Responsive in Planning and Practice:
Comment Kiosks at the Brooklyn Museum

by *Sara Devine* and *Shelley Bernstein*

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At the Brooklyn Museum, we pride ourselves on being responsive to the needs of our diverse visitors. Our mission, and indeed our staff, places the visitor at the center of everything we do. We spend a good deal of time getting to know our constituents through a variety of techniques ranging from audience evaluation to crowd-curated exhibitions. We believe that communicating openly with our visitors allows us to be a truly nimble and responsive museum.

For the past seven years, we've used iPad kiosks in select exhibitions to establish this open line of communication. These "ASK" kiosks invite visitors to ask us questions, selections of which we answer in waves throughout the run of the exhibition. Questions and answers are posted on the kiosk and online with associated exhibition pages; the visitors who pose questions receive a personal email response.

The ASK kiosks in our galleries today are quite different from the models we first installed in 2007. Each subsequent version has been informed by visitor use and input. Though the process has not always been smooth, in the end we've found the ASK kiosks to be a useful tool for visitors and staff alike, and one that can be adapted by other institutions seeking both to engage with and learn from visitors.

Our ASK kiosks began as simple, digital comment books. At first, they were mini personal computers with touch screens; later we updated to iPads. These kiosks sat in every exhibition and gathered visitor responses to the prompt "tell us what you think"; the kiosks automatically emailed those responses, in digest form, to

appropriate curatorial and visitor services staff. Selected comments (both good and bad) were posted in-gallery and online. This feedback provided insight on what worked and what did not within any given show. In some isolated cases, we were able to adapt the visitor experience on the fly in response to feedback—for example, turning off a sound effect that visitors found distracting. With larger issues, staff used feedback to inform and improve future exhibitions. The digital comment books were great tools for direct feedback, but they were, most often, a one-way street of information, generally responsive only in the sense that they gave our staff an instant look at the experience of a visitor.

We began to wonder if we could use these kiosks to encourage deeper engagement, so we shifted to a format we called "In Conversation." Instead of a simple text-only start screen with a "tell us what you think" prompt, we adjusted the start screen to display a short video "call-to-action" (fig. 1). This video had to be played and an (unverified) email address provided before a visitor could leave a comment. These simple steps cut down the amount of horseplay ("I want my mummy" in the "Mummy Chamber," for example) we had seen on the "tell us what you think" versions of the comment books. The number of comments submitted overall decreased with the introduction of these required steps. However, while we considered 30 percent of visitors' comments as insightful comments (something beyond "I like it") on the older kiosks, we judged 70 percent to be meaningful on the new ones. So while the number decreased, the quality increased.
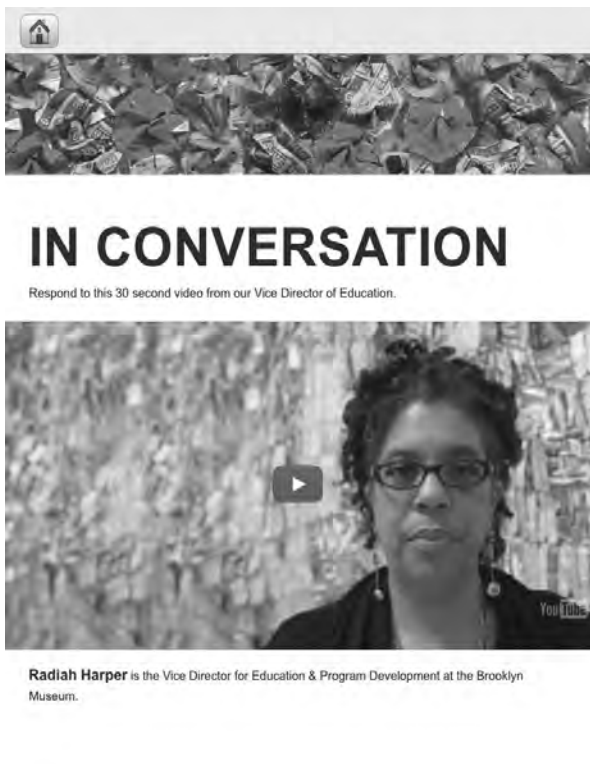
Fig. 1. Start screen from Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui, *one of the first "In Conversation" versions of the kiosks using directed questions. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum*

Fig. 2. One of three kiosks in Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui, *all of which were tethered to a bench. We saw both individuals and groups using them. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum*

We also looked carefully at how and where the kiosks were mounted. We mounted some kiosks to walls and, because we wondered if visitors would rather be seated when they left their comments, tethered others to benches (fig. 2). Whether visitors were standing or sitting, it turned out, mattered little. Additionally, our visitors often come in pairs or small groups, and they seemed to gather around fixed or tethered iPads in equal measure. Tethering the iPads became problematic because cords were often too short or too long; if they were too long they tangled, and if they were too short, tugging on them would set off the security alarm. We've settled on mounting the units to the walls because they are easier to install that way.

In addition to how they are mounted, we found the kiosks have to be very visible within any given gallery. In our John Singer Sargent watercolors exhibition, we placed the iPad—which featured our paper conservator inviting questions from visitors—in a section on technique. While thematically this made sense, the kiosk was mounted in a corner outside the main traffic flow. When we noticed after a few weeks that kiosk activity was low, we spent time in the gallery and observed that most visitors did not see the kiosk. After moving it into the traffic flow, the activity increased almost instantaneously.

In order to develop a better understanding of how content affected a visitor's willingness to use the kiosks, we ran a series of tests in special exhibitions in which we adjusted the video call-to-action each time; one version asked visitors directed questions, while another featured the artist or a staff member inviting visitors to ask questions. With each kiosk type, we began to spot trends in comments or questions. Sometimes visitors asked questions covered in the interpretive materials. In an exhibition of sculptures by artist El Anatsui, visitors repeatedly asked about the artist's process (a common topic across kiosks), even though the topic was explored in wall labels and in a video, which made us wonder: were visitors seeing that information at all? Did we fail to put that story in the right place(s)? Other times visitors would ask questions not

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Fig. 3. While the screen still said "In Conversation," we added the "ASK" graphic to the wall in our Swoon: Submerged Motherlands (pictured) and Ai Weiwei: According to What? exhibitions to explain the call to action better. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum
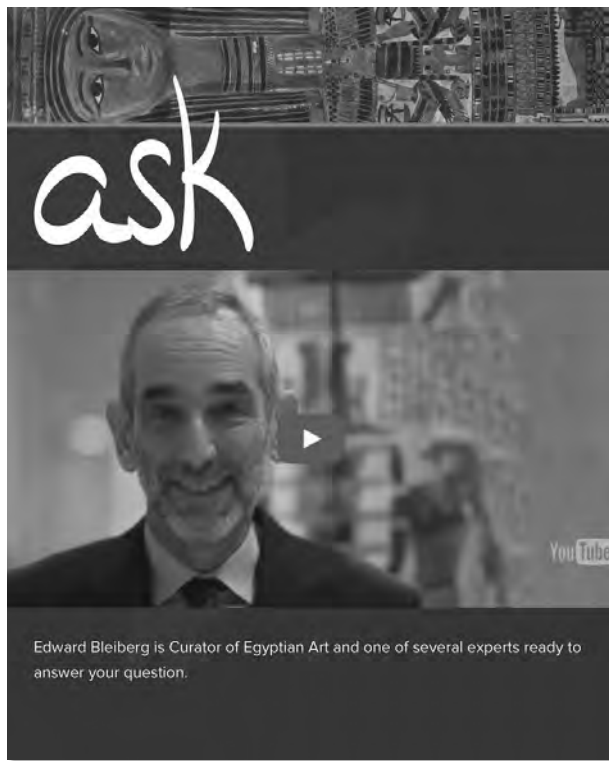
Fig. 4. In the current screen design, the call to action is much clearer. Once we updated the design, the number of questions at this particular kiosk increased immediately. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum

The-ask-a-question version allowed visitors to steer the conversation, which provided the open line of communication we were seeking.

addressed in the interpretation. Within a few weeks of opening, several visitors to an exhibition of LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographs asked similar questions about the artist's personal life and influences that the labels didn't cover, so we printed a copy of an interview with the artist that addressed those issues and placed it in the exhibition.

Both kiosk versions encouraged deeper engagement. Visitors left thoughtful responses to the directed questions. Often referring to another visitor by name, they would even respond to one another's comments, which indicated that visitors were really thinking about the topic and wanted to know if other people shared their views. However, the directed questions still did not constitute an open communication because they were based on our own goals—that is, what we wanted visitors to think about or do. The ask-a-question version allowed visitors to steer the conversation, which provided the open line of communication we were seeking. We shifted to that format exclusively.

As we approached spring of 2014, the

"In Conversation" theme of the start screen remained the same, but we shifted all video calls-to-action from directed questions to visitor-generated questions. During the season, two high profile artists—Ai Weiwei and Swoon—took questions from visitors through the kiosks and recorded a video call-to-action and video answers (fig. 3). Throughout the season, metrics told us how many questions were asked and how many we answered. To add to the metrics we watched visitors in the galleries, and we began to see that for the ASK kiosks, there were two fairly distinct user groups (a slight departure from the previously noted comment kiosk behavior)— the question posers and the response reviewers. Juggling the two audiences on a single kiosk setup was challenging because it wasn't fully suiting the needs of either group. We also confirmed that many visitors used the kiosks in social groups with more than one person gathering at the iPad, which was small in comparison and difficult for more than one person in the group to use.

For the fall 2014 season we made several important changes. First we rebranded

Fig. 5. By dividing the functions between two devices, we can better serve the distinct user types our evaluation has identified—"askers" and "readers." Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum

the design of the kiosks from "In Conversation" to "ASK" (fig. 4). Then, we divided the experience into "ask" and "answers." The iPads remain the place where visitors pose their questions, but we've added a companion touchscreen to display the answered questions (fig. 5). This change caters to the two user groups—askers and readers—while also allowing social groups to gather around devices more easily because the footprint is larger. These changes also allow us to generate more specific metrics because the new design can track questions posed and answers viewed.

These kiosks are a constantly changing feature, and as we move forward we've already identified some changes to test in the spring 2015 season. Namely, we believe the display of answered questions could become a dynamic list of FAQs, which automatically sorts by most popular topic by thematically tagging incoming queries. In previous iterations, answers were displayed merely in order of response, meaning the most popular question might be at the bottom of the screen.

The ASK kiosks offer our visitors content based on their interests and needs; at the same time the setup gives us a great deal of information about our visitor experience. Over seven years, we've seen definite trends and determined best practices:

- Visibility is key. How a kiosk is mounted matters little, but placement within the main traffic flow of an exhibition is critical.

- Simple barriers to participation—requiring email addresses and/or watching a video to leave a comment—substantially elevate engagement level.

- Determine how your audience is using (or not) what you are offering and tweak accordingly.

- When given the chance, visitors will tell you what they think. Be prepared to act upon what you learn.

By adopting a planning approach that relies on trials, evaluation, and adaptation, we were able to learn about, from, and ultimately with visitors so that the end result offers them a better experience. There are risks to opening lines of communication, including misfires, poor visitor experiences, and going in an unexpected direction based on data, but through this process we have the real chance of building something visitors want and will therefore use, creating ever richer, deeper opportunities for engagement. ✳

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