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## Expanding Art's Audience

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Abstract

This paper investigates the need for contemporary art museums to expand their audience to fit their role as educational institutions. It is based on research that looks at ways museums have typically been operated in the past and then focuses on newer modes of operation, using the Brooklyn Museum as an example of a museum that educates and reaches a greater audience. Lastly, the paper looks at how particular artists have broken the mold of presenting art in order to interact with and relate to audiences in new ways. This research explains ways that art can be made accessible to a wider audience through the efforts of museum and artists to educate and involve a more diverse population.

## Expanding Art's Audience

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### Expanding Art's Audience

The world of art is a constantly evolving environment. For years, the museum has undergone little change. Now the expectations of audiences and the difficulties of finding funding have required that museums put on a fresh face that not only focuses on art, but on art's connection with its audience as well. I present a way in which these contemporary expectations can be met. I offer a discussion of using a layered approach to presentation as an appropriate means of bringing about change in the museum. The Brooklyn Museum will be used as an excellent example in which the layered approach has been adopted. Furthermore, my discussion will include the efforts of artists to create an art that alters the museum and effectively connects with its audience. With these thoughts considered I present ways in which museums and artists can be a more compelling force for their audiences.

In recent decades, what people expect of the museum has undergone serious change. The growing number of museums has led to a need for individual museums to try to pull in ever growing audiences in order to remain competitive. People go to the museum, each seeking their own experience. Some want a place of quiet contemplation, some expect entertainment, and others still expect to be enlightened. People want to connect with artwork. Museums now need to be much more than treasure houses.

The need to vie for the attention of the public is a recent phenomenon. According to Kenneth Hudson, "Museums were run either by municipalities or by the state, and those in charge of them were usually under no pressure to produce results, either in the form of a steadily increasing number of visitors or of a more efficient use of funds; the modern practice of obtaining commercial sponsorship for new projects was almost completely unknown."<sup>1</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hudson, "The Museum Refuses to Stand Still," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 86-87.

museums were concerned more with the object and less with their public, a situation that persists in many museums today. This mindset has created a sense of artwork not being an object of appreciation but an object to observe with awe, from a distance. This is no longer an acceptable mode of operation. The goal of being both educator and entertainer has been forced upon museums by the economy and viewer expectations. Museum directors must be open to this new idea in order to succeed.

George F. MacDonald says, “Museums have tended to view their audiences as homogenous groups, and to provide programs on a single level.”<sup>2</sup> In order to have art reach their audience, museums have needed to consider developing their presentation on multiple levels instead of the single level. One of these first developments has been by grabbing interest with pleasurable and/or useful additions to their program. Thomas Krens of the Guggenheim Museum believes the museum needs “great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the Internet, and economies of scale via a global network.”<sup>3</sup> Offering educational opportunities, programs, and events provides an even greater wealth of information while also creating appeal for a larger audience. Based on the research I have conducted, if the museum hopes to stand as an educational institution than it needs to reach more than one audience.

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<sup>2</sup> George F. MacDonald, “Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society,” in *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 163.

<sup>3</sup> James Cuno, “The Object of Art Museums,” in *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 55.

Authors such as George F. MacDonald, Constance Perin, and James Cuno believe that the information a museum provides should also be layered. Providing information in layers allows the audience to choose how far they wish to explore the art or programs offered to them. Constance Perin describes three types of people in regards to the exploration of information in the museum. There are those that go to a museum to look at the art without interest in deeper exploration. There are those that will utilize the descriptions and information provided within the exhibition. Lastly, there are those that will go beyond the museum seeking more information for themselves, researching the exhibit before, during, and/or after their visit. George F. MacDonald states:

The important thing is to make museum's information resources accessible for exploration, but without overloading visitors with information. Layering the information permits each visitor to probe to whatever level meets his or her specific needs.

Interactive technologies and hypermedia (programs in which access to information is not linear or hierarchical) appearing on the market provide a previously unavailable opportunity for museums to enable visitors to take greater control of the learning process, but museums have to be prepared to develop applications specific to their audience's needs.<sup>4</sup>

The use of educational material, programs, modern technologies, and informative exhibition display can help people on all levels find the layer that best fits them and allow them to find satisfaction in their museum visit. Combining the layered approaches of museum development and educational models will help engage and inform a greater range of audience members.

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<sup>4</sup> George F. MacDonald, "Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society," in *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 162.

There are, of course, counterarguments and disagreements. James Cuno is of the belief that a museum's permanent exhibition should be able to stand on its own without having to depend on the temporary exhibits.<sup>5</sup> I do not disagree with this point. Permanent exhibitions should not depend on temporary exhibitions, but these exhibitions do offer more for a greater range of people. A permanent exhibit will appeal to its audience, while temporary exhibits have the ability to engage the interests of changing groups of people with each new exhibit installed. This, if done properly, should also draw people to the permanent exhibit as they are already in the space. The argument is that the important consideration is not whether or not permanent exhibits depend on temporary shows; it's that these temporary exhibits provide for the wants and needs of more people. It also provides greater incentive to revisit the museum.

A second counterargument to the layered approach is that when using it, there is concern that the other activities offered by a museum will come to dominate the display of art. This is a valid concern. Museums do need to be careful when trying to engage their audience. Since a museum is supposed to be a place that displays art, it is important that the art take precedence. Letting the architecture, programs, food, or shops become the key feature defeats the purpose of the museum. Museum directors must be careful to tie their programs into their exhibits. They need to make sure that the art they display is still capable of grabbing attention. They need to make sure to promote the connection between art and entertainment. In a time when the demand for funds is on the rise, it can be difficult to find the balance between entertainment and education.

The Brooklyn Museum is an excellent example of how museums can work to vary their audience. It takes a leveled approach in attracting a diverse audience. In regards to Brooklyn

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<sup>5</sup> James Cuno, "The Object of Art Museums," in *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 55.

Museum, Robin Pogrebin said, “A 2008 museum survey showed that roughly half of the attendees were first-time visitors. The average age was 35, a large portion of the visitors (40 percent) came from Brooklyn, and more than 40 percent identified themselves as people of color.”<sup>6</sup> This is seen in comparison to the average museum audience where 65% of attendees are over the age of 50, and 92% of visitors are white.<sup>7</sup> Brooklyn Museum’s mission statement helps to explain what goals push it to cater to a diverse audience. It states:

The mission of the Brooklyn Museum is to act as a bridge between the rich artistic heritage of world cultures, as embodied in its collections, and the unique experience of each visitor. 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.<sup>8</sup>

The Brooklyn Museum accomplishes its mission by using its space for more than just the presentation of art. It has activities and events that create comfort with the space, removing the air of elitism that is present in many museums.

The Brooklyn Museum has a wide range of events that they hold that caters to almost every section of the population, drawing people in and making the museum a more accessible place. One of the more popular events that the Brooklyn Museum puts on is its Target First Saturdays. The first Saturday of every month, Brooklyn Museum puts on free art programs and

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Populism Hasn’t Lured Crowds,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2010, C1.

<sup>7</sup> “Who’s coming to Your Museum? Demographics by Museum Type,” Museum Audience Insight, accessed October 6, 2013, [http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum\\_audience\\_insight/2010/04/whos-coming-to-your-museum-demographics-by-museum-type.html](http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2010/04/whos-coming-to-your-museum-demographics-by-museum-type.html).

<sup>8</sup> “About Mission Statement,” Brooklyn Museum, accessed October 6, 2013, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/about/mission.php>.



various sorts of entertainment along with food and beverages. Brooklyn Museum holds art educational programs and events for all ages including programs that target particular age groups. It offers day camp visits and even online activities. For families they are currently doing a series of events entitled *Arty Facts*. These include education on different issues within the art world followed by hands on art workshops. There they have Teen Nights and internships filled with artistic and educational activities. Various music events, art workshops, and classes are offered. For adults there are films, hands-on workshops, and tours. The tours offered vary in their message presenting multiple manners in which various exhibitions can be viewed. Recently tours were given that catered to those who are blind or have poor vision. These sensory tours show how the art can be experienced without sight. Music events feature a wide range of musical genres from very old to very new. Such wide ranging groups as the Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra and a contemporary electronic artist known as Pegasus Warning can be heard at the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the variety of activities offered by Brooklyn Museum, it is no wonder it has an unusually diverse audience. The museum offers more than exhibits to be looked at. They open the space up to its public, not only drawing people into the space for their events but also creating comfort with the museum's space. Even within the activities the museum offers, there is variety. The activities, while open to the public can be useful in that they target particular groups of people with what they offer. As mentioned, they cater to youth with educational programs, internships, and dances. Adults are drawn in with films, Target First Saturdays, workshops, and tours. The variety of music, performances, dance, and music can work to bring in people of varying ethnicity and background.

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<sup>9</sup> "Calendar," Brooklyn Museum, accessed October 6, 2013, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/calendar/>.

By using its space the way it does, Brooklyn Museum attracts people and gives a chance to see the museum in a new context. Brooklyn Museum makes itself available to the young and old creating understanding of art and comfort with museum spaces through educational and craft programs. This recontextualizing removes the sense of elitism that clings to museums. The museum and the art within it becomes more accessible as it is visited by people that now have a different experience of the space than they typically would.

Robin Pogrebin looks at this outreach negatively referring to it as “populism”. Pogrebin brings up the point that despite the Brooklyn Museum’s success in diversifying its audience, the overall attendance numbers have decreased. But, as he later points out in the same article, it is not an uncommon occurrence amongst contemporary museums. Pogrebin argues that the activities and programs offered are only momentary grabs for attention. He attempts to equate attendance numbers to success. The Brooklyn Museum director Arnold Lehman stated, “We don’t start with the fact that it could draw a lot of people. We start with the idea that it’s a great exhibition.”<sup>10</sup> Guided by such efforts the Brooklyn Museum accomplishes its mission of creating unique experiences and serving a diverse public. Its programs accomplish the goals of education and entertainment even if the numbers are not as high as some may want. It should also be remembered that it can take time to build a new audience.

Intimacy is what allows for diversity. Brooklyn Museum caters to all sorts of people instead of targeting the art educated, the affluent, and the old, it builds a reputation as a relaxed location bringing people back and drawing new visitors in. Though the Brooklyn Museum is by no means a perfect museum, it is taking great strides in becoming both educator and entertainer. It educates a diverse audience through its programs and activities while providing entertainment

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Brooklyn Museum’s Populism Hasn’t Lured Crowds,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2010.

and knowledge. Its layered approach makes the space inclusive and interactive fitting the needs of contemporary audiences.

Of course, artists also play a role in changing the experience that people have with art. Some artists are working to rethink the typical display of art and to make the viewer an active participant. In the following paragraphs, four cases will be reviewed in order to show some ways this is done. All four artists change the art experience in their own distinct way. Each engages their audience, upsetting the viewer's role as passive watcher. These innovative ways of working and displaying open the art experience to a contemporary audience, breaking the stuffy state of the typical display.

Gabriel Orozco is an artist who has worked with curators to display his art in unexpected ways providing people with a new viewing experience. Orozco has experimented heavily with the perception of art, changing the museum experience several times in the past. One way he has done this is by displaying outside of the exhibition space of museums, disrupting viewers' expectations. Pieces like *Melon* (fig. 1), *Dial Tone* (fig. 2), *Elevator* (fig. 3), and *Recaptured Nature* (fig. 4) have all been displayed outside of the normal viewing space. *Melon* was a cantaloupe placed at the top of a doorway. *Dial Tone* is a long scroll of Japanese paper that has three columns of phone numbers pulled from a phone book listed on it. This was displayed in the space between two escalators.<sup>11</sup> *Elevator*, which is an elevator that had a section removed and was sutured back together to the match artist's height,<sup>12</sup> has been displayed in a hallway in between galleries and, on a separate occasion, by the museum's usable elevators. *Recaptured Nature*, a ball of vulcanized rubber made by cutting apart tires and restructuring the pieces, was

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<sup>11</sup> Temkin, *Gabriel Orozco*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Temkin, *Gabriel Orozco*, 101.

displayed on the landing at the top of an escalator.<sup>13</sup> By displaying works in this way, Orozco put his audience into a sudden and unexpected confrontation with his art. They were not given the chance to prepare themselves for viewing art within the gallery space. Instead the art is inserted quite suddenly into their presence. The viewers must quickly figure out what they are being presented with allowing an unanticipated interaction with his work. Instead of knowing that what they are seeing is art due to its location in a gallery space, the piece is thrust into their transitional spaces requesting on the spot interpretation.

Orozco has also created work that requires direct interaction from his audience. He did this through the creation of games such as *Carambole with Pendulum* (fig. 5) and *Ping-Pond Table* (fig. 6). These creations turned games into art. In the museum space the viewer is asked to do the unusual and play games. *Carambole with Pendulum*, for example, is no true game as there is no way of winning. The cue ball strikes a ball attached to a pendulum and swings about. This oval pool table has no holes so there are no clear objectives or rules, but the interaction occurs regardless.<sup>14</sup> *Ping-Pond Table* is another adaption of an existing game. It is ping pong for four players with a pond in the center.<sup>15</sup> Interaction with art is not what one usually expects in an exhibition. Orozco changes the viewing object into an active experience.

Scott Garner is an artist that has done work that allows interaction in a way that goes beyond what Orozco has done. His piece, *Still Life* (fig. 6), is an interactive work in which the audience can actually alter what they are viewing. The piece, which is made to look like an ordinary still life, is actually a framed screen displaying a digital image. By tilting the frame, the objects inside move in a realistic reaction to that tilt ((fig.7) (.fig.8)). This work alters what has

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<sup>13</sup> Temkin, *Gabriel Orozco*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Temkin, *Gabriel Orozco*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Temkin, *Gabriel Orozco*, 140.

come to be expected of the museum. By allowing people to touch and change his work, Scott Garner has relinquished a fair amount of control to the viewer. His work undoes the idea of the precious object and makes the art about involving the audience.

An exhibit put together by The Department of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dimension called Sephora Sensorium (fig. 9) was unusual in that it was an artistic experience of sight, sound, and scent that fully immersed the viewer. The viewer gazed upon a wall of imagery while breathing scents from a mechanical flower. This was accompanied by separate sounds being played at each image. Duncan of The Inspiration Room says, “Next, in the museum’s marquee event Lucid Dreams, visitors can affect beautiful suspended images inspired by Firmenich’s master perfumers. Using a high tech flower sculpture, the images transform based on the power of the individual’s sniff – triggered by the unique sound transmitted by the physical act of smelling.”<sup>16</sup> This exhibit had the ability of transporting people to a different space in ways that other art could not, due to scents engaging more memories and sensations than an image alone could. The imagery is also affected by how heavily the viewer inhales, swelling and condensing in correspondence with their breathing pattern. This way the connection between sound, smell, and image will be different for every viewer.

The final example is Lawrence Malstaf, whose work not only immersed the viewers in the art, but also makes them become the art. In his work *Shrink* (fig. 10), Malstaf suspends people in shrink wrap, allowing them to become living human sculpture. The audience watches as people pressed between sheets of plastic attempt to move and breathe. The image changes constantly through the actions of the people and due to the fact that the people being suspended also change with each showing. The experience for those who volunteer to be shrink-wrapped is

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<sup>16</sup> Duncan, The Inspiration Room, “Sephora Sensorium – Lucid Dreams from the Sensory World.”

also something that cannot be found in a typical exhibition. Chris Michael, a volunteer and writer for the *Guardian*, said in his description, “It takes a conscious effort of will to decide to cede control, but when you finally give up and allow the plastic to suspend you, it's a womblike experience. You float. The only thing that still moves, monstrosly, is your belly, which shrinks and swells with a mind of its own.”<sup>17</sup> This show creates an ever changing experience for the viewer and unusual sensation for the volunteer. This disrupts the idea that art is a precious unchanging object inaccessible and untouchable. Instead we are presented with people engaging with their confinement, but will stay only as long as they are comfortable. The people who volunteer to become part of the piece can experience viewing and being viewed in ways that are not usually possible.

These four artists, in their own ways, remove their art from the position of the sacred and precious item. All four allow a new experience of immersion whether by putting the viewers into the art or by simply removing their work from the expectations of the gallery space. These works do not depend on the museum to make them effective. They could be removed from this space and still create the same experience. *The Victory of Samothrace* (fig. 11) would not have the same effect if placed in a bar as it does displayed in a museum. Jean-Louis Déotte asks, “Could the *Victory of Samothrace* be moved from the Louvre today? On the contrary, should we not consider that its very landscape, its light, geography and history have become an intrinsic part of the Museum?”<sup>18</sup> Scott Garner’s *Still Life*, on the other hand, could create the same surprise and awe in another setting. *Still Life* would create the same surprise when interacted with, while *Victory of Samothrace* would no longer have the anticipation of the museum space to

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<sup>17</sup> Michael, “I was Shrinkwrapped for Art.”

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Louis Déotte, “Rome, the Archetypal Museum, and the Louvre, the Negation of Division,” in *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire J. Farago, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 57.

lend itself to its reception. These artists work to create art that can be appreciated equally in any space. By putting experience above placement, these artists immerse us in their work; undoing the separation and aura that, according to Benjamin Buchloh would term, museum displays create. This art can be connected to without fear of the precious, without the worry of not being able to understand its deeper meaning.

Through the efforts of museums and artists the museum can accomplish its contemporary role. By making the effort to connect with their audiences, these institutions can draw people in and educate them like never before. By changing the context of the museum, directors and artists can immerse people in the experience of art creating a gripping and enlightening experience. By layering their approach, museums reach a more diverse public. By educating their audience they create a deeper appreciation of the art. By breaking the conventions of art, artists create artistic experiences that have never before been witnessed. These efforts create a more dynamic, compelling, and effective museum space for everybody.

Figures



Fig. 1- *Melon*. Gabriel Orozco. 1993.

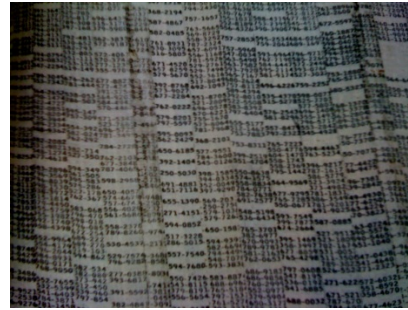


Fig. 2- *Dial Tone*. Gabriel Orozco. 1992.



Fig. 3- *Elevator*. Gabriel Orozco. 1994.



Fig. 4- *Recaptured Nature*. Gabriel Orozco. 1990.



Fig. 5- *Carambole with Pendulum*. Gabriel Orozco. 1996.



Fig. 6- *Ping-Pond Table*. Gabriel Orozco. 1998.



Fig. 6- *Still Life*. Scott Garner. 2012.



Fig. 7- *Still Life* tilted left. Scott Garner. 2012.





Fig. 8- *Still Life* tilted right. Scott Garner. 2012.

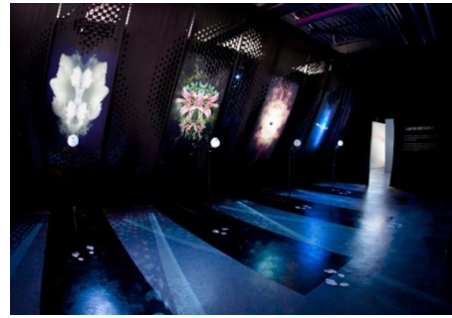


Fig. 9- Sephora Sensorium. The Department of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dimension. 2011



Fig. 10- *Shrink*. Lawrence Malstaf. 2011.

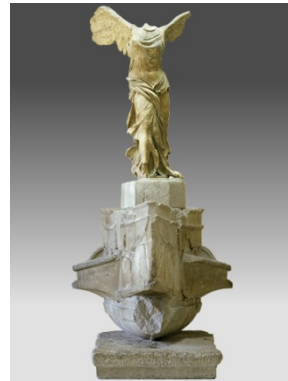


Fig. 11- *Victory of Samothrace*. Artist Unknown. Circa 200-190 BCE.

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**Mentor's Biography-** Curt Germundson is an associate professor in the Art Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he has taught Art History courses since 2001. He received his BA in 1988 from the University of California at Berkeley and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2001. Dr. Germundson has published articles on the German collage artist Kurt Schwitters and on the museum director's Alexander Dorner's reconceptualization of "original" and "replica." He is particularly interested in the way Schwitters uses the idea of the "Cathedral" in his work in order to create a synthesis of "private" and "public."