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## **OBSERVATIONAL STUDY**

### **The New Museum for Contemporary Art & The Museum of Chinese America (MOCA)**

#### Introduction & Methodology

The goals of this study were to observe and compare visitor behavior in two contrasting cultural institutions. I conducted the study at The New Museum for Contemporary Art and The Museum of Chinese America (MOCA), both located on Manhattan's Lower East Side. In order to draw legitimate comparisons from my observations, I chose to visit each institution on the same day of the week and at the same time of day. I visited New Museum on Tuesday, February 14 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. I visited MOCA one week later, on Tuesday February 21 from 2 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. I spent twice as much time at New Museum, since it is a larger institution.

I moved through every space of both museums, from the galleries to the gift shop and café. At New Museum, I took the elevator to the fifth floor and worked my way down to the lobby. At MOCA, I started in the temporary exhibit and then moved to the core exhibit, both of which occupied the ground floor.

In each space, I tracked and timed randomly selected visitors as they moved through the exhibitions. I used the stopwatch on my smartphone to time how long visitors spent in front of individual components and recorded these times by hand in my notebook. I noted roughly how many visitors were in each gallery; whether they were alone, part of a couple, family or group; their gender, estimated age and nationality (where possible).

Finally, I conducted face-to-face interviews with randomly selected adult visitors in order to capture reactions to the exhibits and gauge a better understanding of visitor behavior. I stopped three solo visitors at New Museum and a family of two at MOCA. I asked open-ended questions and recorded responses on the spot. Upon arrival to both institutions, I asked the employee at the ticket desk the same question: How busy is the museums usually at this time of day? I used their answers to contextualize my observations about visitor population, behavior and experience.

#### Exhibition Design

The exhibitions in both New Museum and MOCA featured a comprehensive amount of content and material. There were two temporary exhibits on view at New Museum. The fifth floor exhibit "Shabby but Thriving" featured a new two-channel video staged within an installation. The video, titled "Living Room," was projected onto one of the walls of the gallery. The audio

from the video was loud and muffled. The installation also included sculptural objects: A couch positioned in the center of the gallery; fishing lures and lines stretched across the walls. On the wall facing the elevator was a large-scale panel description of the installation. The text introduced the artist, AK Burns, and itemized the components of the installation. There were no additional labels on any of the walls.

Raymond Pettibon's exhibit "A Pen Of All Work" occupied the three main floors of the museum. The exhibit featured close to eight hundred drawings and objects, ranging from early self-portraits to artist sketchbooks to short videos. Every floor of the exhibit presented the same large-scale panel description of the collection, introducing the artist and offering an overview of the works on view. On the walls of each gallery were smaller labels, detailing individual components. The text on these labels was very small, almost illegible, and the labels themselves were easy to miss. The material on all three floors was grouped by theme, rather than by date. The exhibit presented such an extensive variety of works that every floor felt like a complete survey in itself.

At MOCA, two exhibits occupied the ground floor. The core exhibit, "With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America," was spread out across several rooms, while the temporary exhibit "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America," occupied one large gallery.



*At every place setting there was a pop-up booklet outlining different cooking styles and regional culinary traditions*

The temporary exhibit featured a wide variety of components. In the center of the gallery was a monumental dinner table, decorated with plates, cutlery, ceramic vessels and other sculptural cooking utensils. At every place setting there was a pop-up booklet outlining different cooking styles and regional culinary traditions. Benches were set up around the table to accommodate visitors and facilitate interaction with the various components on display. A video and two photo slideshows were projected onto the walls of the gallery. The audio from the video projection boomed through the gallery, making it virtually impossible to ignore or dismiss.

The core exhibit presented an impressive

collection of objects and artifacts, including ceramics, photographs, videos, furniture, clothing and textiles. The exhibit was organized thematically and chronologically

by section, carrying the visitor on a historical journey, beginning in the early nineteenth century and ending in the present day. A large-scale panel description, written in both English and Chinese, marked the start of every new section of the exhibit pathway with catchy titles like “Go East! Go West!” and “Welcome to Chinatown!” Throughout the exhibit, short historical footage was presented on small screens built into the walls of the gallery. A longer video, featuring modern-day documentary footage, was projected onto a thin screen that hung from the ceiling in the last room. The overall break-down of the exhibit into smaller, more digestible sections allowed for visitors to move from section to section and still get a sense of completion from each, without feeling overwhelmed.

### Observations

The exhibitions in both New Museum and MOCA varied in their physical design and organization. At both institutions, the main exhibits featured expansive collections of materials, densely packed into display boxes and clustered in tight groups on the walls. However, unlike the Pettibon exhibit, MOCA’s core exhibit had a designated pathway, designed to help visitors navigate the space and engage with the overwhelming wealth of materials on view. With a distinct pathway to follow, visitors moved through the exhibit in the same way, from beginning to end. Hence, the flow of visitor traffic was more predictable at MOCA than at New Museum, where visitors did not move in a linear way. Instead, visitors tended to wander somewhat randomly from gallery to gallery. For this reason, I would suspect that the experience of the content was very different from visitor to visitor depending on the direction they chose to move through the exhibit.

On weekday afternoons, New Museum is generally busier than MOCA. On the Tuesday I visited New Museum, there was a long line to purchase tickets, and the lobby was crowded with people. The ticket employee told me that afternoons are usually busier than mornings, even during the week. She explained that the museum is normally “packed” on the weekends, especially when the weather is nice. MOCA, on the other hand, was virtually empty, with very few people in the galleries. The ticket employee explained that weekdays are generally slow, while weekends see a lot more traffic, particularly families with young children. I followed up: Is today more busy than usual at this time? It was, seeing as some weekday late afternoons see no visitors at all.

The visitor profile was different in each museum. On average, the New Museum visitor was a technologically savvy millennial roughly between the ages of 18 and 25. He or she was either solo or with a partner. The MOCA visitor, on the other hand, was part of a family, either a parent or child. The one middle-aged woman I observed during my visit might have been an

anomaly in the trend. For both museums, it would be hard to make a generalization about visitor nationality, given the wide range that I observed, from American to French to Chinese.

Even with so few visitors to MOCA, it was apparent that the museum attracts mostly families. During my visit, between 2 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., a total of 9 people visited, among whom there were three families: An American family consisting of a father and two young girls; a French family consisting of a mother and two young boys; and a Chinese-American mother and daughter. I stopped them as they were leaving the museum and asked: What made you stop in today? The daughter explained that she had heard about the temporary exhibit and wanted to “check it out.” Her mother was in town and she thought it would be a good “mother-daughter thing to do.”

The MOCA visitor profile that I observed was consistent with the museum’s mission of serving families, children and educators. There was evidence within both the temporary and core exhibits of purposeful physical design that promotes shared learning among children and their



*Visitors were prompted to share their outlook by filling out a colored notecard and hanging it on a display wall*

families. For instance, at the end of the core exhibit, visitors were asked to tell the museum of ongoing projects and personal stories that represent the journey we all make in finding community and home. Visitors were prompted to share their outlook by filling out a colored notecard and hanging it on a display wall. A small desk and chairs were stationed to the right of the wall, where visitors could sit and respond to the prompt. The

family-friendly focus is also reflected in the museum’s various incentives for families to participate in the life of the museum. These include discounts for children two and up, reduced membership fees for “Cool Culture families,” and activity guides for parents.

Visitors to each museum had different ways of engaging with the content of the exhibitions. The tracking and timing study at New Museum revealed that visitors tended to experience the exhibits through the lens of a personal device, namely smartphones and professional cameras. On every floor of the museum, I found that the majority of visitors had a smartphone in hand, though the museum states on its website that phones are not permitted in the galleries. Out of the five visitors I observed on the fifth floor exhibit “Shabby But Thriving,”

three used their smartphones to take photos of the installation. One girl took a photo of the text description, without actually reading it.

The use of personal devices was far more pervasive in the Pettibon exhibit. I found that visitors only came to a full stop in front of individual works only if they were taking a photo. On the fourth floor in particular, visitors were drawn to a small-scale drawing of President Trump, and a many stopped to take a photo. One girl mounted her smartphone onto a selfie-stick



*Visitors were drawn to a small-scale drawing of President Trump*

to stage a selfie in front of the drawing. The third floor showcased a video projection in a separate darkly illuminated side room, which visitors generally choose not to enter. Inside the room, there were three small, cube-sized stools for viewing accommodation. Among the few who did enter, one used his smartphone to record about 10 seconds of the projection, while another had large headphones on, presumably blasting music. The only visitor who stayed for



*One visitor used his smartphone to record about 10 seconds of the video projection*

the full duration of the video sat hunched over her phone texting. Even though New Museum has a no photography policy, the security guards on duty in the galleries did not stop visitors from taking photos. Overall, the use of personal devices by visitors did not seem to cause traffic in the galleries. Visitors were generally discrete about taking photos, so as not to obstruct other visitors' view of the works. Even in the lobby café, visitors kept to their devices, scrolling through their smartphones and tablets as they enjoyed cakes and coffees.



As I moved through the museum, I approached three visitors to inquire about their use of personal devices. I stopped three women who had taken photos throughout the exhibit and asked: How do you decide what to photograph? I hoped to understand whether the smartphone or camera helped visitors engage with the content or whether it distracted them from it. Did the device get in the way of appreciating the art on view? I suspected that the intent was to retain a personal, permanent record or memory of the visit to look back on later, and/or to share the viewing experience with friends and social media communities. The answers I received seem to confirm my suspicion. One woman explained that she had taken a photo of the text description because she would “read it later.” Another woman told me that she only takes photos of the “things I want to remember.” The last girl I spoke to said she intended to post a photo from the exhibit on Instagram.

To cater to this audience of technologically savvy millennials, I would have expected New Museum to play up its engagement with technology in the galleries.

Millennial audiences expect more technological offerings such as iPhone apps, interactive touch screens and displays, and installations loaded with motion-sensors and special projectors. For the Pettibon exhibit, an audio guide was available on site upon request at



*The New Museum visitor is a technologically savvy millennial*

the ticket desk (a downloadable version is available online), though I did not see anyone using it.

The visitors to MOCA seemed to engage more actively with the content of the exhibits. They spent more time in front of displays and reading descriptions, without the intervention of personal devices. In fact, there were no smartphones or cameras in sight. Visitor engagement was prompted by the interactive opportunities, particularly the dinner table installation in the temporary exhibit and the wall display of notecards in the core exhibit. The children I observed seemed to enjoy the tactile experience of the sculptural components on display, as opposed to more passive viewing of video components. The mother and daughter I tracked also seemed to be more captivated by the table installation than the video projections. They read through the booklets at every place setting and talked quietly to each other. While the New Museum visitor engaged with the exhibits with the assistance of a personal device, the MOCA visitor preferred the more direct, even tactile experience of the exhibited material.

## Conclusion

On an average Tuesday afternoon, the New Museum visitor might leave with a retrievable record of their experience. Their smartphone or camera might store evidence of their trajectory through the museum: Their favorite display, a selfie or group photo. The MOCA visitor, on the other hand, might not come away from their visit with a tangible record, but rather with some part of the

experience embedded in memory, with the more impermanent but equally impactful resonance of a family-focused learning experience.



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