

Chapter 25

SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS: RECENT AUDIENCE RESEARCH AT THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

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Introduction

Shaking the Foundations, Recent Audience Research at the Art Gallery of Ontario may sound quite dramatic, and in many ways it is. However, in a highly conservative and change-resistant organization, such as an art museum, shaking foundations is not as hard to do as it might seem. It simply involves seeking answers to some fairly obvious, but all too seldom asked, questions. A sampling of these are:

- What do visitors to an art museum expect from their visit?
- How do visitors react when they confront a room full of traditional landscape paintings; or a room full of Abstract Expressionist paintings; or an installation of Renaissance altarpieces?
- Is anything of the "cultural significance" of our collections communicated through an art museum experience?
- Do "aesthetic experiences" really exist—and, if so, what are they?
- Can anything be done to improve the quality of visitor experiences of an art museum?

In order to discover answers that could guide the process of exhibit development towards improving art experiences for visitors, a number of audience research studies have been designed and executed. Through these, the AGO has begun to explore the expectations, behaviors and reactions of visitors to exhibitions. The results have been quite dramatic. Not only has the cursory nature of most visitor experiences become clearer to staff, but perhaps even more important is that the **implications** of research

findings are challenging many aspects of the organization's structure, its stated purposes and the methods of achieving its goals. In short, this research is "shaking the foundations" of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

This paper discusses two initiatives that are of utmost importance to the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), both for the outcomes of the projects themselves and for their implications on how the museum is structured and how it functions. The first of these initiatives was an experiment which tested the impact of interpretive devices on visitors to an installation of contemporary art. The second was a major collaborative project in which educators and curators joined forces and reinstalled a part of the AGO's permanent collection using innovative design and interpretive strategies. In both instances, audience research constituted an important part of the initiative and has flagged important issues that may have a significant impact on exhibit development at the AGO.

Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art (September 1987 to May 1988)

Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art was the first major research project of its kind at the AGO. It was both an exhibition and a laboratory setting designed to examine the way in which visitors relate to artworks in a gallery environment, both with and without the assistance of interpretive materials (animation). The exhibition consisted of eight art objects, representing some of the enormous diversity of contemporary art expression, all dating from the last 25 years. *Viewpoints* was installed in two phases. During Phase I, which ran from September to November of 1987, each work was accompanied only by a traditional label stating the artist, title and date. In Phase II, which ran from November 1987 to May 1988, numerous interpretive aids were added to the installation in order to assist visitors in their exploration of the works. These included audio tapes, computer programs and "flippers" (multiple-page, interrogative information cards). All aids were designed to involve viewers directly in an exploration of the art while providing relevant information as it was required. The flippers, for example, asked questions which were intended to prompt the user to examine the artwork carefully before proceeding to an answer provided on the next card. The audio tapes offered visitors poetry, music and dramatic readings that were considered to parallel, in another medium, the experience of viewing the paintings. Lighting, seating and exact location of the art objects remained constant through both phases. The goal of this exhibition strategy was to enable the Adult Programs Department to assess the differences in visitor reaction between Phase I and Phase II. In essence, the impact of interpretive aids in a contemporary art exhibition was tested. To achieve this goal, a visitor study was designed and carried out. The expressed purpose of the study was to record the behaviors, attitudes and demographics of visitors to both

phases of *Viewpoints*. A random sampling process was employed to ensure that each visitor over the age of 17 had an equal chance of being selected. Once chosen for the study, each visitor's movement through the exhibition was recorded and timed (referred to as "tracking"). As they were leaving *Viewpoints*, subjects were surveyed for basic demographic information. Beyond this, every third subject was then interviewed at length to determine his/her attitudes to the exhibit. By comparing Phase I to Phase II, the general impact of the interpretive devices was determined.

Results of the investigation, which studied 131 visitors in Phase I and 134 visitors in Phase II, were dramatic:

- Average viewing time in *Viewpoints* leapt from 5 minutes and 21 seconds in Phase I, to 16 minutes and 19 seconds in Phase II - a 300% increase!
- Virtually all visitors in Phase II used some or all of the interpretive aids provided.
- Significantly, this tripling of time commitment was recorded with a high level of consistency for visitors in each of the following categories: education level; art background; member/non-member; and alone/group.

Does this data suggest that the public was eager to become more involved with the artworks through the use of interpretive aids? The Adult Programs Department was aware that increasing a visitor's time commitment to *Viewpoints* based on the presence of computers, audio tapes and "flippers" was no **guarantee** that the artworks themselves were actually being explored more thoroughly, or that the visitor's experience was actually enriched. Yet when it was observed by researchers that visitor behavior was much more animated during Phase II than in Phase I (e.g., visitors chatting with friends, laughing, gesturing towards the artworks, calling a friend over to see something, etc.), the hypothesis was generated that, at the very least, visitor satisfaction related to the Phase II experience was improved over that in Phase I. It was necessary, however, to confirm this hypothesis with data obtained from the interviews.

One-third of visitors to each of Phase I and Phase II were interviewed regarding their reactions to the exhibition, as well as their attitudes to contemporary art in general. Whereas our interviewers reported little enthusiasm for *Viewpoints* during Phase I interviews, dramatic increases in enthusiasm were recorded during Phase II. Visitors themselves identified the sources of this positive attitude towards Phase II, which are summarized as follows:

- Patrons generally felt comfortable exploring the art objects using the interpretive aids provided.
- They felt that such aids stimulated debate and discussion amongst family and friends.
- Many visitors believed that they gained insight into the works

of art on display.

As a result of their experience in Phase II, 70% of interviewed visitors rated *Viewpoints* as an "above-average" exhibition. This compares to only 23% of Phase I respondents who rated the show similarly.

By combining the "tracking" and interview data, an understanding of the overall significance of *Viewpoints* emerged. The general conclusions from this experiment can be summarized as follows:

- 1) If provided, interpretive aids in exhibitions (at least in contemporary art exhibitions) will be used by the vast majority of our public.
- 2) Our public enjoys having a choice of interpretive aids, including computers, interactive labels and audio tapes.
- 3) Visitors indicated that they responded well to aids that give insight into the works in a variety of ways (e.g., question and answer format, music, background information, poetry, etc.).
- 4) By providing an opportunity for visitors to explore art objects and their contexts, as well as by encouraging visitors to examine their own personal response to the artwork, interpretive aids can lead to gains in visitor satisfaction.
- 5) Aids which are not effectively designed to support the artwork can distract from the art experience (one of the interpretive devices, a colour-matching computer borrowed from the Ontario Science Centre, was not designed specifically for the artwork it was supporting and many visitors used the device without ever connecting the issue of colour complexities that were raised by the computer to the artwork itself).
- 6) The public is not afraid of technology (96% of visitors in Phase II used at least one of the three computers).

For the Adult Programs Department, *Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art* was a successful exhibition and experiment. The public's uneasiness with these contemporary artworks was apparently dispelled when interpretive devices allowed visitors to become involved with the works in a novel way. In addition, Gallery staff gained valuable insights into the many ways that adult visitors experience art in an exhibition. This experiment provided an important foundation for a major collaborative project between the Adult Programs Department (in the Education Division) and the Curator of Canadian Historical Art, Dennis Reid, that introduced interpretive aids into a permanent collection gallery.

The Canadian Historical Gallery Enhancement Project (CHGEP), contains the second important audience research project initiated recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The *CHGEP* is an experimental undertaking in which the wing of the AGO that houses the Canadian

Historical Collection is being reinstalled over the next few years, section by section. The purpose of this initiative is to make the galleries more responsive to the many backgrounds, learning styles and anticipated needs of visitors, as well as to realize better the potential of the collections to stimulate the intellects and imaginations of our publics. Among the unique aspects of this project is the planning process, which involves the full collaboration of both curatorial and education staffs. A second important feature is that the initiative focuses on alterations to the **permanent collection galleries**. Still further, the integration of audience research strategies into the exhibit development process is novel for an art museum. The *CHGEP* is highly experimental and is seen as a potential prototype for future exhibit development at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Stage 1 of the *CHGEP* was established to totally re-conceive and rebuild the gallery containing the **Group of Seven Collection** (an important and well-known Canadian landscape school from the early 20th century). The planning process for this phase required that numerous issues be taken into account—issues that had not previously been addressed in a systematic way, at least between curators and educators. These included:

- Articulating the potential messages, both explicit and implicit, of the installation.
- Discussing assumptions regarding visitor expectations, attitudes and behaviors, relating to both a general gallery visit and to the "Group of Seven" exhibit specifically.
- Discussing assumptions regarding what constitutes a "personally meaningful experience" for the wide range of visiting publics.
- Discussing the desired outcomes of a visit.
- Consideration of the impact of environmental factors (i.e., the museum environment) on the visitor experience.
- Discussing the relative roles of cognitive and affective thought processes that could be used to enhance the visitor's art experience;
- Discussing the relationship of contextual information to the visitor's "aesthetic experience".

All of these considerations are relatively new to exhibition development at the AGO and have made for exciting discussion amongst the educators, curators and designers who were members of the Group of Seven Gallery development team.

Following two years of planning and preparation, the *Group of Seven Gallery* reopened in January, 1989, with a totally new look and function. The beige walls are now a forest green; dramatic lighting is now being employed; the room is organized into clearly separated areas with

accompanying signage; seven thematic focus areas are now fully integrated into the exhibit area and introduce visitors to issues relevant to the *Group of Seven*; a range of discreet interpretive devices (micro-computers, digital audio systems, interactive labels, and photographs) are now available in the thematic areas to meet the needs of our diverse audiences; and, a visible storage system makes available an additional 70 small paintings that were not on display before. Even though the artworks in the gallery are virtually the same as before the enhancement, the visitor's experience has been dramatically altered.

At the heart of the project's uniqueness lies the use of interpretive devices. All of the animation used in the *Group of Seven* exhibit was designed to be discreet, but accessible, so as not to destroy the essentially contemplative atmosphere of the space. Discreetness in the presentation of interpretive material was considered an important goal throughout the development process—a recognition of the wide range of needs and expectations of our audiences, some of whom we assume either do not need, or do not want, assistance in their viewing. The diversity of the AGO audience is better understood today than it was in the past. This is the result of demographic, behavioral and attitudinal studies conducted during recent years. Despite a burgeoning awareness of our audiences, the AGO recognizes that it is far from understanding how to assist visitors in having "personally meaningful experience" with the art. At this point, there is a belief that we must be responsive to the diversity of backgrounds, learning styles, ages, interests and needs of our publics. In response to what were believed to be "needs" of our audiences, a range of educational strategies (e.g., discovery, directed looking, explanation, etc.) was employed in the interpretive materials, and these were deployed through the range of delivery systems (e.g., interactive labels, audio, computers). Primarily, the interpretive material is object-oriented, and attempts to introduce ideas through an exploration of specific artworks. This approach to exhibit development needs to be closely examined to test whether the assumptions concerning the role of animation in support of visitor experiences are correct.

Before developing the detailed plans for the *Group of Seven* Gallery, it was important to develop an audience research strategy that would help to guide the *Group of Seven* Gallery towards an effective end, but also to provide a foundation for ongoing development of future exhibits. The chosen approach was to conduct a baseline study of the public's behavior in, and attitudes towards, the "pre-enhanced" installation, followed by a comparable "post-enhancement" evaluation. The differences between the two studies would reflect the impact of the enhancements.

In the summer of 1987, two studies were conducted that form the foundation of the baseline. In the first of these, 429 visitors were tracked through the Canadian Wing. All of these people were also surveyed to obtain some basic demographic information. Additionally, one in five

was further interviewed to provide data on motivations for visiting, expectations for their visit, reactions to their experience and any suggestions for improvements. The results showed that:

- A large part of our audience brought to their visit very **little background** on Canadian art generally or the Group of Seven specifically.
- Movement patterns showed a very **cursory** focusing on the works of art (grazing).
- Few visitors could articulate their **expectations** for their visit.
- A majority of people were **first-time visitors** who were attempting to see the entire building during their visit.
- Almost 60% said that the information provided was **inadequate**.
- Most visitors were unsure of the **organizing principles** of the Canadian Wing.
- Few visitors demonstrated genuine, visible **enthusiasm** for their visit.
- Satisfaction levels seemed **acceptable** to the vast majority of visitors (this lead to an hypothesis that low visitor expectations, followed by a cursory experience with the art (grazing), does lead to acceptable levels of satisfaction, though possibly falling well short of the potential experience).

In the second study, 100 visitors were tracked, painting by painting, through the *Group of Seven* Gallery, providing a much more microscopic look at visitor behavior. Significant results of this study were:

- Visitors spent, on average, only minutes in the room (average of 7 seconds in front of the works that they physically stopped at).
- They were very quiet as they viewed—talking was always at a whisper.
- The most popular stop in the gallery was a small gouache covered with a curtain because of its sensitivity to light—this was the only object that distinguished itself by its installation format.
- There was an average of 12 physical stops per visitor while in this exhibit.

Significance

These findings will be used to compare data collected during the post-enhancement research phase.

The *CHGEP* is important because it is the first time that an

experimental exhibit design process has been implemented at the AGO, using the skills of both educators and curators in a full-fledged collaboration. The fact that this initiative has taken place in a permanent collection gallery that features some of the most popular and recognizable images in Canadian art is further testimony to its significance for the AGO. Also, this project has drawn into its planning process the input of the Marketing Division—this, in relationship to the audience research component.

We are now planning the second stage of the audience research for the *Group of Seven* Gallery. Preliminary tracking material is indicating that visitors are spending more than twice as much time as before and the security staff is reporting a high frequency of positive and appreciative comments from visitors. Much research is required to examine not only the general impact of "enhancement", but also to learn more about the "personally meaningful experience" that it can facilitate in this and other exhibits.

All of this work has had two major institutional impacts. First, the Curator of Canadian Historical Art, Dennis Reid, has had such a positive experience that he (and the institution) has committed to continuing the Enhancement Project into four other Canadian galleries over the next three years. Secondly, there is now a Curatorial/Education Task Force that is looking into ways of consolidating the input of both divisions of the museum on a regular and more systematic basis. It is certainly too early to tell where all this activity will lead, but one thing seems clear: the foundations of the institution have been shaken.