

Art Gallery as Public Space: A Work in Progress for the 21st Century

By Barbara Henry, Chief Curator of Education

The transformation of the Oakland Museum of California's Gallery of California Art included providing new approaches to experiencing art as well as on exhibiting the Museum's impressive multidisciplinary collections. With support from the James Irvine Foundation and its Artistic Innovation Fund, we conducted visitor research over a period of four years. We wanted to experiment with a variety of interpretive elements that engage visitors in novel types of art gallery experiences. Our goal was to create a more welcoming, comfortable, and lively art gallery where adults and family audiences from ethnically diverse communities would find new ways to participate in museum learning and return often to explore and be inspired by the art and artists of California.

In creating a museum for the 21st century, we realized the need 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 how technology has altered how people access and interact with information and culture on an on-demand basis. People want personalized and customized experiences and the opportunity to express their perspectives and connect with others in larger networks. We saw California's changing demographics as an opportunity to expand perspectives on the purpose of art, the languages we use, and the cultural and environmental factors that make a public gallery space truly welcoming and engaging for all visitors.

We involved more than 3,300 visitors and community members in prototyping activities, creative sessions, focus groups, and other research activities to explore new ideas and interpretive elements for the gallery. Experts who participated in this process included artists, writers, composers, musicians, comedians, psychologists, educators, dancers, technology specialists, youth, and community activists. In our research, we tested for elements that would engage visitors in interpreting art in a variety of ways, such as slowing down to observe works more closely and examining art from multiple perspectives. We also looked for ways to be more transparent about how art is made and reflects the human experience in our diverse history and natural environment.

The interpretive elements that we selected for the gallery’s opening in May 2010 were those that the research proved to be the most compelling for visitors. The following are a few examples of the new interpretive elements and what we learned from the formative research that continues to inform our ongoing development of the gallery.

Art Speak

Visitors can create their own opportunities for meeting California artists through this digital media interactive piece. In Art Speak, artists talk about their creative processes, sources of inspiration, and personal definitions of art. Visitors customize this orientation experience by making choices from an onscreen menu presented as a colorful selection of trilingual words. Each word leads to a series of five related clips from different artists. This experience is designed to humanize the artists



represented in the collection as well as to recognize the diversity that defines California art. As with all of the gallery’s interpretive elements, this interactive piece is presented in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

Art 360



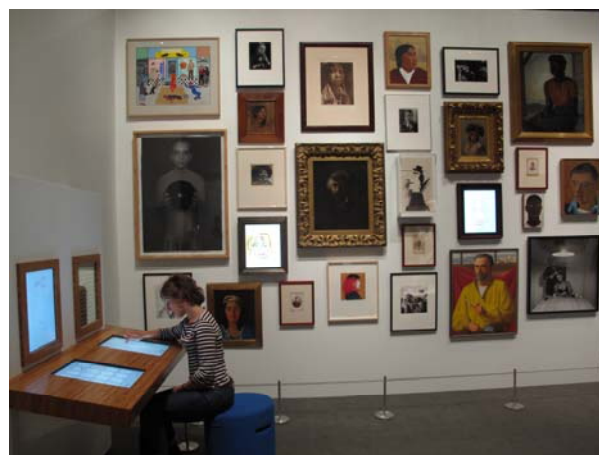
Art 360 One Work of Art — Many Experiences offers visitors a range of activities for careful observation of one work of art, Robert Hudson’s *Double Time*. Here is what can you do in this space: listen to an audio recording of the artist talking about the sculpture; view the work through

different colored lenses; listen to music related to the title *Double Time*; build a miniature version of the sculpture; touch metal samples similar to those used by Hudson; watch a video of the artist; and share reactions on a bulletin board. Providing this variety of art experiences makes the artwork accessible to all visitors, from those with a more limited knowledge of art to those with an advanced art background. Our research demonstrated that offering choices that give visitors new avenues for experiencing artworks inspires them to pay more attention to the works and to develop a heightened appreciation.

Draw Yourself with the YOU ARE HERE Portrait Wall

This installation is a salon-style presentation of artworks by California artists that features diverse representations of the figure and portraiture. Using a trilingual media tablet, visitors can create their own self-portraits that they can then upload and have appear on framed flat screens in the installation. Visitors can also have their creations sent to them by email.

This activity gives people the opportunity to see themselves in the gallery, contribute to the gallery content, and add to the diversity of artistic expressions represented. These capabilities were cited as important to visitors



in our research. Through this activity, visitors can also develop a better understanding of what it entails to create a self portrait and view other portraits with a keener awareness.

Visionary Road Trip — Self-Taught Artists' Exhibit



This digital media interactive piece extends the art experience beyond the Museum's walls and into California. Using a touchscreen table, visitors can discover 15 self-taught artists' outdoor environments and their locations on a map of California. The technology

offers layers of images and information on demand from visitors and brings these art installations to life. It also provides a way to experience California outsider art and site-specific works that no longer exist. This piece reinforces the exhibit message that anyone can be inspired to make art.

Is It Art? Loaded Lounge

Loaded lounges are places for visitors to sit, relax, gather, and encounter a provocative element that prompts a deeper engagement with art. The Is It Art? Loaded Lounge relates to California Pluralism (art since the 1960s) and invites visitors to explore the definition of art, just as artists were exploring new ideas, materials, and techniques. Visitors can vote on whether an object is or is not art and listen to prerecorded conversations of other visitors debating if “intention” makes something art. They can engage in further exploration with a digital interactive activity that focuses on objects from the Museum’s art, history, and natural sciences collections. The contents in this lounge were tested heavily and proved to be successful in inviting visitors of all ages to contemplate what makes something art.



Visitors like to see how others have voted and are interested in having access to multiple perspectives and the opportunity to share their own views.

Our research also led us to experiment with the iconic interpretive tool of the wall label. We approached the label as an opportunity to bring in multiple voices and perspectives to support the idea that there is not just one way to interpret a work of art. Walk through the gallery and you will find comments by art curators, artists, visitors, and our history and natural sciences curators. We also brought in a guest writer, the Bay Area artist Jaime Cortez, whose signed labels appear throughout the gallery. Through these voices, we explore the social and historical context of the work, the artist’s intention, and his or her artistic process, shown by our research to be the content areas of most interest to visitors. Some labels offer playfulness and wit in interpreting the works. We also used labels as moments for transparency as curators talk about why they selected certain works or what they find magical about the art. Our museum registrar and conservator

revealed what they look for in a painting that is often not readily noticeable to visitors. All of this contributes to creating a more comfortable and engaging setting for experiencing art. Seeing other people's differing perspectives helps visitors explore their own reactions and connect with others and the art.

The findings gleaned from our research informed deeper collaborations between the Museum's curatorial and education staff. One shared goal was to provide interpretive experiences in the gallery that are seamlessly integrated into the exhibition design and curatorial presentations. Technology as an interpretive tool is carefully applied to support the experience of art or access to artists. All this is designed to avoid jarring the visitor out of an aesthetic experience, which can happen in galleries where this integration is not fully realized.

We view the gallery as a dynamic entity that will change — in part as visitors animate the spaces and add their voices. The welcoming nature and liveliness of the gallery are conveyed through creative curatorial juxtapositions that include interdisciplinary presentations, along with diverse perspectives, multiple languages, opportunities for contributing content, and vibrant colors of the gallery. The colors used contrast with the traditional white-walled design of an art gallery, a look that youth who participated in our focus groups associated with a hospital and our community advisory council members viewed as a Western European aesthetic. Seating and gathering spaces are distributed throughout the gallery to encourage visitors to hang out, contemplate, and connect with each other and the art.

Our ultimate goal is for visitors to see themselves here and take ownership of this gallery. What we opened with forms our new baseline. Ongoing evaluation is informing our next steps. We have more work to do as we continue to evolve the gallery in collaboration with our visitors, our artists, and our diverse communities. We invite them to claim this gallery as their public gathering space and temple of their musings for the 21st century.