

Visual Velcro

Hooking the Visitor

By Peter Samis

FOOTNOTES

1. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986), 15. (Originally published in *Artforum* in 1976.)

2. Gillian Wilson, "Multimedia Tour Programme at Tate Modern," in David Bearman and Jennifer Trant, eds., *Museums and the Web 2004*, conference proceedings (Toronto: Archives and Museum Informatics, 2004), www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/wilson/wilson.html.

3. Three recent studies conducted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art have consistently borne this out: Randi Korn and Associates, *Matthew Barney: DRAWING RESTRAINT Interactive Educational Technologies & Interpretation Initiative Evaluation* (San Francisco: SFMOMA, 2006), www.sfmoma.org/whoweare/research_projects/barney/RKA_2006_SFMOMA_Barney_distribution.pdf; Marco Moncalvo, "Matthew Barney Learning Lounge: Visitor Monitoring Data, Analysis and Direct Observation Notes," (Internal document, SFMOMA, October 2006); and Mauricio Estrada-Muñoz, "Anselm Kiefer Learning Lounge: Visitor-Monitoring Data, Analysis and Direct Observation-based Notes," (Internal document, SFMOMA, February 2007).

4. S. Jay Samuels, "Some Essential Label-Writing Considerations for Museum Professionals: A Review of How People Learn and Remember, and What Kinds of Texts Are Most Effective." Paper commissioned by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1988: 7–26. Cited in "Interpretation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: Policy and Practice," The 1993 Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation (Internal document).

5. For the tale of the invention of Velcro by Swiss engineer Georges de Mestral, see Wikipedia. "Velcro," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Velcro&oldid=126397829> (accessed April 28, 2007).

6. My thanks to Mimi Michaelson for helping coin the concept of "Visual Velcro" during a series of conversations back in the 1990s.

7. To cite extreme examples, there is a world of difference between the mammoth scale, rich textures, complex materiality and plunging perspectives of a painting by Anselm Kiefer and the smooth touchless surfaces of a sculpture by Donald Judd. Similarly, Bill Viola's video works engage even novice viewers through a combination of human scale, recognizable characters and implied narrative. Nothing hooks us better than a story. Once viewers are hooked, they will follow you anywhere . . . or at least stay for a while. They have become *engaged viewers*.

8. As Thomas Kuhn theorized decades ago in his landmark *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, some mental models, or paradigms, are more fruitful than others. A paradigm stands or falls on how comprehensively it encompasses the data available in the field it is intended to explain. If it excludes critical data, it probably needs revision. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1996).

9. Unfortunately, no such calculus operates in exhibitions where the artist or exhibition topic is not famous. You might think people would come to the museum, see there is a special exhibition about an unfamiliar topic or artist, and say to themselves: "Well here's an opportunity to learn something new about a topic that is clearly important—it's on view here at the museum—but about which I know very little. I'll take an audio tour to fill in the gaps in my knowledge." However, it doesn't work this way. There is simply no prior, pent-up demand. Experience shows that people may duck into the galleries, stroll around a bit and visually take in the unfamiliar material, but they are extremely unlikely to pay for a tour. A recent Antenna Audio study put it this way: "[Of those who take them], about two-thirds take audio guides only occasionally, choosing to use a guide when they are especially interested in the subject matter or if the price is right." Discovery Communications, Inc. *Antenna Audio Global Visitor Survey* (Unpublished study for internal and client use, 2006).

10. Discovery Communications (2006).

11. Randi Korn and Associates (2006).

12. TWRResearch. "Evaluation of a Multimedia Guide Accompanying the Frida Kahlo Exhibition" (Unpublished evaluation report by TWRResearch for Tate Modern, London, August 2005).

13. Jeffrey K. Smith, Izabella Waszkielewicz, Kathryn Potts and Benjamin K. Smith, "Visitors and the Audio Program" (Unpublished evaluation report for Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, December 2004).

14. Matthew Sikora and Kenneth Morris, "Gathering Visitor Feedback to Exhibition Design Before Designing the Exhibition" (Michigan Museums Association Annual Conference, Detroit, October 2005).

15. Gyroscope, Inc., "Museums in Transition: Emerging Technologies as Tools for Free-Choice Learning" (Richmond: Science Museum of Virginia and Gyroscope, Inc., 2006), 26, www.gyroscopeinc.com/News/articles/MuseumsInTransition.pdf.

16. Oakland Museum of California, *Creative Technology Colloquium* (Oakland: Oakland Museum of California, 2006), 18–19.

17. O. Omojola, "An Installation of Interactive Furniture," *IBM Systems Journal* 39 (2000), 3–4; and Flavia Sparacino, Kent Larson, Ron MacNeil, Glorianna Davenport, Alex Pentland, "Technologies and Methods for Interactive Exhibit Design: From Wireless Object and Body Tracking to Wearable Computers," www.archimuse.com/publishing/ichim99/sparacino.pdf.

18. The exhibition was the result of a unique collaboration between curatorial and education departments and benefited from the support of outside partners such as MIT's Media Lab, Steelcase, and Compaq. In the final analysis, the SFMOMA smart tables were not "smart" in the MIT sense; they only appeared smart to gallery visitors because they had a menu of engaging talking heads cycling through them.

19. Taken together, the six tables contained a total of two hours of content. For a more complete description of the "Points of Departure" exhibition and its development process, see Peter S. Samis, "Points of Departure: Curators and Educators Collaborate to Prototype a 'Museum of the Future,'" in *International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting: Cultural Heritage and Technologies in the Third Millennium*, vol. I, full papers, eds., David Bearman and Franca Garzotto (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2001), 623–638.

20. Second Story Interactive Studios has recently developed a new and equally ambitious interactive table for the National World War I Museum in Kansas City, Mo.

21. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT

Press, 1994). In a 1965 CBC television interview, McLuhan stated that “cool” characterized “a medium that uses all of you, but leaves you detached in the act of using you,” <http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-74-342-1818/people/mcluhan/clip4>.

22. What’s more, in SFMOMA’s Matthew Barney study, people familiar with Matthew Barney were *more* likely to use all these resources than people who had never heard of him. This echoes the rule I mentioned before, that people avail themselves of an interpretive resource like an audio guide if they already know something about the subject. Counter-intuitive perhaps, but there it is. For a more in-depth evaluation of the range of interpretive devices and resources offered in SFMOMA’s Matthew Barney exhibition, see Peter Samis, “Petroleum Jelly Served Seven Ways: Visitor Response to a Multi-Track Interpretive Approach to ‘Matthew Barney: DRAWING RESTRAINT,’” in the proceedings of *Museums and the Web 2007*.

23. Ted Loos, “ART: Hi, Let’s Talk Art. No, Really. It’s My Job,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2006.

24. See www.vue.org.

25. In the Randi Korn evaluation of interpretive resources for the “Matthew Barney” exhibition cited above, the podcast and cell phone tour rated most highly among an array of interpretive resources, while traditional analog texts ranked last.

26. John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institution* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2006).