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### Observational Study: Viewing Video in a Museum Setting

A museum's presentation of large amounts of objects tends to steer its patrons towards a mode of viewing that minimizes the amount of time spent with each individual item. A 2001 study of the time 150 visitors spent at 6 paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art found a mean duration per painting of 27.2 seconds<sup>1</sup>. As the researchers Smith and Smith point out, even this brief average time is somewhat distorted by a small number of patrons who spent up to two minutes per work. This is reflected in a median of only 17 seconds spent viewing an object<sup>2</sup>.

A fleeting period with a piece of art such as a painting or sculpture would allow at least a basic understanding of the work's composition and aesthetic agenda – “ah, it's a romantic portrait of Kurt Cobain, next”<sup>3</sup>. However, if this viewing habit also applies to time based works that last longer than 30 seconds, a diminished experience and understanding of the work might occur, potentially to the disservice of the piece. How visitors interact and encounter time based art in museums – video, film, performance, sound art – should have implications in how it is presented in such institutions. Further, it may transform (or more accurately, already has transformed) how artists create work to account for a constantly changing audience that only experience a short excerpt of the work.

This study attempts to analyze the amount of time that museum patrons spend with video artworks. Since multiple people would be viewing the work simultaneously it was determined impossible for the study's lone observer to precisely time each visitor's

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Jeffrey K. and Lisa F. Smith, “Spending Time On Art,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 19:2 (2001) 230.

<sup>2</sup> Smith and Smith, 231.

<sup>3</sup> This researcher's experience at the New Museum's Elizabeth Peyton exhibit, December 2008.

interaction with the work. Therefore, the piece's audience was split up into four sections based on their duration and viewing habit. Quadrant One is patrons who spent less than 30 seconds watching the video. This includes people who walked near the video and then turned and left immediately. Quadrant Two is comprised of those who watched a couple of minutes of the video, but left before it ended. Quadrant Three consists of visitors who came in the middle of the video's loop and then left when it ended. They did not wait for the video to restart to watch the beginning of the work to view the section they had not seen. Quadrant Four comprises visitors who watched the entire video, including waiting through the pause for it to cycle through again allowing them to catch the start of the video.

This facet of time based media in museums, that they end and start repeatedly throughout the day, makes a study of visitor duration quite different than the research of Smith and Smith which observed patron's interaction with paintings. Paintings are outside of temporality (obviously not the painting's carrier which exists in time and has a historical narrative, but its essence or what art conservator Cesare Brandi called an artwork's "appearance"), but videos end. The grouping of the audience into the quadrants described above allows for an examination of how patrons react to a work's ending – normally a sign to leave the theater or change the channel.

As per the instructions of the project two differing forms of museums were observed: an art museum, PS1 in Queens; and an historical/cultural museum, The Museum of Jewish Heritage located in Manhattan's Battery Park. To control the variables of the study both observations occurred on a Monday from 12:50 to 1:35. Further, it was decided to compare video only. While the impetus of this study was a consideration of how all time based media are presented and experienced in a museum setting, evaluating a video piece with sound art might introduce enough variables to make any statistical comparisons valueless. Both video works observed were multi channel pieces that incorporated archival footage and talking head interviews. They were both located in

black box rooms positioned near the museum's entrance. Since the rooms were dark, no attempt was made to record visitors' gender or age.

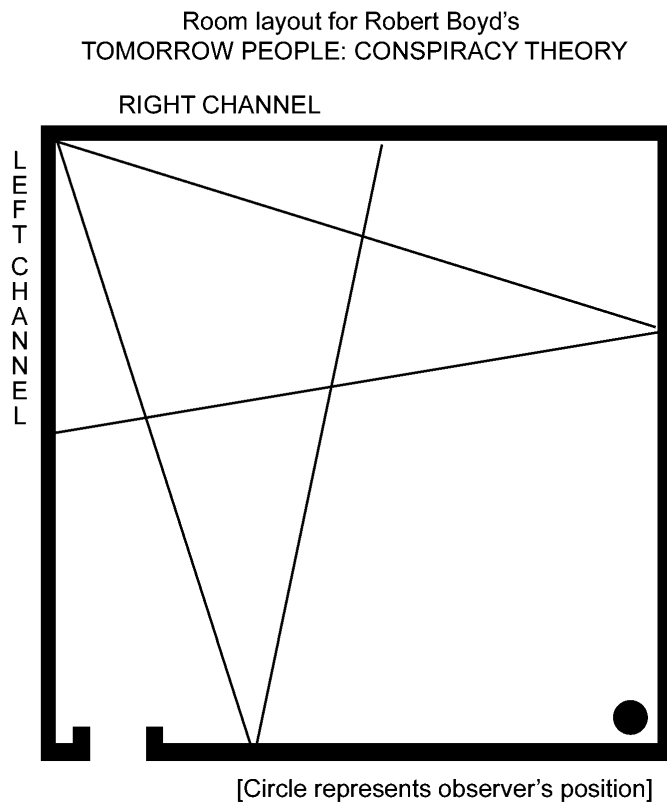
The visit to PS1 occurred on Monday, January 26, 2009. The work observed was Robert Boyd's TOMORROW PEOPLE: CONSPIRACY THEORY, which is a two channel video from 2008 lasting 10.5 minutes.



Robert Boyd, TOMORROW PEOPLE: CONSPIRACY THEORY, 2008, 10.5 minutes

It was located to the left of the museum's main entrance. While the room was isolated from the main hallway, its soundtrack bled outside the room acting as a call, which drew in visitors to the otherwise easily missed side room. Outside the space was a description of the video including its date, running time, and a brief exegesis. The room was square, kept dark, and had no chairs or places to sit. Some visitors sat on the ground, but most stood in a scrum near the door. Most visitors were alone or in couples. The only larger configuration was group of five that appeared to be a teacher and 4 college students on a class trip. The end of the piece was clearly delineated and there was an approximately 20 second pause before it started again.

The researcher sat on the ground in the corner opposite from where the two channels of the video image intersected. Halfway through the observation, the researcher realized that the group of people in the doorway obscured an accurate count of the audience. The possibility exists that someone walked in and out of the room, but was hidden behind people standing in front of them. The researcher decided not to change his location as that would have introduced variables into the observational study and therefore accepted the very slight risk that a patron was left uncounted.



The results of the observation are:

Quadrant 1: 8 visitors

Quadrant 2: 9 visitors<sup>4</sup>

Quadrant 3: 9 visitors

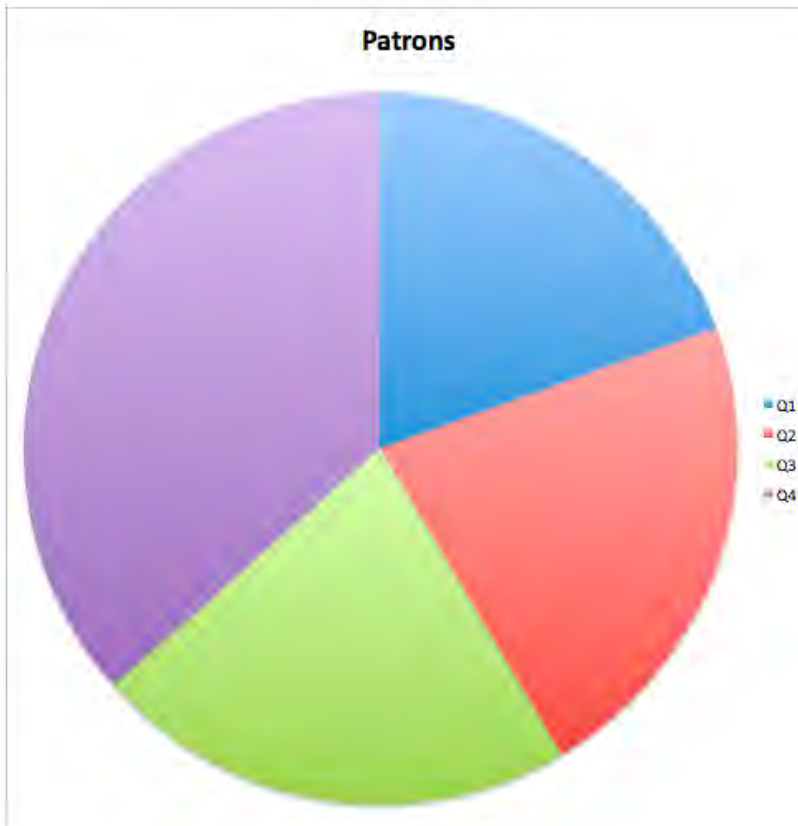
Quadrant 4: 15<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One person sat through the pause at the end but did not stay through everything they had missed. The decision, therefore, was to include them in this quadrant instead of quadrant 3.

Total: 41 visitors.

That results in the following percentages: Q1 – 19.5% (blue), Q2 – 21.9% (red), Q3 – 21.9% (lime), and Q4 – 36.5% (lavender).



**Distribution of audience at PS1**

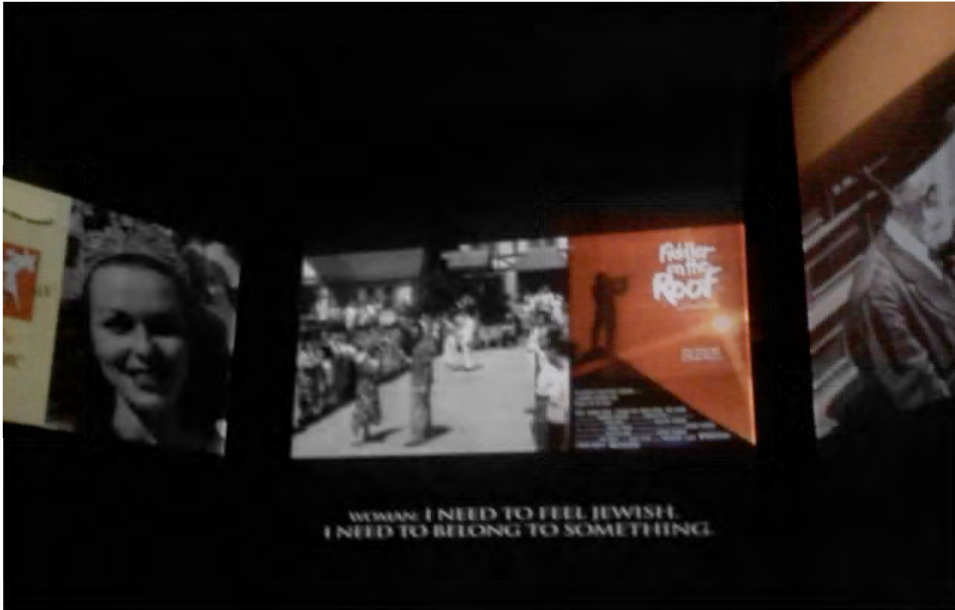
The visit to the Museum of Jewish Heritage occurred on Monday, February 9, 2009. The work observed was an untitled<sup>6</sup> introductory video. The three channel piece is undated and while some form of video has been playing in the rotunda since the museum's opening in 1997, a description of it published in 2007 describes different scenes<sup>7</sup> suggesting it is periodically updated. It is approximately 9 minutes long.

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<sup>5</sup> 9 of these visitors came in right at the beginning of the video so had no need to wait through the pause after the piece ended.

<sup>6</sup> According to the website of video design company Woo Art, the piece is called MEMORY AND HOPE. "Exhibit/Installation," Woo Art International, Inc., Woo Art International, Inc., 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.woart.com/flash/woart.swf>>.

<sup>7</sup> Van Buskirk, Jim, "At the Museum of Jewish Heritage," *Identity Envy: Wanting to be Who We're Not: Creative Nonfiction by Queer Writers*, Haworth Press, 2007, 59.



**Untitled introductory video, Museum of Jewish Heritage, undated, approx. 9 minutes**

The video was located to the right of the main entrance and is the entryway through which visitors walk to the main exhibit of the museum. The room is hexagonal, mostly kept dark (though light bleeds in from the main door and the higher production values of the video presentation automatically bring up the lights at the end), and there are two benches to sit on across from the screens. There was no description of the piece but the doorway did have two quotes from the Torah: Deuteronomy 25:17<sup>8</sup> and Jeremiah 31:17<sup>9</sup>. The running time was determined by the researcher. The end of the piece was also clearly delineated with a 30 second pause between screenings.

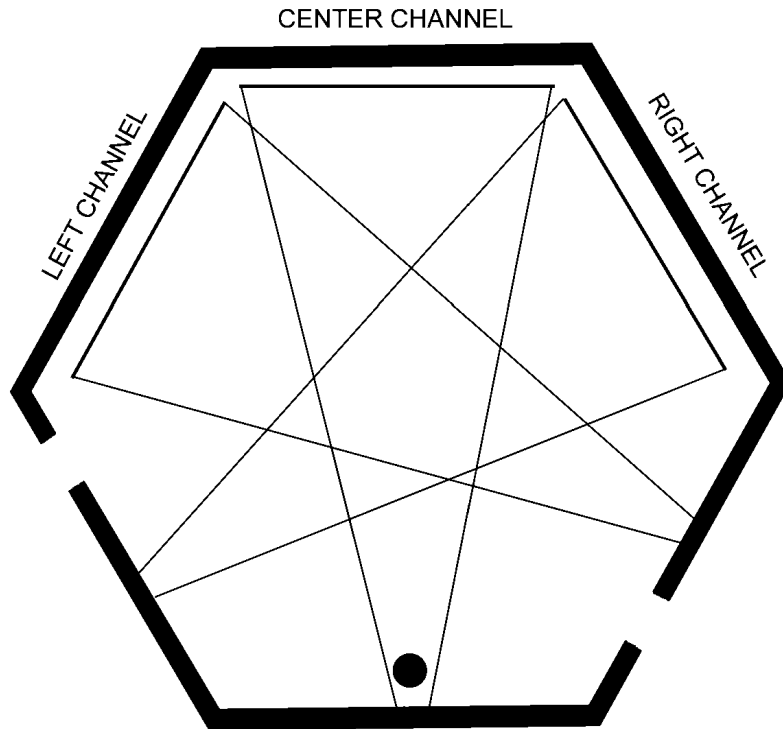
Since the room is the portal through which people enter the main floor exhibit, the vast majority of the people observed were a class walking through the room to somewhere else in the building. A couple of employees also passed through on their way to work. Neither of these groups paid any attention at all to the video on screen. Of the visitors who were actually there for the exhibit one was alone while the others were a group of four.

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<sup>8</sup> "Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt."

<sup>9</sup> "And there is hope in your end, said the LORD, that your children shall come again to their own border."

Room Layout for the Museum of Jewish Heritage's  
triple projection introduction video in the Rotunda



The results of the observation are:

Quadrant 1: 18 visitors<sup>10</sup>

Quadrant 2: 4 visitors<sup>11</sup>

Quadrant 3: 0 visitors

Quadrant 4: 0 visitors.

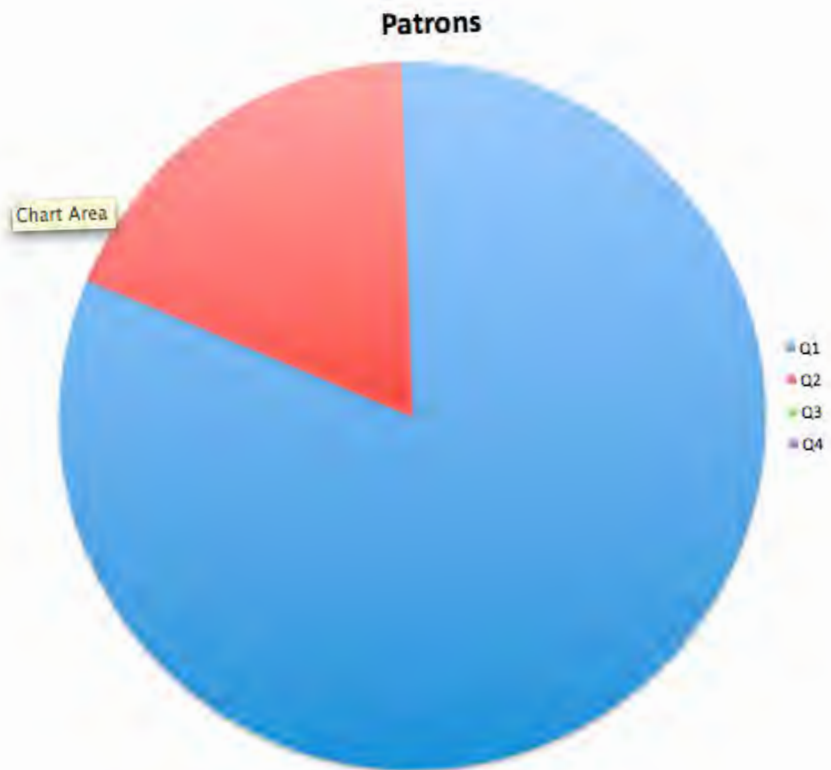
Total: 22 visitors.

That results in the following percentages: Q1 – 81.8% (blue), Q2 – 18.2% (red), Q3 – 0% (lime), and Q4 – 0% (lavender).

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<sup>10</sup> One actual visitor, a group of 14, and three individual employees

<sup>11</sup> This group of 4 was in the room when the researcher arrived, thereby raising the undeterminable possibility that they belong in Q3.



**Distribution of audience at the Museum of Jewish Heritage**

The small sample size, especially at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, limit any statistical comparisons between the sites and any claims that might be made from these results. Future studies would need to increase their sample size through longer durations of observation and multiple visits. Further, regardless of the morphological and locational similarities of the two pieces, three major differences make comparisons difficult. First, while they are both nearby the main entrance of their respective museums, the room at PS1 that housed the Boyd video was slightly off to the side and was as far as one could walk in that direction. On the other hand, the rotunda at the Museum of Jewish Heritage was in the middle of the main thoroughfare of the museum creating a vastly disparate traffic flow between the two spaces. Secondly, the two pieces had very differing exhibition runs; the piece at the MJH has been running in some form for over ten years while the Boyd piece only played for three months. Similarly, the two videos are given different emphasis in the museums' press making the Boyd piece at PS1 a



destination for visitors while the MJH video is unnamed and devalued. Future studies should examine works with similar exhibition runs and approximate amount of press. The third difference is based in the organizing instructions of this observational study, which was to analyze two different forms of memory institutions. This results in two different audiences – an art crowd at PS1 and one interested in history, politics, and Judaica at the MJH – that might be of varied enough demographics and behavior to resist examination. Therefore, future study on this issue should investigate more homologous institutions.

Regardless, from these visits a preliminary conclusion is possible. This is only very tentatively being asserted, but comparing the evidence from PS1 with the Smith and Smith study suggests that museum visitors spend more time with time based art works than with paintings. While the mean time in the Smith and Smith study is only 27.2 seconds, 80.5% of the visitors at PS1 spent more time than that at the Boyd video. Clearly there are multiple reasons why comparing these two studies are invalid – different sample sizes and methodologies, comparing a precise time with an estimated time – but the results are intriguing enough to warrant more study on this issue.

Future studies to more accurately determine how long museum patrons spend with time based media, must increase the duration and number of visits to increase sample size. Also, a stop watch or other device should be used to determine exactly how long each visitor viewed the piece allowing for comparison to studies such as Smith and Smith. Such research should analyze multiple videos in the same museum to reduce the possibility that one particularly popular work gives distorted results<sup>12</sup>. It might be useful for museum curators to know how the environment of the video – presented singly in a

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Pipilotti Rist's PUT YOUR BODY OUT at MoMA that by the nature of its welcoming room design, seductive content and boffo press had large audience that stayed, relative to a painting, a long time. Also, its large crowds make an observational study like this one unfeasible as individual stays would be exceedingly difficult to measure.

black box versus in a well lit room clashing with other works – affects time spent to allow for the proper staging that a piece requires.

### **Appendix – Additional observations on the presentation of moving images at PS1 and the Museum of Jewish Heritage**

PS1, due to the nature of the building it resides in with its numerous small rooms, is an ideal venue to see moving images in a museum setting. The various small rooms are easily converted into dedicated black box spaces for a video piece. This encourages visitors to spend longer time watching the entire video as it limits sound bleed and any visual distractions. The larger group shows do include moving image works, but the layout of the group show up at the time, located the two video pieces – both playing on flat screen monitors hung on a wall – in a room together. This did somewhat isolate the works, but it allowed for greater concentration on the video. Unfortunately, one of the two video pieces, Ana Mendieta's UNTITLED GUNPOWDER WORK #7, was originally shot on Super8 but shown stretched to fill the screen. Add in a poorly compressed digital transfer to DVD and the piece was done a great visual disservice.

As an aside, since PS1 is not a collecting institution but an exhibition space, they do not own the works they show. As such, there is a sign by the ticket counter explaining that since they do not control the copyright of the work that photography is not allowed. In an unintentionally brilliant comment on the absurdity of the current permissions culture that exists in relation to copyright, the Boyd piece observed is entirely comprised of appropriated images, found footage, web videos, and a song by Kylie Minogue. In the spirit of which Boyd's piece was made the researcher felt no compunction in flouting PS1 policy to take the photo of the video shown above.

In the rest of the Museum of Jewish Heritage's main exhibit moving images are used in two ways. There are large CRT monitors embedded in the walls that show talking head documentaries all of whose sound is turned up enough to create a slightly cacophonous effect. There are brief notes next to the monitor telling the subject of the documentary and interviewees are attributed with on-screen credit. However, there are also small monitors that show brief loops of archival footage to emphasize a particular historical moment in the Holocaust. The footage used here is not ascribed to a filmmaker, located geographically or given a date. This is counter to the manner in which archival photos are shown in the exhibit – here the photographer is named and usually a location is given. That the photos' origins are described, but not the moving images suggest future research might be worth undertaking to examine the different manner museums treat moving images versus photos and paintings.

Another exhibit in the MJH, *The Shooting of Jews in the Ukraine*, heavily utilizes recent interviews with survivors and witnesses of the nature of the genocide in the Ukraine during WWII. It includes 4 flat screen monitors with unedited interviews and 8 that have excerpts of the interviews edited around a particular element of the event. Each monitor is showing around 30 minutes of material, none of which is replicated on another screen. The total of all of the interviews is 6 hours and 24 minutes. As the footage is running on a loop and the sound comes through a hand held speaker that must be held up to one's ear, it is very unlikely that anyone would sit through all of the interviews on exhibit. Which raises the questions of why show all of this footage if no one is going to watch it all, for whose benefit is this being screened, and is this the best way to experience these interviews?