



Design Intentionality and the Art Museum

by Maria Mortati

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Exhibitions, and intentionally designed museum experiences as a whole, can be thought of as a series of layered and largely orchestrated engagement mechanisms. They require a type of thinking that is not only about content delivery and participation, but about maximizing potential for engagement across space, ideas, and among visitors, artists, and staff.

Intentional design in art museums is an emerging discipline. It's only in recent years that we've begun to see projects that complement or go beyond curatorial frameworks in terms of visitor experience. Traditionally, we think art speaks for

itself or that it's inappropriate to mediate the subjective experience of an individual through interpretation. Why complicate the challenges around working with original, priceless, disparate works of art by adding the expertise of educators and designers? Or by including new art practices that seem to blur the boundaries between the museum and the public? In this paper I discuss projects that have been challenging these assumptions through new, intentionally designed initiatives.

Operational Design for New Exhibition Practice

Center for Creative Connections at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA)

This is the study of a space that needed a way to work more iteratively and experimentally. The Center for Creative Connections (C3) is a 12,000 square-foot, elegant, and highly participatory space that involves visitors in "active learning about the DMA's collections." (B. Pittman, E. Hirzy, 2010). Their first two exhibitions were on broad themes (such as Materials or Space) and featured works across the collection. Works were connected to the theme visually yet not necessarily conceptually. Hands-on activities were adjacent to the works. While successful in terms of participation, evaluation showed visitors were not connecting with the ideas in the works themselves (Dallas Museum of Art, 2008). Also, mounting these single-theme, complex exhibitions consumed extensive time and resources, leaving little room for the trial and error approach that innovation requires. As a result, C3 Director Susan Diachisin wanted to explore alternative approaches to internal exhibit development and design of future exhibitions.



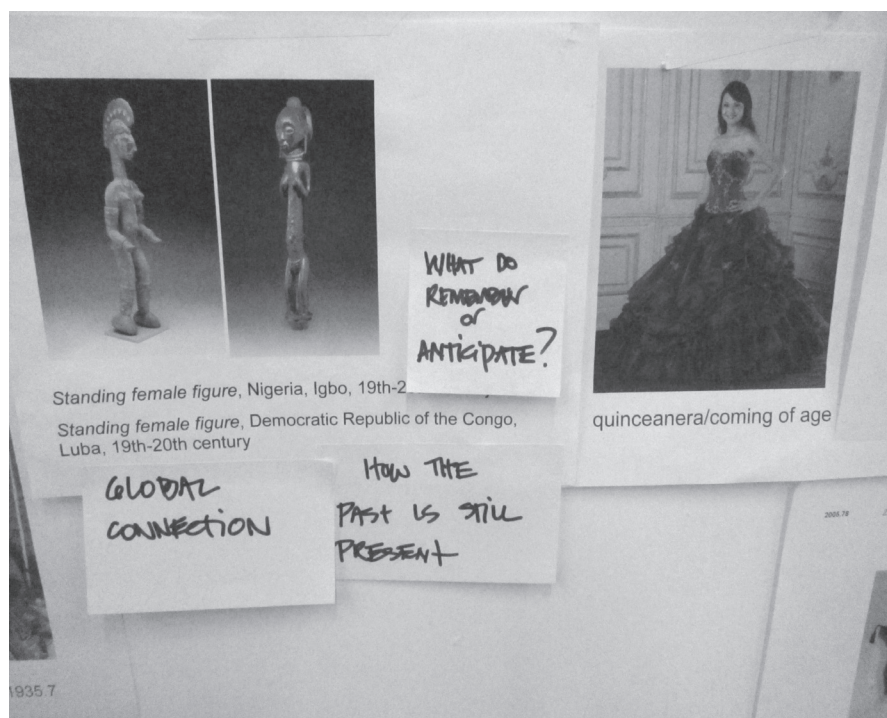
The team had initial meetings to review drawings and do gallery walk-throughs to evaluate the space for new activities and audiences. (Center for Creative Connections, Dallas Museum of Art). Courtesy of Maria Mortati.

We began by evaluating the physical space, assessing how the gallery could maximize engagement:

- Where in the visit were visitors when they encountered C3?
- What kind of art could we install and where?
- Which spaces were matched to what types of activity (drawing, reading, making) and aligned with audience (lines of sight for young, old, spaces for families, singles)?

The museum was reticent to jettison the meta themes because they provided a way to telegraph what was happening in the gallery throughout the institution. In creating an experimental approach, we developed a “theme lab.” It would hold objects or maquettes of objects the C3 team was working on for engagement. The idea was that visitors could view staff developing these interactives. We then developed the concept of a hands-on area that allowed the visitor to test out the in-progress interactives in an adjacent space. A nice thing about opening up experimentation to the public is that it is inherently participatory.

The next step was to determine criteria for how we might select objects for this type of deeper engagement with a concept. Susan wanted to engage the public with objects by being able to connect them to a variety of ideas or fields: Was it related to history? engineering? psychology? events of the day? In addition, each group of objects needed to crisscross the museum’s encyclopedic collection.



New criteria emerged during our process to select works of art from across the collection (Center for Creative Connections, Dallas Museum of Art). Courtesy of Maria Mortati.

At that point in the project, the Museum got a new director and adjusted course. As such, the space is still evolving. However, much progress was made, and the desire to develop operational frameworks (how objects move from the collections to the interpretive space) that support this type of design and interpretive work still stands.

Priming Visitors for Engagement with Art

The Big Table Gallery at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA)

Recently, I worked with the BMA on creating a gallery of interactive engagement for their remodeled Contemporary Wing. This project set out to bring education-based initiatives into the main gallery areas of the wing. Anne Manning, Deputy Director of Education, wanted us to create an experience that would prime visitors for their experiences with contemporary art in the galleries through hands-on activities. This was based on field-wide assessments that today’s art museum visitors come equipped with a fairly low level of artistic

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"The Big Table" at the Baltimore Museum of Art was designed to introduce visitors to contemporary art in the adjacent galleries through activities tied to a contemporary art theme. Courtesy of Maria Mortati.

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literacy (Crowley, Knutson, and Russell, 2011).

Again, we began with a physical evaluation of the new space, determining what areas were best suited for activity. Then we set about crafting its identity: What was it? What did it mean? What were we really trying to do?

Contemporary art is largely conceptual, and visitors can find it difficult to make connections between the abstract image and their own experience. Anne wanted to work with the idea of priming, i.e., drawing on visitors' prior knowledge (N. Humphrey, 2011). She sought to give visitors an "easy" starting experience. We began by taking a singular work of art and building and testing interactives with it. Then we explored various approaches that artists use in contemporary art such as "pop culture." We settled on "text in art" as it spills over into fields the public has a lot of familiarity with (such as advertising). We chose works by artists such as Barbara Kruger, Christopher Wool, and Andy Warhol that embodied an approach visitors would see in the adjacent galleries. We created a movie for a flat screen with images

of the artwork and relevant quotations. This way, visitors could readily connect artworks to the theme, while avoiding the inherent difficulties of having the actual works in the space. Given earlier testing, spatial evaluation, and inter-departmental conversations, we deduced the types of activities the gallery could support: drawing, writing, and reading. Post Typography, a local design firm we engaged to help realize the concept, turned the theme "text as image" into a repeating phrase they played with: *Words Are Pictures Are Words*. They did this as a series of posters mimicking the various techniques contemporary artists used.

I felt the space needed to signal that it was distinct from the rest of the galleries. So, inspired by Takashi Murakami's "Jelly Fish Eyes" wallpaper, we defined visual immersion as one of our environmental design requirements. Post Typography created a wallpaper effect by painting *Words Are Pictures Are Words* around the room in floor-to-ceiling letters. Instead of labels, descriptive callouts were used to annotate what each poster technique was about. The result was a space that was convivial and contemporary, while letting the ideas pop.

A "Big Table" provided a workplace for visitors. Activities at the table were derived from aspects of text in art from the posters: create a drawing from a letter, collage a playful series of words. An issue that I'd seen many times in participatory spaces is an over-use of post-its for participation. It is often at odds with the design of these spaces in art museums. We wanted the work of visitors to look like it belonged in the space. We integrated a



"The Big Table" was custom designed by a local artist with a trough for materials that could be covered for events. Its design was informal enough to warm up the formal space. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art.

series of pegs on the wall into the design. Visitors could use these to hang their work. Not long after opening, each of the pegs on the wall was covered many drawings deep, and people of all ages were participating. Their results were smart, inventive, and funny—a high caliber of work for an unmediated experience. This meant we were achieving the primary goal of the project: to expand on visitors' experience with contemporary art and to prepare them for further engagement in the art galleries.

Designing for Artists and the Public Open Field at the Walker Art Center

In 2010, the Walker Art Center Education Department noticed that their lawn, occasionally used for outdoor concerts and traditional education activities, was being used by the public for picnics and play. Under the guidance of Sarah Schultz, Director of Education and Curator of Public Engagement, they began to ask "...what might happen if we thought of our open space as a shared resource? How

might it frame cultural participation as a collective and dynamic process? What form of public park could emerge from the context of a contemporary arts center?" (S. Peters, S. Schultz, 2012).

To answer, they began with design charettes including local talent to re-imagine the physical space of the field. Through research and dialogue with staff, artists, and designers, they began to develop ideas that could support new participation for both artists and the public. Realizing they wanted to do something outside the norms of program and exhibition development, they created a framework through which their public and the museum could co-create and curate. This became a project called Open Field: an experimental initiative that, over the course of its first three years, engaged 92,000 visitors with dozens of participatory projects, artist residencies, initiatives with local designers and the public's own programming. Projects included a lawn mowing orchestra, outdoor drawing clubs, acoustic

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An orchestrated performance of lawn mowers brought in by the public called "The American Lawn And Ways To Cut It" (Machine Project, Open Field, Walker Art Center). Courtesy of Machine Project.

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Given the emergent nature of intentional design, evaluation practices (and results) are nascent.

campfires, and the Internet Cat Video Festival.

Participation and creativity work best when they have well-crafted parameters. The team understood that in order to empower their staff, artists, and the public to work well together with the project, they would need "rules, tools and seeding"—both conceptual and literal (S. Peters, S. Schultz, 2012). After developing amenities such as an outdoor café, seating, and umbrellas, they also created an outdoor "Tool Shed" filled with art supplies, games, and props. In order to set expectations and tone, they developed a set of rules they called "Field Etiquette" which was posted on their website. After opening, they discovered a need to help folks imagine what was possible with the field, so they "seeded" the field with curated programming.

All of this was intentional design (and curation) on the part of the Walker. The project did not supplant the creativity or voice of the public. Rather it amplified

and focused it. As a result, the department has been exploring new ideas such as how to take this thinking inside the museum while continuing to evolve Open Field itself.

Stats? Evaluation? Impact Data?

Given the emergent nature of intentional design, evaluation practices (and results) are nascent. Also, works of art are works of authorship and the experience is primarily subjective (vs. phenomena in a science museum or artifacts in a history museum). Art requires a slightly different approach. In the case of the BMA, we worked with Randi Korn and Associates on proof-of-concept testing. The initial formulation of DMA's C3 was based on nearly a decade of research (B. Pittman, E. Hirzy, 2010), and the Walker had visitation statistics. In all cases, there is ample anecdotal evidence of enjoyment and engagement with the new exhibits in the form of photos, writing, videos, and anecdotes.

Moving Up the Food Chain

Intentional design is not about coming in after the fact and performing an act of organization or ornamentation. In the art museum, intentional design means end-to-end consideration, including looking at operational practices that provide development frameworks to the exhibitions themselves. Engaging early in this process positions designers to match art and audience with the capabilities of the institution. In each of these examples there were substantial hurdles to overcome: securing objects from curators, working without shared language, and often outright rejections of new forms of participation and curation. Yet all appear to be sustainable because they are developing internal competencies, and creating “ecosystems” instead of departmental hierarchies of content, programming, and design. Intentional design is a whole systems approach to creating new or emerging exhibition practices or public projects within an institution. It draws from all the tools we have available—education, curation, interaction design, architecture, design thinking, traditional museum practice—and integrates them into a design context.

Where Do We Go Now?

Looking ahead, there are challenges in determining why, where, when, and how design is brought to the art museum experience:

- How might we (and can we), play



Visitors could freely use the “Open Field Tool Shed” when it was staffed, for programs or play at the Walker. Courtesy of Maria Mortati.

in the space between the subjective experience of the visitor and a work of art? Are we impeding artists’ intent (and essentially doing a disservice to them) when we bring design into the art museum?

- What can we do if our public and the works in our collections don’t connect? How do we want to address art literacy or engagement through intentional design?
- Artists are developing new art forms that museums aren’t already prepared to support. How do we address that in terms of design?

In the context of an art museum, intentional design can foster an approach that spans ideas, ideologies, departments, and spaces in which visitor, art, and museum co-exist. Through this thinking, these projects and others will continue to push us into new territory. ✨

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