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A User Study:

The Met Breuer and the National Museum of the American Indian

I visited the Met Breuer on the Upper East Side of Manhattan on Sunday, 19 February 2017, for approximately three hours in the afternoon. At that time, the almost year-old institution had two exhibitions running; the second floor held a retrospective of Italian artist Marisa Merz' work, and the fifth floor displayed a smaller photography exhibit of buildings designed by the architect Marcel Breuer. On the afternoon of Sunday, 12 March 2017, I visited the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Battery Park for three hours to complete the comparison. At the NMAI, in addition to the permanent "Infinity of Nations" exhibition in the South Gallery of the second floor, I spent time at the temporary "Native Fashion Now" and "Circle of Dance" exhibitions.

My visit to the Breuer took place over a holiday weekend, which could have influenced the crowd size compared to a usual Sunday afternoon. Similarly, my visit to the NMAI was during spring break, which may have had a similar effect on the crowd size relative to a regular Sunday. There was a significant difference in weather between the two days, my Breuer visit falling on an unseasonably warm day while the NMAI visit took place on a day with below freezing temperatures all day long.

For methodology, while a stopwatch was used at both institutions to record the amount of time visitors spent with a specific artifact, in a particular room, or involved in a particular

activity, the data varied so widely depending on the circumstances, and the sample size was so small, that no concrete conclusions could be made from it alone. A general observation of people's behavior, without attempting to quantify the exact number of seconds spent with individual items, while a more anecdotal and less objective approach, seemed better suited to the constraints of this study and more likely to highlight trends in the comparison between the two institutions. As with timing, attempts to produce exact counts by categorizing visitors according to gender, age, race, and assumed socio-economic status were hampered by the constant flow of people and the limited sample size of one afternoon's visit. While the information gathered by counting and timing helped in forming conclusions, they were combined with a broader, more anecdotal and observational approach to compensate for the many variables. What follows is a summary of my findings using this method of comparison.

The users of The Met Breuer were generally older than the NMAI crowd. Most of the Breuer visitors were either single individuals or couples but rarely included a group larger than two, and included only two larger families with kids. The overwhelming majority of the visitors were white, with some Asians and Latinos present, and only two African-American individuals. In comparison, users at the NMAI were generally much more diverse, although still predominantly Caucasian, and included many African Americans, some Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos. The NMAI also had a higher percentage of families, larger groups of friends, and parents with young kids in strollers.

One of the most prominent features of the exhibitions in each museum were the introductory interpretive wall-texts contextualizing the exhibitions or aspects of them. At the Merz exhibition, where I spent the majority of my time at The Met Breuer, people entered the exhibition space either through a set of elevators or stairs, which landed them in front of a series

of aluminum sculptures by the artist as well as the introductory interpretive wall-text. A majority of the users consulted and indeed fully read the introductory interpretive wall-text at the Merz exhibition for anywhere between 30 to 90 seconds before moving on to the art works. This is likely due to the prominent location of these writings at both the photography and the Merz exhibitions. The same held true for the three exhibitions that I visited at the NMAI. Most patrons did stop and take the time to fully study the introductory wall-text for contextualization.

In general, people conversed more at the NMAI compared to The Met Breuer. Both Breuer exhibitions were much quieter than the exhibitions at the NMAI. This can be partly attributed to the presence of more large groups, especially families with children, who were definitely the loudest individuals at the NMAI, asking their parents questions about the objects. There are some exceptions to this, however. For example, the “Circle of Dance” exhibit at the NMAI was quieter than the busier exhibitions on the second floor of the museum and the Merz exhibit at the Breuer. I theorize that this was partly due to the expansive space, dark-lighting, and moving-image projection that gave the “Circle of Dance” space the look and feel of a movie theatre. The exception at The Met Breuer was a guided-tour group in the Merz exhibit, with some particularly lively discussion about art history between the guide and one of the group-members. Some interactions between guards and users at both institutions regarding the use of cameras and proximity to the works were also observed.

How much time each individual spent with a particular artifact varied widely depending on the artifact, person, and exhibit; for this reason, it is difficult to compare the museums on this level. Some artifacts attracted more people and invited longer scrutiny, some individuals pondered all the objects they chose to approach longer than others, and some exhibits tend to keep people longer than others. For example, The Met Breuer’s photography exhibit rarely had a

person looking at an individual photograph for more than 30 seconds while the “Circle of Dance” exhibit had visitors studying one costume for more than a minute. This is likely due to the amount of comparatively large amount of text associated with the dance regalia at the NMAI while the photographs at the Breuer had very little text associated with them.

By virtue of there being only two running exhibitions at the Breuer at the time of my visit, I found that Breuer visitors spent more time in the Merz exhibit than most people did in any single exhibit at the NMAI. This could be due to visitor awareness of how much more there is to see in their limited time at the NMAI compared to only two exhibits to explore at the Breuer. Thus, people taking their time at the Breuer exhibit while more people were moving quicker to cover the whole museum at the NMAI. It should be noted that within the Breuer itself, visitors spent far less time in the photography exhibit compared to the Merz exhibit which attracted the bulk of the Breuer visitors for a longer stretch of time.

Finally, the NMAI gift shop was comparatively more crowded, catered more to kids and families, and had a lighter atmosphere than the more sparse and rigid atmosphere of the Breuer shop. This observation affirms my conclusion that users of the NMAI were generally younger and more diverse than Breuer visitors.