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Observational Study: The Whitney Museum vs. The Brooklyn Public Library

In early February 2009, I conducted an observational study of the ways people behave and respond to both their real and constructed environments in two institutions that house objects whose intended use-values run to different ends: an art museum and a public library. To observe the patterns of traffic through and public engagement with an audiovisual installation in a museum, I visited the Whitney Museum of American Art, where a work by video artist Alex Bag was on display. The installation is situated on the first floor of the Whitney, in a room adjacent to the elevators that take patrons up to the main exhibition spaces. To gain access into the museum in the first place, patrons enter through the revolving doors and make their way to the left where they may purchase tickets. Beyond this reception area is a coat check, which is placed in considerable proximity to the first floor of the Museum's gift shop (which is largely composed of artists' books). As a result, many patrons, either before or after checking their coats, will rifle through the items proffered for sale by the Museum before even seeing any of the exhibitions. On the other side of the lobby, presuming the patron is not first sidetracked into purchasing items at the gift shop register en route, visitors to the museum hand their ticket to a Museum staff assistant, who tells the visitor to tear off the sticker on their ticket and affix it to their clothing if they have not yet done so. After access is granted, a visitor may partake of complimentary walking tour headphones, located to his or her left,

walk past the booth to enter the media exhibition room (where Bag's piece was installed), or proceed to any of the five elevators directly ahead of them.

As I sat on one of the four brightly colored benches that comprise the installation experience, I noticed it became difficult to assess the "average" amount of time that museum patrons spent watching the installation without the benefit of a stopwatch. Many people peeked their heads in for no more than a few seconds; others came into the room and stayed from anywhere between one to ten minutes. Pairs and groups of people were more conversational amongst one another than individuals were with each other while watching the video. A text describing the video was placed on the wall just outside the exhibition room, such that it was visible to anyone waiting for the elevator (I noticed a number of people reading the text without actually setting foot inside the room).

Although there were, as earlier mentioned, designated seating areas for people to make use of during the installation, many patrons chose to stand anyway; this seemed as dependent on the number of people sitting down as it did the viewer's own desire to stay and watch the video. Those who stood tended more often than not to watch the video for a shorter length of time than those who made use of the seating, though this was by no means a hard and fast principle. For instance, one child sat down while his parents stood towards the entrance of the installation; after twenty seconds, the parents began to walk away, and the child promptly arose and followed them out.

As a matter of fact, on this particular Sunday that I visited the Whitney, there was a considerable concentration of families in the Museum. One possible reason for this is the presence of an exhibition by Alexander Calder, who, though today considered a "fine artist," created a number of playful, imaginative works that certainly appeal to

museumgoers of all ages. The attentiveness paid to Bag's installation by children can, presumably, be explained to some degree by the presence of children in the actual work itself. The concept of Bag's piece is a satire on children's public access educational television. Bag herself plays a barely sentient, drug-addled children's show host who periodically engages in activities with the (non-acting) children on the "set" of her show, such as reading Sartre's *Nausea*. The video piece employs children, non-professional actors, reacting to Bag's bizarre behavior, and is thus relatable on some level to children in the audience, who are likely as confused as the children in the video are. Overall, however, the amount of attention paid to the video varied from spectator to spectator as well, depending on both the nature of the video and of the crowd.

To get a better sense of the typical patterns of activity in the space of the installation, I interviewed the sole security guard in the room, Naraine, about the quotidian aspects of his job as overseer of the space. Naraine informed me that the security guards in the Whitney typically stand in their designated spot (which often changes) for the entire day, with two short twenty-minute breaks scheduled before and after a longer lunch break, from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. His primary function as a guard is to keep an eye out to make sure no one violates the Whitney's exhibition policies. A case in point occurred as we were talking, when Naraine had to tell two separate patrons to not touch the installation props (a wheelchair and a podium both used in the actual video piece) and to not use her cell phone's camera to take pictures. Naraine also told me that typically, the Whitney curators and exhibition coordinators do not explain to the guards about the art they watch over, save for the explanatory wall text which they can read on their own, but ample time spent in the room does allow them to think and formulate ideas

about the art (it seemed to be understood that patrons rarely approach the guards to ask their opinions about the artwork). The security guards at the Whitney, then, regulate the flow of traffic inside and outside the exhibition space and act as enforcers of museum policy with regard to prohibited activity in the museum.

The second institution observed in this study was the Grand Army Plaza branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. While the Grand Lobby of the BPL includes two exhibitions, “Beautiful Brooklyn” and “Public Spaces, Private Places”, that were both frequented by visitors, I was more interested in comparing the patterns of activity between the primary functions of each institution. As such, I spent my time at the library observing activity in the Popular Library section that is housed just beyond the Grand Lobby and the main security desk, where patrons can freely peruse and check out material to read or watch. The Popular Library contains the most frequently consulted items in the Library, which consists of periodicals, magazines, newspapers, videotapes and DVDs, audio discs (CDs and audiobooks), newly-released fiction and nonfiction books, microfilms and microfiches, and periodicals indexes. In addition, one may print, copy, use computer terminals, connect to wireless Internet, add value to one’s library card, and request holds or reserves materials in this section. There are a number of tables available at which researchers may sit down, spread out books, or place a laptop or notebook for writing on.

A help desk is situated towards the entrance of the Popular Library room, where one can fulfill requests or ask an employee for help. There was usually at least one person stationed behind the desk when I made my observations, and occasionally another helper or two joined him. From the desk assistant’s position in the room, it would be difficult to monitor the activity throughout the somewhat large room, and I did not notice

him acting in any sort of security capacity during my observation. In fact, no such guards seemed to exist in the room in the manner of Naraine at the Whitney Museum. Many people entered the room and immediately went towards the help desk; others, if they knew where their materials were located, headed straight for the appropriate section, and still others would walk into the room, hesitate, and observe their surroundings before either asking for help or searching on their own.

I observed, from atop a rather conspicuous perch on a staircase leading to an upper floor of the library, a number of behaviors associated with different types of media available for public perusal in the Popular Library. Many people who looked at magazines, it appeared, did not have a definite idea of a specific magazine to read and instead would comb through several. Much of the time a patron would thumb through a magazine while standing at a rack, to make picking out another magazine easier (the tables were situated on the opposite end of the room). Patrons looking through the recently released books section would often browse visually, usually from top to bottom, before selecting a book. Nearly all of the time I observed this behavior, the patron looked at both the front and back cover, and sometimes, but not always, a patron would flip through a couple of pages in the book to get an idea of the writing style, the subject matter, etc. CDs and DVDs were often treated in a similar manner, i.e. the patron would select a CD based on either the level of visual interest of the cover or the patron's predilections towards liking a particular singer or actor featured on the cover and then inspect both the front and the back of the jewel case. A number of computers are set up in the Popular Library to ostensibly aid in research assistance, though I was able to notice many people playing computer games or using personal instant messaging. There was,

notably, a television screen positioned above the computer area on which was playing a BPL-created montage about Black History Month; perhaps due to the screen's ignorable size and placement in the library, no one seemed to notice or pay much attention to it.

The element of interactivity with the materials on display in both the Whitney Museum and the Brooklyn Public Library makes for an interesting set of comparisons. Libraries, specifically ones available for general public perusal, put a premium on actual tactile use of the materials and the items on display for human consumption, whereas a museum emphasizes and guarantees the uniqueness of the object by restricting user interaction in order to prolong the life of the object (this is obviously not true for all artists' work, but on the whole these cases are the exception more than the rule). Because of this, patterns of circulation throughout museums tend towards the realization of boundaries, coupled with a kind of self-awareness of the spectator versus the object. Libraries, as vast, user-friendly repositories of information, seem to guarantee much freer movement amongst patrons, and the relationship between user and object tends to be taken more for granted (i.e. there is not so much of a need to "figure out" or "interpret", say, a magazine as opposed to a work of video art). A great deal more about the disparities between similar cultural institutions can be learned with more in-depth observational study, such as through conducting interviews with patrons to determine conscious and unconscious negotiations with their environment.