

CAML CINE-GT 3049

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Observational Study: The Shed and Museum of the City of New York

I. Introduction

I conducted my observational study at the Shed, a contemporary art centre opened last year at Hudson Yards, and the Museum of the City of New York, a local history museum located in the Upper East. I visited the two institutions on March 10th at the afternoon.

The Shed commissions, produces, and presents a wide range of activities in performing arts, visual arts, and pop culture. The cultural centre is maintained by an independent non-profit cultural organization of the same name. The Shed features several architectural features, including a retractable shell that creates a space, named The McCourt, for large-scale performances, installations and events; a 500-seat theatre; and two levels of exhibition space. For my observational study, I mainly visited the “Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” exhibition held on the 2nd floor and 4th floor.

The Museum of the City of New York was founded by Henry Collins Brown, in 1923 to preserve and present the history of New York City, and its people. It is a private non-profit organization which receives government support as a member of New York City's Cultural Institutions Group. The museum hosts the "New York At Its Core" permanent exhibition, the first-ever museum presentation of New York City's full history, and 7 other current exhibitions.

II. Methodology

I used the stopwatch on my phone to track how long people stay in each place and each artifact. I took photos of the exhibitions and visitors, as well as taking notes on my phone and also recorded some of my observations via voice recorder. I also interacted with the staff in both institutions. However, I did not interact with visitors in the two institutions.

III. Observations

- 1) Do visitors read labels first, or look at objects first? How long do they read for? Look for?

The Shed: A series of objects are often labelled together either next to the far left or right object. Whether visitors read labels or look at objects first is highly depended on

their walking paths. In terms of individual objects, people tend to look at objects before they read labels. However, for objects with a detailed introduction on the label, visitors tend to read the labels before they look at objects. Usually, visitors read labels for 10-30 seconds and look at each object for 40-90 seconds. It is worth noting that people spend more time on installations than paintings, and they also tend to walk around the installations instead of standing still in front of paintings. For one particular object—
—an installation with a written poem, people normally spend 90-150 seconds looking at it. In terms of interaction, younger visitors are more likely to communicate with each other than elder ones.

MCNY: Most visitors read labels before looking at objects. Compared to visitors at the Shed, visitors at MCNY spent more time reading labels and introduction pads, but less time looking at objects. They tend to look at objects in groups instead of individually. They also stayed longer at each section of a room since the objects are displayed in a higher density than they are at the Shed. Usually, visitors read labels for 30-60 seconds, and look at objects for approximately 20-40 seconds. For “The City Within: Brooklyn Photographs by Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb” exhibition, most people only looked at the photographs without reading labels. Visitors are much more communicative at MCNY than those at the Shed.

- 2) Moving image displays: is seating given? Are running times displayed? How is the illumination?

The Shed: There are moving image displays, with seats given for all of them. Running times are always displayed. A relatively lower level of illumination is offered.

MCNY: There are moving image displays, with seats given for about half of the displays. In the exhibition “City/Game: Basketball in New York”, no seats are offered. Running times are always displayed. For the film *Timescape* screened on the ground floor, there is a showtime schedule and a count-down to the next screening shown on-screen.

- 3) Are there guards? How many? Are they trained in the art on display (as they are at the Met)?

The Shed: There are one guard in each gallery. They are not trained in the art on display. There are two staff members in the 4th floor gallery. One staff member walks around and hands out leaflets as well as answering visitors’ questions. The other is responsible

for a specific area of a dark-curtained room with Denes' neon objects. He would remind visitors of the existence of the room and follow the visitors each time they enter this room. There are one staff member in the 2nd gallery, who stood in the corner of the room without walking around or handing out leaflets.

MCNY: There are guards patrolling around the museum, especially in the public areas. There are also staff members in the public area, especially at the entrance hall, answering questions and providing guided tours. However, there are no guard or staff member in the galleries.

- 4) In an exhibition, is there a pre-determined pathway through it? Is there a central object of the exhibition? A central room?

The Shed: As I am not sure of whether there is a pre-determined pathway or a central object for the 4th floor gallery, I asked one of the staff members. She told me that there is not central object or a pre-determined pathway through the exhibition, but the objects are grouped together in terms of theme, as Agnes Denes usually devoted to one specific theme in each period of her career. Her earlier works are displayed by the entrance, while some of her later works such as map projections are displayed in the centre and the back area of the gallery. There are seats provided at the end of the room, with her books on them for visitors to consult.

MCNY: There is no pre-determined pathway through the exhibitions, nor is there any central object or central room in the exhibitions.

- 5) Audio tours. Are visitors listening to curated information using headphones? Cell phones?

The Shed: Audio tours are not offered.

MCNY: During my visit, no visitor listened to curated information using headphones or cell phones, despite that audio tours are offered by the museum.

- 6) Are there any interactive displays? Are they being used?

The Shed: There are screens located above the ticket kiosk, displaying information about hours and admission. Also, screens display information about the exhibition are located outside the two galleries. However, there is no interactive display in the public area or inside the galleries.

MCNY: The museum is highly interactive with multiple interactive displays in every room. In the "NY at its Core" exhibition, visitors can use tablets to learn about famous New Yorkers in history and their life stories by zooming in on pictures and swiping up for more information. In the Future City Lab, visitors can build a future city via a video

game on tablets. Visitors can also take surveys on tablets to contribute to the museum's data collection for the "Who We Are—Visualizing NYC by the Numbers" exhibition. The result of one's survey will be visualized as a data portrait with a unique color pattern for each participant, who can then choose to buy the data portrait button at the ticket desk. In addition, in the "Collecting New York's Stories: Stuyvesant to Sid Vicious" exhibition, only a glimpse of thousands of objects brought into the museum's collection over the past few years are displayed. The Museum's Collection Portal is displayed on a tablet for visitors to view the detailed records and images for over 200,000 objects. The museum's commitment to data collection and interactive display is also seen in their DATA2GO.NYC and Data Nook projects, where visitors can use tablets to learn what lies behind the numbers, for example, data sources for maps, statistics and charts displayed in the exhibitions, and definition of key terms and concepts addressed in the exhibitions.

- 7) Are visitors part of larger groups, families, or visiting in couples, singly? How are they categorized by socio-economic bracket, nationality, age, gender, etc.?

The Shed: During my observation, the majority of visitors are in couples, mostly elderly. There are a few young couples as well. There are also some visiting singly, mostly middle-aged. There is one group of 6-8 students who had just finished their visit when I arrived. Visitors tend to be in high socio-economic bracket, with a majority in the upper-middle class. Except from one Asian visitor, most visitors are Anglo-Saxon Americans. The gender distribution of the visitors is relatively equal.

MCNY: Compared to the Shed, the visitors at MCNY are generally younger. The visitors are mostly in couples or from a family group. There is one large African American family with 4 children, and several smaller family groups of Anglo-Saxon Americans. Solo-visitors are less seen at MCNY than at the Shed. The visitors are in a comparatively lower socio-economic bracket than those at the Shed. About half of the visitors are from a foreign background, most likely tourists. In terms of gender distribution, the number of female visitors is slightly higher than male visitors, since there are some female visitors in pairs.

- 8) Are there leaflets, flyers, to take away?

The Shed: There are leaflets about the venue and the Agnes Denes exhibition at the ticket desk and by the galleries' entrance. There is also a staff member handing out the Agnes Denes exhibition leaflets to visitors in the 4th floor gallery.

MCNY: There are museum maps in different languages at the entrance and the ticket office. However, they are not offered in individual rooms.

9) Is there a cell-phone policy? If so, how is this communicated?

There is no cell-phone policy in either the Shed or MCNY.

10) Is there a café. A gift shop? How are these positioned in relation to the room you have been observing?

The Shed: There is a bar, Cedric's, located on the 1st floor, which offers a menu of daytime and evening fare including cocktails, craft beer, wine, and coffee, accompanied by shareable bites, sandwiches, and salads. The bar shares the creative, inclusive, and inventive spirit of The Shed.

There is a gift shop on the 1st floor with an emphasized theme on books about art, philosophy, and feminism. There is also a special focus on books written by female authors. The gift shop also sells Agnes Denes exhibition postcards and the Shed tote bags. There are also two carts selling tote bags and postcards by the entrance of the two galleries.

MCNY: There is a café named Chalsty's Café, and a bakery called Amy's bread located on the 2nd floor with a terrace overlooking the Central Park. Visitors are welcomed to have their meal and coffee on the terrace. There is a gift shop on the 1st floor by the ticket office, where souvenirs about New York are sold. However, the souvenirs are more tourist-oriented and are less connected with the museum and the exhibitions.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, both the Shed and the MCNY offer an immersive experience for their visitors. However, for the Denes exhibition, the Shed deploys a minimalistic strategy in terms of labelling and positioning artifacts, as well as the exclusion of interactive displays, in order to create a full immersion in Denes' art *per se*. In terms of the MCNY, the visiting experience is highly interactive and entertaining, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in history as well as in the interactive activities themselves.

Photos taken at the MCNY



Photos taken at the Shed

