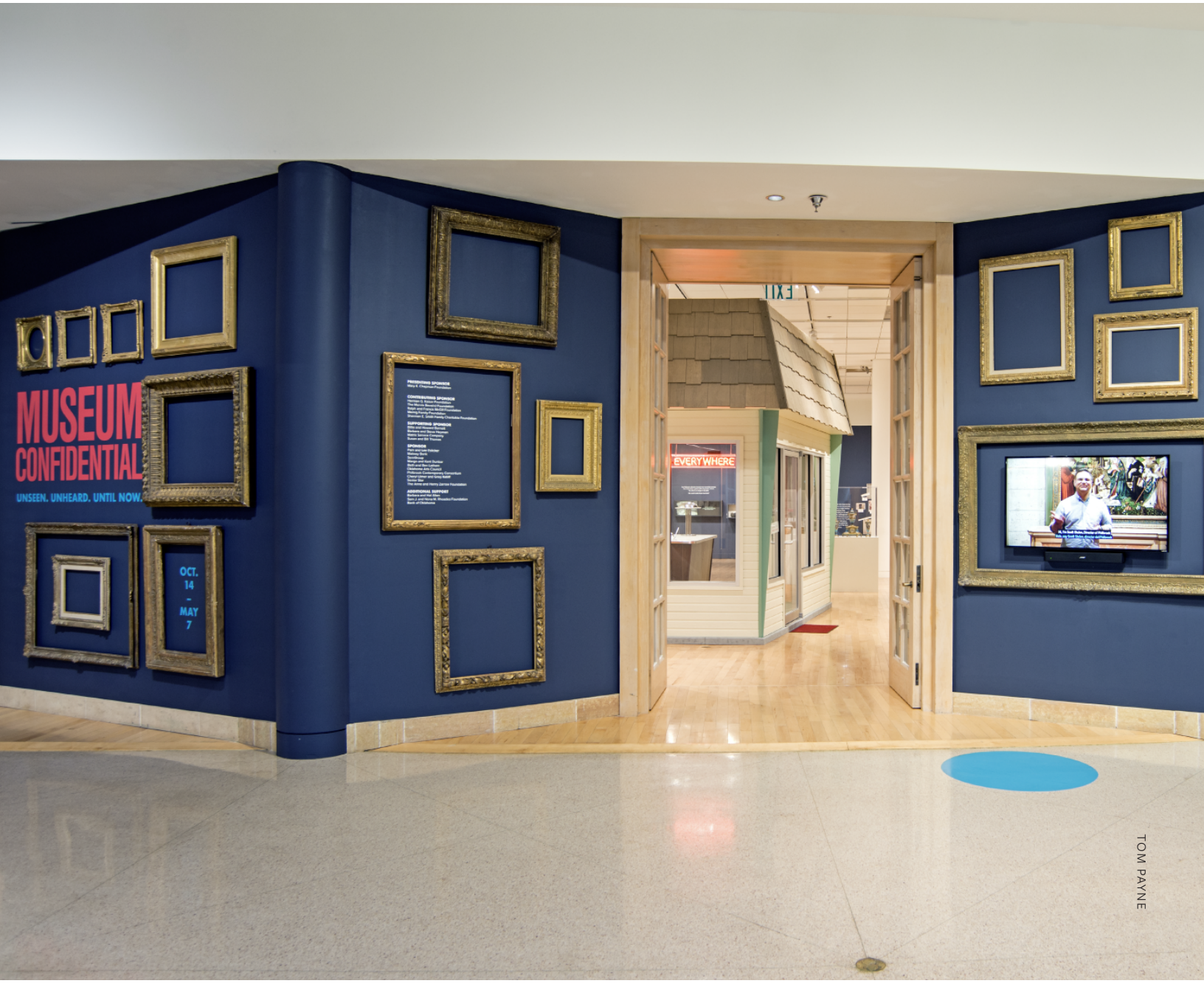
Fig. 1. Gallery entrance to *Museum Confidential*, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.



TOM PAYNE

Fun is Not a Four-Letter Word

An Art Museum Case Study

Rachel Keith

Competition for leisure time is increasing steadily. As art museums evolve, aiming to position themselves as accessible, exciting leisure destinations, embracing fun as an engagement strategy is an increasingly important tactic – one that a number of businesses peripheral to art museums, like Museum Hack, Meow Wolf, and even the Museum of Ice Cream have harnessed effectively.[1] Supporting this strategy is a 2017 national study into the attitudes and behaviors of cultural audiences, which cited "having fun" as the most important motivator for cultural participation.[2] So what constitutes fun, and how can art museums incorporate it into their regular practice without compromising their integrity?

For decades, the concept of fun in museums has largely been relegated to organizations dedicated primarily to children, such as children's museums, science centers, and zoos. While play has long been accepted as an important mode of learning for children – and increasingly for adults, too – art museums have only recently begun to incorporate play as a strategic engagement tool for visitors,[3] and the notion of fun has remained largely taboo, as the dearth of research on this particular topic suggests. Whether because of its frivolous or hedonistic implications, class-based associations, or the perceived unsophistication or childishness of the word (do we take fun more seriously when we refer to it as our "Ludic function"?),[5] we in art museums are still uncomfortable with "fun" per se – despite its proven ability to support learning outcomes, reduce stress, and increase creativity.[6]

In 2017, with a mandate from director Scott Stulen, the staff at Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, set out to create an exhibition using fun to shift our audience's perceptions of our museum. *Museum Confidential* (October 14, 2017, to May 7, 2018) aimed to demystify museum practice by exposing the inner workings of art museums, such as how curators select works for display, why some objects are rarely shown, and why collections research matters. Even more important than specific learning outcomes, however, was a set of attitudinal outcomes: visitors would see Philbrook as a fun, dynamic, welcoming place – a counter to the common stereotype of museums as boring, static, dusty places where artworks go to die.[7]

We started by building the right team: 16 staff members, including curators, designers, educators, marketers, preparators, and registrars who sincerely wanted to create a fun and meaningful experience for our visitors. We added a contemporary artist, Andy DuCett, who was eager to engage with visitors – and had a sense of humor.

Fig. 2.

A band plays inside the motel built as part of Andy DuCett's installation.

Fun is a feeling or mindset, and it's deeply personal and subjective.

And we enlisted help from the incredibly versatile architects Frank Escher and Ravi GuneWardena of Los Angeles–based Escher GuneWardena, who are keenly attuned to nuances of art and space.

Working collaboratively, the *Museum Confidential* team planned the exhibition explicitly to be *fun*. This goal was surprisingly hard, and likely would not have happened without our director's encouragement (or even, at times, insistence). A fun approach runs counter to years of training that so many in the field have had: to maintain credibility as a cultural authority, museums must come across as authoritative, objective, impartial, and serious – or so many of us have been taught. But museums are changing, and as we work more closely in partnership with our communities, the expectation of the museum voice as unimpeachable cultural authority is no longer a given, nor is it necessarily the aim.

Where concerns about fun persist, however, having a solid academic underpinning and a clear, mission-based intention will help mitigate them. So with an initial outline for the show, including a "big idea," clearly identified visitor outcomes, and detailed plans for how each section of the exhibition would support the big idea and visitor outcomes, we divided the large original team into four cross-departmental groups, each focused on one section (Stulen and I floated to work with each team and knit the entire project together). The primary objective for each team was to find a fun and engaging way of delivering the visitor outcomes for their section.

Toward a Definition of Fun

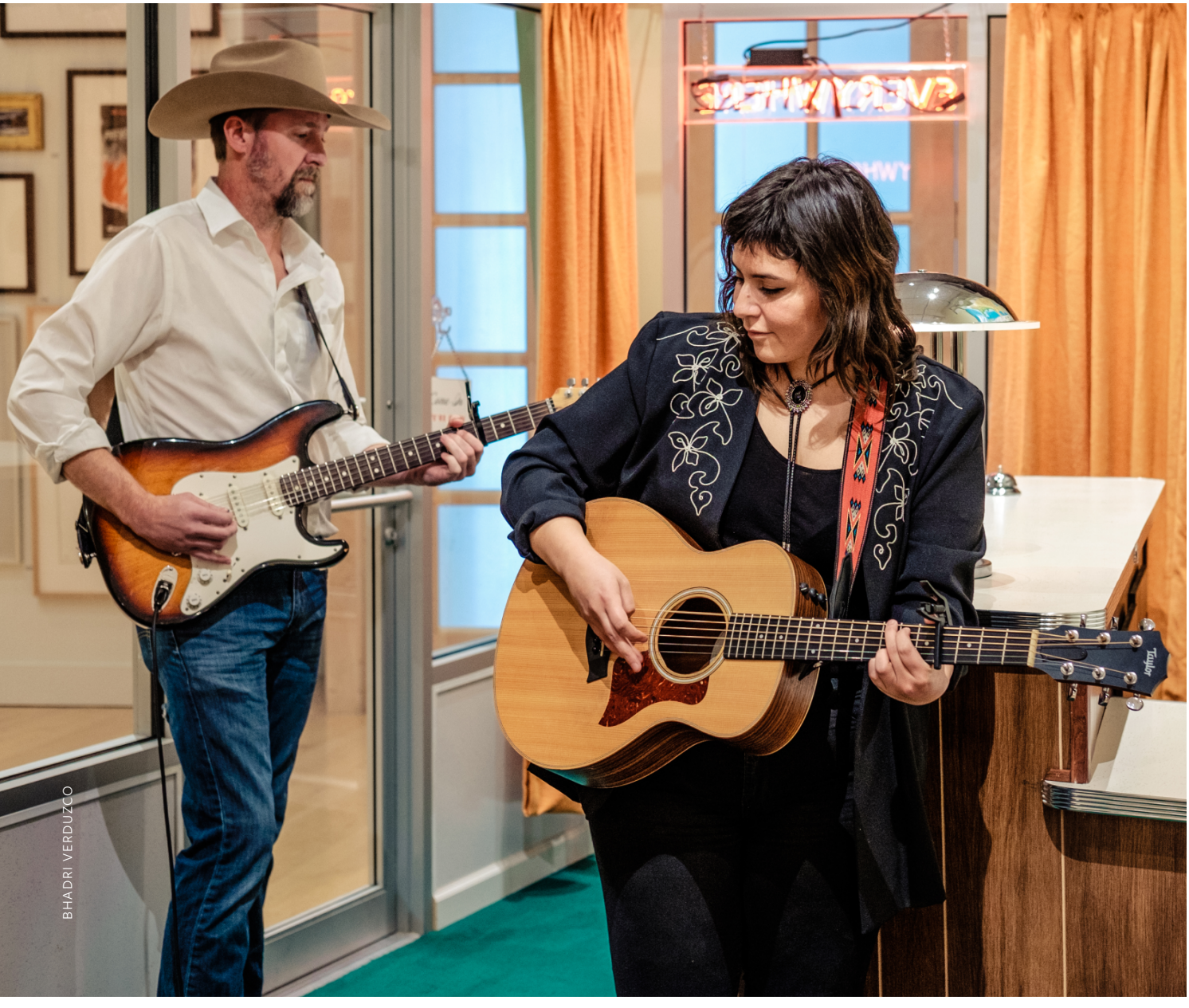
At that point, we really struggled to define "fun." We all agreed we knew it when we saw it, or felt it, but we also recognized that fun is individual, contextual, and at times elusive – it can't be forced. Many scholars have defined play and generally agree that play is an activity with no extrinsic purpose that is enjoyable and self-directed.[8] Within the museum field, researchers often use the word "play" as a euphemism for fun. But to be clear, play and fun are not the same. They are closely associated, but have different purposes, characteristics, effects, and methodologies.

Fun is a feeling or mindset, and it's deeply personal and subjective. Perhaps because of its subjective and contextual nature, establishing clear parameters for fun across disciplines is challenging.[9] Without a clear roadmap, we began by brainstorming specific ideas we thought would be fun: secret rooms, slides, an awesome interactive artist's installation, a chance for the public to curate part of the show themselves. Some ideas were more practical – and more relevant – than others, so we focused on those.

Through every step of the process, we asked ourselves what else would be fun. Now, looking back, I can see the key elements that emerged:

- humor;
- an element of surprise or fantasy – an antidote to the mundane;
- kinesthetic engagement;
- joy, lightheartedness, or irreverence;
- social connection; and
- full engagement or flow.

While individually these elements don't automatically equate to fun, collectively, once two or three of them come into play, they do. Fun is the magic we create through the synergy of engaging these individual characteristics in a singular experience.



BHADRI VERDUZCO

How We Made Magical Fun Synergy in *Museum Confidential*

A life-size replica of half a motel lobby took visitors by surprise as they walked into the 5,000-square-foot exhibition gallery (fig. 1, p. 78). Part of *At the Intersection of Everywhere*, a site-specific installation by Minneapolis-based artist Andy DuCett that formed the central core of the exhibition, the motel was a site for mini-performances by local bands and conversations between "motel clerks" – aka docents and community volunteers – and visitors (fig. 2). Three other sections pinwheeled out from the center in a dense presentation designed to evoke thoughts of a museum "vault" and to encourage open-ended exploration:

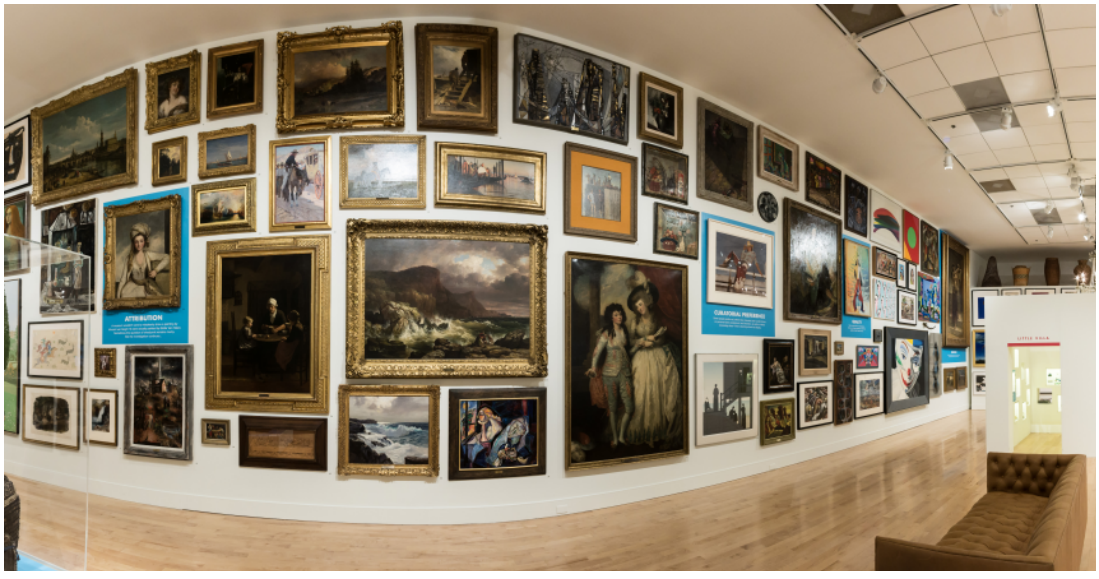


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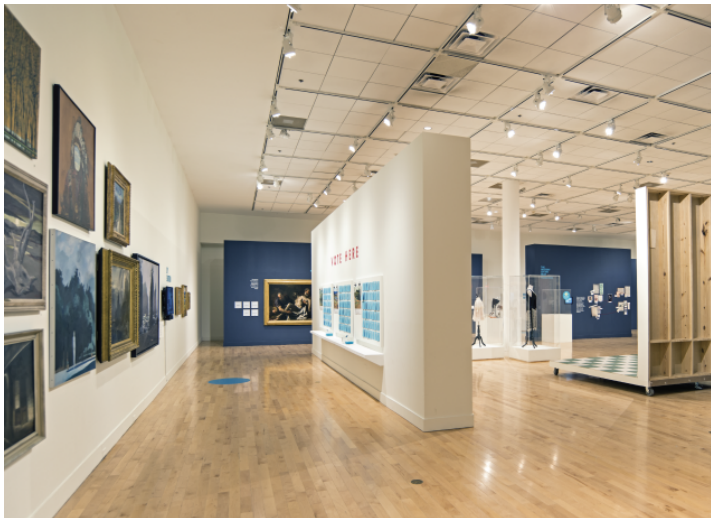
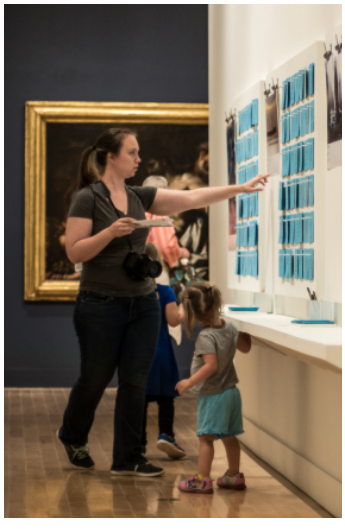
Fig. 3.

"The Other 95%" (installation view).



TOM PAYNE



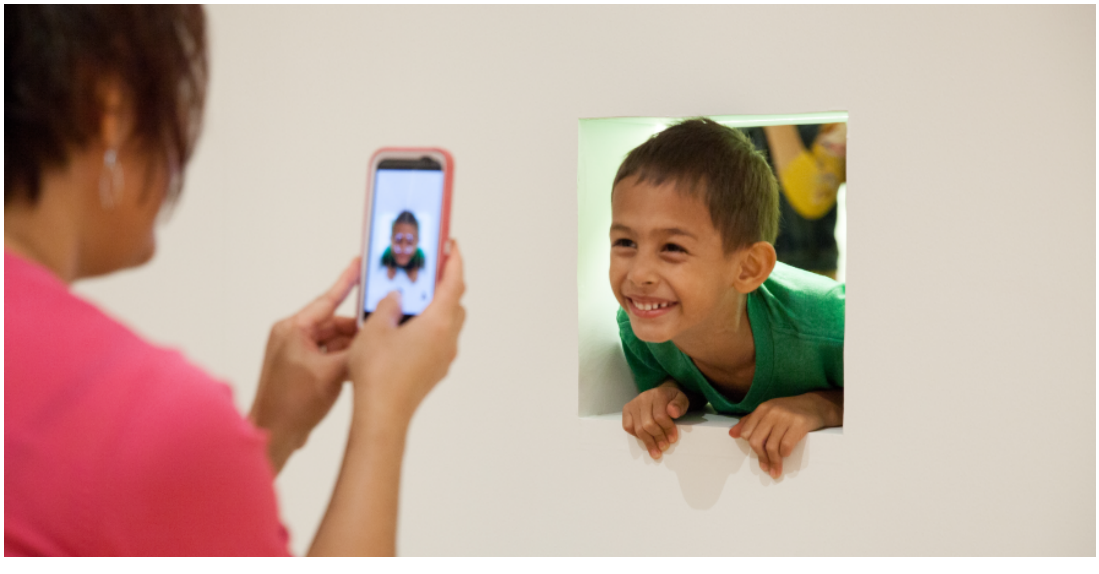
BHADRI VERDUZCO

Fig. 4.

(left) "Museum Mysteries" (blue walls at back) and "DIY Exhibition" (at left)

Fig. 5.

(right) A visitor votes for the next painting to be added to "DIY Exhibition."



BHADRI VERDUZCO

Fig. 6.

In the "Little Villa."

Most of the objects in *Museum Confidential* were not inherently fun (at least not to a broad audience) – it was all about our tone and approach.

- "The Other 95%" (fig. 3): Based on statistics that most museums show only a small fraction of their collection at any given time, this section packed in over 250 rarely or never-before-shown paintings and prints hung salon-style along two walls and dozens of objects in cases. This immersive visual experience also highlighted certain artworks to illustrate key reasons they had not been exhibited, such as condition, relevance, quality, or curatorial preference.

- "Museum Mysteries" (fig. 4): Along the back wall of the exhibition stood a series of installations taking a deep dive into how collection researchers solve artwork puzzles. From X-rays and CT scans revealing that an ancient Egyptian mummified "hawk" was actually a rare corn mummy, to how a man's beard helped not only to date an Italian Renaissance portrait but also offered clues to identify its subject, these artworks with extensive accompanying interpretation offered intriguing behind-the-scenes stories.

- "DIY Exhibition" (fig. 5): Along the wall to the left of DuCett's installation, visitors had a chance to "think like a curator" by considering three paintings on display and voting for one to join a larger group hanging nearby. Every two weeks, preparators moved the winning painting to the larger group and installed a trio of new candidates.

Most of the objects in *Museum Confidential* were not inherently fun (at least not to a broad audience) – it was all about our tone and approach.

Giving Permission to Have Fun

Because fun is a mindset, right from the start we deployed advertising, social media, and design to signal it was okay to have fun in this show. The member mailer set the tone using the format of a vintage tabloid, with a cover blaring headlines like "SHOCKING TRUE STORY: Philbrook Hides 95% of Collection." Local advertisements and social media posts took a similar approach.

Outside the exhibition entrance, an assortment of empty gilt frames hung, playfully introducing guests to the show's theme. Inside the door, the sheer scale and gentle absurdity of DuCett's life-sized motel sitting within the gallery reinforced the lighthearted tone of the show.

Juxtaposed against the motel stood a large, pristine white cube with a child-sized door (another wall of the structure held a larger door for adults) and an oversized crystal chandelier. The interior of this white cube, dubbed "Little Villa," held 20 small, plexiglass-covered windows showcasing the tiniest objects from the collection: diminutive Native American baskets, miniature tea sets, uranium glass (the slightly radioactive type), a collection of tiny dogs, vintage toys, Egyptian scarabs – and a couple of open windows for peeking back into the larger gallery (fig. 6). The unexpected, lighthearted features of this installation delighted visitors, poked a little fun at the concept of the "white cube," and provided an architectural backdrop that elevated the tiny objects that would easily have been lost within the larger exhibition – all while providing a safe and secure place where children (and adults) could playfully engage with the objects on view.

Reinforcing Tone through Texts

Conversational, short texts throughout the exhibition were never more than two or three sentences long and got the point across quickly using casual language. For example, text in "The Other 95%" section explained why one type of object often stays in storage:

> Much like a large ocean liner, museums can pick up a few stowaways along the way. Often referred to as "found in collection," these objects are missing vital documentation about donor history.

Evocative or melodramatic, short headings created intrigue:

> The Mystery of the Bearded Man

We agreed early on that one of the biggest buzzkills in the exhibition would be boring texts. We distilled and scrupulously edited everything, cutting text deemed "boring" – anything dry, formal, or overly scholarly – and transforming wordy passages into pithy, casual, and at times humorous explanations:

> *Attribution*: A museum wouldn't want to mistakenly show a painting by Vincent van Gogh if it were actually painted by Eddie Van Halen.

Humorous texts encourage visitors to laugh, relax, and have fun. If our institutional voice is a little irreverent and shows we can laugh at ourselves, our audiences know they can laugh, too.

Creating Hands-on or Experiential Opportunities

Museums ask more of visitors than going to a movie – or staying home and watching Netflix. But that kinesthetic experience of moving through galleries – often socially, with other people – distinguishes having fun from being entertained: fun is active, not passive. Fostering kinesthetic experiences in a no-touch zone like an art museum is extra challenging. We had to actively seek opportunities to include touchable features or experiential moments (and employed plexiglass liberally to keep the art safe):

- Even the larger, adult-sized doorway of the "Little Villa" required most adults to duck to enter. This small physical act transformed the door into a portal, emphasizing the experiential aspect of the space and isolating it from the real world. Once inside, adult visitors felt slightly out of scale, like Alice in Wonderland, and had to crouch to look inside the child-height boxes. Children, on the other hand, found themselves in a space made just for them.

- Once inside the "Little Villa," visitors could use magnifying glasses to examine the tiny objects there, push a button to activate an ultraviolet light that made uranium glass goblets glow, or peek through a window to "spy" on the rest of the gallery.

- In "Museum Mysteries," simple lift-labels allowed guests to access deeper layers of information at their own pace while physically engaging with the space. Based on visitor observations, these cards were surprisingly effective and popular – almost every group lifted at least one.

- In "DIY Exhibition," visitors could use pencils and paper to vote – and explain their choice – and then hang their ballot on a peg for other visitors to read, allowing a social element even for solo visitors.

- In DuCett's installation, visitors could open the door of the motel, feel the gold-flecked white counters, and talk with the "motel clerk." Behind the motel, in a recreated library full of "defunct books of knowledge" such as outdated encyclopedias, visitors could peruse, removing books from the shelves, turning their pages, and placing them on a cart for reshelving.

Cumulatively, these small opportunities for physical (and social) interaction within the space heightened the kinesthetic experience for visitors by connecting them with the space and its contents rather than distancing them from the materials there.

Being Surprising, Light-hearted, and at Times, Irreverent

We sought new ways to present artwork and the stories surrounding them, and recognized that being irreverent isn't always appropriate. In "Museum Mysteries," the installation "The Mystery of the Blue Headdress" used TV crime dramas as inspiration for explaining some of the detective work that goes into artwork authentication and provenance research. A "crime board" displayed (copies of) the available primary source materials with red thread connecting them to subsequent and ongoing research about a headdress that may or may not have come from the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn, or the Battle of the Greasy Grass. While using a novel and somewhat playful approach to tell this story, we were careful with the tone to remain respectful about the object and the seriousness of the topic. Further, we agreed that the headdress would only go on display when we knew it was appropriate to show it, and as the research around this object remained inconclusive, the object never went on display.

In other parts of the exhibition, however, we embraced the irreverent, unexpected, or incongruous – at times even bordering on silly: when the final audience-selected painting was being installed in "DIY Exhibition," we brought out a high-school drumline to celebrate the accomplishment with a joyous march through the gallery.

Don't Be Boring.

We recognized that historically, art museums have not created an environment conducive to contemporary notions of fun. Expectations of reverence for great masterpieces, reminders not to touch, admonitions to be quiet, the somber, detached tone of many academic texts, objects presented without real opportunities for engagement, stern security guards, and overly prescriptive gallery layouts – these all make it harder to relax into a flow of free engagement and have fun. These roadblocks are all too common in art museums, particularly those built as temples to art. Without conscious effort, we can easily slip into a zone that approaches boring, stuffy, or uptight – the antithesis of fun.

So we tried not to do any of those things.

Instead, recognizing that we cannot force fun, we aimed to create an environment conducive to fun by eliminating potential impediments to flow and encouraging social interaction, conversation, and connection within the space. This meant including comfortable seating, playing background music,

and ensuring gallery staff and volunteers were friendly and supportive of social interactions – that instead of glaring or shushing, they smiled, said hello, and helped everyone feel welcome.

What We Learned

Results from the summative evaluation of *Museum Confidential* clearly indicated the exhibition achieved its goal of changing visitors' perceptions of Philbrook. According to evaluator Jeanine Ancelet of the firm Audience Focus, "Those who saw *Museum Confidential* were significantly more likely to perceive Philbrook as active, changing, interesting, and intellectually accessible than were those who did not see *Museum Confidential*."[10] Exhibition visitors also demonstrated more advanced understanding of the specific learning outcomes the team developed, such as recognizing the tools used by museum staff to research a work of art and considering the decisions museum curators make when choosing what to display.

Despite the emphasis the planning team placed on "fun," measuring it via an exit survey proved sticky among the evaluation team, as some did not consider fun a valid metric. Because of concerns that fun isn't taken seriously enough, or that it is too subjective to measure effectively, we compromised by adding "enjoyable." Unfortunately, combining these two similar but quite different feelings somewhat dilutes the results.

We found that 94 percent of *Museum Confidential* visitors reported having a "fun / enjoyable experience."[11] Interestingly, the same percentage of the control group – those who visited the museum without seeing the exhibition – agreed. But here's where it gets really interesting: *Museum Confidential* visitors were significantly more likely to report that they had learned something – either about themselves and their families or about history and culture – than museum visitors who did not visit the exhibition.[12]

From research in the field of learning science, we know that people learn best when they are relaxed and having fun.[13] And recent developments in the field of affective neuroscience indicate that learning is significantly more effective when paired with a feeling.[14] With this understanding, I'm hopeful that strategically deploying fun approaches in *Museum Confidential* not only changed visitor perceptions of the museum, but also improved the learning outcomes for visitors, and that we will see similar results as we apply these strategies more broadly across our galleries – and in other museums as well. Further research on the topic of fun generally and in museums specifically will surely benefit the field.

Smart Fun

In *Museum Confidential*, we successfully merged thoughtful, smart content with fun approaches to engage visitors in new ways. In doing so, we created a "smart fun" brand that now permeates our institution, proving that programming can be academically rigorous and fun at the same time. Granting permission to have fun in a professional or academic setting requires both confidence and the ability to be comfortable taking risks.

With 81 percent of cultural participants citing "having fun" as a top motivator for cultural participation, museums must embrace fun as a crucial strategy for audience engagement.[15] Used judiciously, it offers an antidote to the stigma of the boring, stale museum – a stigma we as a field cannot afford to perpetuate as we work to grow and sustain audiences in today's fast-moving, digital world. Further, if education is truly one of

our primary aims – and education intended for a broad and diverse audience – combining fun with content is a vital means of bringing in new visitors and ensuring the content connects with them while they're here.

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1 Museum Hack is a New York-based for-profit company that offers irreverent, fast-paced "renegade museum tours" in major cities across the United States and consults for museums around the world. Meow Wolf, an artist collective turned public benefit corporation with locations in Santa Fe, Las Vegas, and Denver (and as of 2020, four more slated to open soon), and the Museum of Ice Cream, a for-profit with locations in New York and San Francisco, are both experiential, interactive spaces built on creativity, fantasy, and spectacle, with Instagram-worthy backdrops where visitors can take selfies to share on social media. Fun lies at the heart of all of these businesses, who have seen great popular and commercial success – even as many traditional museums struggle to break even.

2 "Having fun" was the highest-ranked choice, with 81 percent of respondents identifying it as a leading motivator. See *Top-Line Report: Culture Track '17*, Culture Track / LaPlaca Cohen, accessed July 31, 2020, https://s28475.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CT2017-Top-Line-Report.pdf.

3 In recent years art museums have embraced the topic of "play" with major exhibitions – such as *Serious Play* (Milwaukee Art Museum and Denver Art Museum, 2017–18), *PlayTime* (Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), and *Play!* (Autry Museum of the American West, 2017) – as well as game-based initiatives such as PlaySFMOMA and the Cleveland Museum of Art's ARTLENS.

4 Ben Fincham, *The Sociology of Fun* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, Kindle) includes a fascinating overview of why academia has been slow to approach "fun" as a topic in its own right – rather than as a side effect of a more productive activity. While some museum researchers have taken up the topic – for example, see Deborah Perry, *What Makes Learning Fun? Principles for the Design of Intrinsically Motivating Museum Exhibits* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2012) – the term "fun" is rare in research connected to art museums. Perry's book lays out an excellent framework for the development of fun educational displays in a hands-on museum setting, much though not all of which could be adapted for use in an art museum.

5 The "Ludic function" is simply our capacity to be playful and have fun. "Ludic" comes from the Latin word ludus, which has a range of meanings including games, playfulness, sports, primary school, and jokes.

6 Much of the research supporting the value of fun comes from the fields of education and organizational psychology. Related to learning, see Judy Willis and Malana Willis, *Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning: Insights from Neuroscience and the Classroom* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2020). The 2005 management guide *Fun Is Good: How to Create Joy & Passion in Your Workplace & Career* by Mike Veeck and Pete Williams (United States: Rodale, 2005) is full of anecdotal evidence in support of the value of fun in a business setting, and Erin R. Fluegge-Woolf's article "Play Hard, Work Hard: Fun at Work and Job Performance," *Management Research Review* 37, no. 8 (July 2014): 682-705, offers a data-driven study showing that having fun at work leads to both improved task performance and increased creativity.

7 From German philosopher Theodor Adorno, who famously wrote, "Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art" in "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms* (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), to contemporary research evidencing the persistence of the stereotype of museums as "stuffy, aloof, and boring," per the 2013 study commissioned by the Museums Association in the United Kingdom, "Public perceptions of – and attitudes to – the purposes of museums in society. A report prepared by BritainThinks for Museums Association," March 2013, https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954916.

8 Since the American Academy of Pediatrics released their study, *The Power of Play*, in 2007, a number of other studies have recognized both the tremendous value of play and its dwindling role in the lives of children and adults alike. For a summary of the research, see Rachel White, *The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning* (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Children's Museum, 2012), accessed April 25, 2020 at https://www.childrensmuseums.org/images/MCMResearchSummary.pdf. See also the seminal work on the topic of play: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016, an unabridged reprint of the 1949 English translation of the work first released in Dutch in 1938).

9 In "Do we know what fun is?" (Fincham, *The Sociology of Fun*, 147), Fincham offers a thoughtful and comprehensive explanation of the complexities around defining "fun," as well as considering it historically, including as a subversive act of "resistance to routine and regimentation" for an "unsophisticated" working class. Mark Blythe and Marc Hassenzal explore the etymology of "fun" and its implications further, revealing the roots of the low-brow associations with the term that persist today, in "The Semantics of Fun: Differentiating Enjoyable Experiences," *Funology – Human-Computer Interaction Series*, vol. 3 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 91–100.

10 Jeanine Ancelet, "Museum Confidential Summative Evaluation," Philbrook Museum of Art, June 2018. In 2017 and 2018, Ancelet completed an evaluation study on *Museum Confidential* by collecting and analyzing data from 202 visitors. Her methodology included gallery observations and exit interviews with both exhibition visitors and a control group of non-visitors. Ancelet developed the instruments for the evaluation, trained a team of four part-time educators to collect data, analyzed the results, and provided a final report.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Willis and Willis, *Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning*.

14 Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain: Exploring the Educational Implications of Affective Neuroscience* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

15 Culture Track '17.