lounge is a place for their opinions about the artworks among visiting groups. What is interesting to note—does it indicate that we would like to hear the Museum curators debate the topic rather than their fellow visitors. This contrast in visitors’ opinions is one step in the right direction. They also value other people’s opinions about what art is instead of their own.*

The report also mentions visitors’ thoughts about the amount of information provided in the lounge. While some visitors appreciate that the lounge was created in the Gallery’s Turn of the 20th Century section that features artworks from the Craftsman era in California as well as paintings and photographs from the era. We explored various concepts for the lounge, including references to the philosophies of the Craftsman era and the related appreciation for beauty and comfort of handmade furniture. Tedd Colt, a local master craftsman, collaborated with us to conceptualize the space and identify the range of furniture to include. He then created all of the furniture that has the look and feel of a domestic living room comfortable for reading, including a reproduction of a mahogany table and chairs from the Gamble House in Pasadena and reproductions of a child’s table and chairs, based on designs from the Swedishborgian Church in San Francisco.

This is a nice relaxing place to rest from the busy museum walking day.”

—VISTOR COMMENT 2010

Living the Good Life Lounge

MARY T. FABIA, ARTS INNOVATION PROJECT DIRECTOR KAREN G. NELSON, INTERPRETIVE SPECIALIST
Rather than use wall labels or other didactic materials in this space, we wanted the furniture itself to present the messages about the use and appreciation of handmade materials, playing with the idea of “if the furniture could talk.” Anecdotes about the furniture and explanatory comments about specific construction features are engraved into the furniture in English, Spanish, and Chinese. Text includes materials descriptions, dates and locations, and even a legend.

Other materials for visitors to explore include wooden joinery puzzles, oversized scrapbooks, and reading materials for children and adults about the art and architecture of the time.

The design

“Living the Good Life”

“I like the smell of the wood and the colors and the comfortable couch has a very homey feeling.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020

“I want one! I love the stained glass that was put in the table. Thanks for this relaxing space!”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020 (BY AN 11-YR-OLD)

Adult furniture engraved text

CHAIR
• chair design from Bolton house in Pasadena, 1906
• Diseño de silla de la casa Bolton en Pasadena, 1906
• 椅子設計,來自帕斯達那Bolton屋, 1906年
• ebony spline strengthens the end joint
• nubia de liya de la casa Bolton en Pasadena, 1906
• 脊子設計,來自帕斯達那Bolton屋, 1906年
• square ebony peg locks joint in place

TABLE
• African ebony hardwood reinforces softer mahogany, creates a design element
• stained glass design from front door of Gamble house, Pasadena, 1908
• Greene and Greene used Japanese-inspired designs for pewter and mother-of-pearl inlay

Settle arm engraved text

Arts and Crafts furniture makers darkened oak by ammonia fuming. Legend says this process was discovered by noticing oak beams in stables darkened from animal urine fumes.

Children’s table engraved text

(objects embedded into the table)
• hammered copper cobre amartillado
• stained glass
• mica mineral flakes
• fired clay tiles

Hands-on wood joinery puzzle engraved text

• dovetail joint
• mortise and tenon joint
• through tenon joint
• double mortise and tenon joint

Hands-on wood joinery puzzle engraved text

Art and Crafts furniture makers darkened oak by ammonia fuming. Legend says this process was discovered by noticing oak beams in stables darkened from animal urine fumes.

All text was translated into Spanish and Traditional Chinese.

“I think people had a good life here.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2010

“I think people had a good life here.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2010

“Like the smell of the wood and the colors and the comfortable couch has a very homey feeling.”
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“I want one! I love the stained glass that was put in the table. Thanks for this relaxing space!”
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“This is a great place to chill out and enjoy the beauty of handcrafted furniture.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020

“I love the stained glass that was put in the table. Thanks for this relaxing space!”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020 (BY AN 11-YR-OLD)

“All text was translated into Spanish and Traditional Chinese.”

“This is a great place to chill out and enjoy the beauty of handcrafted furniture.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020

“I think people had a good life here.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2010

“In this room, you can see the craftsmanship and creativity of the Arts and Crafts Movement.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020

“All text was translated into Spanish and Traditional Chinese.”

“This is a great place to chill out and enjoy the beauty of handcrafted furniture.”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020

“I love the stained glass that was put in the table. Thanks for this relaxing space!”
—VISITOR COMMENT 2020 (BY AN 11-YR-OLD)
The experience

Visitors of all ages marvel at the beauty of the furniture while enjoying the comfort and serenity of the space as they read, chat, or look out at the artworks in the Gallery around them. This Living the Good Life Lounge has become a favorite for visitors, as is evident in the journal entries.

The intent of this space was one of the most debated topics in the Gallery reinstallation process. Plans alternated radically between a loaded lounge and a reading room at least nine times over two years. In the end, we have a space that combines the two approaches. This is a reading room with elements of a loaded lounge, such as the unexpected “talking” furniture. Also, the very comfortable seating invites visitors to spend considerable time here while having an opportunity to try out the Craftsman era seating. Our goal was to create a space that was more domestic than institutional and that would encourage visitors to relax, reflect, and explore at their own pace.

We have seen families as well as separate groups of visitors readily make themselves at home in this lounge. Visitors are using all of the books, scrapbooks, wood joinery puzzles, and alphabet cards. Thoughts for changes in the space include providing more hands-on materials for children and adding ambient music or nature sounds. The final changes to make will be determined as we continue to see how visitors use this space.

VISITOR: “We actually spent most of our time in one of the lounge areas. I really like how it’s like a hanging-out kind of museum as opposed to a more formal looking-at-stuff.”

DATA COLLECTOR: “Which of the lounge areas?”

VISITOR: “The arts and crafts one. Yeah I very much liked the feel of the place and we live nearby and are members and we’re starting in the habit of just coming to hang out here.”

—VISITOR COMMENT 2010

VISITOR: “The chairs are cheerful and it feels like they can almost tell a story and I love the tables.”

—VISITOR COMMENT 2020
I haven’t written for three years, and I’m a writer. This new museum has changed my life. The first new thing I will write about will be you. Thank you.
As the project manager for the Art Gallery reinstallation since 2008, I had a particular view about what went into making the new Gallery happen. With a great deal of assistance, I managed and coordinated the various elements that were required to assure that we not only stayed within budget and deadline but also fulfilled the promise of a progressive and welcoming gallery. I had the pleasure and responsibility of needing to know practically everything, from technology infrastructure to furniture to interpretive strategies to conservation requirements to curatorial content to, not least of all, the Irvine Arts Innovation grant’s goals. At times, the various elements were in tension with one another. For example, one pervasive tension common to many museums reared its head on numerous occasions and in different guises, namely the conflict between education interests and those of curators. Early on, there was tremendous concern when it came to giving up space for interpretive elements that presumably could be occupied by artwork. In addition, these conflicts became embodied in the need to have practically every player included and informed in every decision, big and at times exceedingly small. This basic curator/educator schism played itself out not only in what came up as an object for consideration but also in how we went about our business.

This whole process provided me with an incredible learning opportunity. As a curator used to working with people (as a contemporary art curator, at the very least, artworks were attached to the maker if not the maker’s community), it was not only surprising that so much drama surrounded inanimate objects. The curators defended the integrity of pure experience of the object, the educators fought for the object’s ability to communicate to a general public, and the conservators and registrars wanted to protect the object from physical dangers and harm. Ultimately, these tensions diminished as each party grew to appreciate and respect each other’s roles. More importantly, once it became tangibly clear that the visitor’s experience was above all else the priority concern, each party benefited from a shared set of criteria with which to direct our thinking and work. The visitor as a focal point galvanized our efforts.

Along the way, someone coined the phrase “exhibit is design is interpretation is exhibit is design is interpretation, etc.” I believe this saying became the unspoken motto for the reinstallation of the Art Gallery. It meant that every facet depended on the others to provide the best visitor experience possible. One example is the furniture. We designed and built a system of seating that provided rest but also the opportunity to experience art and deliver interpretation. The use of color in the Gallery also grew out of visitor research that told us color acts as a marker for familiarity and comfort. Of course, we needed to place colored walls in relation to the artworks displayed on them; this also impacted the design and weight of our labels and exhibition text. Additionally, the order and placement of artworks and style of presentation were cross-referenced to the messages we hoped to convey. These are just three examples, but I can’t think of any part of the installation that did not have multiple co-dependent parts.

Along the way, someone coined the phrase “exhibit is design is interpretation is exhibit is design is interpretation, etc.” I believe this saying became the unspoken mode of operation for the reinstallation of the Art Gallery.

—René de Guzman
Early in the concept phase of the reinstall project, we decided to divide the Art Gallery into three thematic areas: Land, People, and Creativity. Immediate, clear, and visual communication of each theme was an obvious priority, and curators held many discussions about the best ways to achieve this. Exhibit designers in an earlier phase of the project had suggested a theme-specific color scheme that we adopted, but we knew we needed something more.

Over the course of many meetings, curators talked about the best way to approach the theme of California People. Surveys and other audience research showed that visitors had a deep desire to “see themselves” in the Gallery. Comments such as “there’s nothing for me here,” “my story isn’t being told,” or “my culture is not represented” were common. We knew we wanted to represent the great diversity of California’s people (a parallel to the diversity of the state’s natural environment) and to help create parallels between visitors’ personal stories and the California stories they would see in the History Gallery as well as elsewhere in the Art Gallery.

From these discussions came the concept of the California Portrait Wall. Dovetailing nicely with the depth of our collections and our natural desire to show more art, we decided to hang the wall “salon-style,” as a dense grid with little or no space between works. Each piece would portray the human face, but otherwise we devised the checklist to highlight diversity: of ethnicity but also of age, gender, sexuality, time period, and media. Nineteenth-century photographs would rub shoulders with contemporary painting, traditional “fine art” would appear juxtaposed with craft objects, commercial images, and folk art.

Curators each contributed a list of works from their collecting areas, which we all then discussed and winnowed down to a number appropriate for the allotted space. The exhibit designer presented a helpful elevation of how the wall would look when finished. Planning ahead, we selected a second set of similar works to allow for future gallery rotation and a second iteration of the wall. When installed, the wall gave a strong sense of kaleidoscopic variety, of both people and artistic styles.

While we felt the concept and design were successful, we still needed to address other visitor concerns. We frequently heard a desire for more activities, for “something to do” in the Gallery, and particularly for multigenerational activities. Drawing activities in temporary exhibitions had proven successful in the past and were being prototyped successfully in the Art Lab space. Returning to the fundamental question of how to make visitors feel they are a part of the Museum, we asked ourselves, “What if the wall could actually contain the faces of visitors, drawn by themselves?”

From these conversations grew the idea for the You Are Here activity. As implemented, visitors approaching the California Portrait Wall notice two frames that look slightly different from the others. Flat screen video monitors are framed to look like hanging artworks, drawn at a special station. The station contains a mirror and an electronic sketch pad on which visitors can easily create a self-portrait, which is then “posted” into the wall frames.

Since opening, this activity has consistently been one of the most popular and continuously used activities in the Gallery. It has increased the level of social interaction in the Gallery and, judging from the sounds of laughter, encouraged visitors to feel more at ease in the Museum. The juxtaposition of a range of art with visitor drawings has encouraged identification with the creative process and helped demystify art and artists.
On the facing page are just a few of the comments culled from nearly a decade of visitor research conducted by OMCA staff. As the Museum anticipated the reopening of its Gallery of California Art in April 2010, the education and curatorial staff took such comments to heart as we collectively reconsidered our interpretive labels and signage. Our initiatives included: discarding academic jargon, providing transparency moments, limiting the amount of label text, inviting different voices into the Gallery, and adding images of artists to “humanize” the art viewing experience. This posed a creative and administrative challenge because any one label could go through several vettings that involved the author’s point of view, curatorial review by the content specialist, interpretive review by education staff, review by the managing art renovation team, content and “voice” editing by an outside consultant, review by the art label coordinator, and copyediting by in-house and contract staff (for example, do we spell out “19th century” or use numerals?). Whew. We could have had a more streamlined process, but I think the end results are generally positive.

In one instance, our natural sciences curator wrote a Bubble Label about a bear skull that is installed next to a 19th-century painting of a bear hunt. These labels are literally thought bubbles that present information or a perspective from one person and are intended to stand apart from the traditional object label. This particular installation is part of our initiative to selectively juxtapose history and natural sciences artifacts next to artworks in order to tell a richer story about California art. In an effort to break down the divide between public visitors and professional staff, art curators also wrote labels from the first person point of view. In our special daguerreotype installation, for example, our curator of photography recounted his teenage fascination with these early photographic images made on metal. Art and education staff also felt it critical to include different voices from our community. We invited (and hired on contract) Jaime Cortez, a local artist and writer, to create labels responding to a wide variety of works of his choice: from an 1849 lithograph by Nathaniel Currier to a 1969 hard-edged abstract painting by Lorser Feitelson to rock posters from the 1960s. Jennifer Bates from our Native American advisory council, our Museum conservator, and the art registrar were among many others who contributed labels that reflected their points of view. In June 2010, Randi Korn & Associates conducted exit interviews in the new Gallery of California Art. Their report indicated that the introductory text panels and labels had the highest rate of use by visitors compared to other interpretive tools (for example, media components). According to the report:

Nearly all interviewees used and appreciated the range of information provided—from basic facts about the artwork’s title and artist’s name to interpretation and quotations that provided insights about the art... In particular, the quotations presenting multiple voices of Museum workers and artists received overwhelmingly positive responses from interviewees... As one interviewee said, reading excerpts in the quotation bubbles felt like “you’re talking to someone about the art.”

Our visitor comment books also provide us with important anecdotal feedback. “Wonderful—extremely user-friendly,” one guest wrote. Another observed: “Text on exhibits is incredibly accessible. Lets visitors engage on many levels. Wonderful mix of art, history, science. Amazing museum experience.”

---VISITOR COMMENTS 2010---

“Labels help me to understand an artwork better and stimulate my thoughts.”

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---VISITOR COMMENTS 2010---

“Labels help me to understand an artwork better and stimulate my thoughts.”

“Where are the different voices of Californians?”

“‘I like to read personal stories and make human connections when I look at art.’

“Breaking Down the Divide: Multiple Voices

KAREN TSUJIMOTO, SENIOR CURATOR OF ART

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During the transformation of the Oakland Museum of California, I was hired to write labels for the Art Gallery. I created labels for individual art pieces and for groupings of art works. Here I will reflect on two key learnings gained during the process.

**Learning 1: Inertia impacts the rate and nature of change**

The impetus to change the way the OMCA relates to its constituencies and organizes its exhibitions, programs, and communications was both internally and externally driven. The Museum planned how it wanted to change, but the plan had to fall within the parameters prescribed by major funders. This simultaneous sense of self-determined agency and deference to funder priorities creates an intrinsic tension as staff members try to determine the limits of self-determination within planned parameters.

Tension is not necessarily a negative thing. It can be quite productive because resolving the tensions required that we define our assumptions, philosophy, and goals as cultural purveyors.

This tension manifested even for me, an outside consultant working only on one small part of the reinstallation—Art Department labels. On the one hand, OMCA wanted innovation, surprise, and even disruption in the labels. On the other hand, the innovation and surprise had to fit within consistent, firm restrictions on each label’s word count, language level, goals, and content.

I was told from the beginning that I should feel free to use experimental, personal, and non-traditional approaches for some of the labels. I wrote many traditional labels before I ventured forth and created more poetic, subjective ones. I am an artist, and like many artists, I profess a great love for open-ended, subjective expression, and yet I held back on writing imaginative labels. I was upholding the way of writing labels that most resembled the status quo. But I had no stake in upholding the status quo, and if you asked me, I would have told you I was enthusiastic about innovation in art labels.

So what was happening?

In retrospect, I think I experienced the subtle, relentless gravitational pull of inertia. The status quo did not align with my greatest interests and enthusiasm for change, yet there I was, upholding what felt traditional. Writing the more poetic, subjective labels felt much riskier. Experimenting and stumbling could make both me and OMCA look unprofessional, unconsidered, gimmicky, undisciplined—not museum material at all.

What helped most to break away from inertia was how the Museum staff often used the words “we don’t know.” Time and again, they let me know that they didn’t have all the answers yet, that they had more of a compass than a roadmap to our destination, that they were figuring out some of it as they went along, and that we had to live with ambiguity, contradiction, and not knowing until each issue could be resolved somewhere down the line.

I found this candid admission of not knowing helpful because I eventually saw that we were all together in this process of researching and finding and being a bit lost. All of us were out of our comfort zone, all of us were juggling multiple objectives, and all of us were trying to make our work dovetail with the larger goals and strategies of the Museum reinstallation. Knowing that we were all fumbling for answers created a safe environment for experimentation, innovation, and risk taking.
Despite my desire for specificity, I still had to speak in broad terms for that label. I was much more satisfied with the label I wrote for Bruce Connor’s 1957 mixed media assemblage entitled Spider Lady House. Bruce Connor’s piece ushers in an eccentric form to the home. The layering of buttons, beads, and nylon webbing suggest a sensual eroticism. But that eroticism is overt and materialistic, gathering dust with no hope of igniting attraction. In the process has been informed with the desire to reconcile the desire for transparency and accessibility with the desire to share specialized knowledge and terminology. This is one of the many tensions OMCA has experienced in this reinstallation process. Although the OMCA staff has been very thoughtful and conscious about the tradeoffs inherent in every choice about labels and language, there will be no doubt be misgivings and concerns about the new approach. If so, OMCA can take comfort in knowing that they took this path after serious, thoughtful consideration, and that the process has been informed with the desire to serve multiple constituencies, goals, and mandates and create a museum experience that pulls in and engages ever-larger and more diverse audiences.

When I was asked to join the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) team in their transformation project in 2006, it was a dream come true. OMCA is in my museum DNA—my museum career was born here—and the Museum’s early days shaped my passion for museums as agents of social change. So it was an interesting homeownering for me personally.

It also seemed to me that all the essential elements were in alignment—a harmonic confluence of sorts—to really make a difference:

• A remarkable building and gardens, designed as a convivial public place
• Its location in the center of Oakland, a quintessential 21st-century American city of social and cultural diversity, sophisticated and down-to-earth sensibilities, dynamically engaged in the major issues of our times
• Its roots as a “museum of the people” and its longstanding partnership with community advisory councils
• Its interdisciplinary mission to explore the cultural, environmental, and artistic heritage of California
• Visionary museum leaders who embraced the necessary experimentation and risk-taking

Visitors today expect to customize their own experiences and expect the information they access to be hyper-current. For museums that spend years designing permanent exhibitions and writing gallery labels that will remain unchanged for years to come, this is a serious problem. And whether or not they want to, museums are being forced to confront evolving public reactions to the value of “authority” and expanding definitions of “expert” and “expertise.”

Having worked with museums all over the country, I’ve heard Boards say they want to be “innovative,” to try something different and new, or to be a “new model” for museums, “new and better, without having to make sweeping changes that are too risky.” This is because when all is said and done, most museums are conservative organizations, unwilling to upset the status quo for fear of the disapproval of their Boards, colleagues, funders, or visitors. And most museums, with their refined sensibilities, just can’t tolerate the messiness required for a process of change and innovation.
OMCA leadership has embraced enthusiastically the experiments I’ve been eager to try out as the art gallery’s lead consultant for the Irvine Arts Innovation Project and creative director of the History Gallery and Natural Sciences Gallery transformations. We are testing new processes for idea development, exhibition design, fabrication, installation, and even project management. We are incorporating rigorous prototyping and experimentation into all aspects of the transformation. In the spirit of the creative commons, we are exploring every imaginable way to incorporate visitors and community voices into the installations, programs, and even the curatorial processes. Most importantly, we have the freedom to challenge long-held assumptions about what is “appropriate” in a museum, from the behavior of visitors to constraints on design.

We have designed the galleries to be flexible, more akin to stages in a theater that continually provide fresh offerings and perspectives. We have designed all of the displays so that objects, labels, and signs can be moved or taken down and changed quickly to accommodate new information, or in response to the ongoing prototyping and visitor research that will be taking place at the museum. If we find out that an exhibit element is confusing, or if new information surfaces, the museum will easily update the display. And we have made a commitment to being transparent—that is, we are letting visitors know about the museum’s goals, research practices, and methods of design and installation. This is not only because we are taking a more open approach to what we do and how we do it, but because—in the true California spirit—we are considering our many diverse visitors to be players and partners in the ongoing life and soul of this oakland museum of California. While most museums still just continue to talk about these ideas, OMCA is walking the talk. It’s not always a stroll in the park—we navigate among the potholes and ruts of “best practices” and we trip over roots and traditions, of expert authority. Like all experimental creative projects, the resulting installations and programs don’t always measure up to our visions and aspirations. But OMCA’s commitment to ongoing change, its rejection of the notion of permanent galleries, its experimentation with new processes and ideas, its convivial attitude toward its many communities, and its willingness to take risks and invite some messiness into the perfection, makes this an exciting place to be.
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Appendix A
Oakland Museum of California
Philosophy of Interpretation
Adopted May 24, 1990
Revised in 1995 and 2000

The integrity of the Museum as a vital educational resource lies not only in its capacity to foster an understanding and appreciation of the state’s history, art, and ecology, but also in its ability to help visitors identify and define their own role in contributing to the Californian experience. Programs foster curiosity, enliven the mind and spirit, encourage lifelong learning and, ultimately, a sense of stewardship toward this state.

Developing a Californian Identity
As the Museum of California, the Oakland Museum fosters the development and appreciation of California identity among its audiences. Appreciation of California identity contributes to fostering a sense of connection with the region’s cultural heritage and natural environment. Working with the Art, History, and Natural Sciences collections and special exhibitions, Museum programs help to identify and define Californians through multiple perspectives.

Programs explore the many dimensions that characterize the state’s diverse ecological and cultural communities. Some offerings focus on aspects of California that may not currently be represented in Museum collections. Such programs offer opportunities for research that is needed to develop collections or special exhibitions that are more representative of the region. Programs can serve as a focal point for California’s increasingly diverse communities and contribute to and expand the legacies of this unique state. They may also foster tolerance and understanding between communities. Visitors should have the opportunity to explore the special places California has in its lives as well as their active participation in shaping Californian present and future.

Supporting Diverse Audiences and Learning Styles
Museum audiences are diverse, and this diversity includes education, ability, disability, age, knowledge, social-economic status, language abilities, learning style preferences, world views, cultural background, and prior experience with museum collections. Therefore, the appropriateness of interpretive strategies needs to be carefully considered in order to ensure meaningful, relevant educational experiences for the wide spectrum of museum visitors. Such experiences can inspire lifelong learning and aspirations for children, youth, and adults.

Certainly noteworthy Museum programs can address the concerns of every audience. However, decisions about audiences and programs should be carefully analyzed to ensure that they do not, in effect, exclude those who historically have had no means to be in hospitable public places.

In general, the Oakland Museum of California should strive to make itself accessible to the widest possible audience. In its commitment to documenting and preserving California’s cultural heritage and natural environment, it seeks to reach Californians who believe in the value of preserving the state’s resources and who cognize the valuable contributions of its diverse communities. The education process can help develop an understanding and appreciation of the Californian experience that will relate to one’s own life experiences and values.
Recognizing Multiple Perspectives: Developing an Informed and Responsible Stewardship

The museum is a place where visitors develop an understanding of making informed decisions about the region’s cultural heritage and natural environment. Programs examine museums, collections, and cultural practices of California, past and present, from multiple perspectives to broaden and deepen visitors’ understanding of the region and create an informed citizenry.

In exploring California, visitors weigh alternative points of view to make informed decisions not only about conservation and preservation but also about potential changes and new directions for California. For example, programs that examine the cultural practices of past and current Californians from different perspectives encourage visitors to deepen their understanding of the complex and multidimensional social landscape of the region. Other programs that explore issues concerning California’s natural environment allow visitors to consider multiple perspectives and make informed decisions, not only about conservation and preservation, but also about potential changes in the environment as a result of the actions we take in our daily lives. While building visitors’ knowledge of the state, programs also strive to communicate the importance of using that knowledge. In this way, programs can motivate people to become involved in causes and more active in their communities.

Offering Diverse Interpretative Programs

Interpretive programs would be suited to the specific exhibition or collection and its intended audience and should also uphold the integrity of all the respective disciplines. Through these programs, we hope to stimulate the spirit of inquiry at various levels of visitor capability, mastery, and interest. Programs may include tours, exhibitions, classes, lectures, symposia, festivals, workshops, performances, collaborations, and partnerships with local schools or community organizations, outreach activities, online endeavors, and publications.

Creative, innovative, and experimental approaches to program endeavors are encouraged to inspire audiences at various levels of expertise. Every program incorporates specific interpretative strategies that actively engage the visitor in thoughtful contemplation of the collections and/or themes related to the program theme. School programs enhance and supplement classroom learning in ways that textbooks cannot by providing direct exposure to the ‘real’ and ‘original’ in art, history, and the natural environment. Programs are designed to speak to the magic and awe-inspiring power of collections and of the museum as a place of discovery that ignites the visitor’s curiosity, imagination, and creativity.

Outlining Intercultural Learning

One of the strengths of the museum is its multidisciplinary collections in California art, history, and natural sciences. Programs are designed to reflect the richly layered historical, aesthetic, and ecological perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of the state as well as make for a more enriching and comprehensive experience. This type of interdisciplinary learning is essential as the complex, modern world increasingly requires information from many different sources to make rational, informed decisions. Such programs also have the potential to accommodate diverse audiences, as some people have a natural proclivity toward one discipline or another. Multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary strategies increase the array of material for some audiences and open up new areas of interest for others. While interdisciplinary learning presents innovative educational opportunities, the unique perspective and integrity of each discipline as well as the shared processes should be clearly respected.
leading Active Engagement: Museum programs and exhibitions strive to actively engage visitors in intellectually, aesthetically, creatively, and emotionally rewarding ways. Programs should facilitate a process that actively engages visitors in an exploration of California themes and issues. For many visitors, this active engagement requires establishing personal relevance between the individual and the program topic. This personal relevance brings deeper, lasting meaning to people’s learning experiences. Diverse interpretive strategies appeal to personal relevance by examining collections from multiple perspectives that speak to the visitor’s life experiences, values, and interests. Active engagement is facilitated through a variety of program strategies that address visitors’ multiple interest processes, learning styles, and motivations for learning. It offers opportunities to use visual literacy, problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

Programs based on objects or exhibits provide self-engagement and personal relevance on two levels: on one level, visitors are engaged in a process of seeing, observing, and reflecting for reasons ranging from the personal or intellectual to the intellectual or aesthetic. On a second level, visitors consider the object, exhibit, or the specific subject in a broader context that includes multiple perspectives and layers of meaning. This can be achieved through diverse kinds of programs such as gallery talks or tours, storytelling, interactive performances, panel discussions, multimedia events, feedback, hands-on activities, cultural festivities, and other occasions that involve a variety of people who have unique contributions to share.

By using diverse interpretive strategies that involve active engagement, we strive to spark the visitor’s imagination and curiosity in the region, as well as foster understanding, appreciation, and the preservation of California’s cultural heritage and natural environment. Through this process, visitors build skills that they can apply to their endeavors in school, the family, and the greater community.

Addressing Community Objectives: The Oakland Museum of California recognizes its responsibility to provide memorable, educational experiences that support diverse communities in developing a greater understanding of one another and their roots in shaping a multicultural society. To that end, educational initiatives will be approached in the context of community objectives as well as learning objectives. Listed below are some of the community objectives generated by members of the Museum’s multicultural advisory council when discussing the value of the Museum to their communities:

- To develop multicultural impact and understanding
- To foster communications and understanding between communities/diverse audiences
- To understand California as a diverse and creative environment consisting of multiple voices and perspectives
- To develop a sense of ownership of the Museum as a place for “me, my family, and my community”
The Philosophy of Interpretation was revised in the summer of 1999 as part of an orientation process for new education staff. The Education Department experienced major staff changes, including some whoresigned, following the 1998 GOLD RUSH California's Gold Story Project. In reviving the Philosophy of Interpretation, staff felt it was important to address the Museum in the context of the demographic, economic, and social changes occurring within the state. Changes in this document reflect steps toward redefining the Museum as more responsive and relevant institution to a constantly changing California.

This document was revised in 2000 to incorporate the community objectives stated above, given our more extensive work with community-based endeavors since the 1999 revision. These revisions speak to the value and mission of Museum educational endeavors to serve the region's diverse communities and in the context of increasing demographic changes in California. The Philosophy of Interpretation was incorporated into an overall planning document for the Museum's transformation that was focused on creating a more visitor-centered Museum for the 21st century.

In 2010, we found the Philosophy of Interpretation continued to be relevant and useful given ever-increasing demographic changes and the growing impact of technology on how visitors learn and experience culture in their lives. The elements identified in this philosophy echo recommendations about the skills needed for 21st-century learning, as discussed in Daniel T. Willingham's A Few Minutes of Insight: How the Brain Learns and the Future of the Future and the Institute of Museum and Library Services report Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills. During the Museum's transformation of its galleries, "active engagement" was discussed in terms of providing participatory experiences and offering visitors opportunities to customize their experiences, generate their own content, and connect with other visitors. The term "relationship" is being re-considered as to whether this is an accurate and helpful term to use in defining our relationship with the environment. We are also exploring how we can integrate social media into our philosophy and practice. The principles of the Philosophy of Interpretation stay in tact as we work to evolve them further as a result of our ongoing research, societal changes, and collaborative efforts with our visitors and communities.

OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA MISSION STATEMENT
Our mission is to connect communities to the cultural and environmental heritage of California. Through collections, exhibitions, education programs, and public dialogue, we inspire people of all ages and backgrounds to think creatively and critically about the natural, artistic, and social forces that characterize our state and influence its relationship to the world.
Appendix B

Oakland Museum of California—Education Department

Art Gallery Renovation Evaluation Coding Key and Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODING KEY</th>
<th>LEARNING OBJECTIVES (L)</th>
<th>COMPREHENSIVE OBJECTIVES (C)</th>
<th>ART GALLERY GOALS (G)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Foster skills for those learners to experience and interpret art in a variety of ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Increase observational skills for experiencing art from multiple perspectives</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>Increase awareness of how art is made and the creative impulse in California</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>Develop greater understanding of how Californians see their lives as experiences in our diverse history and natural environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Develop multi-faceted respect and understanding through greater appreciation of artwork reflective of the experience of diverse people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Foster camaraderie among communities/ensure dialogue through shared experiences and public dialogue about art of CA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Develop a personal understanding of the gallery of California art as a place for &quot;me, my family, and my community&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Understand California as a creative environment embracing of multiple voices and perspectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Recognize that art is important for understanding diverse people's cultural roots and identities</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>Museum is welcoming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>Foster intergenerational learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>Attract and engage ethnically diverse community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>Foster a personal connection between artist and the visitor</td>
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</table>

Coding Criteria:

- "Diverse learners" refers to learners that specifically address different learning styles (e.g., Gardner's multiple intelligences, Mastery's 4MAT, etc.) and learning differences that are related to intergenerational exchange (e.g., "I don't need that, I don't"). This is true whether or not there is a positive or negative response ("I don't like it, but some people can appreciate it without it").
L1 (nameless observation skills) relates to instances when the visitor seems to be simply looking about; specifics in what he is looking for is deeper level (reflecting what they see), or when they are implicitly asking about the function of the activity in their observation process (as in... the sound adds to how I experience the piece, not just the overall experience [this seems more explicit in L3]).

L3 (how art is made) relates to instances when the visitor specifically invokes the thought process or actions of the artist, but not when they only talk about characteristics of the work itself (this would be L2).

A6 (history and environment) relates to instances when the visitor mentions aspects of history or the natural environment—when they connect the art to a larger "context" issue.

C1 (understanding respect and understanding) specifically relates to instances in which the visitor expresses understanding of art as reflecting diverse experiences, not more generally "how people need sound to appreciate art" (would be 1:11).

C3 (public dialogue) relates to instances that foster dialogue between people in their explicit through conversations, or through representing multiple voices in the activity, not when one person is respectfully expressing their opinion.

C5 (closeness of the gallery) incorporates all of the "C" elements (see below) A visitor response may be coded C1 if it's more specifically about creating a personal or community related need of the visitor and/or the accompanying child.

C4 (multiple voices and perspectives emphasize the diversity of aesthetic techniques, style and movement; in this past, as opposed to other elements of the environment.

C5 (note and identity) specifically relates to instances that address specific arts and ambitions, not personal memories.

G1 (welcome) is a broad category that can be used for instances that range from the general gallery experience (i.e., "I like the way the room is arranged") to specifics about experiences of the activity; "I found the music soothing, "It made me want to smile," "I love it," etc.). However, this experience must be stated clearly, "I like it here," and repeated at least every couple.

G2 (family and friends) relates to the family engaging in the art and/or activity together.

G3 (sociability between personal manners) relates to sociably diverse families and/or adults engaging in the art and/or activity.

G4 has been added. The definition is "to foster a personal connection between art and the visitor." This can relate to instances in which the visitor relates the work to a personal experience (i.e., when I got stuck in the drums), or when they talk about feeling as emotional or physical experience in the work ("When I see the sand, it's like I am inside the plane").

NOT G1, G2, or G6 reflects a negative response if we are specifically NOT meeting a goal (e.g., "it doesn't feel comfortable" would be NOT G6).
Appendix C
Sample Instrument for Conceptual Content—Art 360

Oakland Museum of California
Erinase Art Innovation Project

ADC_HUDSON (2006-2009) Interview #: Date: Date Collector:

Prompt: "Hi, we're trying an experiment about experiencing art in different ways. Please give it a try and we'll ask you some questions when you're done. Your feedback will be very valuable. Would you like to try it? Once agreement is reached, thank you. Go ahead and try it and we'll talk about what you've done.

General Observation Notes

1. Which activities did you try?

☐ walk (sensible)
☐ express (sensory)
☐ observe (gaze)
☐ search (flashlight)
☐ build (model)
☐ discover (use)

2. Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember seeing in the artwork?

Was there anything particularly interesting that you saw?

[ ] YES [ ] NO

[If YES] What did you find interesting?

[If YES] What made that interesting?
3. On a scale of 1-6, with 1 being not helpful at all and 6 being very helpful, how much would you say these activities helped you to see the artwork in a new way? (Circle one.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(1-2 or above) Can you say a bit about what you saw in a new way? ____________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Do you think there are enough different kinds of activities to help you see the artwork in a new way? (Circle one.)

YES

NO

If NO: What else would you want to see included? ____________________________________________________________________________________________

5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about this set-up of different approaches to experiencing art?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Okay, I have few final demographic questions.

Gender:
(Circle one.) Male Female

Please check your age range:
(Circle one.) 9-18 19-25 26-40 41-60 60+

How would you identify yourself racially/ethnically? ____________________________________________________________________________________________

Is this your first visit to the Oakland Museum of California? (Circle one.) Yes No [Free] How many times in the past 12 months have you visited? ____________________________________________________________________________________________

What was your reason for visiting the Museum today? (Circle that apply.)

- special exhibition
- bringing family
- bringing guests
- other ____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Thanks again. Your input has been very helpful.
Appendix C
Sample Instrument for Design Sustainability—Art 350

Oakland Museum of California
Innovate Arts Innovation Project

ADC_HUDSON [Underlined] 
Inter Semi -
Data Collection:

Preamble: "Hi, my name is _______ and I work here at the museum. Did you happen to try the activity around the sculpture about experiencing art in different ways? [If yes] Would you mind taking a couple minutes to answer some questions that would help us develop and improve this activity? Your answers are confidential. Thank you.

1. Did you notice the sign displaying the title of this set-up? (Select Ways to Experience Art)
   (Circle one) Yes  No

2. If you came upon this sign in the gallery without a museum person to greet you, would you feel welcome to try the activities?
   (Circle one) Yes  No
   Can you say a bit about why you answered ________ (yes/no)?

3. Were the directions for each of the activity stations clear?
   (Circle one) Yes  No
   Can you say a bit about why you answered ____________ (yes/no)?
Okay, I have few final demographic questions:

**Gender:**
(Circle one.)
Male  Female

Please check your age range:
(Circle one.)
8-15  16-25  26-40  41-60  60+

How would you identify yourself sexually/ethnically?

Is this your first visit to the Oakland Museum of California? (Circle one.)
Yes  No

If yes, how many times in the past six months have you visited?

What was your reason for visiting the Museum today?
(Circle that apply)
* Special exhibition (e.g. African, Regional Parks, LA Parks)
* Bringing family
* Bringing friends
* Other

Thanks again. Your input has been very helpful.
Appendix C
Sample Instrument for visitor preference—Art 380
Oakland Museum of California Series Arts Innovation Project
April 3, 2009 (VolShe, 6)

Please tell us what you think about "Six Ways to Experience Art?"
Circle all the activities you tried.

1. journal 6. video
2. music 5. magnets
3. glasses 4. model

Which was your FAVORITE activity?
Why?

Which did you like LEAST?
Why?

Circle the two activities that you think go together and should be next to each other.
1. journal 6. video
2. music 5. magnets
3. glasses 4. model

What would make "Six Ways to Experience Art" more fun for you to use?

Demographic questions
Gender (circle one): Male Female
Please circle your age range: 10-13 14-18 17-19
Is this your first visit to the Oakland Museum of California? (circle one) Yes No
How would you identify yourself socially/ethnically? __________________________
Thanks again. Your input has been very helpful.
Appendix C
Sample Instrument for Conceptual Content—Cups Activity In the art? Lounge
Oakland Museum of California
In the arts in Innovation Project
Located Lounge/CLIPS (6/28/09)

Interviewer: ___________________
Data Collector: ___________________

[Randomly select participants 13 yrs. and over]

Parameters: “Hi, we’re developing an activity for our art gallery. This is just a prototype, but you might see this in an art area where you can sit down and relax or talk together. Would you like to check it out and then when you are through, we can talk for a few minutes?” (Data agreement to be noted) Thank you. Why don’t you give it a try and please let me know when you are finished.

General Observation Notes

1. How interesting or engaging was this activity for you?
(click one)

1 2 3 4 5 6
not interesting/engaging very interesting/engaging

Can you say a bit about why you gave it a __________? 

2. Was there anything confusing for you?
(Circle one) yes no

[If yes] Can you say a bit about that...
3. If you were to tell a friend about what this activity was about, what might you tell him or her? Anything else?

4. Pick the sentence that best fits your experience. This activity...
   - didn't help me think about why some things are considered art and some things are not.
   - didn't affect my feelings about why some things are considered art and some things are not.
   - helped me think about why some things are considered art and some things are not.

   Can you say a bit about why didn't help i didn't affect i helped?

5. Would you recommend this activity to a friend? yes no

   Why or why not?

6. We know that visitors come to museums from all walks of life, how much experience do you have with looking at and thinking about art?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   [If 2 or higher] Can you tell me a bit about your experience?

7. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to say about this activity?
Okay, I have few final demographic questions.

Gender: (Circle one.)
Male          Female

Please check your age range:
(Circle one.)
13-18          19-25          26-40          41-60          60+

How would you identify yourself racially/ethnically? ________________________________

Is this your first visit to the Oakland Museum of California? (Circle one.)
Yes          No

[If yes] How many times in the past 6 months have you visited? __________________

What was your reason for visiting the Museum today?
(Circle all that apply.)
• special exhibition (e.g., "Rebel Parks... Schemed")
• bringing family
• bringing friends
• other ________________________________

Thanks again. Your input has been very helpful.
Appendix C
Sample Instrument for design and usability—Cups activity in art gallery

Oakland Museum of California–Education Department

We're trying an experiment for the new art gallery!
Your feedback is very valuable as we develop this activity.

After trying the 'cups' activity on the board, please complete the items below.

1. Did you read the short introduction at the top about 'intention'?
   (Circle one) yes [ ]

2. Was the short introduction about 'intention' confusing in any way?
   (Circle one) yes [ ]  no [ ]
   If yes, please say what was confusing:____________________________

3. This 'cups' activity has given me some new information about art.
   (Circle one) true [ ]  false [ ]
   If 'true,' please say more about what information the activity has given you.

4. This activity helps me feel I'm allowed to have my own opinion about art.
   (Circle one) yes [ ]  no [ ]

Demographics

Gender:
(Circle one) Male [ ]  Female [ ]

Please check your age range:
(Circle one) 13-20 [ ]  21-25 [ ]  26-30 [ ]  31-40 [ ]  41-60 [ ]  60+ [ ]

How would you identify yourself racially/ethnically?____________________________

Thank you!

A17
Appendix D

California Museum of California Art Department

Wall Text Content Generation Guidelines

A Panels

WORD COUNT

1-2 words

(California Land, California People, California Creativity)

Subhead: NO SUBHEAD

Body text: 60 words

CRITICAL CONTENT

Explain why the artworks are together in this way—i.e., work from the Big Idea.

Explain that the whole section is about LAND or PEOPLE or CREATIVITY.

Make clear reference to what is on view in the section within that three lines.

If there is a critical concept that should have gone into a subhead, include it in the body text.

Be sensitive to political impact of vocabulary, as perceived by different cultural groups: e.g., avoid use of "civilization," "America," etc.

DEFINITION OF THE LABEL TYPE

- A Panel: Addresses a major theme section of the Gallery

LABEL REVIEW POINTS

Tone (from Spanish and Chinese focus groups' recommendations, June 2008)

- Unreadable, bland, positive language.
- Uncommon, current terms—simple, yet inspirational.
- Unintelligible address (i.e., address the individual reader).
- Keep it accessible to middle school level.
- Uses tone that does not "talk down."

PURPOSE

All labels should help visitors to:

- Feel welcome.
- Read quickly, easily, and comfortably.
- Spend more time looking, looking more closely, and/or look again from a fresh perspective.
- Feel like they've learned something new.
- Explain something to or discuss something with their family and friends.
- Connect to something that resonates with them and recognizes something familiar about themselves and their world.
- Feel more at ease in creating their own responses.

(Adapted from OCMA LABEL DEFINITIONS, PURPOSES, STRATEGIES)
VISIT TEC CONTENT GENERATION GUIDELINES

**B Labels**

**WORD COUNT**
- Head: Up to 2 lines and/or up to 8 words maximum
- Subhead: Up to 3 lines and/or up to 10 words maximum
- Body text: Up to 10 lines and/or up to 100 words maximum (including quote)
- Photo: If photo is included, adjust word count as needed.

**CRITICAL CONTENT**

**Essential Elements**
- Explain why the artworks are together in this way—i.e., work from the big idea. This provides transparency. Feel free to write in FIRST PERSON.
- If the title of the bay appearing on the B Label needs explanation, explain within the first paragraph.
- If there are major subgroups but no G Label is explaining your grouping, address this in the B Label.
- Make direct references to works or view within first TWO lines (e.g., refer to what is seen in the Gallery and acknowledge what is NOT architecture, e.g., mostly walls faced in Gold Leaf, etc.).
- Speak to what the artists were doing (“humanizing” the artists); reading, documenting, experimenting, romanticizing.
- Address visitor questions, make content relevant to their life experiences. (See specific visitor questions by bay as provided in head copy.)

**DEFINITION OF THE LABEL TYPE**
- B Piece: Addressess a mid-destination within the Art Gallery

**OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS TO INCLUDE WHEN POSSIBLE**
- Within a conversational, personal tone, using active rather than passive voice.
- Avoid "quotes" rather than long paragraphs. One key point per paragraph.
- Engage the visitor in contemplating the exhibitors. Further, you might give visitors something to "look for and think about or even "solve."
- Be sensitive to political impact of vocabulary as perceived by different cultural groups; e.g., avoid use of "civilization" and "American."

(ADAPTED FROM OMACA LABEL DEFINITIONS, PURPOSES, STRATEGIES)
C Labels

**WORD COUNT**
- Head: Up to 1 line and/or up to 5 words maximum
- Sub head: Up to 2 lines and/or up to 20 words maximum
- Body text: Up to 3 lines and/or up to 50 words maximum (including quote)
- Photo: If photo is included, adjust word count as needed.

**CRITICAL CONTENT**

**ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS**
- Make direct reference to works on view within the first two lines.
- Explain why the artworks are sub-grouped together in this way within the first paragraph.
- Speak to what the artist was doing ("humanizing" the artist); narrating, documenting, experimenting, re-making.
- Make the connection what this subgrouping has to do with the Big Idea—i.e., to the information in the 6 label.
- Use active, direct, positive language, using conversational tone.

**DEFINITION OF THE LABEL TYPE**
- C Panel Label: Addresses a subgrouping within a mini-exhibition

**OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS TO INCLUDE WHEN POSSIBLE**
- Write in "charla" rather than long paragraphs. One keypoint per paragraph.
- Engage the viewer in contemplating the exhibit further. You might give visitors something to "look for and think about or even solve.
- Be sensitive to political impact of vocabulary as perceived by different cultural groups; e.g., avoid use of "civilization" and "America."
D Labels

**WORD COUNT**
Object Info: 7 lines are allocated for object information (e.g., "tonalional inflo
Text: None
Subhead: None
Body text: Up to 6 lines and/or up to 65 words maximum (including quote)

**CRITICAL CONTENT**
- **Essential information (must not be included in any other section)**
  - Must be directly related to the specific work on view.
  - This is what the artist was doing ("humanizing" the artist). Showing, documenting, experiment, manipulating—as indicated by source material.
  - Provide information about processes and materials if included by source material.
  - Provide historical context for the work if indicated by source material.

**IMPORTANT POINTS TO INCLUDE WHERE POSSIBLE**
- Write in a conversational, personal tone, using active rather than passive verbs.
- Engage the writer in contemplating the exhibit/review. You might give visitors something to "look for" and think about or even "solve.
- Be sensitive to social impact of vocabulary as perceived by different cultural groups; e.g., avoid use of "colonialism" and "Americo."