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2.18.2009

The Brooklyn Museum: User Experience in a Digital Age

“I’d rather be a lamppost in Harlem, than the Governor of Georgia.” Anonymous

The Black List Project, an exhibition of twenty-one portraits of famous African-Americans, ends its run on March 29th, 2009 at the Brooklyn Museum. The large format photographs and accompanying video interviews profile men and women who have made significant contributions to American society in professional athletics, the arts, politics, and social activism. One of these featured role models, NBA’s all time leading scorer turned author/historian Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, elicits the above quote in his 4-minute video interview. A saying popularized during the Harlem Renaissance, Abdul-Jabbar found comfort in the phrase while growing up in New York during the early 1960s. He saw Harlem as a place where blacks were accepted and “encouraged to be their best”. Even someone with only *lamppost* aspirations, Abdul-Jabbar argued, was a functional, integral, and welcomed part of the neighborhood. Creating strong, supportive communities was important to African-Americans at a time when they especially felt their race limited their access to traditional structures of institutional and corporate power.

The Brooklyn Museum has made it its mission to foster a similar supportive community, and it is no an accident that *The Black List Project* is the first exhibit a visitor sees upon entering the main lobby. The idea of a participatory, diverse user community

permeates almost every facet of the museum's curatorial practice. The quality of user experience is paramount. And although this may seem an obvious goal for most museums, the Brooklyn Museum is exceptional in its commitment to strengthening its user base to reflect the minority faces seen in the surrounding community. The mission statement pointedly illustrates this concern.

...Dedicated to the primacy of the visitor experience, committed to excellence in every aspect of its collections and programs, and drawing on both new and traditional tools of communication, interpretation, and presentation, the Museum aims to serve its diverse public as a dynamic, innovative, and welcoming center for learning through the visual arts.¹

In an essay on the museum's website, Museum Director Arnold Lehman states that the museum's new schedule of exhibitions and public programs has "significantly broadened and diversified" its visitors. And in a recent user survey, the museum found that 40% of museum-goers were people of color.

According to the 2000 US Census, African-Americans comprise 36% of Brooklyn's population. However, the neighborhoods surrounding the Brooklyn Museum are 82% black, and these neighborhoods taken alone would represent the largest concentration of African-Americans in the United States outside of Detroit.² The Museum seems acutely aware of these statistics: in addition to mounting temporary exhibits such as *The Black List Project*, the museum has permanent collections aimed at connecting African-American adults and school-aged children to their cultural past.

On a recent Friday morning, the author saw several local African-American school groups touring sections of the museum specific to the African diasporic

¹ <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/about/mission.php>

experience. A large group of 8 – 10 year old children were exploring one of the many decorative arts sections of the museum. Several replica period rooms from the 18th century exist at the museum, including replica slave quarters from the American South. Students were asked by an instructor to imagine what life was like for their ancestors during the days of slavery. Likewise, in the African Arts wing of the first floor, another group of African-American children were asked to make connections between ancient artifacts from Africa and their current day antecedents in America. For example, students compared how the West African music of the kora related to the aesthetic style of delta blues guitar developed here in the 1920s.

In addition to the conversational user interaction at the museum, curators also ask visitors to actively participate in augmenting existing exhibitions. In the American Experience wing on the 4th floor of the museum, student-written responses to works of art hang alongside curated descriptions. For example, a 22-year old from the Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program has a posted blurb next to a 1850s oil painting of New York. He explains why he likes the painting and why it has value (*it is good to see how people lived back then so we can appreciate how good we have it now*). These student-created plaques and are given the same weight as the rest of the exhibition tombstones. The inclusion of these blurbs suggests an attempt by the museum to offer the kind of give-and-take exchange many young people already experience within blog culture and social networking sites.

The average user of the museum is now 35 years old, and curators are diving headlong into new technologies, utilizing tools aimed at attracting and retaining a youthful constituency. The Brooklyn Museum has a highly visible presence on the

² <http://factfinder.census.gov/>

Internet and that presence is not only felt online, but also within the brick and mortar operation of the institution. There is now free Wi-Fi in the outside plaza area of the museum, creating what Lehman describes as a new and important “truly civic space” in Brooklyn.

The use of new technology within the museum has increased dramatically within the last year in part because the museum has tried to find a niche not only within the intensely competitive museum market in New York but also with competing forms of largely internet-based entertainment. The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art has recently integrated eight iTouch consoles into their exhibition space. The iTouches are mounted on small, clear plastic shelves three feet from the floor. Headphones rest on hooks next to the devices. At first, the iTouches appear to be artist installations, but as one walks around the room, it becomes apparent that they are meant to be video equivalents of written, curated descriptions of the various works.

Each device contains one video, usually an interview with the artist of the adjacent work. The placement of iTouches assumes a certain level a familiarity with Apple technology: a visitor must actively find the video option on the phone, know that the screen is touch-sensitive, and then understand how to navigate to the correct display. There are no instructions as to how to use the device, except for a short note on the wall stating that the video is also available on the Brooklyn Museum website.

Upon accessing the website later, one has the opportunity to revisit the exhibition by reviewing the videos online, reading and commenting on a “feminist blog,” watching video lectures of events in the Sackler Center, and downloading podcasts of recent center talks. The museum is attempting to use the website to not only entice visitors into the

physical exhibition space, but also to encourage them to visit their virtual presence after they have seen the artifacts in person. The Brooklyn Museum is attempting to create a dynamic relationship between the web visitor and the building visitor. The curators are not assuming that people will choose one or the other experience, but rather they want the two spaces to complement each other; conceptually they are on equal footing.

The Black List Project has taken the idea of user interactivity to a high level of complexity, giving user opinion significant curatorial weight. Not only do users have the ability to comment on the exhibition online, but they can also change it. Using MacBook laptop kiosks in the gallery, visitors can record a video sharing their personal experiences related to race. The videos are then uploaded to the *The Black List Project* YouTube Channel. Visiting the YouTube channel on February 15, 2009 yielded 147 videos created by museum visitors. Curators seemed to realize that a single exhibit of video and photographic portraits of well-known African-American could never reflect the wide and varied experience of being black in America. This YouTube initiative allows curators to expand the meaning of the exhibit; the kiosks allow the museum user to take control and perhaps steer the initial project into unforeseen and exciting new directions.

The museum has also integrated Flickr-type tagging on their website. Users can look through approximately ten thousand images posted by museum staff. Visitors are encouraged to tag images in the collection as they see fit. For example, a search for "women" yielded 180 results of user-tagged data.

The Brooklyn Museum is not the only cultural institution using web 2.0 applications in their curatorial practice. In a recent article in the *New York Times*, "Historical Photos in Web Archives Gain Vivid New Lives," Noam Cohen reported that

the German National Archive uploaded nearly 100,000 photographs to Wikimedia Commons, a widely used on-line repository of public domain images. The archive director stated that the library simply did not have the resources to identify the photos and was reaching out to the public for help. The Library of Congress has taken similar measures by creating a Flickr profile, allowing users to tag and comment on thousands of photographs, ranging from WWI panoramas to early photochrom prints. These two organizations are looking to preexisting commercial and non-profit enterprises and their associated users to assist them in the massive workload of cataloging a backlog of content. They are also hoping to raise their profile and participate in a conversation that is happening on a wide scale with the general public; Flickr alone is said to host 3 billion images.

It seems, however, that the Brooklyn Museum has greater ambitions. Instead of piggybacking on Flickr or Wikimedia technology, the museum has created its own social networking site, thereby cultivating a unique interactive web presence. Registration is free at brooklynmuseum.org and users can join what the museum calls a "posse," essentially a social network managed by the museum where members can tag and comment on images in the collection. There is a sense that the Brooklyn Museum wants to integrate into its museum practice the ways people use networking sites in their everyday lives. However, user-created art object identification is not a perfect solution; a search on the tag "monkey" for example, yields an 1878 Wyatt Eaton oil painting of William Cullen Brant.

There is no museum as large as the Brooklyn Museum in the New York metropolitan area that is so explicitly committed to integrating new technologies both

inside and outside their museum walls. This new reliance on technology stems from a twofold motivation. Firstly, by creating interactive exhibits that explicitly talk to their African-American visitors, the museum wants to expand their user base within the diverse community that surrounds their grounds. Secondly, the museum wants to attract a more youthful museumgoer, investing in a future generation of visitors who have become tech savvy at an early age.

The museum also seems to be confronting the issue of its own potential future obsolescence. By heavily integrating user's ideas and opinions into both the virtual and physical presence in the museum, the Brooklyn Museum is attempting to compete with highly interactive, virtual forms of entertainment. However, an obvious question seems to be: should museums try to compete in this arena or do should they make more of an effort to separate themselves from the (mis)information-glut of this digital age? This is obviously begging the question and it would be interesting to examine studies that focus on user as well as curator reactions to interactive exhibitions. It is possible that these tools fall into the realm of gimmick, devalue expert opinion, and ruin the sacred space of the museum environment that some users expect when they enter the doors. Certainly, technological tools can help teaching and learning about art, but how those tools are applied should be carefully considered, lest institutions like the Brooklyn Museum slide down that slippery slope into middle-brow theme park.