

The *Click!* Experience: A Participant's View

by Amy Dreher

Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition

Brooklyn Museum

Inspired by James Surowiecki's critically acclaimed book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, **Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition** explores whether the author's premise—that a diverse crowd is often wiser at making decisions than expert individuals—can be applied to visual art. **Click!** began in March 2008, with an open call for photographs depicting the “changing faces of Brooklyn,” a theme that allowed for a wide variety of interpretations by contributing photographers. After the submission period, there was a two-month online evaluation—the public assessed the 389 photographs that were submitted, using a sliding scale from most to least effective, and taking into consideration aesthetics, the photographic techniques used, and the work's relevance to the exhibition's theme. Evaluators were asked to self-select their knowledge level (from “none” to “expert”) and designate their geographic location.

The online evaluation tool was designed to promote fairness. Works were presented at random, and our algorithm ensured that all photographs were seen an equal number of times. To minimize influence, works were displayed without the artist attribution; evaluators were unable to skip past images or to forward links to individual works.

A total of 3,344 people participated in the evaluation process by casting 410,089 evaluations. Each of the 389 works was viewed approximately 1,054 times. The top 20 percent of the 389 submitted works were shown in an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum from June 27 to August 10, 2008. The photographs were displayed by size according to their relative ranking within this percentile. More information can be found online at www.brooklynmuseum.org/click.

Last spring I got word that a rare opportunity was being offered by the Brooklyn Museum: a chance to have work hung on their esteemed walls. There was a caveat: find the changing face of Brooklyn, and pass the muster of being judged worthy by the masses.

Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition called for participants to do one of two things: submit a photo for consideration and/or review the works submitted based on criteria from the Brooklyn Museum. There would be four weeks to enter a single work that captured the exhibition's theme, “the changing faces of Brooklyn,” and six weeks for the crowds to review and evaluate all submitted photographs on that

subject. After the evaluations were tallied, an exhibition would show the work; the size of each photo would be based on the crowd-determined ranking.

Having delved into the world of social networking via Flickr, an online photo sharing site, it seemed natural to come together with some of my contacts and try to tackle this. It would be easier to find the changing face if we banded together. The deadline for submission was close—about five weeks away—not much time for the non-Brooklynites to acclimate themselves to the borough, research changing neighborhoods, and then capture the essence of that change in time to review and submit their work.

Amy Dreher is a photographer living in Brooklyn.



Billboard/poster for **Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition** in the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum. Photo by Amy Dreher (2008).

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Ten of us came together and formed a private Flickr group, *Clickworthy*, to organize photo walks and participate in discussions. The group started by discussing the question that the Brooklyn Museum asked: What is the changing face of Brooklyn? How do we represent that? A ‘face’ was too obvious. But different faces, or maybe old and new cultures next to each other? Then, *where* was the changing face of

Brooklyn? Areas in Brooklyn that were getting press (like Coney Island or Red Hook) might be too obvious, and not stand out. What would resonate with the critics, in this case, whoever decided to evaluate the photos submitted? Just because we thought it represented that changing face, would the crowds who were to curate this show see it that way? The group encompassed all skill levels from amateur to professional.

As a proud Brooklynite, I volunteered to help research walks, and we planned to do at least one walk a weekend, with the potential for smaller groups to meet after work during the week. I got out my stack of books on Brooklyn, and cross-checked with online sources. Upcoming walks were announced on the group discussion board, then e-mailed to everyone. Our differing schedules prevented everyone from getting to each walk, but most made it to three or four; a couple of us were treating this as if we were searching for hidden treasure (in a way we were).

We asked the questions over and over again, in different ways, as we started the walks. Everyone suggested the neighborhoods they knew or wanted to know about. If we weren’t looking for the obvious, we came to the conclusion that the idea of “changing faces” would reveal itself to us, in its own good time. We began to relax, and just enjoy learning about Brooklyn. It was fun to figure out where to go next. I even asked co-workers who I knew lived in Brooklyn where to go in their then mysterious neighborhoods. Fellow Brooklynites revealed favorite food spots. I learned where the best pizza is (DiFara’s in Midwood), Italian sandwiches (Sheepshead Bay), Chicken Pot Pie (Bay Ridge), and local beer (Red Hook). I know what High School the Cosby’s shot at,



“Congestion,” by Amy Dreher (2008), from the exhibition **Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition**.

and where to go fishing. We walked through Coney Island, Brighton Beach, Sheepshead Bay, Manhattan Beach, Midwood, Boro Park, Red Hook, Gowanus, Carrol Gardens, Cobble Hill, Atlantic Avenue, downtown Brooklyn, Vinegar Hill, Sunset Park, Williamsburg, Bay Ridge, Fort Greene, and Prospect Heights. Sometimes we went twice a weekend and then a couple of times during the week.

I found the image that would eventually make it into the exhibition on St. Patrick's Day as I was with fellow photographer Trish Mayo from our group. On our way to Coney Island, we had stopped to look at the Atlantic Yards, a railroad hub where many of the nearby buildings were slated for demolition to make way for a new basketball stadium. It was a bright, clear day. Walking up a busy section of road I turned around to look across the busy intersection at Fort Greene, another quickly gentrifying neighborhood. There it was, past, present and possibly future stacked on top of each other: the unfinished high rise, the old and new restaurant signs and traffic; lots of traffic that potentially would increase when the huge complex to rise there was completed. Here it was, on the other end of my changing neighborhood. A few minutes later, Trish got the shot that would end up in the *Click!* exhibition and eventually in the *New York Times* in an unrelated article (Givhan, 2008).

Some of our group asked for guidance in selecting what would be their final submission, and others selected their photograph on their own, but after each selected and submitted a single “changing faces” capture, we all waited. Most of us filled the time reviewing the other photos submitted. Some went far enough to find the photos they thought other group members submitted—works were presented anonymously



Bittersweet. Author stands by her photo with mixed emotion. Photo by Amy Dreher (2008).



Snapping the artist snapping her photo. Photo by Shelley Bernstein (2008).

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it helped us form a connection to the institution itself.

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know what they like.
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during the evaluation period, and some of us refused to tell which was ours. Some of the group reviewed all the photos in order to size up the competition or keep busy while we waited. When the final selections were announced, it was heartbreaking to learn that the majority of the group did not make it in. As much as this exhibition was about the study, the scientific look at how a crowd chooses, we were all artists hoping to get something on those forbidden walls; to slip in, just this once. To say: “See? I made it. Here’s my photo. That’s my name under it.” For me, and some of the other members of the group, it helped us form a connection to the institution itself.

The reviews of the exhibition were not kind to the work itself. While the concept of the show, the idea of testing the wisdom of crowds out was given a fair discussion, the art was not. It was deemed “..akin to striking postcards,”(Esplund, 2008) “artistically pedestrian” (Johnson, 2008). And compared to the work from Life magazine. It was disconcerting to have made it so far—to be approved of by the crowds that ranked the photos—and then to be panned by the critics.

I was proud to be a part of the exhibition. I sheepishly went up to the second floor of the museum several times, just to see my photo hanging there, often greeting the security guards that were there. “Back again?” they would often say. I felt ownership over what was on those walls because I had been involved in it from the first walk we took to the last photo I ranked. It was so nice to see so many “voices” showing how they saw my beloved Brooklyn changing.

Regardless of what the critics said, *Click!* drew significant crowds. In my (frequent) observation, the Brooklynites came out in force to see what the changing face of their Brooklyn was. There always seemed to be a discussion going on in front of the photos—a son explaining a photo to his visiting parents; locals looking at the sites they have grown so familiar with, but perhaps never thought of capturing, there on the walls. They were relearning their neighborhood; their changing faces. It’s okay if the critics didn’t see this as a successful exhibition artistically. Brooklyn did. Regardless of what the critics thought, that was still my photo hanging on the wall, with my name under it. ✨