

Gregory J. Helmstetter
3049 CAML
Observational Study
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Observational Study: The Whitney and the Transit Museum

Introduction and Methodology

On Friday, March 17, 2017, I visited the Whitney Museum of American Art, and on Saturday, March 18, I visited the New York Transit Museum to understand more about how both institutions operate and appeal to visitors. Though both of these institutions are considered museums in their own right, and each place is distinct from the other. The Whitney has developed into an institution that collects and exhibits 20th- and 21st-century American art,¹ while the New York Transit Museum concentrates on telling and preserving the history of the city's mass transportation system.² Over the course of my visits to the two different cultural institutions, I was able to make many observations about for what purposes people visit museums, how people interact with the space and objects, and how institutions accommodate their visitors.

Upon visiting each museum, I wanted to approach my observational study with an open mind and as few preconceptions as possible about what I might see at each place. That being said, it would be difficult and unrealistic to think that I could not go into this without some sort of expectation, and I think it only fair to outline generally how I perceived each institution prior to the visits. Regarding the Whitney, I was aware that they had access to many resources, evident by the opening of their new building in Chelsea/West Village a couple years ago, and it was gaining popularity and attention from, I assumed, the modern architecture of the building. I knew that the museum concentrated on American art, but I did not understand the scope, which I now know includes modern art, paintings, and abstract art, among other genres.

As for the Transit Museum, I tried to approach the museum with the same openness that I did with the Whitney. However, I will say that I had already visited the Whitney, which gave me an idea of how to approach this museum and may have influenced the way I looked at the Transit Museum's exhibits. Overall, I had heard generally positive reactions to the Transit Museums from friends, to the effect that the content of the museum was something that I would be interested in seeing. I have a strong interest in history, and there was of course the appeal of old subway trains, which had been my characterization of the museum.

Considering these preconceptions and expectations, my general approach to the visit concentrated on a few aspects. First, I wanted to get a general sense of the museum and how people visited the museums, so I moved quickly through some areas of the museum to determine the best approach and to make some general observations. After an overview of the exhibits, I settled into a couple of areas (in each museum) where I could specifically watch how

¹ "History of the Whitney | Whitney Museum of American Art," accessed March 26, 2017, <http://whitney.org/About/History>.

² "About," *New York Transit Museum*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.nytransitmuseum.org/about/>.

people reacted to the museum, how people looked at specific objects, how they interacted to other patrons, and what they focused on. I will describe observations of each museum in the order that I visited them and then draw my conclusions through comparing and contrasting their attributes.

The Whitney Museum of American Art

I visited the Whitney around 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and coincidentally, it was also St. Patrick's Day. I had some reservations about my timing, thinking the galleries might be devoid of patrons or I would not get an accurate sense of the museum. On the other hand, I thought I might also get a much more telling experience, with a good balance of tourists in town for the holiday and maybe a bunch of locals thinking that tourists would rather be at bars. In addition, the Whitney is open late on Fridays and Saturdays (until 10:00 PM), and I was concerned if this might also lead to overcrowded galleries. Whether any of these factors had a major contribution to the crowd size, I cannot be sure, although I suspect that the museum is much busier during the weekdays and regular hours.

Upon approaching the building, the surrounding area was bustling. There were people who were winding down their days, sitting and chatting on the steps outside leading to the entrance. People were milling about the lobby and trickling through the ticket line. I was taken aback by the modern architecture of the building, and specifically, the entire first floor entrance was made out of glass. It gave a much more inviting, less intimidating feeling than the Met, for example. And the orientation of the first floor contributed to it. The doors opened to the all-glass lobby, which has an open layout with maybe 25-foot high ceilings, and tons of natural light. The ticket desk is somewhat in the middle of the lobby, with a huge bookshelf cordoning off the bookshop, and on the other side, patrons filled a large restaurant, about the same size as the rest of the lobby.

Upon entering, I got my ticket, which was free because I work at another museum, and other museum staff get in free. Once you have your tickets, you enter the galleries through either the elevators or stairs, which are side by side in the center of the lobby. They have a strict bag policy, and I was told by the young lady scanning tickets that I had to check mine. I was skeptical of how strictly they enforce the bag policy, and later during my visit, I found out how they deal with those situations: a young woman (maybe in her early twenties) brought a small backpack that doubled as camera case, and a security guard approached her saying that she was supposed to check the bag. The young woman rebutted saying that coat check said the bag was okay, and the security guard reiterated that all bags were to be checked but then abandoned the task.

Also at the start of my visit, I looked for any free paper materials they had, and all that I found was a museum guide, so I grabbed one. Unbeknownst to me at the time, there were also listening devices available in some sort of iteration because later I saw two men (in their sixties maybe) walking around using their cellphones with headphones. I assume there was something available at the entrance, but I did not see any signs or indications, even after looking again on my way out.

After consulting the museum map, I quickly formed my general plan, which was to work my way down from the top floor (there were 8 floors but not all were open to the public), and I took the elevators, which functioned as galleries in their own right. One elevator had checkered

patterns, and the one that I was in had wood paneling in the shape of a window frame with blue squares as the window panes. The elevator gallery even had a namesake noted: Pamela Roland Devos Elevator. This was interesting since the donor is the sister-in-law to our new Education Secretary.³

The museum guide proved to be valuable, and it outlined what exhibits were on which floors. It has detailed information about all the exhibits and floors, but I referred to it specifically to find the subjects of each exhibit. The guide outlined three main exhibits: “Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s,” “Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney’s Collection,” and “Whitney Biennial 2017” which, through research after the fact, I found is their long-running survey of contemporary American art. Overall, their galleries are situated in a pretty standard fashion, each floor has several large, spacious rooms with a small bench (maybe 12 feet long) in the center. Art hangs on the walls; in some instances, there are sculptures hanging from the ceiling or placed in the middle of the galleries; and there is the occasional mixed-media or audiovisual piece. They even had a room dedicated to a tree display in which tour guides explained the artistic value of trees and how they developed thick bark (spoiler: it’s apparently because of mastodons rubbing their tusks against the trees).

However, the most interesting part of this visit was the people. On two occasions, I stopped to observe how people interacted with the art and with each other. In the Fast Forward gallery, one couple (a man and woman in their 50s or 60s) were engaged in a robust discussion of a painting. They stood maybe 10 feet from it, the man pointing at the art, the woman talking about the feeling of the piece. Then, their discussion led them to move closer to the painting and start reading the description. In contrast to that, there was a group of four (two men and two women, maybe thirtysomething), dressed en vogue, taking in the art. The two men scanned the art in the room, then moved closer to the paintings that caught their eyes, while the two women were engrossed in a discussion about their weekends. The women did not seem to pay much attention to the art, and the men only glanced at the descriptions, maybe long enough to see who the artist was. A couple other times, I notice the two men whip out their phones and snap a picture of a painting and quickly move on. Other people did this as well, mostly younger people.

As I moved to the next floor of the museum, I stumbled upon another couple (a woman and a man, early twenties), seemingly art students, because the young woman, horn-rimmed glasses and all, moved slowly through the gallery, lifting her glasses occasionally as if to examine its brush strokes on the paintings.

At one point, I sat in front of a collage of photographs and watched as a pair of friends (twentysomething women) were taking pictures of themselves and with the art. One of them had a nice DSLR camera (the same woman with the who was stopped by security for her bag) and took pictures of the other who seemed to be posing pensively for the camera. Then they reconvened to examine the picture they took.

A few minutes later, in the same location, a family took notice of the college. The mother (maybe in her 50s) looked attentively at the college, while the son and daughter (late teens, early 20s) chatted between themselves. At one point, the son grabbed the card that outlined the photos, glanced at the card, spoke to his sister, then glanced at the photos, all very

³ “Can You Stay Apolitical When Betsy DeVos Is One Of Your Biggest Supporters?,” accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.refinery29.com/2017/02/140474/pamella-roland-betsy-devos-nyfw-fall-2017>.

nonchalantly, and then placed the card back in the holder, and they all proceeded to the next gallery.

Other features of the museum included audiovisual displays. There were at least two different instances where there was a moving image pieces. In both cases they were played on LCD monitors. One was playing an animated short, with two sets of headphones attached to listen to the audio (only two people could listen at a time). Two women (maybe a mother-daughter situation, maybe 50s and 30s respectively) were taking advantage of the display, and at one point, the older women burst out in laughter at the content then looked around and at the other woman for approval. At the other moving image display, the TV was much larger and the audio was playing for all to hear. People stood around the display in a semi circle, and rarely did anyone stay for the entire video. There was also a table set up with maybe eight virtual reality-type goggles, and there was a line to check them out. The Whitney also has a theater which was playing an experimental piece, but it was not a typical theater. It was a large room with no seating except for a few large cushions in the middle of the room where four people lounged as they watched.

The New York Transit Museum

In many ways, the Transit Museum was the opposite of the Whitney, the starkest difference being: you would miss it if you were not looking for it. The Transit Museum is located in an old subway station renovated as a museum, and the entrance is a subway stairwell. The sign looks like a subway sign except that it reads New York Transit Museum. The way that I was able to confirm whether it was the correct entrance was the three different families milling about outside, children and strollers in tow.

After figuring out how the entrance worked, I found the converted subway ticket booth, and received my admission for free again, using my museum employee card. In contrast to the Whitney, there are fewer options to take when navigating through the Transit Museum. Being an old subway station, the ceilings are low and the floorplan is long and narrow. There are only two floors to the museum: the first floor has a couple galleries and many permanent and temporary exhibits; and the lower floor is the train platform, where the iconic subway cars are made available to explore.

At the entrance of the museum, there is a gift shop on one side, the ticket booth on the other side, and sandwiched in between the two is the entrance to exhibits with signs indicating the way. This entrance led directly into the first permanent gallery, "Steel, Stone & Backbone: Building New York's Subways," which was a narrow passageway. Historical photos were printed on vinyl posters with descriptions in large lettering were next to them, describing the creation of the subway. There was an old rail cart (about 4 feet by 4 feet) that was used to remove rocks during construction. People could push it back and forth a couple feet. There was also this big wood construction that was hoisted about 4 feet above the ground; visitors could go underneath and look up and see what it would have been like to look out of the subway during its construction. There were also TV screens embedded into the walls and they played old film footage of early street cars.

I visited the museum on a Saturday afternoon, and the variety of people who visited this museum were much different: there were families and couples. The families seemed to be thirty-somethings with young children around 4 to 5 years old, in some cases, with grandparents

in tow. There was also a racially diverse sampling of people: black, white and hispanic families. The couples that I noticed were of a variety of ages, some in their teens or early twenties through to middle age. Overall, the Transit museum has limited hours (10am-4pm, M-Th; 11am-5pm, Weekends), and I cannot imagine the selection of patrons varying greatly depending on the day. In fact, I would guess that Saturdays are their busiest, since families can all go together.

In the first gallery, one of the couples (white, in their sixties, seemingly well-to-do) made their way through slowly, both taking time to read the descriptions written in the walls and to take in the information. The families on the other hand went through like a wrecking ball. I noticed a few different families go through that gallery, and in each case the mother was helming the stroller, the father help on of the children and made sure they stayed close together. They also seemed to spend less time reading and more time pointing out interesting items to their children.

As you exit the first gallery, there is an entrance to another temporary gallery called "Bringing Back the City: Mass Transit Responds To Crisis," about how the transit system has historically reacted to disasters. It was just as narrow as the first gallery, but there were many more audio visual displays. This space was divided loosely into thirds with each section separated by a half wall with a large video screen on it. There were also videos screens with buttons to choose from a selection of interviews, and there were also model command-centers and other photos and descriptions. Fewer families made the trek together through this exhibit, although it was not particularly graphic. The adults spent more time here, selecting the different videos to watch, and staying for upwards of 10 to 20 minutes (as opposed to maybe spending 10 minutes in the first gallery).

Parallel to the two galleries was a long corridor with kids hanging on a row of old subway turnstiles to illustrate the many iterations of subway ticketing. At the end of the galleries and the turnstile exhibit is a wide room that modeled the intersection of a street, with the front section of two busses facing each other as if they were at a traffic stop. They were retrofitted with seating for kids to crawl on like a jungle gym, and they took full advantage. It was loud and chaotic in this section with kids running around. One old man was sitting in the back of one of these "buses" watching a video display. A little further past the fake intersection was a completely empty commissary.

Along the corridor with the turnstiles were stairs, like in a subway station, that took patrons down to the second floor of the museum, which was basically a subway platform. On either side, there were many iterations of subway cars from early models to the contemporary versions. They were all stopped with the doors open, and people were free to move up and down the platform to look at the cars in the order they pleased. Description cards were placed outside each car telling about the history of the respective model. There were fewer people in this area, but there was a tour guide riling up a group of about 20 children in one of the cars. On that note, aside from the tour guide for special groups, there were few employees to be found. One employee was selling tickets; one security guard was stationed at the entrance/exit of the museum/gift shop; one was walking around; and the tour guide.

Conclusions

There were many similarities and differences between these museums, which can give a sense of the type of institution each one is. At the Whitney, there was a wide age-range of visitors, generally from teenagers to seniors, but it was increasingly white, although there was a wide range of ethnicities represented, although it seemed like a predominantly white, well-to-do patronage. In contrast, the Transit Museum was filled with families, very young children, few grandparents, and even fewer teenagers; there seemed to be an even racial makeup of white, black and hispanic visitors.

The starkest difference though was probably age and the way it determined the fashion in which the visitors experienced the museum. In both museums, the older folks tended to spend longer amounts of time in front of the objects, specifically looking at the art, reading the descriptions, and actually trying to learn something about the art.

At the same time, and more specifically to the Whitney, I had this strong sense that for younger patrons, visiting this museum was more of a social and cultural exercise. They used the museum as an opportunity to prove that they were cultured. They moved along quickly from artwork to artwork, snapping photos of the work to look at (or not) later. Or to post to social media. Their goal was much more to prove that they had been to the Whitney, rather than appreciating it. To one extent, there were the two women who appeared to be there only to catch up with each other and did not seem to look at the art at all.

The Whitney is a more traditional art museum but with deep pockets, while the Transit Museum has some interesting interactive displays but is limited in what it can do because of space and funding. The Whitney was started by one of the wealthiest families in America and has gained a strong reputation and attracted huge donations, hence the new building. On the other hand, the Transit Museum is a self-supporting branch of the MTA and has a non-profit organization to keep it running. Another example of the state of each institution could be seen in the hours of operation: the Whitney has longer hours, many more staff (who are art pieces in their own right), and charges two and a half times for entrance; the Transit Museum has shorter hours and I could count the number of staff on one hand.

Overall, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the New York Transit Museum are two distinctly different museums. The Whitney appeals to a more sophisticated group of visitors, while the Transit Museum appeals to families with young children. The Whitney is much more spacious and typical to an art museum, with large galleries and white space, while the Transit Museum is smaller, with more interactive objects, audiovisual screens, and a focus on history. To that end, each museum knows their audience and attempts to accommodate their expectations.