

Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design

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‘When Is an Interactive Not an Interactive? When It’s an Artwork?’

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The process of creating interactive exhibitions at Walsall in the last 14 years has generated many questions, some of which have been resolved for Walsall; some are still being worked on and experimented with. There is never a single right answer and evaluation is an on-going process.

- Do you have original artworks in an interactive gallery? Why do you need to and what is an original artwork? Is an interactive, which has been designed and made by an artist, an interactive or an artwork?
- What’s the difference between an interactive artwork and an interactive interpretation of an artwork? Do we have a problem if our visitors cannot tell the difference between the artwork and the interpretation?
- Under what circumstances should visitors touch artworks or interpretations of artworks? Protection and conservation are major issues. Does touching an artwork enable greater learning to take place? What exactly are visitors learning from touching artworks? Are they learning to touch artworks in other galleries where they are not allowed to touch? The potential for confusion and humiliation is endless.
- What are the pitfalls of an artist making artworks to touch and to interact with? The reality of a public interactive gallery is hard to conceive. Most children and many adults will push and bend to ‘see how far it will go’ without realising the destructive force they are exerting. Malicious damage is also a problem.
- Does the environment in which the artworks are placed influence the manner of the handling and interaction by the public? Will they trash it if they don’t ‘honour’ it? Does this mean that contemporary artworks are treated differently from historic artworks? Why should this be?
- Who controls the selection, placing and/or commissioning of artworks in the interactive gallery? How does this influence the aims, quality and design and display of the gallery and its evaluation?

Interactive interpretation at The New Art Gallery Walsall.

The original aims of Walsall’s interactive art exhibitions were to attract new audiences to the art gallery. It was hoped that visitors would learn that the gallery is an enjoyable place to visit and a place that they will want to come back to.

In 1990 a decision was made to focus on children as a major audience development strategy. It was felt by the staff at Walsall Art Gallery that, if children could become

used to visiting the art gallery as a regular part of their activities, then many of the barriers to gallery visiting, especially class barriers, would be overcome. We aimed at very young children in order to encourage gallery visiting as a 'normal' occupation before any preconceptions about the gallery as a place 'for them not us' could become deeply entrenched. The children would also be accompanied by adults, providing opportunities to change adult perceptions about the gallery and at the very least, show them that the gallery had something they would want to bring their children to.

Interpretation for adults as well as their children is an integral part of the interactive strategy and a major motivation for the multi-level/multi-sensory learning approach to interactives that we have taken. People of many different ages and abilities learn in many different ways and what is a suitable presentation of information for one person is not necessarily suitable for another. Learning through play has long been understood as essential for young children, and many adults do not operate within a framework in which traditional learning methods are an enjoyable experience. It was clear that to attract new audiences we would have to create an enjoyable learning experience for both adults and children. We wanted many different opportunities for learning, not just text-based approaches, and we used research into the different ways people learn, such as Howard Gardner's theories on multiple intelligences. Interactive interpretation aims to bridge the gap between the gallery's remit for education and the target audience's needs, particularly their perceptions of the gallery and their individual learning method requirements.

A long-term strategy of audience development was needed not only to get new audiences visiting the gallery but also to get them repeatedly coming back for more. In order to ensure that these first-time visitors came back, it was crucial that they should enjoy their visit, that they were not intimidated by the gallery's appearance and that their perception of the gallery and of what it had to offer them and their children would be a positive one.

Although audience development was and still is a main aim of the interactive exhibitions and galleries, it should not be seen as the only aim. The educational remit of the gallery's work is integral to the process. Visual literacy through engagement with original artworks is central to the mission statement of the gallery. Audience development is the beginning of the process.

The New Art Gallery Walsall has a policy of showing original artworks of high quality, with the main exhibition focus on contemporary art. When gallery staff had the opportunity to create a permanent interactive gallery in The New Art Gallery, it was decided that contemporary art would be the focus of that gallery. It was recognised that many people find contemporary art even more difficult to understand than historic art. The interactive gallery was therefore to act as an introduction to the temporary exhibition programme. For many people acceptable two-dimensional 'art' has a frame around it and three-dimensional 'art' is on a plinth or in a case. Many people still have problems with 'modern' artists such as Picasso, let alone the diverse nature of contemporary artworks. Frames and plinths brand the work as 'art' and make it instantly and easily recognizable as such. Contemporary art often does not conform to these recognizable categories of art.

The last century has seen a continuous process of artists challenging these ideas of 'art' and challenging the stereotypes of art. One of the problems we are dealing with is people's perception of art galleries. When people who believe that 'real' art should be 'on plinths and in frames' go into a gallery and see contemporary art, they often do not know it is 'art' because it does not conform to that expected norm. Interactives can challenge and start to change perceptions of what art is and of what an art gallery is, but the potential for even greater confusion is very real.

When we put interactives into a gallery with contemporary art, we are confusing people even more as to what art is, because it is often very difficult to tell the difference between the art and the interactive, given the nature of much contemporary work. Some people may not even realize that there is any art there at all. With very young children, how can they tell the difference? They may not even realise that they are in an art gallery let alone what an art gallery is. This very lack of preconceptions, however, means that we do not have the same problems of perception that we have with our new first-time attender adult audiences.

One of the problems for adult audiences can be expressed through the old cartoon joke, which shows a picture of two people in a contemporary art exhibition staring at a small plastic square on the wall. The caption reads, 'Mary made a fool of herself at the exhibition by admiring the light switch.' The crucial point here is about embarrassment, 'Mary made a fool of herself. ...' Many visitors, after bravely venturing into the gallery for the first time, leave feeling like idiots because they do not understand what is going on. And someone who feels that they have been made to look foolish will not return to be made to look foolish again. They are not that much of a fool, thank you. The result is no repeat visit, and the learning experience is simply that contemporary art is a con, just as they had thought.

The aim of the interactive gallery is to bridge the gap between the audience and contemporary art. The question is, do visitors recognize the difference between the interactive interpretation and the artworks? Do they feel foolish if they can't tell the difference? Children often can't and don't distinguish between them. Given that many interactives have been made and designed by artists, does this inability to distinguish between the two forms matter? When is an artwork an interactive and when is an interactive an artwork? Many visitors are not even aware that they are looking at original artworks in our more traditional galleries, which contain 'art in frames and on plinths'. Astonished statements such as 'You mean that's a real Van Gogh!' attest to this, and even very young children are not immune to this, as demonstrated by the five-year-old who looked up at a painting with me and said, 'Someone's been painting on it'. People are so used to reproduced images in the media that the physical creation of a work of art is a very long way from the images with which they are surrounded in their everyday lives.

Walsall New Art Gallery has commissioned artists to make sculptures that can be touched and interacted with. We have commissioned both computer-based artworks and computer-based interpretation, with very little clear distinction to our audiences as to which is which. Does the audience care? Not really. But we do, because we want people to learn from looking at artworks, and to do that surely they need to know that they are looking at an artwork. If they are learning merely from looking at an interactive then surely we have failed? Or have we? If our aim is to create visual

literacy, then it should not matter, but if our aim is to create visual literacy through looking at original artworks then it obviously does matter. But if the interactive is an artwork as well, then is that OK? When is an interactive an artwork? We go round in circles.

Some interactive galleries in the USA solve this little conundrum by only having artworks on display that cannot be touched. The interactives are there to be played with but the art is purely to be looked at. A system of 'Touch' and 'Don't Touch' labels has been created to help to define the two separate categories. This creates a clear distinction between what is art and what is not. The problem with this is that it ignores and leaves out all those many artworks that the artist intended to be touched, handled, interacted with and explored in many different ways, including multi-sensory approaches. It also ignores the exciting input that artists can have in designing and creating interactives, which can give unique perspectives on other artists' work.

The advantages of this 'selection and display' approach are that people are clear about which are the artworks and which are not. They are also learning that art should not be touched, avoiding the potential difficulties when we appear to be teaching people that all artworks can be touched – a recipe for disaster in most art galleries. People feel very humiliated and embarrassed when they are told by gallery attendants not to touch, and many will not return because they realize that they have not understood the rules. Understanding the unspoken rules of gallery attending is something that most of us who work in museums or galleries take for granted. For many first-time attenders understanding what you can and cannot touch is not easy. The traditional format of an artwork label is not familiar to them. The whole experience is a huge learning curve and open to misunderstanding from both the visitor and the gallery.

Here's an example. We displayed a large unglazed painting, and to protect it from casual touching and scratching we placed a low barrier consisting of a stand at each end of the painting with a rope between them, about two feet away from the painting. One visitor with his four-year-old son was discovered in between the barrier and the painting, only inches from the painting surface. When asked why he was in front of the barrier, he replied that he thought that was what it was for, to show him where to stand. As a result we now box in the barrier against the wall.

The Discovery Gallery in The New Art Gallery Walsall has been developed under the policy that if something can be touched it is available and accessible for that purpose. If we don't want it to be touched, then we make it impossible for visitors to do so. This does not solve the problem of displaying the many exciting types of contemporary works that cannot be made secure, and it does not solve the problem of accidentally 'teaching' people that artworks can be touched. It also occasionally fails to make a distinction between the artwork and the interactive, an area made more confusing by the fact that some interactives are made and designed by artists.

Other galleries solve the problem by placing their artworks in a setting that is honorific to the artwork. They continue to offer the concept that 'art is something on a plinth or in a frame', it is recognizable as 'art' because it conforms to what we think an artwork should look like. The problem with this is how to take account of the work of twentieth-century artists seeking to change our perception of art? What about all

that fascinating and stimulating contemporary work, much of which certainly is not 'on a plinth or in a frame'?

Other interactive galleries solve the problem by having on display only contemporary works that have been commissioned for the interactive gallery. The theory is that it does not matter if the work is damaged, because it is not part of the collection and the artists made it for the interactive gallery. The reality is that many of these galleries are like this because the curator of the collections will not allow the work from the collections to be put in the 'children's' gallery. Are we teaching people that it's alright to touch some artworks but not others? Do they then perceive these artworks as being of less value because they can touch them? Do they think that they are being given inferior works? In some interactive galleries they are. One gallery in the USA displayed only original works that the curator had deemed not good enough for the collections and had given them to the education department for use in the interactive gallery.

There are many arguments for and against enabling visitors to touch artworks. There are also arguments to be made for having no artworks in an interactive gallery. Whatever we choose to do, we can be sure that our visitors are learning many things about art galleries that we may not intend them to learn. They are learning things that tell them whether or not they are welcome and whether the gallery is a place for families and their children, or whether it is still a place for 'them, not us'. If we get it wrong (and we all too frequently do) then those hard-won first-time visitors will not become repeat visitors and we will have lost our opportunity to develop a sustained engagement with original artworks through long term repeat visits.

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pioneered work with very young children, which led to the interactive art exhibitions 'Start' and 'Me and You'. These exhibitions were an important foundation for the Discovery Gallery at the New Art Gallery.