The Contemporary Visual Art Audience: Space, Time and a Sideways Glance

Janine Fenton Sager

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Western Sydney

November 2008

© Janine Fenton Sager
This thesis is dedicated to
my mother, Elsie [Chant] Fenton
(1927 - 2004)

Her life was an amazing example of both professional and personal achievement in an era when women were not expected nor encouraged to do so. She provided the inspiration for the next generations of women who dare to achieve beyond even their own expectations.
Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude to Dr. Pam James for her perseverance, diligence and dedication to both guiding and propelling me toward the final goal of completing this thesis. Thank you for believing in me, and in the importance of this research and its application.

My husband Roger, who has always been supportive, and at times even enthusiastic, thank you so much because without your support this would not have been a possibility. Our four daughters, Hannah, Georgia, Cate and Ann who have lived every day for the past four years with me and my thesis, thank you all for sharing every one of those days.

To Celia Featherstone for her generosity, listening endlessly to the latest rewrite and offering practical advise, I cannot express enough my boundless appreciation. A dear friend and neighbour whom my children have come to refer to as ‘mummy 2’ because, when my priority has been this project, she has been the one to take care of their every need.

My gratitude to my father, brother, and all my friends who have allowed my priority to be this thesis and still talk to me, and especially to those friends who answered endless questions and even acted as willing research subjects.

The School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney for recognising the importance of international research through their generous support.

Many thanks to Dr. Elaine Lally for her help and advice, and to Loelene Harrison and Kris Magnoli for answering all those obscure administrative questions.

My appreciation of Matthew Richardson’s valuable advice on editing, and Caroline Richardson’s help with transcription.

My appreciation to Nathan James (Visitor Services Officers Co-ordinator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) for his assistance, and to the Visitor Services Officers who offered insightful information.

Thank you to Ulrich Schötker (Head of Education for Documenta 12, Germany) for the interview in which he most generously provided insightful and astute knowledge on the Documenta 12 project and also a wealth of knowledge on education in the arts in general.

I would also like to thank Lee Weng Choy (Director of Sub Station, Singapore) and Low Kee Hong (General Manager, Singapore Biennale 2006) for their cooperation, assistance and generosity.

I would also like to acknowledge the staff of City Hall, Singapore for their help and support during fieldwork at that location.

My thanks to Ingrid Hoffman and Kath Von Witt (past and present directors) and all the volunteer staff at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery for the help they offered freely and without hesitation.

I would also like to thank my students for their thoughtful comments and to Sarah Warby for generously providing the photographs of herself with Jeff Koons, *Puppy*.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the gallery staff and the many audience members whose comments and actions contributed a wealth of knowledge to the construction of this thesis.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

........................................

(Signed)
# CONTENTS

**The Contemporary Visual Art Audience: Space, Time and a Sideways Glance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF FIGURES</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Focus is the Audience</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Content</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating Research Results</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Cross Disciplinary Approach to Visual Art Audience Research</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation as the Primary Research Tool</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Research / Ethnomuseology</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Art Museum: If These Walls Could Talk</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural Framework</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Response to the Art Gallery</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating to the Art Object</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Artist as Proponent of Change</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Viewing Public</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Zone of Interaction: Considering the Heterotopia</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Theories</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognising the Art Museum</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Exhibitions</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Aesthetic Experience: Understanding the Invisible</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Aesthetic Experience</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Museum Culture: Viewers Making Meaning</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>J. Faulk and L. Dierking: The Interactive Experience Model.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>View of shopping mall and entrance to retail outlet. Photo J. Sager</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A shopping mall and art gallery interior and public, 2008. Photo J. Sager</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>An example of the floor plan from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Museum of Contemporary Art, Ground Floor Plan with tracking overlays. Arrow pinpoints MUMMP point described below. Copy of original fieldwork diagrams by J.Sager.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>City Hall, Singapore. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Neue Galerie, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Aue-Pavillon, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Deerubbin Centre, George Street, Windsor. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Guards in Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Viewers at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany Photo: J. Sager.</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Lines marked on the floor of documenta-Halle indicate the works of different artists, either installed overhead or placed on the floor. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Detail from Giovanni Paolo Pannini, <em>Galerie de vues de la Rome moderne</em>, 1799. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>White walled gallery space at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: J. Sager.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Advertisement from <em>Blue Mountains Life</em>, Dec 2006. Australian lifestyle magazine. (Inside front cover, full page).</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: J. Sager.</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>The walls on each floor of Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, were painted a different colour as a visual reminder for the audience. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sainsbury Wing to the left and the National Gallery, to the right, London. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Front aspect and main entrance of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 27 Museum of Contemporary Art with Sydney Harbour Bridge to its right, and the cityscape to its left. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 28 Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney, exterior views. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 29 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Northern entrance. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 30 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Northern entrance from George St. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 31. Deerubin Centre foyer (interior and exterior views). Photo: J. Sager

Figure 32 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, front door. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 33 Map showing the location of gallery sites used for Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, 2007. Map from www.documenta12

Figure 34 Images of Aue-Pavillon in Karlsaue Park, detail of Aue-Pavillon main entrance, interior view, and detail of curtains in Aue-Pavillon. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 35 Museum Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 36 Museum Fridericianum, detail of front portico. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 37 Iole De Freitas, Untitled, Museum Fridericianum. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 38 Logo of Documenta 12

Figure 39 Audience at Documenta 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 40 Audience at Document 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 41 Logo of 2006 Biennale of Sydney

Figure 42 Logo of Singapore Biennale 2006

Figure 43 An audience member at the Singapore Biennale 2006. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 44 Logo of Western Front: Contemporary Art from Western Sydney

Figure 45 Audience at Western Front, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Windsor. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 46 Audience member examining Mary Kelly’s Love Songs, 2007, at Documenta 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 47 Jane Alexander, Verity, Faith and Justice, 2006, installation views. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 48 View of Sydney Prints, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Windsor. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 49 A viewer seated on the floor to spend an extended time viewing a particular

Figure 50 Audience member at Sydney Prints, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Windsor. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 51 Audience at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 52 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 53 Approach to the Museum of Contemporary Art along the promenade at Circular Quay.

Figure 54 Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay entrance. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 55 Museum of Contemporary Art, George Street entrance. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 56 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery is not visible from the exterior of the building as it is located on the top level of the solid brick walled wing of the building pictured here. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 57 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, showing entrance to the foyer of the gallery, ground floor entrance to the building and signage on main road and inside the building. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 58. Takafumi Hara, Signs of Memory: City Hall Pink Windows, 2006. Exterior and interior views. Photo: J. Sager
Figure 59 Iole De Freitas, *Untitled*, 2007. Exterior and interior views. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 60 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, showing the museum café at the front of the building and the path to the entrance. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 61 Inside the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art looking toward the entrance to the café. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 62 A juggler practices outside the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 63 Advertisements published in *Sydney Morning Herald* 12th Jan and 26th Jan 2008.

Figure 64 Museum of Contemporary Art advertisement from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1995.

Figure 65 Jeff Koon’s *Puppy* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. Photo Mrs. Warby

Figure 66 Sarah Warby, age 8, in front of Jeff Koon’s *Puppy* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. Photo Mrs. Warby

Figure 67 Audience members photographing the work of Romuald Hazoumé at Documenta 12. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 68 Viewer of *Sydney Printmakers Exhibition* at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 69 Audience members at Tanglin Camp, Singapore during Singapore Biennale 2006. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 70 Detail of installation of Ai Weiwei’s *Fairytale* in Museum Fridericianum during Documenta 12.

Figure 71 Detail of installation of Ai Weiwei’s *Fairytale* in Au-Pavilion during Documenta 12. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 72 An audience member has made a seat her own by sleeping across it, whilst other viewers seem unperturbed by her presence. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 73 Above three images - Audience members sitting at Musée d’Orsay and The Louvre, Paris, 2007. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 74 Audience members at Documenta 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 75 Călin Dan, *Emotional Architecture 2 – Sample City*, 2003, video still, (from Zones of Contact 2006: Biennale of Sydney, Biennale of Sydney Ltd., Sydney, 2006, front cover).

Figure 76 Audience members viewing *Maximale Gier*, video installation, 2003 by Dias and Riedweg in Aue-Pavillon at Documenta 12. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 77 Video art *This Is How We Walk On The Moon*, by Johanna Billing showing seating arrangement. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 78 Audiences in Aue-Pavillon, Documenta 12, Kassel. Photos: J. Sager

Figure 79 Exhibition map of Aue-Pavillon, Documenta 12, Kassel showing floor plan and list of artists and location of their works.

Figure 80 Museum of Contemporary Art foyer from above showing the location of a video monitor to the left of the exit/entrance. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 81 Viewers at Documenta 12, Germany, 2007. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 82 Goods displayed on wide flat shelves for easy access at the Bon Marché, Paris. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 84 Takashi Kuribayashi, *Aquarium: I feel like I am in a fishbowl*, 2006. Photos: J. Sager

Figure 85 The previous three images are installation views of Takashi Kuribayashi, *Aquarium: I feel like I am in a fishbowl*, 2006 at Tanglin Camp, Singapore. Photos: J. Sager

Figure 86 A ‘mediated’ group of audience members at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 87 ‘Miffy at the Gallery’ by Dick Bruna

Figure 88 View of City Hall, Singapore from the front and along the side of the building. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 89 Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 90 Way-finding poles for the Tate Modern Gallery, Bankside, London, England. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 91 Audience members in the Aue-Pavillon, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 92 Audience members taking time out from viewing to watch other viewers, read the catalogue, talk with companions, and simply rest. Photo: J. Sager

Figure 93 ‘Miffy at the Gallery’ by Dick Bruna.
ABSTRACT

A modified retail research model has been used to study the behaviour of visual art audiences to better understand the actions of viewers as they encounter the environment where contemporary art is displayed. Behaviours are expressed in a movement, a glance, the positioning of one's body in space, the placement of a belonging. Actions reveal or express an individual's role within the viewing environment. What the audience is unable to express verbally the ethnomuseologist is able to interpret and use as a tool for audience development. The research methodology developed for this study provides the key to expose and analyze viewer's actions and relationships within the space of interaction. The work of Paco Underhill was the impetus for this research as his market research showed shoppers reacted to their retail environment in unpredictable, yet obvious ways that once isolated could be rationalized and the retail environment altered to make their shopping experience a more enjoyable one. It stood to reason that this form of research methodology could achieve similar results when implemented in the art museum environment. The particular characteristic of the modified research model used for this thesis, and what makes its application unique, is its ability to be implemented in any site where art is displayed. To test this theory, the researcher chose disparate locations where contemporary visual art was displayed, and compared and contrasted the results of her observations. Included were the 2006 Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia; the inaugural Singapore Biennale 2006 at various location in Singapore; and Documenta 12, 2007, within a variety of venues in Kassel, Germany. Behaviours were analyzed using theories of social behaviour, aesthetic experience and spatial dynamics, overlaid with museological theory. Results suggest that this ethnomuseological (termed by the author) research model is able to recognize, analyze and present ways of resolving viewing idiosyncrasies that require modification to support and improve the viewing experience. In this way the ethnomuseologist is able to act as audience advocate, without interruption to the viewers experience, whilst gathering pertinent information. The argument for a more user-friendly visual arts environment is championed within contemporary art critical commentary.
From the murky winter streets of Chicago in 1969, emerged the barely recognizable shape of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. Passers-by were only able to make out its angular form beneath the swaths of greenish-brown tarpaulin fastened to its walls with over a thousand metres of Manila rope. The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude had created more than an artwork. Their Museum of Contemporary Art, Wrapped questioned the relationship between the art museum and its public. ‘Not a consequence of the work but its primary motivation’, Brian O’Doherty argues, is that ‘a position must be taken not just by art folk but by the immediate public to whom art is usually as remote as the phyla in an aquarium’. O’Doherty contends that by wrapping the art museum the public was forced to, not only notice it, but also, to consider their relationship with it both in their personal experience and possibly as

---

a reassessment of that institution’s function and place in their society. What was their connection, as an audience member, to this institution and what it represented and contained? As they stood on the footpath, the notion that they were not only excluded from the site where art objects were normally made available for them to view, but that they were actually viewing an artwork, may have presented questions those passers-by would not have thought to ponder previously. Where Museum of Contemporary Art, Wrapped unsettled the accepted terms of association between audience and art museum, this thesis presents a methodology that is able to examine that very complex relationship the viewing public has with visual art and the spaces where it is displayed.

This thesis argues that the implementation of a research model adapted by the author from a retail research model provides the best opportunity to study contemporary visual art audiences engaged in the act of viewing. It is argued on the premise that observing what people actually do in response to a particular environment reveals most about the relationship between audience, art and the space in which they both exist. The model on which the structure of this research is based was designed by Paco Underhill as a ‘research system to document and analyze shopping behavior’. Underhill is founder and CEO of Envirosell, and it was the recognition of his success in the retail sector that alerted the author to the possibility of applying a modified version of his research methodology in the museum sector to examine visual art audience behaviour. ‘Envirosell is a New York based research and consulting firm specializing in studying retail and service environments. We [Envirosell] study where products and people meet.’ Underhill’s methodology utilises video surveillance, tracking and informal interviews. Essentially, the modifications made by the author involve the addition of a participant observation component and the exclusion of interviews, which allows audience members to participate in the research, at times unwittingly, and whilst not being interrupted from their viewing experience. By maintaining an inconspicuous, observational dependent research focus the researcher is able to study the behaviour of viewers whilst they are interacting with the space that initiates their behaviour. It is proposed that by implementing this research model precisely where the interaction occurs, the researcher is able to distinguish, analyse and understand specific viewing behaviours, and thus present a body of knowledge to be utilized within the professional climate of audience development.

The author proposes that this research methodology achieves superior results to what has previously been attempted in audience research because it examines viewing behaviour when it occurs, as a direct response to the space in which it occurs. In addition, and most significantly, the researcher is able to interpret the actions of the viewers based on extensive knowledge of the site, understanding of aesthetic experience, and knowledge of social behaviour. Although Underhill’s research model has achieved success in the retail sector and service industries, there has not, prior to this research, been a similar model utilized in the visual arts audience development arena. The specific modifications made

---

4 O’Doherty, ibid.
6 Envirosell is a New York based research and consulting firm specializing in studying retail and service environments. Information pertaining to Envirosell is available on their website, www.envirosell.com
7 Quoted from the home page of www.envirosell.com
8 Envirosell has conducted research for Opera America. They were commissioned to examine the audience’s pre and post opera going experience. The objective of this project was to develop an understanding of what occurs outside of the performance to:
to Underhill's research model by the author become the foundation for its successful implementation into the viewing environment for the study of audience behaviour. Because the actions of the audience are directly associated with what motivates them, this study presents evidence of behaviours and why they occur as verification of specific viewing experiences. The result is a fresh perspective on the complex arena of contemporary visual art audience participation and a means of advocacy for the public and their needs.

This study is not about contemporary visual art, though an explanation will be offered as to why a problem between contemporary art and its audience exists. The genre of contemporary art, rather than other forms of visual art, will be shown to elicit distinctive reactions from its audiences. This study is not a critique of contemporary visual arts management, although it may be critical of the interface between arts management and their audiences. What this study does achieve is an understanding of audience behaviour in response to the immediate environment of its action. By understanding what initiates specific responses to elements of an environment, alterations and improvements can be initiated that serve the purpose of improving the interaction between the audience and contemporary visual art.

*The Contemporary Visual Art Audience: Space, Time and a Sideways Glance* presents the triangulation of museological theory, theories of aesthetic experience, and the behaviours inspired by the action of viewing art. This thesis therefore offers insight into the complex relationship between the site and the viewers, the artworks and the viewers, between staff and viewers, and between the viewers themselves, underpinned by a comprehensive theoretical and practical knowledge of museology. It examines the theoretical relationship of the art object to the museum, its public and the individual; and an understanding of social interaction between individuals and groups in a public setting. Empirical evidence of behaviour is gathered with tools carefully balanced between ethnographic methodologies and retail market research practices.

The construction of this specific research methodology and its implementation within the art museum is referred to, by the author, as ethnomuseology. Ethnomuseology is founded on the hypothesis that close observation of subjects involved in the act of viewing provides information about their responses and actions that would otherwise go unnoted. Therefore, the scope of this thesis encompasses a wide-ranging accumulation of factors that influence the behaviour of visual art audience members. It is the body of knowledge surrounding and infiltrating the viewing experience that renders the ethnomuseologist a specialist in the field of audience behaviour. Versed in the disciplines of museology, aesthetic experience, and sociology of public behaviour, the ethnomuseologist offers a scholarly interpretation of visual art audience behaviour and presents suggestions to facilitate improvements to create a more enjoyable overall experience and provide more sensitive outreach to new and emerging opera fans.\(^9\)

---

\(^9\) Ethnomuseology, at term coined by the author to describe the marriage of ethnology and museology to form a specific science – the study of the society of people engaged in the viewing of artifacts. The author has not seen this term used to describe social behaviour in museum settings within the full extent of her research and thus believes this application of the term to be her own, to the best of her knowledge. However ethnomuseology has been used to describe ethnographic collections and their display in natural history museums, eluding to a different application of the term, described by Moira Simpson as ‘emerging ethnomuseology incorporating parallel practices drawn from conventional museology and Indigenous custodianship practices’, [http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/staff/homepage.asp?Name=Moira.Simpson](http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/staff/homepage.asp?Name=Moira.Simpson) accessed July 2009.
the space where visual art and audience meet, a specific space identified by the term ‘zone of interaction’. The central question to museum administration and audience development should be; what does the public want from their viewing experience? This thesis argues for the provision of an audience advocate who is equipped to champion the needs of the viewing public. To achieve this outcome the cross-disciplinary research methodology provides the best possible opportunity. Retail market research informs audience development research. The former has been proven to initiate improvements to the shopping experience, whilst the latter has the propensity to enrich the viewing experience.

Underhill’s observation of shoppers, as they move through the retail environment, has revealed surprising truths about shopping behaviour. What he learnt from shoppers’ actions formulated his suggestions to retail management concerning what changes should be implemented to improve the shopping experience for their customers. The implementation of his suggested improvements has resulted in the growth of his company, Envirosell, into ‘a leading research and consulting agency for stores, banks, restaurants and consumer product manufacturers’ around the world. Because Paco Underhill and his company Envirosell ‘help companies understand what motivates the behaviors of today’s consumers’, it is motivation enough to test implementation of a similar research model in the art museum environment. This comes with a desire to help arts administrators to understand what motivates today’s visual art audiences. In fact, it was the realization of what a retail research model could achieve in the retail sector that prompted the author to test its application in the arts sector. Because audience members are generally oblivious to their actions being observed or their movements being recorded, every idiosyncrasy is revealed to the ethnomuseologist who is expertly equipped to interpret behaviour as a direct response to the environment in which it occurs.

Presented in this thesis is the evidence that this model can indeed be successfully implemented, and is equipped to provide positive outcomes in the visual arts sector. What has been achieved, using this model, is the recognition and analysis of specific properties of the viewing experience occurring within defined spaces of audience interaction. This process has enabled the researcher to discover components of the viewing experience that have, until now, been overlooked or have remained invisible. Not because they are unremarkable, but because they have been neither noticed or noted by the creators, curators or managers of contemporary art spaces. The apparent lack of success of more common strategies will be discussed further in the introduction.

It is important to note at the outset of this study that the people most involved, those who appear to be most interested in the viewing process, are those who are least likely to see what is happening, literally, under their noses. The artists create their work and exhibit it for public appraisal. However, they leave

---

10 The ‘zone of interaction’ will be described in detail within this introduction. Briefly, it is the space occupied by visual art objects, the audience who view them and all other elements within that space.

11 Examples of Underhill’s research findings can be found in Paco Underhill, Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1999.


13 Full explanation of how this is achieved can be found in chapter one.
the exhibition once it has been launched, their work complete, and rarely do they return to examine the public’s response. They merely listen to, or read the criticism of the art commentators. Meanwhile it is the viewing public who engage personally with their work. Likewise, the curators and management of the gallery spaces painstakingly select and display the artworks. This action renders these arts professionals too closely involved in the process to see what the audience is actually doing in that space. The exhibition is designed to engage the audience in a particular process of thought. However, just as the worn or incongruous details of mismatched cushions or worn carpet in our own homes are easily overlooked when familiarity renders them invisible, the staff in the art gallery are not subjectively able to assess the public’s reactions to what they themselves have created. They see only what they intended, expect, or want to see. This is why the impartial eye of the ethnomuseologist is able to observe all components of the exhibition, and the audience’s reactions to them, within the moment of interaction. The focus is removed from the exhibition construction to the audience’s reaction.

Therefore, the outcome of this research can be stated at the outset - attention to what the viewing public is doing within the zone of interaction provides evidence of what is working and what is not, in regard to the viewing experience within that space. Quite simply, the evidence of what is occurring works as justification for change to promote an improved experience of viewing. By employing the innovative science of ethnomuseology, the viewing public is indirectly empowered to improve their own experience, because it is the single focus of the ethnomuseologist to provide advocacy for the viewers of contemporary art. Without this relationship to the viewing process there seems little prospect for the viewer to validate his or her own actions.

The arts establishment rarely focuses their undivided attention on the nature of the interface they provide between the artworks and their audience. To do so means they would have to step into the shoes of their viewing public. It is at this point where the significance of the ethnomuseologist is justified. Removed from the influence and responsibility of being a staff member actively involved in the provision of the art exhibition, the ethnomuseologist is able to see the viewing environment with fresh eyes, eyes unencumbered with preconceived values and expectations of what should be occurring within the space. The work of the ethnomuseologist is to discover significant structure of experience or insight into experience by, firstly, observing what viewing behaviours there are, and then discovering the *whys* of those viewing behaviours. Once the *whys* are understood, strategies can be formulated to accommodate and enhance the viewing experience for the users of the contemporary art space being studied.

The introduction presents an explanation of ethnomuseology and its application within the canon of visual arts, why it is timely that the debate surrounding audience behaviour should be presented, and the reason why this research provides a much needed insight into audience behaviour not available

---

14 The author has conducted previous research into the contemporary art exhibition opening and the behaviour of both artists and their audiences within that setting, which revealed the opening to be a specific event disconnected to the remainder of the exhibition. Janine Sager, *A Mile of String, The Flâneur and an Exhibition Opening*, Honours Thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2004, (unpublished).

15 There is research being conducted by art establishments to try to ascertain the opinions of their audience, however, what this thesis argues is that there has been no method of actually examining and understanding what the audience really does in the gallery space, until now.
prior to this body of research. A brief overview of the six chapters introduces: the methodology and how it has been applied, the art historical context of the research, the configuration of spatial theory, an understanding of aesthetic experience, the viewing public’s relationship with the art institution, and an interpretation of audience behaviours.

**Terminology**

*Ethnomuseology* describes the subject, the method, the location, and their interdisciplinary marriage. A self-coined term, ethnomuseology offers an innovative approach to a specific area of audience research and development within the broader field of museological practice. Primarily, ethnology is the study of people and their way of life within social groups. The social group in this instance is defined as people who are viewing contemporary art. This social group and their actions occur most frequently within the space of an art museum/gallery, which in turn locates the study within the field of museology and is therefore governed by the canon of museological practice. The research for this thesis is bound by two important parameters; firstly, it will discuss encounters between members of the public and contemporary visual art; secondly, those encounters occur within public art institutions and spaces designated for the display of contemporary art by the arts institutions.

Within those parameters, the *zone of Interaction* is the term used to describe a particular space, both physical and psychological, between the viewer and the artwork being viewed. It does not exist as a direct line from viewer to artwork, but rather extends to the environment where both are found to include all that that space contains. Not only the physical elements such as a sculpture, a chair, a staff member, lighting, the movement of other viewers; but also the role each participant plays as a member of that environment. The zone of interaction is defined by what is taking place within it and textured by the relationships between all the elements of that space. This research method therefore, specifically looks at how members of the contemporary art audience react to, not only the artworks, but also how they interact with the space where contemporary works of art are installed and their relationship with other members of the audience and staff they encounter.

Why has this study focused on contemporary visual art in particular? Contemporary art is viewed in the same time frame in which it is produced. It is contemporary because it exists as a representation of our visual culture that is evolving as a consequence of what is happening within our lived experience. It is a reflection of our life and the issues that are current. The issues pertain to each individual as a personal reflection of his or her place in our local and global society. The artwork is judged according to

---

16 See note 9.
18 It will later be shown that this methodology has been designed in such a way as to allow it to be implemented anywhere visual art is displayed and is not restricted to the art gallery or museum, though for the purpose of an introduction I have simplified the description and will later expand on this detail.
19 'Contemporary' is understood to be ‘a person or thing living or existing at the same time as another’. Sara Tulloch (ed), *The Readers Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder*, Readers Digest, London, New York, 1993 edition, p.309.
what we know now, unlike the way in which historical artworks are viewed. Historical artworks exist outside their time. They are judged with hindsight, unable to be experienced in their original context and therefore judged purely as a visual record of that moment in time. We come to them with a degree of familiarity with their history, which is unlike the poignant realization that analysis is required in the reading of contemporary art. Contemporary art evolves in our minds eye as we view it. We bring to it no preconceived ideas other than what we are able to make of it with what we know personally. To initiate engagement with each artwork the audience requires ‘a point of recognition and connection’. Unlike the familiarity of many historical artworks, we gaze at contemporary artworks for the very first time. It is not an easy undertaking.

Nicholas Tsoutas, past and present director of many major contemporary art galleries in Australia, describes contemporary art spaces; ‘these spaces are hyperactive, they are disturbing spaces, they are unsettling, and they are proactive in continually reinventing the languages of contemporary art’. The audience has much to contend with in these spaces. And that is why this study focuses its attention on the viewing of contemporary art - because the viewing of contemporary art is fraught with difficulty. And because it is fraught with difficulty, it is that experience which stands to gain most from research into the interface between contemporary art and its audience. A study of contemporary visual art audiences in Australia revealed that two thirds of Australian galleries surveyed ‘don’t know much about the contemporary art audience’. Therefore, if audiences are challenged and the arts establishment don’t know how to assist them, this thesis contends that the work of an ethnomuseologist is well placed to offer a means of understanding the relationship between audience and contemporary art.

The Focus is the Audience

Professionals who choose to work in the arts do so because they believe in its ultimate benefit to society. They believe in the benefits the arts bring to those who engage with it. They believe everyone should share those benefits. The benefits are numerous, such as education, aesthetic pleasure, self-discovery, reflection, creativity, stimulation and so many more. Arts professionals want everyone to be enlightened, educated, pleased, inspired, moved, fulfilled and challenged. Why don’t more people want to share in these attributes viewing art offers? There is always a striving to provide a better service to...
the viewing public, and thus a hunger to better understand the viewing audience.\textsuperscript{25} Audience research ‘has consistently been nominated by Arts organisations as a priority for support’.\textsuperscript{26} In any society where public funds support the provision of visual art, the public demands value for their tax dollars. To legitimise public expenditure for the provision of visual arts in a concrete form ‘visitor numbers’ are offered as ‘accountability’. Statistics provide a ‘bottom line’, the result of that investment. What is lacking from this equation is the realization of what actually constitutes the audience’s experience. The public deserve more than a statistical answer. Ethnomuseology is able to provide much more than a head count.

An examination of visual arts audiences by leading arts professionals and academics, such as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill from the UK\textsuperscript{27}, John Falk and Lynn Dierking from the USA\textsuperscript{28}, and Carol Scott\textsuperscript{29} and Paul Costantoura\textsuperscript{30} of Australia, as well as many others, provide relevant information on the subject of visual art audience research. Noteworthy is the fact that these, and other museologists have not explored first hand the actions of contemporary visual art audiences as they interact with works of art. They may not have encountered a research model based on observation that could be successfully implemented in the museum environment, which is why this research model is so significant in its innovative configuration and application.

At face value there appears to be no impediment to the retelling or describing of what is observed in the public art museum/gallery\textsuperscript{31} when individuals are involved in the activity of viewing art. The complexity lies in the relationship those individuals have with the art institution, the physical space of the gallery, the works of art, gallery staff, and each other. The zone of interaction is never static nor isolated. The elements comprising the zone of interaction are not easily isolated, as one impacts on the other in a complex interweaving of influences. Firstly, each element presents a complex semiotic configuration the viewer must interpret based on his or her personal sphere of reference. Secondly, this occurs within a reflexive association with all aspects of viewing. The way in which this study is constructed provides an entry into each component of museological practice relevant to viewing behaviour as it dismantles the environment of viewing to examine how each element is related to the other. The overriding factor is the influence of the environment on the behaviour on those who frequent the zone of interaction, which is argued by, firstly, describing the authority the art establishment who configure that environment has on viewing behaviour, and then by arguing that the actual site of experience is a specific heterotopia\textsuperscript{32} recognized by the behaviour of its participants wherever it is located.

\textsuperscript{25} Research is conducted by Arts Councils both in Australia and Britain, by individual arts establishments and by museologists, all too numerous to place in the footnotes and many of which are cited in the bibliography.

\textsuperscript{26} Audience Research Made Easy, Arts Victoria and The Australia Council, Melbourne, 2005, p.iii.


\textsuperscript{28} John H. Falk, and Lynn D. Dierking, Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, 2000. See other publications by these authors in the bibliography.


\textsuperscript{31} The use of the term ‘museum’ will refer to the building where visual art objects are collected, stored and displayed, and the term ‘gallery’ refers to a room within the museum where works of art are presented to the viewing public. The ‘art institution’ is a broader based term referring to the organization established for the provision of visual arts, including government officials, museum staff and the museum combined to provide a service to the public.

\textsuperscript{32} The term ‘heterotopia’, coined by Michel Foucault, is described later in this introduction.
Chapter Content

To fully understand the viewing experience, as a consequence of interaction between contemporary visual art and its audience, the format of this study is presented so that the most significant influences can be examined and offered separately, even though they are most definitely superimposed and interconnected. They are presented as six defined topics beginning, most significantly, with the modified retail research model.

Chapter One, A Cross Disciplinary Approach to Visual Art Audience Research explains the methodology; comparing and describing the methods, their components, and how they mesh together to construct the ultimate tool for studying viewing behaviours. The initial motivation that inspired the formulation and implementation of this study was, as I have described, the work of Paco Underhill. Underhill conducts research in the retail environment. Recognized as ‘urban geographer and retail anthropologist’, Underhill’s experience in the field of market research has enabled him to refine a model for the explication of detailed information about the shopping experience and use that information to improve the shopping experience for consumers, literally, around the globe. He states in his book Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping:

If anthropology had already been studying, not simply the store, but what, exactly human beings do in it, where they go and don’t go, and by what path they go there; what they see and fail to see, or read and decline to read; and how they deal with the objects they come apon, how they shop, you might say - the precise anatomical mechanics and behavioral psychology of how they pull a sweater from a rack to examine it, or read a box of heartburn pills or a fast-food restaurant menu, or deploy a shopping basket, or react to the sight of a line at the ATM,... well, then we wouldn’t have had to invent the science of shopping.

Underhill’s method of visualizing each action to understand a shoppers’ behaviour as he or she negotiates the retail environment is ideally suited to the contemporary art museum. Underhill states, ‘our proprietary methodology utilizes qualitative observation techniques, mapping programs, attitudinal interviews, and small video cameras to capture consumer behavior patterns’. The study presented for this thesis is also based on qualitative observation techniques, video recording and tracking. However, it has been modified with the addition of participant observation rather than the use of interviews, which is a significant alteration in response to the complexity of the viewing environment.

34 Underhill, ibid. Underhill is director of an international market research company Envirosell, operating around the world. Their web sites is www.envirosell.com
It appeared obvious that by using similar methods to Underhill, a similar result could be achieved in the visual art arena. The end result for Underhill is not quite the same as audience development in so far as the retail sector is profit driven and their outcomes are measured in terms of profit margins. Audience development outcomes are far more complicated and extend beyond the initial measure of attendance numbers. The fundamental parameter for this study is conducting research that exposes specific and useful information that would otherwise be overlooked. This discovery by Underhill demonstrates the usefulness of the observation tool:

When we staked out the pet aisle, we noticed that while adults bought the dog food, the dog treats were often being picked out by children and senior citizens. We realized that for the elderly, pets are like children, creatures to be spoilt. And while feeding Fido may not be any child’s favorite chore, filling him up with doggy cookies can be loads of fun. Parents indulged their little ones’ pleas for treats here just as they did over the cookie aisle. Because no one had ever noticed who exactly was buying (or lobbying for the purchase of) pet treats, they were typically near the top of the supermarket shelves. As a result, our cameras caught children climbing the shelves to reach the treats. We witnessed one elderly woman using a box of aluminum foil to knock down her brand of biscuits. Move the treats to where the kids and little old ladies can reach them, we advised the client. The client did so and sales went up overnight.\(^{37}\)

The implementation of a modified research model, based on that used by Underhill, requires the researcher to engage in the process of information retrieval on multiple levels. Video records are analysed, statistical information concerned with visitor movements correlated, and the presence of the flâneuse, or participant observer, add to this multilayered research model. It will be shown that the inclusion of the flâneuse in the process of gathering data about the act of viewing contemporary art is significant because the information acquired by that method cannot be acquired using an alternate method. Also, the act of flânerie sits comfortably within contemporary public space. Each of the methods used has been adjusted to take into consideration the differing requirements of each of the sites utilized.

Chapter Two, *The Art Museum: If these Walls Could Talk* provides an explanation of the development of the art museum as an overriding context for this study. A study being conducted within a museological canon requires clear description of the influence the art institution’s development has had, and continues to have, on constructing behavioural responses in its patrons. As they approach the art museum and negotiate the space within its domain they cannot help but be mindful, whether consciously or subconsciously, of what the expectations are in relation to that particular space. Carol Duncan, Ivan Karp and Tony Bennett\(^{38}\) discuss the influence museum development has had on its users from the architectural form to social relationships. Also, the art museum context plays a fundamental role in establishing the regard in which the audience holds the art object.\(^{39}\) The work of art, though objectified by its existence within the art gallery, has undergone a transformation via a process


of subjectification and it is this process that will be discussed as part of the complexity of museum display. Comments made by museum visitors reinforce the theories presented in this chapter.

Chapter Three, *The Zone of Interaction: Considering the Heterotopia*, negotiates the space where the research is undertaken. It is not enough to merely describe a ‘place’. The environment where interaction occurs must be understood to be as relevant an element within this study as any other component of the viewing experience. Therefore, the method of identifying the zone of interaction, as it occurs within the institutions used for this research, is presented and explained. Specific art museums and sites used for particular exhibitions are presented and described to provide a clear picture of where the research has been undertaken. However, the methodology has been constructed in such a way as to allow the application of the research methods in any situation where visual art is displayed for the public’s attention. The zone of interaction is a specific space clearly explained using Foucault’s theory of a heterotopia. Foucault suggests a heterotopia is a space separate and distinguished from other spaces by the function its inhabitants confer on it whilst it is still connected to, and thus influenced by, the rest of society. This theory is essential to locate the research model. Identifying the heterotopia as *space where people are viewing art* allows application of the study anywhere that particular action occurs. The actions of viewers and the space in which they exist constitute a heterotopia.

The sites for this study, identified as heterotopias, were carefully chosen to represent a wide range of criteria. However, one constraint is that the implementation of the research model has taken place within government owned and funded, and thus public institutions only. A decision was made to exclude commercial enterprises from this study because they present differing motivation for the presentation of visual art, and therefore, consumer driven behaviours or pressures from profit focused management would complicate information gathered. The choice made here does not preclude future research being conducted in commercial galleries; it merely acts as a self-enforced boundary for this thesis.

The primary objective of the institutions selected is to provide the public with access to contemporary visual art of the highest standard. To test the theory that this study can be implemented in a range of situations, where contemporary visual art is displayed, four very different sites were chosen. They crossed, not only local demographically divergent areas, but also breached international borders in order to realize the efficiency of the working model used for the study. Included are the Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney, and specifically the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, and Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Windsor, both in New South Wales, Australia. A case study carried out in Singapore during the inaugural *Singapore Biennale* 2006, adds an international scope as does research conducted at *Documenta 12*, 2007 in Kassel, Germany. The range of sites and formats

---


42 Appendix A provides images and video footage of each location to add a visual dimension for the readers information.
where contemporary art is presented may appear too diverse to provide a clear outcome. On the contrary, the range in sites exemplifies the ability of this research model to be applied in any space where the public is engaged in interaction with visual art, anywhere where the site is identified as a zone of interaction. The actions of viewers in one site have the potential to inform analysis of actions occurring in other sites. It was fortuitous that one of the international contemporary art exhibitions was the first of its kind to be held in Singapore, whilst Documenta, held in Germany, is the longest running intermittent contemporary art exhibition held, the 12th since 1955. In comparison, the Sydney Biennale is the 15th of its kind to be held in Australia.

Chapter Four, *The Aesthetic Experience: Understanding the Invisible*, reflects on the viewer's personal experience and involvement as they engage with the work of art. Aesthetic experience is an individual and very personal experience, an experience that has been researched, examined and theorised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, John Dewey, Richard Lachapelie et al., David Finn and James Elkins, to mention a few, in an effort to understand just what that experience involves. It is expressed both inwardly in a silent reverie, and as an outward display of emotion. It is the outward manifestation of this phenomenon that can be observed and documented through the course of this research. However, there is a significant reliance on the scholarly writings of theorists who have examined the subject of the aesthetic experience in far greater depth than this study could achieve. Therefore, the work of the scholars mentioned in this paragraph, and others, all of whose work has been significant in the area of sociological and psychological examination of aesthetic experience, provide a subjective analysis of what constitutes the aesthetic experience. They are able to furnish ample material for debate within an expanded study of audience development.

Chapter Five, *Contemporary Museum Culture: Viewers Making Meaning* examines what is occurring in the visual arts establishment currently, reflected in discussion of issues surrounding and influencing audience behaviour. The ways in which audience members react to the viewing environment is an evolving subject of scrutiny. The intensity of visual culture and the ramifications of globalisation play an increasing role in the adjustment of public and personal attitudes towards the visual arts and are born out in the changing actions of the public within the art museum. A direct result of the increase in visual literacy of contemporary populations is expressed in the way viewers approach the art object, although this open interface may be masked by the difficulties arising from engagement with changing and more challenging artistic formats of contemporary art. Installation art, video art, performance art and conceptual art have the potential to initiate contested or difficult relationships with viewers unaccustomed to these formats. How the artworks are approached and the comments they draw from their audiences, add to the understanding of the viewers' experience. Changing attitudes to gallery going in general constitute a topic gravid with consequences for the future development of visual art.

---

audiences and cannot be omitted from this discussion. The range of issues pertinent to the topic of audience behaviour builds a strong case for its closer scrutiny.

Chapter Six, *The Social Life of The Art Museum: Mediating Viewing Experience*, explains the multiple influences acting on the viewer as they negotiate the public space of the contemporary art gallery. The actions of audience members are explained by categorising their behaviours into different ‘roles’. The outward manifestation of behaviours, observed by the researcher, can be explained by identifying the impetus for those behaviours. Individuals react as participants in a public arena, as members of a social order, and as viewers of art within an art gallery environment. Any one, or a mixture of these roles, may inspire or contain an individual’s reaction to the infinite combinations of stimuli presented in the public sphere of the zone of interaction.

To unravel this complex behavioural presentation, the work of Erving Goffman, pre-eminent sociologist, has been adopted to assist in the deciphering process for this research. Chapter six discusses his concepts and then applies the relevant theories concerning public behaviour to the observations made by the researcher. To clarify the interpretation of behaviours witnessed at the various sites, detailed descriptions and interpretation of behaviour, within the public sphere of the zone of interaction, are presented as illustrations, which provides the clearest explanation of what constitutes viewing behaviour.

The Conclusion, *Things and People Make Space Happen*, demonstrates that the observation of specific behaviours within zones of interaction can provide more concrete evidence of behaviours to inspire improvements of those environments. What is learnt from one environment can also be used as evidence and inspiration within other viewing spaces. Whatever information is gathered as a product of this research can be used to improve the viewing experience of audiences of contemporary visual art wherever it is presented to the public. However, the outcomes of this research are dependent on holistic understanding of audience behaviour. Therefore, the audience’s reaction must be linked back to the subliminal and liminal effects of participating in the art museum arena. This thesis demonstrates how specific actions are associated with the museum environment, such as the reverential demeanour assumed by viewers as they enter the traditional gallery space, and the predictable progression of way finding by the majority of viewers as they advance through the galleries. In these instances the outcomes must also be linked directly to the influence of the physical environment, and to an understanding of what constitutes an aesthetic experience. The ways in which viewers acknowledge each other, members of the institutions staff and particular elements of the environment, can be both predictable and surprising and these form a body of relevant information that could assist in audience development and ultimately be instrumental in benefiting the audience themselves.

The culture of a space, which refers to the collective attitude of the staff of any given venue, is shown to also be a significant factor within the audience interface and is discussed in detail in the conclusion. The spaces of viewing examined in this study are public spaces, and thus subject to what constitutes

---

an accepted degree of public order. The dominant behaviours articulated in the actions of all who participate in the zone of interaction are taken into account and are presented as evidence to support the development of audience interaction.

As this thesis demonstrates, the observer of audience behaviour must be aware at all times of relations in public, relations within social streams and relations between individuals. Examples of these relationships are documented and presented as anecdotal evidence and illustration of what the author is describing. The body of knowledge constructed by this method becomes the valuable commodity when presenting conclusive evidence and suggested remedies for the discord between contemporary art and the viewing public, where discord exists.

Locating Research Results

A perceptual understanding of viewing behaviour is achieved with the use of this innovative research methodology and is presented in this thesis. However, where does that body of knowledge fit within the broader context of an expanded critical study of visual arts? Included in the introduction must be an explanation or locating of this research within art critical commentary. The reaction of the audience to art has taken a minor role in comparison to the art itself throughout art history and it seems timely to be bringing this relevant component of visual art history and criticism to the forefront.\(^47\) Within her account of affective response to art, Susan Best, art history scholar, argues ‘the viewer is not exactly rendered impassive by this concentration on the production of the art, but certainly the viewer’s affective reaction is not currently central to our understanding of the meaning of art, or to the experience of looking’.\(^48\) The question of why there is a need for focused attention on visual art viewing practices is a legitimate one. In response, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, a leading authority on the subject of museums and their audiences,\(^49\) suggests:

One of the greatest challenges for museums in the twenty first century is the turn to the visitor. A response to the call to become more visitor-focused will require considerable changes in the professional practices of museums. It will entail expanded visitor or audience research and this, in turn, will require the development of new professional skills, a re-prioritization of recourses, and a re-conceptualization of museum policies and plans.\(^50\)


\(^{49}\) Eileen Hooper-Greenhill is Emeritus Professor of Museum Studies and formerly Director of the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester. Her research interests focus on the relationships between museums and their audiences. She has written and edited many books on the subject (see bibliography). Extract from ‘Notes on Contributors’ in Sharon Macdonald, (ed), A Companion to Museum Studies, Blackwell, Maldon, 2006, p.xii.

Hooper-Greenhill goes on to explain the path visitor studies has followed in the previous century, stating, ‘in most museums in most parts of the world, including the UK, museum visitor studies remains a largely unexplored territory’. The work of French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, published in 1969, *Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, remains the fundamental and most influential research of fine art audiences to be produced last century because of its international scope and the ramifications of its findings. Art museum audiences were surveyed and found to be, predominantly, of a higher educational standard and more professionally skilled than the average, and thus of higher social status. Summed up in Bourdieu’s later publication of *Distinction*, in 1979, is his argument concerning the formulation of an elitist culture of inequality founded on the perception of taste. What he found was a distinction between the way in which the upper, middle and lower classes approached the act of viewing art. The upper, or privileged (through family background, education and income) gallery-goer was informed and at ease in the museum, preferring a solitary experience; the middle class gallery-goer was found to prefer to read any additional information provided and was at ease to question and learn from guides; while the least educated, blue-collar workers and rural dwellers felt intimidated by the museum surroundings, did not ask questions of staff or guides in case they showed their ignorance, and preferred to be surrounded by friends and family. These findings suggest that social background defines the type of access gallery-goers expect and attain within the art museum. In light of these findings, Vera Zolberg suggests that ‘perhaps European art museums did not intend to intimidate the less educated, but they made little effort to ease the path for those unaccustomed to the atmosphere they had created’. Is this issue still relevant today? What is borne out in this study suggests that may be the case.

What is in question is how to improve the interface between arts and the public. Would the viewers themselves be aware of what changes could be made to improve their visit? Even if they did, could they formulate an argument and would the arts establishment listen? The viewer requires an advocate who is able to communicate with the museum staff on the same professional level so that issues raised can be supported with theoretical, historical and practical argument to produce the optimum outcome for the viewer and, in turn, the institution.

This study is not the first to examine the relationship of audience interaction. There have been studies that express a similar configuration of influences to those suggested in this introduction which play on visual art audiences, such as the one devised by Falk and Dierking called ‘The Interactive Experience Model’ shown below, as an aid to understanding the complexity of the museum visitor’s experience.

---

51 Hooper-Greenhill, Ibid. p.363.
54 Bourdieu and Darbel, *Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*.
Falk and Dierking recognize the intersection in predominant factors effecting behaviour as viewers negotiate the viewing environment. Hooper-Greenhill expresses a similar notion as fundamental to the understanding of visitor experience, though the outcome is an over-all image created as representative of the museum, and in turn, ‘the image of the museum affects the perceptions and attitudes of the people, and will affect whether or not they decide to visit the museum’.

The study of the zone of interaction, as an alternate process, looks at the experience from the vantage point of the viewers who are engaged in the act of viewing, and their actions understood as responses to the particular environment in which they exist. And further, it takes the divergent facets of the viewing environment into account as initiators of behaviour, and examines responses as a result of what is occurring in the zone of interaction. These direct responses are considered in conjunction with the aesthetic experience in the belief that it is an integral part of viewing experience in general. What results is a personalized insight into the specific environment being studied.

Hooper-Greenhill argues that ‘art museums, or museums with mixed collections, have not been equally interested [as science museums] in the response of their visitors and very few studies can be identified’. She does concede that surveys have been carried out, but they are largely unpublished and conducted by individual museums. There have also been surveys questioning a cross section of the general public to ascertain trends based on a variety of demographics. One such report is

---

59 Falk and Dierking, Ibid.
62 Hooper-Greenhill, Ibid.
Australians and the Arts, commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts. Another commissioned research publication is *The Great Indoors: Developing Audiences for Contemporary Art and Craft in Australia*, which surveyed the management of galleries and, by telephone and face-to-face, interviewed audiences nationwide.\(^{63}\)

The interest in, and need for visitor research within museums is increasing, according to many of the writers on the subject, though it appears audience research is more prevalent in museums other than those specializing in contemporary art and art museums in general. Janet Vitmayer states ‘the quantity of research now being undertaken is overwhelming… the need to know and understand more about our visitors and their experience is real’.\(^{64}\) Vitmayer is referring to museums across the United Kingdom (UK). Here in Australia, there have been papers written on different aspects of audience research such as Megan Axelsen’s research into what motivates visitors to attend special events in art galleries\(^{65}\) and Maree Stenglin has written a thesis constructing ‘a grammar of three dimensional space’ of the museum to better understand the effect spatial dynamics has on the visitor to that environment.\(^{66}\)

There have been studies of visitor movements,\(^{67}\) studies of young people’s relationship to museums and art galleries,\(^{68}\) research into family visitation,\(^{69}\) the relationship of the museum to society,\(^{70}\) and a plethora of related topics. The majority of papers mentioned here have been published in 2006, which emphasizes the significance of the topic of visitor studies within museology and how arts professionals are striving to improve the working relationship they have with there audiences. None have based their research on observation and ethnography to reveal details of specific audience behaviour in response to the environment in which they are located.

Interestingly, a market research company from the UK, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre\(^{71}\), was commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts to present a series of workshops to arts professionals across Australia. There were two workshops presented in Sydney in November of 2005: ‘Audience Builder’ and ‘Walk a Mile in Visitor’s Shoes’. ‘Audience Builder’ was designed to assist those arts establishments who sold tickets to performances and were able to use a database generated

---


\(^{71}\) Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 50 Copperas Street, Manchester, UK M4 1HS, [www.lateralthinkers.com](http://www.lateralthinkers.com). Their mission statement reads: ‘Morris Hargreaves McIntyre is a creative and intelligent arts management consultancy working in the interests of audience and organizational development’.
system to contact their recognized audience base and promote their establishment and productions. ‘Walk a Mile in Visitor’s Shoes’ however, contained relevant information concerning visual arts audiences in particular, with pertinent information to assist gallery staff to gather their own data on audience ‘needs, motivation, expectations and outcomes’. The observation of visitors whilst they were actually engaged in viewing was not emphasized as a major component of their ‘methodology matrix’ and was offered as a minor asset to overall research protocol.

One innovative action Morris Hargreaves McIntyre promoted was providing the audience members with post-it-notes and pen and asking them to write their comments and post them at the actual location that had motivated the comment. The post-it-notes were colour coded (yellow for adults, blue for children for example) and offered an open dialogue for audience members to comment, both positively about anything they thought was helpful or enlightening, or negatively about whatever they thought needed improving, and why. This method allowed the viewer anonymity and the gallery an incite into aspects of their gallery and its contents through the eyes of their audience.

Alternatively, research being conducted by PhD candidate Jane Deeth from the University of Tasmania considers audiences relationship with works of art through the implementation of an interactive model or ‘intervention’ that also requires audiences written response. Deeth looked specifically at the length of the viewers written response. What she discovered was the response was shorter when they knew it would be displayed on the gallery wall, and longer when it was not displayed. The results showed a reluctance to respond publicly. However, the audience member’s interaction with the works of art increased as a result of having to consider a response. Her research did not include a general analysis of her observations of the audience as they interacted and was limited to an exploration of specific ‘interventions’.

The crucial difference in the study being conducted for this thesis to those that have come before is that the audience remains unaware that their responses are being examined so that their behaviours are not altered for the sake of the researcher. To visualize and analyse behaviours inspired by the zone of interaction and its’ complex configuration of influences, a method which reveals details of those behaviours that, until now, have gone unnoticed and/or undocumented, has been developed and is presented here.

Public art museums, as all organizations, are required to be accountable. They are unable to utilize profit margins as a yardstick of performance in the way most commercial enterprises do. Therefore, ‘visitor numbers’ have traditionally provided parameters to gauge the success of visual arts institutions. It appears this accountability system, first established in the corporate sector, has been adopted by public museums as a process of evaluating performance in order to justify expenditure. Carol Scott

---

72 Notes taken during Leading Voices workshop, 21st November, 2005.
73 Workshop given by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, ibid.
74 Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, notes taken during Leading Voices workshop, 21st November, 2005.
argues that they are looking for ‘performance measurement’ through numerical indicators.\textsuperscript{76} These indicators include number of visitors, number of virtual visitors via their website, the number of exhibitions, number of publications produced, number of educational programs offered and number of art objects acquired and held. These quantifiable parameters do have some advantages for management; to identify trends, present data for accountability and to project future needs. Scott suggests, however, that they fall short of assessing the quality of the service provided, which requires qualifiable measures of benefits to the public.\textsuperscript{77} Benefits to the public have been assessed beyond the walls of the museum and have ‘concluded that participation (in the arts) has multiple, long-term benefits for both individuals and communities’.\textsuperscript{78} The Australia Council for the Arts would not cite their aim as a ‘mission to enrich the life of the nation through the arts’ if it did not believe it was able to do so. The value of the arts as a service to society is not what is in question here.

The creators and/or providers of the interactive space of viewing continue to present work with confidence in the belief that it is the work of art which is the primary source of attraction, and therefore, the driving force of audience behaviour. It can be shown that that is not necessarily the case. There is more to the viewing experience, which is born out by this study and presented in this thesis. The interaction between viewers and works of art is extremely complicated and has been studied and theorized from multiple angles. This research provides a new angle, a practical angle, one which gives the providers of visual art explanations of particular behaviours, along with suggestions for improving the viewers relationship within the zone of interaction.

\textsuperscript{77} Scott, ibid, p.45.
\textsuperscript{78} Scott, ‘Measuring Social Value’, p.46.
CHAPTER ONE

A Cross Disciplinary Approach to Visual Art Audience Research

Below, around her, continued the eddying of the crowd, of which the
double current of those entering and those going out made itself felt as
far as the silk department…First came the wonderful power of the piling
up of the goods, all accumulated at one point, sustaining and pushing
each other, never any stand-still, the article of the season always on
hand; and from counter to counter the customer found herself seized,
buying here the material, further on the cotton, elsewhere the mantle,
everything necessary to complete her dress in fact, then falling into
unforeseen purchases, yielding to her longing for the useless and the
pretty. They had awakened new desires in her flesh; they were an
immense temptation, before which she succumbed fatally, yielding at
first to reasonable purchases, then tempted by their coquetry, then
devoured.

Émile Zola

When Émile Zola wrote *The Ladies Paradise* in the late 19th Century he was recounting the shopper’s
reactions to the environment of the newly established department store. He describes how the layout of the
store and the presentation of goods seduced his female character into purchasing items as she surrendered
to her desire. Her desire was motivated by each element of the shopping environment that had been
carefully constructed to elicit her response. Close examination of shopping behaviour in the 19th Century
provided Zola with material for his novel, and consequently, also furnished later generations with a clear
understanding of the department store environment at the time Zola wrote his novel. Paco Underhill also
studies shopping behaviour, not to provide an insightful description, although he has as a consequence, but
to better understand the retail environment and its customers. His research methods are instigated as a
marketing strategy to discover ‘why we buy’ and as a result of those findings Underhill has been able to
improve elements of the retail experience for the users of that environment.  

form by Charpentier in 1883), p.222.
2 Although the writing of a book on the subject of shopping was not Paco Underhill’s primary motivation for studying shopping
behaviour, he has written two books and many articles on the subject. *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, Simon and
Schuster, New York, 1999, claims to be one of the most widely read non-fiction books in the world, having been translated into
several languages and continues to be printed nearly ten years after its first publication.
Underhill’s methodology impressed on the author its propensity to achieve similar outcomes if it were employed for the purpose of audience research within the arts sector. Not financial success through increased sales, but as a way to understand and improve the experience of the users of the visual art arena. The premise, on which Underhill has established his market research consultancy, is his desire to fulfil the particular needs of the users of that environment, and in doing so, to also meet the expectations of the retailers who employ his services. Underhill states that ‘our studies proved that the longer a shopper remains in a store, the more he or she will buy. And the amount of time a shopper spends in a store depends on how comfortable and enjoyable the experience is…ultimately, we’re providing a form of consumer advocacy that benefits our clients as well’. The two essential components of his methodology are, firstly, the model employs observation as its primary research tool to identify specific behaviours in response to a particular environment and, secondly the primary objective in doing so is to fulfil the needs of the users of that space. The author of this thesis, whose objective is also to understand the behaviour of consumers, although consumers of the viewing experience rather than consumers of retail goods, has applied a modified version of Underhill’s methodology to the contemporary visual arts arena. The social space of the art museum is studied with tools previously used predominantly for market research, although Zola also relied on observation to construct his narrative around the fledgling consumer society. What is of importance, however, is the use of observation techniques and how they can be utilized to examine the behaviour of members of the public in relation to specific sites.

First of all, this chapter will present the methodology utilised by Underhill in the retail environment and how it was adapted from a model used by sociologist William Whyte. Then it will be shown how and why the author modified and adapted Underhill’s methodology and how it has been implemented within the arts sector. What has been accomplished is the construction of a specific research methodology moulded to fit the environment where contemporary visual art is presented to the public.

The fundamental nature of this research method is its ability to reveal behaviours that would otherwise go unnoticed. Previously, audience development research has relied on surveys and questionnaires, which can only enquire about already recognised behaviours, and the use of statistics illuminate factors such as frequency and duration of already documented demographics and superficial behaviours. Heather Maitland, arts management consultant, suggests ‘we have a tendency to restrict our research to what we think they [audiences] ought to be motivated by, giving respondents options from a list we have compiled’. A fresh approach to audience research, based on Underhill’s methods, discovers behaviours that were previously not known to exist. Significantly, because they are sighted at the point where they are enacted, there is opportunity to discover what is causing those particular responses.

---

Therefore, this research provides an opportunity to reveal information about human behaviour within the specific social arena where contemporary visual art is displayed, and to witness the actions of audience members that have not previously had the prospect of being examined.

**Observation as the Primary Research Tool**

Paco Underhill was a student and self professed admirer of social scientist William Whyte⁵ who researched ‘The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces’ in New York city in the 1970s, as part of the Street Life Project.⁶ Whyte studied exactly what people did, stating that it was a ‘study of spaces that work, don’t work, and the reasons why’.⁷ To discover the basic elements of a successful urban space he used observation. Whyte suggested that the rule to this form of research is to be unobtrusive using methods that do not reveal the intentions of the researcher. He used photographic stills and super 8 video cameras (cutting edge technology of its day) to cover specific sites where accumulative behaviour was observed, and those recordings used for later analysis when alterations and consistencies in behaviour over time could be studied. A most compelling observation, and one that illustrates the usefulness of this form of research is what Whyte found to be the case within small urban spaces.

What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people. … many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true, and that what people like best were the places they stay away from. People do often talk along such lines; this is why their responses to questionnaires can be so misleading. How many people would say they like to sit in the middle of a crowd? Instead, they speak of getting away from it all, and use terms like “escape,” “oasis,” “retreat.” What people do, however, reveals a different priority.⁸

Whyte discovered that the more a space is frequented the more people use it. Empty spaces are passed by. What makes some spaces more attractive than others is fundamentally; sunshine and seating that affords the best view of passers-by.⁹ Whether provided or improvised, people gather where they can sit. Open spaces also were observed to be less likely to be inhabited, with users clinging to the edges or gravitating toward a tree or pillar within the space. Whyte suggests that this could be a primeval instinct: ‘you have a full view of all comers but your rear is covered’.¹⁰

---

⁵ Underhill, Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping. ¹⁹⁸⁰.
⁷ Whyte, ibid, p.8.
⁹ Whyte, ibid, chapters 1, 2 and 3.
The significance of what Whyte revealed is that by observing what people actually do, the truth and therefore the reason, in turn, becomes apparent. Underhill discovered this to be the case when he began his study of shopping behaviour. The obvious didn’t become apparent until what was actually happening was observed. He states, ‘as a research agency, we have been pioneers in developing research systems (since 1986) to document and analyse shopping behavior. Our proprietary methodology utilizes qualitative observation techniques, mapping programs, attitudinal interviews, and small video cameras to capture consumer behavior patterns. Envirosell's unique combination of in-store research methodologies explores the dynamics and patterns of the actual shopping process, as well as the influences on purchase decisions’.¹¹

Underhill’s methodology is a combination of the recording of specific sites using small video cameras, tracking by trained researchers and informal interviews conducted whilst the subjects are still in the store. They claim by ‘combining traditional market research techniques, anthropological observation methodologies and videotaping, Envirosell has established its reputation as an innovator in commercial research and as an advocate for consumer friendly shopping environments and packaging’.¹²

When Underhill trained his video cameras on specific locations within the retail environment he discovered some interesting behaviours such as one instance in the main aisle of a department store where there happened to be a large rack of men’s ties. The cameras weren’t set to look specifically at that point, but when the footage was later examined a distinctive behaviour was noticed. Most people when they were brushed by passers-by from behind whilst they were looking, especially if they were bending over to examine ties on the bottom of the rack, would immediately abandon the tie rack and move on. Underhill suggested to the management that the tie rack be relocated to a less busy side aisle. Sales of ties rose immediately. He had discovered, what he termed, the ‘butt-brush effect’. Most people, especially women, will not tolerate being touched or brushed from behind. Simply by moving goods that require the shopper to bend down to examine them, to a space where they are unlikely to be

touched by other shoppers passing by, results in a trouble free shopping experience for the public and increased sales for the retailer.\textsuperscript{13} Underhill argues that ‘even the plainest truths can get lost in all the details of planning and stocking a store. The obvious isn’t always apparent’.\textsuperscript{14} An example is when Underhill noted the existence of a transition zone. He observed that an area just inside the entrance to any space, in this instance a shop, is used primarily for the adjustments that each one of us makes when we move from outside to inside. There is most often no specific structural signifier that it exists but it is always there. It is the space where anyone entering, within a few seconds, makes multiple adjustments and decisions. Each person adjusts to the difference in light, sound, and atmosphere, decides on his or her forward path as decisions are made according to which direction is the fastest or most interesting, or to be avoided, or where to proceed in order to find what it is the shopper seeks. While these adjustments and decisions are being made, whatever is in the transition zone goes un-noticed. What was significant for him was that shopping baskets are usually placed in this space and therefore customers walk straight past them. It isn’t until the shopper is at the other end of the aisle, arms filled with things they didn’t want until they saw them, that they realize they need a basket. If there are no baskets at hand, the laden shopper will go straight to the checkout. Underhill noted that when baskets were provided further into the store, shoppers would continue browsing, filling their baskets and, coincidently, end up spending twice as much.\textsuperscript{15} This, of course, is valuable information for the retailer, which Underhill was able to bring to their attention.

The fact that nothing of importance to the retailer happens in this transition zone can also be applied to the art gallery.\textsuperscript{16} Artworks, signage, fliers, notices placed in this zone are unobserved by the viewer as

\textsuperscript{13} Underhill, \textit{Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping}, p.18.
\textsuperscript{14} Underhill, ibid, p.19.
\textsuperscript{15} Underhill, \textit{Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping}, pp 46-57.
\textsuperscript{16} Underhill, \textit{Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping}, p 46.
they orient themselves to the space they are entering. There is detailed discussion of the transition zone and its influence on the art gallery audience in chapter three, but the point being made here is that the methods used to discover these instances of similar behaviour, cited by Underhill in the retail sector and through this research into visual art audiences, are valuable tools in both environments.

A description of Underhill’s research methodologies, and the results they produce in the retail sector, provide a clear illustration of the value of this form of behavioural research. The outcome is the creation of a more successful shopping environment for the benefit of both shopper and retailer.\textsuperscript{17} Armed with the belief that the service Underhill provides his clients is not for their benefit alone, but is heavily skewed towards the customer’s requirements, he satisfies the needs of both shopper and client as a result.\textsuperscript{18} The shopper benefits by experiencing an environment more suited to his or her needs and the retailer benefits through increased sales and greater profits. Of course, the advantage for Underhill is the success of his company, Envirosell, and a greater demand for their services due to their record of success.\textsuperscript{19} As testament to that success, since 1986 the company, with Underhill as CEO, has opened offices in six countries and have worked in twenty-six countries across six continents.\textsuperscript{20}

*Bergent Marketing Intelligence*, located in Melbourne, was found to be the only registered user of Paco Underhill’s market research methods in Australia.\textsuperscript{21} In the course of this research the author spoke to *Bergent’s* Project Director, Haydee Galic, who offered advise on the best way to implement Underhill’s model for the purpose of this research. Her recommendations included adjusting the observation format in accordance with the space under surveillance, and to adopt the form of observation that would be less likely to alert the subjects of the observation to the presence of the researcher, whilst also facilitating the most detailed observation possible. Her advice was heeded and alterations were made to Underhill’s original research model to facilitate a successful transition and implementation into the visual arts sector.

To examine the behaviour of shoppers in response to the retail environment, Underhill bases his research on direct observation. Video surveillance cameras are installed in specific retail establishments to record defined areas within those stores. The video footage provides information pertaining to traffic flow, areas of high and low usage and any repetitive behavioural characteristics. In conjunction with video surveillance he employs ‘trackers’ to follow individual shoppers and note their more specific reactions, such as where they look, what they touch, if they look at the price etc. In some

\textsuperscript{17} Underhill, ibid, p.244.  
\textsuperscript{18} Underhill, ibid.  
\textsuperscript{20} Envirosell is a registered company with Paco Underhill as director and CEO. It is an international enterprise with offices in New York, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Milan, Bangalore and Tokyo. www.envirosell.com. Accessed 11/02/2008.  
studies, Underhill’s staff approached shoppers asking them to answer specific questions about their experience in that store. The three methods of attaining information, once combined, give a clear and informative picture of the shopper’s behaviour within a specific retail environment.

By observing shoppers as they negotiate specific stores or retail environments, detailed information about the nature of their experience is examined and noted. From this information Underhill is able to analyse the exact nature of the behaviour, discovering why it exists and, in some instances, ways the environment might be modified to alter that behaviour for the benefit of the shopper and/or retailer. Underhill argues ‘the fact that a minor alteration can bring a major improvement should come as no surprise, critical truths are discovered that way’. Critical truths are what the ethnomuseologist expects to discover by employing a similar research methodology in the contemporary visual art arena.

**Retail Research / Ethnomuseology**

“Ethnography” literally means writing about the way of life, or culture, of social groups. The social group identified in this thesis is the viewing audience of contemporary art exhibitions. The art exhibitions where research was carried out for this thesis were held in various sites in Australia, Singapore and Germany. Thus the audiences who were viewing contemporary art at those sites became the subjects of this research. Underhill studies and writes about the social group identified as shoppers, and discusses shopping behaviour in locations across North America. Both shopping and viewing art are common activities easily distinguished from each other, which is significant because the two activities have many common traits and the environment of each has been influenced by the other. The dramatic use of lighting to isolate and enhance the perceived value of the object is used in both retail and arts sectors, for example. Advertising is also a field of retail marketing that borrows from the visual language of fine arts to make associations through taste and class distinctions. Isabelle Szmigin has also explored the notion of aestheticization of consumption in a paper that exemplifies two art exhibitions that deal with the process of consumption and how artists themselves have entered into dialogue with their audience through the familiar act of consumption. There are crossovers of

---

behaviour in the two different environments, however, it is the specific act of either shopping or viewing art that identifies each particular social group. There are certain behaviours shared by both social groups, which may deem those behaviours characteristic of human behaviour in general, although the initiating factors and/or the repercussions of those behaviours are specific to each site. There are other instances where the two environments, shop and gallery, produce social behaviours predictably present in both, and these will be discussed in following chapters.

Figure 5 A shopping mall and art gallery interior and public, 2008. Photo J. Sager

However, this chapter differentiates between the methodology and the finer details of what is debated through the course of this study, so that the methods of observing viewing behaviour are clearly presented before further debate is entered into. Underhill’s methodology was devised for market research within the retail sector and has not been used in the visual arts environment prior to this study, according to Bergent Marketing Intelligence, who believes that there is no reason why similar methods could not be employed productively in the art gallery environment when appropriate alterations are made to the methodology.26 Because of the profound dissimilarities in the sites chosen for this research there were indeed a range of different methods of information retrieval employed. These were necessary, not only due to the physical variations in the sites, but also to accommodate the requirements and restrictions presented by the management of those different sites.

One of the fundamental differences in the application of this research model between shop and gallery is the reason for implementing it initially. The reason is related to financial priorities. The retail sector is explicitly aimed at increasing profit margins, while public art galleries are government funded, ‘not for

26 From an interview conducted with Haydee Galic at Bergent Marketing Intelligence offices 111 Queensbridge St. Southbank, Melbourne, Victoria in October, 2003.
profit’ organizations. However, unlike other retail market researchers, Underhill stresses the importance of the customer, as opposed to the retailer, earning him the label of ‘shopper’s advocate’. He believes that the experience of the customer should be as pleasant as possible, firstly for the benefit of the customer, and secondly, when the customer is comfortable he or she stays longer in the shopping environment and the longer they stay the more they buy. The end result is increased profit and a satisfied retailer. In the gallery the emphasis is on the viewing experience and how that can be improved for the benefit of the viewing audience. A more pleasurable viewing experience is able to translate into, not only a longer length of stay in the gallery, but more frequent visitation and the important ‘word of mouth’ advertising when the satisfied viewer expresses their enjoyment of the viewing experience to other gallery goers and significantly, to non gallery goers. The gallery they have visited benefits by increased visitation, reflected in the all important visitor numbers, while the art establishment in general benefits from the development of a larger and more enthusiastic audience. More important than this holistic viewpoint is the experience of each individual audience member and provision of a means to achieve the best experience possible for every one of those viewers.

The desirable outcome of this research project is therefore, to introduce a viewer’s advocate, which was discussed in the introduction. To validate oneself as a viewer’s advocate the researcher must be positioned to better understand the behaviour of people who frequent the zone of interaction. Understanding this behaviour is reliant on observation. Observation, as opposed to other forms of research methods, provides the researcher with evidence of behaviour in direct response to the environment in which the subjects are located. This is vital for this study to be of any significance. Sociologists Patrick McNeill and Steve Chapman agree that ‘the ethnographic technique which has proved to be the most effective is generally thought to be observation’. There are different forms of observation used for sociological research noted by C. Robson as ‘direct or non-participant observation’, ‘participant observation’ and ‘complete or covert observation’. These classifications help determine the different forms of observation used for this study. ‘Covert observation’ is the form used by Underhill with the installation of discrete surveillance video cameras that are trained on particular areas of the shopping environment to analyze movements of shoppers within that space as a direct result of that environment. When Underhill was interviewed by Carrie McLaren concerning ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ forms of information retrieval, he commented that the obtaining of personal data about individuals addresses, banking details, credit information etc. through databases, without the subjects knowledge was more covert and unethical in comparison to his research which never identifies the subjects, maintaining their anonymity at all times. Even when illegal shoplifting activities were recorded by researchers the information that may have lead to identification of any one involved was not made available by Envirosell to the authorities.

---

27 www.envirosell.com
29 C.Robson, cited in McNeill and Chapman, Research Methods, p.92.
30 Carrie McLaren, ‘Shopping Spies: Why is that Man Staring at me?’ www.envirosell.org
installation of video cameras in any of the galleries being studied is controlled by ethical protocols to protect all members of the public. 31

In order to view members of the public in a public site there are stringent ethical guidelines that must be followed. 32 The subjects of this study must be informed that they are under observation for the purpose of research and contact information supplied should they wish to ask questions or pursue the matter further. However, it is also crucial that they do not alter their behaviour whilst the research is in progress. A sign stating that the space is under surveillance for the purpose of research was placed at the entrance to the art museum or gallery site. The sign was displayed in plain view however, it appeared to go unnoticed by most viewers. It was, of course, placed in the transition zone.

Most gallery goers are also used to the presence of surveillance equipment as many galleries have this equipment installed to safeguard the valuable artworks. In today’s post September 11 society, surveillance equipment is often viewed as a safeguard for all and its presence is integrated into societies’ everyday activities. 33 However, this does not negate the responsibility of the researcher to the public. Notification of the presence of research being conducted within the gallery allows the audience to make a decision to enter the gallery, known as informed consent. If they require more information they are able to discuss further with the staff and gain more information about the process. Any enquiry to the staff, who were briefed on the structure of the research, initiated a full explanation and the enquirer was supplied with the researcher’s contact details, or an introduction to the researcher if she was on the premises at the time. This provided opportunity to discuss any queries or problems the viewer might have. In the event a viewer objected to the research being conducted while he or she was in the gallery, the research would be halted while that viewer was in the gallery. 34 The second way to meet ethical principals is to keep all the subjects’ identities private at all times. This is not a difficult task during this research as the researcher does not know the identity of viewers, and therefore there is no identification of subjects during this study. However, prearranged interviews were given with consent to use that person’s name and title when they represented a larger organization. Also, during the course of the research, particular individuals were invited to discuss their experiences with the researcher and on these occasions the individuals were informed and they consented to the use of a first name only. In general, viewers are described by statistical data relating to their gender, age and if they are alone or with others. Behaviours are described which have no relationship to a particular individual who could be recognized by that information. No individual is placed in any position of danger at any time through the actions of the researcher. It could be described as the observation of visual art audiences in their natural habitat of the art gallery and no viewer was identified in the making of this thesis.

31 Approval from the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethic Committee is No HREC 06020.
32 Guidelines set out by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethic Committee were followed for this research and with their approval, No HREC 06020.
33 Surveillance cameras had been installed by the gallery in all the location of this study.
34 During the entire research project carried out over a three year period, there was never an objection or query by an audience member.
Video surveillance was not the only form of observation utilized for this research and was often not the primary method implemented. ‘Direct or non-participant observation’, which is more closely akin to the role of the ‘tracker’ used by Underhill, was found to be an effective method. Direct observation is explained by McNeill and Chapman as ‘the sociologist who takes on the role of a detached onlooker who carries out detailed analysis of social activity’.35 Underhill’s trackers are trained to follow shoppers noting their every movement. ‘The tracker will stick with the unsuspecting individual (or individuals) as long as the shopper is in the store (excluding trips to the changing room or restroom) and will record on the track sheet virtually everything he or she does.’36 These trackers are trained to note facial expressions, where the subject looks, how they approach things, what they touch and their body language. Interestingly, he found the trackers most suited to this task of observing others were artists, actors and writers because ‘their professional skills are often rooted in their ability to observe’.37 The researcher and author of this thesis is a practicing curator and artist, and, notably a viewer of contemporary visual art, which provides a degree of expertise at every level of participation within the visual arts field and positions her as a member of each social group being analyzed.

Both Underhill, and McNeill and Chapman believe that an important factor in ethnographic work is to exist within the social group being studied. To Underhill it is surprising that most retailers do not recognize the requirements of shoppers more often, because they themselves are shoppers at one time or another. As the researcher observes viewing behaviour, much of what is noted can be understood through personal experience, those assumptions supported by the comments and actions of the subjects of the study. This affinity with the role of audience member also places the researcher in the third category of ‘participant observer’.38

‘Participant observation involves the sociologist being on the inside because he or she joins in with the activities of those being studied and shares their experiences of social reality’.39 It appears that the strength of this ethnographic research lies in the observation of behaviour in its natural setting and to ‘make a study of social process, rather than being limited to the snapshot or series of snapshots of the survey researcher’.40 William Whyte, when he was studying the streets of New York in order to understand how their inhabitants used them and how they could then be improved for subsequent users of urban spaces, stated: ‘As I sat and listened, I learnt the answers to questions I would not have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis’.41 This particular insight or theory, that listening to what the participants have to say about their environment when they are in that environment reveals more than would otherwise be expected about that experience, is a significant advantage to the practical application of this research model. The tracking

35 McNeill and Chapman, Research Methods, p. 92.
38 The role of participant observer is similar to the behaviour of the flâneur, which is discussed at length later in this chapter.
39 McNeill and Chapman, Research Methods, p.95.
40 McNeill and Chapman, ibid, p.118.
technique used by Underhill has also been developed for this model into what may be described as the ‘flâneur factor’. The flâneuse is, in practice, the participant observer.

Charles Baudelaire recognized that it is the flâneur’s ‘passion and profession to become one flesh with the crowd’. Walter Benjamin described the life of Parisians engaged in the every day activity of public life in the modern shopping arcades and department stores of the early 19th Century, recognizing the opportunity for the flâneur to wander those spaces unnoticed by other inhabitants. It had become acceptable for the ‘window shopper’ or ‘browser’ to spend time looking at merchandise produced in this new industrial age, at a time when the consumer had become an integral member of the fast developing consumer society. The direct translation of flâneur is idler/stroller. He was able to stroll about, not consuming products as others around him were, but observing those who did. It is in the roll of flâneuse that the researcher is able to stroll and idle in the galleries, becoming one of the audience as they view what is on display. The flâneuse is not out of place or different in any way to the viewers being observed, able to enter information into a notebook as would any of the other art students who frequent the same gallery. The flâneuse easily becomes one of the viewing audience while discreetly noting intimate behavioural activities of those close by. It is advantageous, in fact inevitable, that the flâneuse overhears the conversations and comments of other viewers and is easily included in these dialogues pertaining to the artworks and general comments about that shared experience.

Émile Zola shared the space of the department store with its inhabitants as a means of understanding the personal, emotional texture of The Ladies’ Paradise, an excerpt from which begins this chapter. The Ladies’ Paradise is a novel he wrote at the end of the 19th Century, which today is regarded as a reliable account of retail society in Paris at that time. Zola studied his subjects as they were living the evolution of modernism and the new consumer culture of the 1890s.

Émile Zola researched the lives and habits of the inhabitants and habitués of the department stores, writing on the psychology and sociology of department store employees. Zola spent four to five hours a day for a month at the Bon Marché and the Louvre before he began his novel, compiling over 380 pages of notes on the demoiselles of the stores and their environs.

---

42 The French word ‘flâneuse’ is the feminine of flâneur and is used in this form throughout this paper in reference to the female form of the original flâneur described by Walter Benjamin in The Arcades Project of 1939. Whilst I believe the use of ‘flâneur’ would retain the original tone of the term because at the time of its conception there were only male flâneurs, the term flâneuse, being a modern derivation of the term, will be used in this thesis.


44 Note that Baudelaire’s flâneur was masculine because, at that time, it was not acceptable for women to be seen wandering the streets unaccompanied. Today the art museum has a majority of female viewers where a female flâneur is more suited to be one with the viewing audience.


The knowledge he gained from his observations provided his readers with an accurate description of that retail experience. The contemporary flâneuse will provide an accurate description of the society of the visual art audience at the beginning of the 21st century. Flânerie is perfectly suited to the slow pace of the art gallery where viewers are seen to be strolling and looking. Within the zone of interaction the researcher is presented with the opportunity to be 'the secret spectator of the spectacle of the spaces and places of the city'.

It is one thing to gather information, but the retelling is critical to the interpretation. With all forms of research, the presentation of research that deals with the human condition, in any field, is usually carried out in a way that reflects what the researcher wishes to discover at the outset. If statistical information is required then the accumulation of numbers of things or events is the focus. When the behavioural pattern of subjects is the objective, then observation is the key. The audience is observed and what is seen is transformed into the words of the observer. David Frisby argues that 'in order to be able to see things in their hardly still remembered significance, the flâneur had to wrest the details from out of their original context. To read them means to produce new constructions, means to derive more meaning from them than they possessed in their own present. "That which is written is like a city, to which the words are a thousand gateways"'. The ethnomuseologist provides the words that open those gateways into the experience of viewing.

The ethnomuseologist translates observations into knowledge. That knowledge is then shared and debated by arts professionals. A description of a location and the action of viewing within that location is transformed into an accessible format. The researcher as interpreter of those details provides a clear image of what had been previously invisible to arts professionals who have been looking, but not 'seeing'. The words become the key to unlock the door into the world of the viewer. For example, whilst tracking viewers at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, it was observed that viewers were hesitant to enter side rooms to view video art. This may have been attributed to reluctance to enter a darkened room as a general characteristic of public behaviour within the gallery. However, what was revealed by spending time in those rooms as a participant observer was the uncertainty of viewers when they realized that they would be interrupting other viewers if they entered that room when they realized they would have to walk between audience and video projection. If they did decide to enter they were committed to stay a reasonable length of time so as not to, again, disturb other viewers on their way out. These assumptions were substantiated when observation at Documenta 12 in Germany revealed that video art audiences entered and stayed longer as a result of the space configuration. At Documenta, video art was not located in darkened side rooms, but occupied space defined by open-

49 Observations during fieldwork at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
ended walls where viewers could easily enter and exit from all four corners. If videos were installed in a room, there was at least two entry/exit points to allow through traffic. The result of these considerations was; many individuals tend to relinquish control of their own needs to accommodate others, so it is important to allow viewers easy entry and exit in such a way as to not disturb other viewers. Another factor, discussed at length in chapter six, pertains to body language and the prospect of commitment. Basically, viewers are inclined not to commit to entering a room where they may be seen to be ‘with’ those viewers already present. It appeared that this phenomenon was dissipated when viewers were seen to be ‘just passing through’. This analysis of the ethnographic study is built on observations interpreted within sociological theories. What is important to this form of research is the way in which the ethnographer/flâneuse ‘lives’ in the same space as the subjects of the research to firstly recognize, then understand why those behaviours occur.

Another ethnographic research model, which this study has been influenced by, and interestingly, has also been taken from the shopping experience, is Daniel Miller’s *A Theory of Shopping* which studies the experience of shopping in North London. Miller needed more than observation and statistical information to obtain an understanding of the underlying forces that motivate, what appears to be, the simple and mundane act of shopping. It is the way in which he managed his research that came to reveal more about the act of shopping than what would have been discovered through observation alone.

Miller conducted his research using a specific road in North London. This particular road was representative of the wider area because one side of the road was council housing and the other private housing, consisting of a range of house types from small ‘maisonettes’ to large family homes, thus encompassing a wide range of personal and income related subjects. His research was carried out over a one-year period. He involved 76 households, to a greater or lesser degree, ranging from interviews to involvement in the home and, importantly, their shopping experience.

It is the degree of involvement with some of these families that is revealed in his research and which validates his theories. By accompanying his subjects while they were shopping and observing their family dynamics in their own homes, Miller was able to discern what these people felt about the act of shopping in relation to their lives and families. He discovered what it actually meant to them over and above the obvious act of provisioning. How, for most women, it was an act of love in obtaining what they believed to be ‘healthy’ for their family members and ‘beneficial’ to the family unit when these items were obtained at the best price. ‘Love has come to be primarily objectified through everyday practice of concern, care and a particular sensitivity to others, within which shopping plays a central role’.

\[51\] A maisonette is part of a house or block of flats forming separate living accommodation usually on two floors and each having a separate entrance.
\[52\] The majority of shopping expeditions Miller was involved with were to supermarkets for grocery provisions.
Scattered throughout his theoretical writings are conversations he had with his subjects, illustrating his points and turning this into a living document and record of a particular social groups shopping behaviour. Miller’s research is an example of how more intimate forms of research methods are sometimes able to reveal a clearer picture of what actually motivates the human behaviour we observe. Learning from the success of Miller’s work, the focus of this research has also been to discover what motivates the social group identified as viewers and the essence of the viewing experience that is acted out in the exhibitions being studied.

The opportunity to discuss the act of viewing with audience members as a participant observer, and to also discuss the viewing process with staff and artists, reveals insights into the act of viewing and the expectations of both audience and arts workers. The author accompanied audience members as they inhabited the viewing environment, talking about their experience as they observed and interacted within the space of the exhibition. This clarified particular viewpoints as a response to particular exhibitions. For example, a fellow Australian audience member at the Singapore Biennale 2006 was more focused on, and was left with lasting impressions of, the locations where works were installed rather than the works themselves. Alternately, a Singaporean artist found the more difficult and multi-element installation works worthy of many return visits and were the subject of later discussions about the exhibition. These responses do not emerge as being unusual, considering the personal contexts from which each viewer originates, and stand to exemplify the individuality of the art viewing experience. This is precisely why researchers into the audience experience have relied, in the past, on quantitative methodologies to express manifestations of audience behaviour. What has been presented in this thesis is the marriage of both quantifiable and qualifiable viewing behaviours that result in a clearer picture of what is actually occurring.

As stated earlier, Underhill incorporates trackers and questionnaires along with surveillance footage for his research. Underhill’s trackers are trained to follow their subjects through the store watching their every movement. This type of tracking in the gallery environment would however quickly alert the viewer to unwanted attention. Other ways of tracking visitor circulation have been used. Hans-Joachim Klein writes in his paper, Tracking Visitor Circulation in Museum Settings; ‘observation of (visitor) locomotion or circulation patterns constitutes a major element in any behaviour setting analysis of design.’ The emphasis of previous tracking studies has been primarily to establish exhibition and/or layout design problems, rather than for the purpose of better understanding viewer behaviour. However, quantifying analysis or statistics form a basis for that enquiry. A particular behaviour needs to be identified if it is to be analyzed. Klein notes that Melton, in 1935, tracked the movement of visitors through the Flemish-Dutch Gallery of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art.

---

54 Hans-Joachim Klein, ‘Tracking Visitor Circulation in Museum Settings’, Environment and Behaviour, Vol. 25 No. 6, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 782. The diagram is from page 788 of this publication. More recently a paper by A. Turner, Ecomorphic Dialogues, examines the relationship of interaction between viewer and artwork within a computer generated art gallery where the walls alter in configuration in response to the viewers response to the environment of the gallery, thus providing an evolving model which changes to accommodate the needs of the audience as a digitally generated program. Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, London, 2002.

34
Figure 6. Melton’s floor plan and visitor routes in the Flemish-Dutch Gallery of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art (from Hans-Joachim Klein, ‘Tracking Visitor Circulation in Museum Settings’)

As a piece of quantitative research, this diagram not only shows the greater percentage of viewers turn right on entering, but also what he describes as “museum fatigue” where there is a ‘decreasing attraction potential of numbers of similar objects’. This is noted when visitors spend decreasingly less time at each item (marked as stops and stays) down the length of the right wall and also, the “exit attraction” which Melton describes as ‘the means to the end of exploration, satisfaction of curiosity or a desire to see that which cannot be seen’. What is quantified as ‘stops and stays’ by Melton, alternatively, can be qualified by Stephen Greenblatt as ‘resonance and wonder’ when the viewer is attracted to, and enthralled by, specific qualities in the artwork. This research attempts to discover all forms of personal motivations whilst viewers are actually involved in the aesthetic experience, which in turn provides a multi-layered description to better understand that experience. Unlike Melton’s form of tracking, where he actually installed an elaborate network of electrical sensors under the flooring of the gallery, the addition of the flâneuse allows the observation of nuances of behaviour otherwise unobserved, such as where the viewer is actually looking, the qualities of what it is that attract their gaze and the influence of the other viewers on their progress. Quantified anomalies of behaviour are explained when the influence of their immediate environment is then able to be qualified.

A paper written by Falk, Koran, Dierking, and Dreblow, *Predicting Visitor Behaviour*, postulated that particular elements of the museum experience attract a greater degree of attention from their audiences, such as the exhibition itself, the setting of the museum, and other visitors. To determine this information, trackers asked visitors to the museum for permission to be observed for the entirety of their stay there. The subjects were therefore aware that they were being followed and Falk agrees that ‘it is possible, however, that observation had an effect, but in what direction would be hard to predict’. By tracking 60 visitors to the Florida State Museum of Natural History and noting, every 3 minutes, what held their attention, the researchers discerned what they thought to be the dominant visitor behaviours. What was noted was that the majority of visitors stayed in the museum for 30 to 45 minutes paying a constant and high level of attention to the exhibits. After that length of time attention to the ‘setting’ decreased as the visitors ‘changed from moving slowly from exhibit to exhibit and reading labels to “cruising” through the halls, stopping occasionally and only very selectively’. This behaviour also corresponds to Melton’s “museum fatigue” and has allowed Falk to discern that it was not the type or quality of the exhibit that attracted the attention of the viewers in that particular natural history museum, but the ‘stamina’ of the viewers themselves. The conclusion was that ‘they looked at exhibits until they got tired and/or bored; for most visitors these reactions occurred at about the same time’ and ‘despite their heterogeneity, [museum visitors] may behave in reasonably predictable patterns’.

The author has used tracking to investigate the movements of individuals and groups through gallery spaces to differentiate between common movements and those peculiar paths that allude to an occurrence worth closer scrutiny. Each path may lead to the discovery of unexplained behaviours within the zone of interaction. The use of a simple method of plotting movements on a transparent overlay of the gallery layout, and later establishing an accumulative overlay to visualize the most common paths taken, was implemented. Each path was recorded with the addition of coded statistical data about the individual, a couple or group, or an organized group. The use of the word ‘with’ is a term coined by Irving Goffman to signify more than one individual moving or acting together – they are ‘with’ each other, such as a couple, family or group of friends. This is distinct from an organized group, which is identified as having many members who may or may not know each other, and is lead by an authoritative figure such as a schoolteacher or guide. The organized group may be made up of pupils or a collection of audience members on a guided tour provided by the gallery. The members of that tour may have begun as individuals or ‘withs’, but are a group whilst in that configuration.

By tracking an organized group of viewers, what came to light was individuals who join one of these groups spend more time at each artwork than if they were on their own. However, not all members of guided groups remain attentive, and are likely to leave the group along the way or their attention focus alters to the setting rather than the artworks. This behaviour could have much to do with ‘museum

fatigue’ – the more intense the engagement with the exhibit, the faster the viewer tires of the experience. Another behaviour inspired by the presence of school groups in particular, is the propensity for other viewers to move on quickly to avoid occupying the same gallery space. This behaviour is most likely due to the noise and activity a school group creates, although a group of mature, quiet and orderly students generated the same response from other viewers, which may allude to the nature of crowding as a deterrent for proximity. In this way, and with other observations, the realization that a trend is present can initiate closer study to see if an intervention or redirection of resources may be appropriate to assist all viewers with their visit.

Tracking and participant observation techniques have uncovered distinct viewing behaviours, while the use of video surveillance footage facilitated recognition of different behaviours, behaviours that may have gone unnoticed had tracking and participant observation methods been used alone. The effect using cameras has on both those taking photos, and the other viewers is one of these. This phenomenon is described in detail in chapter five of this thesis, but briefly, viewers duck and weave to avoid the camera’s lens, which interrupts their viewing experience and brings into doubt the photographer’s quality of viewing experience as well as other viewers. A combination of video surveillance, tracking, and/or participant observation provided access to the viewing process and the influences that direct and support the actions of contemporary art audiences. It is also important to stress that the different nature of the spaces being observed required different strategies of observation and recording of data. In determining the appropriate methodology for the observation of each of the exhibitions used for this research, the configuration of the space, the numbers of visitors in that space and the limitations set by the management of those spaces were all taken into consideration.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (MCA) is a multiple level building with moderate to sparse numbers of viewers present at any one time. The 2006 Biennale of Sydney was the major exhibition whilst this study was being conducted. The exhibition was installed on four levels of the building, the configuration of the floor plan shown in the figure below.

---

63 Detailed information on the building, its layout and location is presented in chapter three.
64 Descriptions of visitor numbers are comparative between the four different sites used for this research.
To conduct research at the MCA a colour coding system was utilized by the researcher to record tracking movements of viewers. This permitted easier, faster identification of statistical groupings and when unexplained movements appeared in tracking records. Participant observation was implemented to determine the specific causes of any irregularities. As an example, a lack of traffic entering one of the ground floor galleries (shown on the image below as the room at the bottom right hand corner marked by the arrow) provoked concentrated observation of viewers entering, or not entering that room, to ascertain what was causing that particular action.
The focused study of that peculiarity led to the discovery of the ‘make up my mind place’ (MUMMP), which slowed or blocked traffic, and was noted to occur at the entrance to many of the galleries where video work was exhibited. This anomaly is discussed in detail in chapter five of this thesis. What is of importance is the eventual uncovering of details of behaviour and what has caused them, simply by being aware that they exist, and then investigating why they exist by directing further observation to that particular action as it occurs.

Fieldwork

All fieldwork at the MCA was conducted without the added assistance of video surveillance as the management of the museum was not willing to allow a non-staff member to either record, or access existing surveillance footage on their premises. The Chief Operating Officer at the MCA believed doing so would ‘compromise building security’. However, direct visitor observation was deemed to be of no threat to their security and I was accommodated with open access and the support of the Visitor Services Coordinator and his staff. This presented an opportunity to increase the depth of the investigation at that gallery in one respect by inviting staff members to be complicit in the observation of their viewing audience. A meeting was held with a group of Visitor Services Officers (VSO) at the beginning of the Biennale of Sydney exhibition to discuss the research to be undertaken at that gallery. The VSOs were willing to help by revealing their own observations and tendering their opinion about particular audience behaviours. This allowed a validating mechanism when particular behaviours were interpreted in different ways giving the researcher an opportunity to crosscheck information and verify interpretations that allowed for a consensus of opinion to be established. Their observation over a prolonged time, up to five years, has given them clear opinions on different general behaviours during different viewing times. For example, the observation that the viewing public on a public holiday was not representative of the viewing public in general was unanimous and it was agreed that the public appeared to be more boisterous and less intent on looking at the art on those days. It was also established that Australia Day was the time when most ‘out of place’ visitors attended. One VSO confided that she thought many of them stumbled in by accident and were not sure where they were.

The smaller space and fewer viewers present at any one time in the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery made the recording of particular behaviours easier, while the actual observation as flâneuse, at times,

---

65 A more detailed description and analysis of the MUMMP appears in chapter six.
66 Email correspondence dated 12th April and 10th May from Nathan James, VSO Coordinator.
more difficult. When there are only one or two viewers in the gallery, constant observation by the researcher becomes too obvious. The friendly and personal nature of this gallery did, however, provide opportunity for more informal discussion with staff and audience members. The research methods implemented at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery were participant observation supplemented with a limited amount of video footage and photographic recording.

The management of Singapore Biennale 2006, consisting of staff from the National Arts Council of Singapore, was pleased to accommodate any form of research implemented during the exhibition. Video surveillance was installed in two rooms at the major venue, City Hall, allowing footage to be recorded intermittently over a two-week period. Participant observation and tracking, carried out during an initial three-week period in September of 2006 and a further three week period in October, were utilized specifically at both City Hall and Tanglin Camp, and as less significant research timeframes at other exhibition sites during the biennale. Informal interviews with viewers, artists and staff members supplemented the body of research in Singapore.

The researcher worked within a limited time frame to complete the observations required for Document 12 held in Kassel, Germany. Over a period of four days, tracking and participant observation was carried out in the major venues of the exhibition and many observations within particular sites and environments were documented using photographic records. Supplementary information was gathered through formal and informal interviews with staff of Documenta 12 and residents of Kassel. Secondary information from journalist and academic writings provided further opinions on the exhibition that added valuable and alternate points of view.

What is important in the way the research data is gathered are the details of behaviour recognized as direct responses to the environment in which they occur. Details of behaviour that even the viewers who perpetrate them would not acknowledge and may not even realize are occurring. These small but significant actions perpetrated by a viewer tell the researcher more about the behaviour of the viewer than if he or she were asked to either complete a questionnaire, or answer a series of interview questions. When questioning research subjects directly, the information they give is sometimes modified for the questioners benefit – they tell the person asking the questions what they think that person wants to hear, not necessarily what they actually think. McNeill and Chapman discuss the different forms that research can take, noting:

If we designed a questionnaire to ask people what they did in their spare time, how would we know whether the answers we received gave us a true picture of how they spent that time; or a picture of what they will say to a researcher when they are asked the question? This is not just a

67 Reference to interview with Ulrich Schötiker, Head of Education, Documenta 12, 13th August 2007. Appendix B.
It is this degree of uncertainty in written response questionnaires and interviews that has led to their exclusion from this research format. By observing the subjects whilst engaged in a specific activity or at a predetermined location, a more accurate picture of behaviour is established. Because many of these behavioural traits are subconscious reactions and would not be noted through the research methods of social surveys or structured interviews, they have remained invisible and uncontested until now. A viewer standing transfixed with their mouth open as they enter a gallery room, or another fidgeting and looking elsewhere instead of at a video work are not likely to communicate these reactions an hour later when they are asked to respond to a questionnaire before they leave the gallery. However, intimate details such as these provide a wealth of information about the viewer’s experience and reveal the connection between that behaviour and the immediate environment in which it occurs.

The questionnaire component of Underhill’s methodology has therefore been excluded from this study. The most effective methods he employed in the retail environment have however been utilized because of their obvious advantages in ethnographic research. Underhill expressed his belief in the value of these research practices and notes: ‘it is crucial to our work that shoppers don’t realize they are being observed. There’s no other way to be sure we’re seeing natural behaviour’. This is why he uses hidden video cameras to record footage of shopping behaviour. Following this methodology, video recordings were obtained in the Singapore Biennale, and for a short period at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery plus some hand held footage at Documenta 12.

Recording of data for the multi-location study is therefore comprised of video recordings, sound recording, still images, informal and formal interviews, and the accumulation of detailed field notes in each location. The translation of these observations into written research material has been possible using the interpretation of behaviours by sociologists and ethnographers, and a range of theorists who have expressed notions on the subject of public behaviour in general, and within the museum canon in particular. These theorists and scholars are referred to throughout this thesis. It must be remembered that the impetus for an individual’s behaviour in public is rarely isolated to a single influence. Not only is the viewer of art conscious of their location and the artwork before them, they are alert to, and influenced by; social, group, and companion behavioural norms. A major component of this research has been informed by the theories postulated by Erving Goffman in *Behaviour in Public Places*, aiding

70 Repeated attempts to contact Documenta staff via email prior to the excursion to Germany were not acknowledged. Therefore, with no prior permission, I did not attempt to negotiate the installation of video cameras at that exhibition for the short time available to me.
the author to rationalize visual data collected, and decipher the overlapping and layering of behavioural traits influenced by numerous personal and social experiences. Goffman discusses ‘body idiom’ as a form of communication between individuals and argues one can stop talking, but one is unable to stop communicating through body idiom. ‘Paradoxically, the way in which he (the person under observation) can give the least amount of information about himself is to fit in and act as persons of his kind are expected to act.’

The endeavour of deciphering behaviour attributed to the viewing experience is a complex task. Body idiom is also referred to as body language and is how Desmond Morris claims a proficient observer is able to ‘come to a deeper understanding of human interaction and of the remarkable predictability of much of human behaviour’.

This ‘predictability’ of human behaviour can be a useful guideline and one that, when altered by a subject, provides a wealth of information to the ethnographer. Behaviours that stand out from the rest become objects of investigation. It is the significance of actions that this research relies on. As Edward T. Hall suggests, ‘just because we talk doesn’t mean the rest of what we communicate with our behaviour is not equally important’. Ethnomethodology is a way of making sense of social interaction. ‘Its central focus is on the meanings and understandings that people use to make sense of their everyday lives’. They are not obeying unwritten social guidelines but are all working together to achieve orderliness. The ethnographer who postulated this theory was Garfinkel who believed that ‘people need to make enough sense of any social event to be able to act appropriately, “The ability of members successfully to perform practical activities in collaboration with others is what makes the social world possible”’. This theory can be superimposed in the art gallery environment where the notion that gallery-goers are expected to act in a particular way is a generally believed concept and is discussed extensively in chapter two. For many visitors to a gallery, it is a return visit, and they are aware of the expected behaviour as they enact the same behaviour that is performed by most of the visitors present. It is a way of conforming and behaving in a collaborative way to maintain a cohesive social group. If a visitor enters the gallery for the first time, he or she is able to adjust his or her behaviour in order to maintain the orderliness of the situation. It is of interest to the researcher, however, when a visitor to the gallery does not behave in the same manner as the other viewers. The reactions of those present at the time convey both a shared understanding of what is acceptable within that social situation, and what actions may be instigated to alleviate the discomfort felt by those who find this unusual behaviour awkward. As an example, an audience member at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, approached other viewers in an attempt to discuss the artworks with them, speaking to them at a normal volume, rather than the conspiratorial level of a near whisper reserved for more intimate discussion. This loud, in comparison, and brash approach inspired other viewers to avoid eye contact with him and move away from the general path of this person in an attempt to discourage

---

75 Morris, ibid, p128.
contact and the necessity to speak with a stranger in that environment. The particular actions of all those present and how each individual reacts as a response to, not only each other, but the environment in which these behaviours are located, adds to an understanding of viewing behaviour in general.

Conclusion

A retail research model has been refined and implemented to examine the social behaviour of viewing contemporary visual art in public art museums and other spaces utilized for that purpose. The use of more than one method of data collection, referred to as methodological pluralism, allows the researcher ‘to build up a fuller and more comprehensive picture of social life’. Appropriating and incorporating methods used by a range of other ethnographers, has built a specialized methodology to attain identification and interpretation of social behaviours occurring within the contemporary art gallery. Basing this study on the somehow unlikely methodology of a retail market researcher, Paco Underhill, has given this study a clear view of audience behaviour and established an innovative form of research never before carried out in the visual art environment. Particular reference is also made to the work of Daniel Miller in his exploration of shopping behaviour, and importantly, the work of William Whyte in reference to his study of social urban spaces in the streets of New York City.

Interpretation of qualitative research data gathered in the zone of interaction provides explanation of, and insight into, viewing behaviour. The use of video surveillance and tracking techniques allow recognition of, and the compilation of certain movements, reactions and attitudes of viewers in response to their environment. The environment, or the zone of interaction, is composed of the gallery site, the artworks and the other viewers and staff members present in that space. The flâneuse, identified by the viewing audience as another audience member viewing the same exhibition as themselves, is surreptitiously occupied in the process of qualitative research. The flâneuse may also be considered a participant observer, listening to fellow viewers reactions to their immediate environment and using that information as important research material. Quantified anomalies, or trends in behaviour or movements are noted by the tracker, and once noted, are examined more closely. The motivations for those actions are then explained in association with the environment in which they occur. They are able to be qualified. The methodology for this research has rationalized visual data collected and deciphered the overlapping and layering of behavioural traits influenced by numerous personal and social experiences. The fundamental nature of this research method, and its true significance, is its

76 McNeill and Chapman, Research Methods, p.22.
ability to reveal behaviours that would otherwise go unnoticed. However, there are other levels of experience that are unable to be seen, heard or felt by anyone other than the person experiencing them. One of these influences on viewing behaviour has a profound effect on the majority of audience members involved in the zone of interaction. It is the influence the art museum environment has on those who frequent that environment.

This chapter opened with a passage describing how a particular shopper was influenced by the environment of the department store, an environment constructed in such a way as to elicit specific reactions. The art museum has also been constructed precisely to evoke particular responses in its participants. Chapter two describes how the development of the art museum and the authority it commands over those who frequent it, has specific influence on the behaviours of viewers. It will be argued that this influence is not restricted to the stereo-typical art museum, but occurs in other spaces designated for the display of art, sites that also elicit similar responses in its participants. Chapter two will examine responses that are attributed to the influence of the art museum, behaviours that are fundamental to the study of audience behaviour.
CHAPTER TWO

*The Art Museum: If These Walls Could Talk*

They stopped at the entrance to the gallery. Leaning slightly forward, they both glanced from side to side, straightened and allowed their eyes to wander over what they could see from the door. Without verbal exchange both stepped into the gallery, and turning to their left their gaze lingered on the first image, a colourful John Coburn print. Without a word the tall graying man and well-dressed woman proceeded to read the text panel, which offered limited information about the work. They then moved to the next image, and the next, until they had made their way methodically around to the back wall of the gallery. From time to time they exchanged comments, briefly, and in a whisper, although there was no one else in the gallery whom they may have disturbed had they chosen to speak in a louder voice. They seemed to be acting within self imposed boundaries of behaviour. The controlled, even subdued way they viewed the works, the way they moved in the space, how they communicated with each other appeared to be a well-rehearsed performance.¹

Why did these two visitors, observed by the author, behave in the way described? Their actions are common to many viewers when they interact with visual art within the designated space of an art gallery exhibition. The research methodology, which was explained in the previous chapter, is used to study audiences as they interact with visual art. The author argues that actions of viewers are evidence of a direct response to the viewing environment. To provide insight into responses viewers have to their viewing environment it is necessary to understand the background and development of that environment in which they are immersed. The manner of the art museum’s development and the authority the management of those institutions has over its present form, influences the interface between institution and its public. This chapter describes the development of the constantly evolving art museum, from 1789 when the Louvre was first opened to the public, up to one of the most recent public galleries, Aue-Pavillon constructed for Documenta 12 in 2007. It will be shown how the users of gallery space are influenced both directly and subconsciously by the physical and subliminal qualities of the art museum and the importance individuals attribute to that institution. An understanding of the historical development of the art museum in general helps make sense of the present gallery context and the relationship the audience has with it.

¹ These members of the public were observed, and their encounter described by the author, at the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery on 26th February, 2007.
This chapter traces the historical development of the art museum through the last two centuries highlighting the influences those changes have had on the audiences who frequent that environment, such as the behaviour of the viewers described in the epigram. The architectural form of the museum, the design of its interior, the ‘gatekeepers’ charged with the responsibility of the collections, the advent of reproductions and the evolution of media and visual cultures have all moulded the audience’s attitudes and subsequent behaviours in response to the art museum. Why and how these factors add to an understanding of each individual representative of a contemporary art audience, when he or she is engaged in the experience of viewing, is debated in this chapter and will form a pretext for acknowledging particular viewing behaviours throughout this thesis.

Arguing that the art museum, as an architectural and socially constructed entity, promotes particular behaviours is of fundamental importance within this study. However, this emphasis does not negate the fact that each individual who views art does so as an action influenced by the complex configuration of their personal, cultural and social contexts. Detailed discussions of these additional influences appear in the following chapters. Behaviour in response to the art museum environment, as a physical space and as an institution, explains the general adherence to particular behaviours proven to exist across all environments where art is displayed. This knowledge base therefore relates to audience behaviour within the visual arts sector in general and is applied within contemporary art spaces in particular. The actions of viewers, for example the viewers described in the epigram, are the result of complicated and diverse influences. Their behaviour appears to be conducted within the guidelines of a code of conduct. This chapter explains what has evolved to create this unwritten code of behaviour performed by participants within the zone of interaction.²

A particular behavioural pattern is often witnessed in art museums and galleries and is a pattern explained by outlining a number of theories pertaining to the subject. Carol Duncan described these behaviours as ‘reverential’ and has suggested that they are inspired by particular manifestations of the art museum in Western society.³ Donald Kuspit describes the art museum as ‘The Magical Kingdom’⁴ arguing the art institution has created a unique situation that elevates the status of the art object to where it has become something that requires a special level of attention. Museologist David Fleming believes audiences are influenced even before they enter the art museum as a result of depictions of stereotypical behaviours of gallery going in popular media.⁵ Within this chapter, these, and other theories will be examined within the context of the developing art museum.

These discourses pertaining to audience behaviour are built on the notion that a reverential attitude is adapted by members of the viewing audience as a response to multiple characteristics of the art

---
² ‘Zone of interaction’ has been explained in brief in the introduction and is examined in detail in chapter three.
museum, as suggested by Duncan in *Civilizing Rituals*. Briefly, what will be debated is the suggestion that the architectural form of the art museum influences the audience and that also, once inside, the acquired status of the artefacts selected as visual representation of society’s ideas and ideals, inspires specific behaviours in audiences as they negotiate the space of the art museum. The manifestation of ritual behaviour, as Duncan contends, has developed with the construction of a direct historical link from church and temple, to the palace, and then directly to the civic building, the public museum being included in this category. The architectural form follows this progression maintaining the same symbolic ideology as those institutions that preceded it. Their grand and imposing edifices create a demarcation between everyday life and the, once spiritual, now secular doctrines that control our society.

The way in which religious spaces have been used and how societies, past and present perceive them provides illustration of the influence those institutions have over the people who frequent them. The temple and church were constructed as sites of worship cordoned off from the rest of the community and reserved for ritual ceremonies where believers could find solace in a spiritual world apart from their daily activities. Those buildings were created and used as a link to the unseen divine world accessed through the performance of ritualistic routines carried out within their walls. The church, though open to the public, maintained, and still does, standards of separation between those who administer the faith and the remainder of society, especially worshippers who understand and uphold the doctrines of that faith.

Likewise, Western society constructed secular buildings, such as the castle and palace, as a means to segregate elite rulers from the remainder of common society. The walls of the monumental palace separated the monarch or dictator from the plebeians over whom they ruled, the lavish buildings testament to their power and success. Within the palace, items of great beauty and value were collected, received as ‘gifts’ and as the spoils of war, acquired as evidence of the wealth and power the ruler commanded at that time. These collections were only accessible to the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and not the wider popular classes, ‘they symbolised not so much the power to amass artefacts which might be impressively displayed to others, as the power to reserve valued objects for private and exclusive inspection’. The demarcation between private and public display was to remain a significant factor in the development of the art museum.

The Louvre was opened to the public in 1789 as the first art museum accessible to all classes of society. The lavish displays of artefacts intended, ‘to dazzle and overwhelm both foreign visitors and

---

6 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*.
7 Carol Duncan, ibid.
8 An example of this religious conduct appears in Catholicism - the Pope and his advisors reside in the Vatican, isolated from the worshippers whilst their decisions influence the conduct of their devoted followers, as I understand it to be.
local dignitaries’, and ‘often displayed in impressive halls or galleries built especially for them’ were made accessible to the general public.\textsuperscript{11} Practices established in the exclusive sanctum of the royal palace, where access was granted only to those subjects fit to be in the presence of their monarch, were transferred to the Louvre. The first art museum was therefore, in essence, an action of permitting the public to enter a space that had previously allowed only members of the ruling class to enter. An action that appeared to denote equality was actually an act of demarcation, and permission to cross that boundary was conditional on standards of behaviour. It was not only the extravagant mode of display that laid the foundations for the imposing modern art museum, but the notion of being granted access in order to pay homage to the valuable contents. The emphasis appeared to have been on the artefacts displayed there, whilst in reality, it was the setting of a stage, a stage from which the objects drew their value, and one which stood as a constant reminder to the audience of their own status within that space.

Many similarities between temple or church, and museum can be drawn. Deities and effigies of the spirits and gods they worshiped were given elevated positions within the temples and churches to signify their status. They were placed on plinths, in lit alcoves, and beyond elaborate and ornate cordons. Demarcations such as these are also used in the art museum to infer elevated value of specific objects. For example, the plinth is used to raise and isolate particular art objects so that they are viewed in isolation with individual lighting, their importance accentuated by their elevated position. ‘To put on a pedestal’ signifies a glorification of that person or object.\textsuperscript{12} Certain paintings are cordoned off to protect them from human touch, from the too close encounter of passing audiences. Heavy rope or cord is used to mark a restricted area in a church, informing worshippers that only the prominent officials of the church are permitted access to revered objects within. In the contemporary museum the rope has been replaced with an electronic cordon that sounds a shrill alarm when the excessively inquisitive viewer moves too close, interrupting the beam of light separating object of value from audience member.\textsuperscript{13} As the value of particular art objects increases new ways of protecting them from theft or destruction evolve. The higher the value the art object is deemed to have, the more restricted the access to it, such as the \textit{Mona Lisa}, set behind glass, guarded, and viewers contained at a distance behind sturdy cordons.\textsuperscript{14}

The notion of a demarcation line between the audience and work of art is not restricted to material barriers. Cultural barriers have been used to delineate between who is worthy of entering the art museum and who is not. Current attitudes resemble practices implemented in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. To be


\textsuperscript{13} This form of security was installed at the National Gallery of Australia, specifically in front of \textit{Blue Poles}, and at the entrance to Anthony Gormley’s \textit{Asian Fields} during the Sydney Biennale 2006.

\textsuperscript{14} Security measures observed by author, The Louvre, August 2007. This is in part caused by its theft in 1911.
recognised as possessing 'good taste', gentlemen of that time were expected to 'have learned key critical terms and concepts (without the help of labels),.....such knowledge was taken as a sign of aristocratic breeding'.

Public admission to the art museum was offered at that time, however, a standard of knowledge and behaviour regulated access to educated patrons and in this way a barrier remained. A similar form of demarcation remains to this day.

According to a study conducted by Jennifer Blunden at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the choice of language used in text panels in art galleries remains a hindrance to audience engagement, 'for non-arty people, the language of art is not just a bit heavy going: it can be utterly impenetrable'.

David Fleming also argues 'museums have restricted themselves to serving the interests of an educated and prosperous minority, which has jealously guarded its privileged access'. These arguments do not suggest that an exact formula has been adhered to by all art museums from the opening of the Louvre to the present day. However, the way in which the Louvre evolved from palace to art museum, and the form that subsequent museums have taken, illustrate how the creation of what we now know as the 'public' art museum evolved.

What is important within the discussion of audience behaviour is the way in which both the physical presentation, and notions of various degrees of access by social classes continue to influence audiences as they engage with the space of the art museum. Tony Bennett argues that the museum maintained a visible representation of 'exclusiveness' perpetrated by the bourgeois governing bodies who controlled those public institutions. He suggests that 'the conception of the museum as an institution in which the working classes – provided they dressed nicely and curbed any tendency toward unseemly conduct – might be exposed to the improving influence of the middle classes was crucial to its construction as a new kind of social space'.

The working classes could then be identified because they did not look or act the same way as other visitors who understood the ritual of art gallery conduct. This delineation is one aspect of gallery going that prevents the art museum (and especially the contemporary art museum) from attracting a wider audience today. Elitist attitudes within the arts remain a potent issue. In fact, sixty six percent of Australians (from a survey of 1200 participants), when asked what would make them feel more positive about the arts, cited "less elitist attitudes".

Poignant examples are comments made by young adults when they attended the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. When they were asked if they would return, their replies alluded to the notion of exclusion - 'No, I doubt I will visit another exhibition. Artwork I believe is for only certain people.' or 'Yes, I enjoyed the experience and would like to be part of it.' or 'Probably no, because my interest in Art (student's emphasis) is not extensive, especially not in modern Art.' and 'Yes I would. I

---

20 The Archibald Prize is a prestigious annual award for portraiture held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.
loved the atmosphere and I think it’s great to keep up with culture and see what’s going on in the “art world” (students accentuation). Each comment acknowledged a reference to either being included or excluded from an environment clearly defined by some invisible contextualising barrier. They all refer to themselves as being, or not being, part of whatever is happening within the gallery. Some are attracted to, and want to be part of that ‘world’, while others perceive that the door is metaphorically closed to them and they don’t wish to change themselves in order to be acceptable. The barrier that these students allude to is manifest, not so much physically but semiotically, and is inferred on many levels within the configuration of the public art museum.

Architectural Framework

In order to investigate the role architectural signifiers play in the representation of social values, this research was conducted in a variety of contemporary art exhibitions presented in a wide range of venues, from historically significant buildings to temporary structures, across three nations - Australia, Europe and Asia. The common concept underlying each exhibition was the use of the universal form of monumental structure to, in some way, legitimise the significance of the exhibition. The public art museum has embraced the presentation of form that evolved from the temple, an example of which is the Art Gallery of New South Wales built in 1904-09 designed by Walter Liberty Vernon using ‘the penultimate example of the long established use of the neo-Greek temple as a portico for a major public institution’. The civic building, or public institution, has been modelled on the palace, which had in turn mimicked its grand appearance from earlier temples. Each of these buildings (temples, churches, palaces) is set apart from other buildings by the use of form in which a semiotic message of superiority is embedded. Museum Fredericianum in Kassel and City Hall in Singapore are examples of this neo-classical architecture implemented as agents of official taste.

Civic buildings, as the seat of government and thus of power, maintain the monumentality of structure, more elaborate and imposing than other buildings. Thus, superiority has been affirmed through physical presence, as evidenced in The Houses of Parliament in London or Government House in Canberra, both more imposing than the buildings surrounding them and easily recognised as central sites of public significance. With this visual representation of prominence comes the belief that these buildings stand

21 During a field trip for the unit of study, Media and Visual Cultures, at the University of Western Sydney, students in their first year of study commented on their experience of visiting the Archibald Prize Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, March, 2005.
22 Refer to figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 in this chapter as visual evidence.
24 Carol Duncan has described this proliferation of neo-classical design utilized by prominent art museums throughout Western society and compares the architectural style of the Art Gallery of New South Wales to them. Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, p.9.
25 Chapter three will expand on site-specific debates of architectural representation.
for truth and justice, which, Duncan suggests, ‘helps bind a community into a civic body by providing it a universal base of knowledge and validating its highest values’. Because the public art museum has been modelled on grand civic buildings it acquires the same inference that it is keeper of the truth and representative of standards most valued by that community or nation. This draws a direct connection with the art it contains, maintaining the ideology of ‘high art’ being contained within the defined precinct of the art museum. The civic building becomes the metaphorical plinth on which the valued artefact is displayed. From its vantage point, the art itself is then empowered as the object of civic pride.

Conceived as more than a place in which exhibits could be housed and the public could be educated. It was part of a greater scheme of civic improvement and thus expanded the role of the museum structure in society. The museum, therefore, becomes more than a vehicle for the exhibition, study, and preservation of precious objects; it represents the highest goals and aspirations of a society and, even more importantly, becomes a bold statement of civic and national pride.

An example of imposing public architecture is the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, the state’s capital and largest city in Australia. Although not designed in the neo-classical fashion described previously, it is a notable example of art deco and the last of that style to be built in Australia, an impressive structure situated in a visually dominating location. Originally built to house the Maritime Services Board Headquarters, which was a significant government agency, the building is now home to a premier collection of contemporary art, and as a museum its presence never the less follows the same formula articulated by Duncan; ‘like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention…Museums are normally set apart from other structures by their monumental architecture and clearly defined precincts.’

---

The building that now houses the Museum of Contemporary Art was constructed in 1939 and is of monumental design, occupying a prestigious location overlooking busy Circular Quay at the heart of Sydney’s central business district. The iconic Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge are its neighbours. The open space surrounding it is an important clue to its public importance because the enormous cost of land in that location adds to the status of being able to maintain the surrounding lawns and parkland as public space rather than releasing it for commercial use. It is easily recognised as a civic building because of its visually imposing presence within that public expanse. However, it does not provide the symbolic architectural form commonly utilized to indicate a building of cultural significance, and in fact the heavy angular bulk of the building has attracted criticism. Francesca Morrison argues the façade of ‘Art Deco stepped profiles are in fact counteracted and diminished in energy and activity by the building’s solid horizontality…expressing a rather stodgy public mentality of provincial civic architecture’. It has actually been criticised for being ‘too monumental to attract the passing crowd’, a comment that alludes to the notion that the public establishes a relationship with buildings as a consequence of the architectural form in which semiotic messages are embedded.

31 Appendix A: ‘Museum of Contemporary Art’, is a collection of images of this building.
33 Francesca Morrison, Ibid, p.36.
34 Further discussion of specific architectural characteristics of this and other sites will be discussed in Chapter Five.
It is significant to note that both the Singapore Biennale 2006 and Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, presented a significant amount of their works of art in major public buildings, some of which had been previously utilised as museum space, and others given over to the exhibition of visual art as a secondary function. City Hall in Singapore had previously housed various government departments including the Supreme Court and ‘the spacious front steps form one of Singapore’s most historic public spaces’.35

The architectural form emulates the neo-classical style used so extensively for significant civic buildings. Documenta 12 was housed in a number of different buildings, including the Museum Fridericianum, which is described as the first purpose built public museum in Europe, and was completed in 1779.36 It follows closely the neo-classical style and is set before a large open public square, Friedrichsplatz, located in the centre of Kassel.37

35 Ben Slater (ed.), Belief: Singapore Biennale 2006, National Arts Council Singapore, Singapore, 2006. The significant events played out on those steps included Admiral Mountbatten’s acceptance of the Japanese surrender in 1945, Singapore was proclaimed a city in 1951, Lee Kuan Yew proclaimed self-government of Singapore in 1959, and Lee also declared Singapore an independent republic in 1965. The Supreme Court was relocated from City Hall to new premises nearby in 2005 and the building had been left empty until the Biennale. Appendix A, ‘Singapore Biennale’, provides more images of the sites for Singapore Biennale.

36 Reference to the origin of Museum Fridericianum was made in the city of Kassel web site – www.kassel.de/cms02/englisch/culture/museums/02149/index.html. Also in David Watkin and Tilman Mellinghoff, German Architecture and the Classical Ideal 1740-1840, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, p.46-47.

37 Appendix A, ‘Documenta’ provides images of all the buildings included in Documenta 12.
Museum Fridericianum was one of a few sites used for this exhibition constructed in the neo-classical style, among them Schloss Wilhelmshöhe (formerly a palace, built in 1786 overlooking the city of Kassel) and Neue Galerie (formerly a civic building) in the business district of Kassel.\footnote{These sites and exhibitions will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.}
Constructed to display artworks for Documenta 12, the Aue-Pavillon is an expansive glasshouse-like building located in parkland near the centre of the city of Kassel. The modular construction of transparent walls suspended on light metal frames resembles the Crystal Palace that was built in 1851 by Joseph Paxton in London's Hyde Park to house the Great Exhibition. Though on a much smaller scale than the Crystal Palace, Aue-Pavillon's recognisable form and impressive size alerted passers-by to its function as a site of public display.
It is not size alone that confers significance of a building. William Curtis remarked that ‘monumentality is a quality in architecture which does not necessarily have to do with size, but with intensity of expression….the problem [then is], to handle public buildings with the appropriate degree of presence and accessibility: to establish the terms of a democratic monumentality’.  

The concept that public buildings can be recognised by their architectural form and defined presence is none the less significant in regional centres, in particular, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in Windsor, to the North West of Sydney (though now touching the outreaching western suburban sprawl of that city). Although this building is not as physically imposing as the Museum of Contemporary Art, it is still instantly recognisable as a public institution, making the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery (within the Deerubbin Centre), a contemporary version of monumentality achieved through design principals. The centre is set within a public precinct of open lawns and extensive pathways that define its presence within the city of Windsor. Civic ownership is denoted by the public accessibility through these open grounds to the strikingly designed building rendered in glass and steel.

![Figure 15 Deerubbin Centre, George Street, Windsor. Photo: J. Sager](image)

The notion of accessibility plays a significant role in any discussion of the audience’s approach to the public art museum, as they must first be seduced into crossing the threshold of that institution in order to enter the gallery and become participants in the zone of interaction. The specifics relating to public access to each of the museums selected for this study will be explained in detail in chapter five.

40 Appendix A, ‘Hawkesbury Regional Gallery’, offers more images of this gallery and location.
41 The Deerubbin Centre Grand Opening Commemorative Booklet, Hawkesbury City Council, Windsor, 2005.
Public Response to the Art Gallery

Members of the public make a decision to visit the art gallery and their reasons for doing so vary. What is significant is the way in which they respond to the environment of the art institution, be it the exterior and interior architectural design and layout, or the environment already inhabited by other viewers and the works of art. As they approach and enter the art museum, each individual remains connected metaphysically to home and family, work and workmates, they are part of the social fabric of both their public and private lives. However, there is recognition that museum and gallery space is distinctly different from other spaces they know, and those differences are manifest in the ways in which they respond to the art gallery environment. Visitors to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (MCA) explained their reactions to that space, ‘it was a great experience and something very different in terms of my daily life’, and ‘other members of the audience behaved differently than what you would expect in the general public’. Viewers such as these react to the art gallery environment as a direct response to that space, recognising its significance, responding to the subliminal messages the design of the public building and the behaviour of others communicates. Their visit is punctuated with the ritual significance they perceive it deserves. It is comprised of visual cues and subliminal indicators.

There is a point where the visitor to the art gallery alters their role to that of audience member and viewer. This is the point of demarcation between outside and inside; the end of what came before and the beginning of the experience to come. It is a significant point, a physical space each person will pass through as they enter the zone of interaction. This specific area, just inside the entrance to any building, has been described by retail theorist Paco Underhill as the ‘transition zone’. Underhill observed, when studying retail environments, that nothing of importance happens in this transition zone. The significance of this information within the art museum has consequences for gallery management, and for the audience. The transition zone is not necessarily presented as a physical embodiment of space, although it can be, and it is, in some buildings. The transition zone exists as well as, or in spite of, whatever configuration of internal design is employed at that place. It is just inside the entrance portico where anyone unfamiliar with the building takes a few seconds to adjust from being outside, to inside. Quickly they orient themselves to this new environment. Their eyes adjust to the artificial light as they stop or slow in order to scan what lies ahead and make decisions about their onward progress. This slight cessation of onward movement and scanning of the interior by most visitors as they enter a

---

42 The opinions of audience members at the Museum of Contemporary Art during the Sydney Biennale, August, 2008.
44 Specific reactions by audiences of each gallery involved in this study will be discussed in later chapters.
45 Notably, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a space inside the front entrance provides a transition zone before the expansive interior of the museum opens out from that space. This enables viewers to take time to adjust to their new environment before making decisions concerning their onward progress.
46 This behaviour has been recorded on video footage and documented at various art museums and spaces.

57
gallery has been observed at each location under scrutiny during the course of this research. For the audience, the importance of the transition zone is one of demarcation, the point at which they relinquish their association with the everyday, with the outside world where they were in control. The audience have chosen to enter a liminal space where their behaviour is influenced by a different set of indicators to those they have been responding to outside the gallery walls.

All the locations where research has been undertaken for this study provide evidence of a demarcation between outside and inside, which is manifest in the behaviour of the visitors under observation. The public, as they enter the zone of interaction, become immersed in the social action of audience member; they have become part of a group involved in a common activity, each experiencing the act of viewing art within a shared environment. Some viewers are likely to find themselves adrift in unfamiliar surroundings with little knowledge of what is expected of them and how it is they go about fulfilling the act of viewing. They have entered a liminal space. Liminality is defined as a period of transition during which normal limits to thought, self understanding, and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to something new, a threshold. Not all viewers are comfortable with this sensation, however, and may not feel that this is a positive experience when they lack control over the situation and are unsure of what is actually expected of them. The liminal character of the art museum, from the perspective of the general viewing public, establishes a hierarchical organisation from which the viewer may be excluded, uncertain of their standing or status within the esteemed walls of the gallery. There exists an aura of expectation that something extraordinary is present and available to those who do recognise it.

For members of the public unfamiliar with attending an art gallery the experience as they enter can be likened to the action of entering a large church. Both spaces present the visitor with an initial moment of indecision where one is unsure of what to do to show respect for that ‘religion’s’ beliefs and rituals, not wanting to be identified as an ‘outsider’. In the gallery the viewer is drawn into an environment constructed by arts professionals – the architect, interior designer, gallery director, curator and artist. How the viewer proceeds from the transition zone is dependent on their familiarity with the space itself, their experience of viewing art in general, and the construction of the space they are confronting at that moment. The arts professionals, the conductors of the act of viewing, have left the space to the public, not available for comment or advice. It is entirely up to the viewer to decide his or her own way of progressing into the zone of interaction, a space provided for the public and activated by their presence.

47 The zone of interaction has been discussed in the introduction and chapter one as the space where audience members interact with the artworks, the space and its contents and whomever is present within that space.
48 Not every person entering the zone of interaction is there to view art, however. Staff or other guests who may be just passing through on their way to meetings and the like, can influence the behaviour of others around them. This is taken into account by the researcher.
49 At this stage in the discussion of audience behaviour it is necessary to generalize in order to contain and articulate predominant characteristics of audience conduct.
51 Duncan gives a detailed explanation of the liminal experience in art museums- Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, p.11-14.
‘When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the cloakroom. Nor do they respond passively to museum displays’, argues Ivan Karp. The viewer responds to the environment of the gallery, a gallery that is inhabited by more than the artworks. The viewers proceed, aware of the echoes of expected ritualistic behaviour whilst still carrying with them their personal and cultural baggage. They have adopted the mantle of visual art audience member, worshipper of art, as they endeavour to ‘belong’ and ‘perform’ in a way befitting the grandeur of the building in which they find themselves or as a consequence of being in the presence of high art. What rituals are they expected to perform? Duncan suggests it is ‘those who are best able to perform its rituals – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – [who] are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms’. In the audience there is a mixture of those who ‘belong’, and those who don’t. Using the simile of the church, parallels in behaviour can be drawn. These relate to the individual’s performance as ‘frequent worshipper’ who knows the intricacies of the rituals, automatically responding in similar ways to the other worshippers; and in contrast, the behaviours of the ‘outsider’ or non-believer as he or she hesitates, unsure of what is expected of them when they enter the sacred temple. In this situation the most informative ‘assistant’ in deciding how to proceed is the viewer who appears confident navigating the space. By watching the practiced viewer, the ‘outsider’ can either mimic, or at least make a more informed decision about their progression.

By observing the public as they enter the gallery, it becomes apparent who is at ease in that environment and, in contrast, those who enter as a novice, by the way they survey the site. Some individuals direct their attention to the artworks allowing the attraction potential of particular objects to guide their onward progression. Other visitors have been noted looking to their fellow participants for an indication as to what path they should embark on. This behaviour is most obvious when the novice enters a space unoccupied by other viewers because he or she often turns and looks behind to see if anyone is entering that may provide a role model. If there is, they will often let them pass, then watch what they do, or at least have company in this uncertain terrain.

The environment from transition zone onward into the gallery is important, because a first impression is likely to influence a viewer’s gallery experience as a whole. It is at this stage that gallery staff can do most to put the inexperienced gallery goer at ease. It is not enough to have gallery staff behind a reception counter and a profusion of signage. Staff must make themselves available and welcoming. A smiling face has the ability to put visitors to the gallery at ease, which may seem obvious, however, this does not always occur. This first impression can be, and often is the most important encounter a viewer will make in their entire visit. At Hawkesbury Regional Gallery viewers were observed returning to the receptionist to ask questions and enter into conversation after, and likely because, they had been


welcomed with a smiling countenance as they arrived. Those visitors appeared at ease in the gallery, assuming a confident air and pleased with their encounter as they left the gallery. An alternate scenario was manifest at the MCA. Whilst tracking visitors from the entrance through the gallery, there was an absence of personal connection between staff and viewers. Visitors were more frequently not greeted with a smile, but left to decipher the jumble of signage and identify the way forward alone, only the brave or oblivious visitor asked for assistance. On many occasions the only contact between visitors and staff at the MCA came as the unwitting visitor who walked into the gallery space wearing a backpack was quickly pursued by a staff member and asked, without explanation, to remove the offending backpack and return it to the cloak room. Whilst in discussion with one of these visitors, she described how demeaning and rude she thought this was. When I explained to her why visitors were not allowed to wear backpacks into the gallery, she commented that, had the staff member explained, she would have been happy to comply. A frequent viewer at that museum confided that ‘the MCA guards generally look quite stern, or bored’. There are many personalities within the collective term of gallery staff, and of course there are many differences in how each one relates to the audience. The over enthusiastic staff member, referred to as ‘visitor services officers’ (VSOs) at the MCA, or guard at Documenta 12, can be a hindrance to the viewing experience also.

Two journalists who attended Documenta 12 within the first few days it was open noted that ‘visitors must negotiate the constant intrusive attentions of the Documenta “guards”, that’s what their silly bib-like outfits have written on them, who inform you not to get too close, not to breathe on the glass, not to

---

55 Observations made during research at that site.
56 Further discussion on this subject appears in chapter five.
57 Backpacks are not to be worn into the gallery because it is more likely that art objects will be brushed or bumped inadvertently by the pack as the wearer may not be aware of its bulk as they turn and move.
lean against the walls, not to carry a bag, not to point, sneer, laugh or break wind; and Jackie Wullschlager describes them as ‘mulish guards and gallery attendants whose aim seems to be to separate the public from the art it has travelled hours to see.’

Wullschlager does go on to concede that ‘these are minor, absurdist obstacles’. These personal opinions emphasize the notion that no two experiences are the same and whatever occurs within the zone of interaction is interpreted on a personal level. However, the point of this information is to highlight the ability of the smallest detail, beyond the artworks, to influence the viewer’s experience. The most vulnerable visitor is the first time viewer, and it is for him or her that strategies to make the viewing experience as easily accessible as possible must be understood so that the path to a return visit is made as inviting as possible.

Fortunately for the first time viewer, there are commonly other viewers who are familiar with the space of the gallery, familiar with the art viewing ritual in general. Those who have been exposed to the art museum previously are more likely to find the transition into the role of viewer less traumatic, even comforting, as this extract from The Bell by Iris Murdoch describes:

Dora had been in the National Gallery a thousand times and the pictures were almost as familiar as her own face. Passing between them now, as through a well-loved grove, she felt a calm descending on her. She wandered a little, watching with compassion the poor visitors armed with guidebooks who were peering anxiously at the masterpieces. Dora did not need to peer. She could look as one can at last when one knows a great thing very well, confronting it with a dignity which it has itself conferred. She felt that the pictures belonged to her, and reflected ruefully that they were about the only thing that did. Vaguely, consoled by the presence of something welcoming and responding in the place, her footsteps took her to various shrines at which she had worshipped so often before.

Some viewers have an intimate relationship with the environment and the artworks found there and Murdoch’s description of one person’s viewing experience within the gallery reveals the quality of that encounter. It is true that some viewers enter the art museum with a desire to worship the artwork, to find comfort and solace in the familiarity of the space and its contents. However, it is not the committed viewer for whom the outcome of this research is aimed. They will attend no matter what. It is the first time and infrequent viewer for whom a better understanding is needed and to whom improvements are directed. Means to allay their anxiety are required. By observing behaviour in general, opportunity to discover what is provoking both positive and negative response is possible.

60 This has been observed in the course of this research. It is not substantiated by specific numbers, but merely a general observation.
Relating to the Art Object

Reverential behaviour within the space of the art museum is manifest in the attitude of most viewers as they move slowly and quietly, talking in whispers and practising restraint. Viewers are seen standing in front of a painting, for example, leaning their faces even closer to the work, their hands clasped behind their back or placed in their pockets. This posture indicates a desire to make a close examination of the particular work while also practising a self-imposed restraint against the impulse to touch. Hands visibly held behind a viewer’s back or kept in their pockets also reassures the gallery staff of the viewer’s intentions, or, more precisely, their intention not to touch.

Figure 17 Viewers at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany Photo: J. Sager.
The design of the gallery, in particular the flooring, can provide demarcation between the artwork and the viewer. A line of different coloured tiles on the floor or merely lines of tape adhered to the floor around an object provides a visual, while subtle reminder to viewers that there is a defined distance to remain between them and the object. The use of markings on the floor to announce various areas has been employed in many of the spaces observed for this study and their presence can do much to assist the viewer, and also deter them in a similar way to this example found to occur in hospitals; ‘Patients whose walking is tentative are frightened of floors of uniform colour and high gloss. They feel they have no reference points, and the prospect of a large “sea” of empty space to be crossed fills them with uncertainty’.\(^6\) A similar sea of uncertainty is, for some, present within expansive gallery settings when viewers are not provided with way-finding indicators that could be so easily embedded in flooring where they would not obstruct viewing, nor impede alternate circulation.\(^6\)

\(^6\) The subject of way-finding will be pursued further in the conclusion.
Features of gallery design have been devised to communicate particular directives to the audience. It is not an accident that gallery environments are perceived to demand respect from their audience and, in some cases it may even be believed that, as David Flemming suggests ‘many museums were designed to overwhelm visitors’. The use of towering classical columns and expansive stairs as dramatic entry to the art museum accentuate its status. Duncan may also find merit in this suggestion and explains, ‘like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning. One is also expected to

---

behave with a certain decorum'. The space of the gallery is designed to exaggerate the already heavy burden of reverential behaviour. Large open interior spaces and hard floorings produce an amplification of sound. Any noise above the normal hum of activity, such as hard soled shoes producing louder than usual sound, mobile phones ringing, children squealing, raucous laughter and raised voices, causes other members of the viewing audience to either look disapprovingly in the direction of the noise, roll their eyes or, in some instances, comment to their viewing partners. The loud and discordant sound is out of place in these ‘interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies’. Again, the art object, or ‘potent effigy’ contained in the art museum is mindfully positioned within that environment. Most viewers know not to touch the objects within a gallery, although young children, the over exuberant and those who just have to, have been seen performing the occasional surreptitious act of touching an art object. Not being able to touch does, of course, protect the physical well being of the objects, however it also maintains the notion that the art object commands a form of respect from its viewers. Unlike items in a retail environment where the shopper is permitted, even encouraged, to examine each item closely, the viewer of fine art is permitted only to consume the art object with their eyes. An invisible barrier elevates the art object to a superior status beyond the physical reach of the audience.

It may seem that the primary purpose for display is to enhance the quality of the aesthetic appreciation through display techniques, however, what this also accomplishes is a further delineation between object and audience. Donald Kuspit describes the art museum as a ‘magic kingdom’. He perceives that a magic spell is cast over every artwork accepted into the sacred space of the gallery. It is not only the physical manifestation of the space, but also the notion of superiority of the art object within the art institution as a whole. Kuspit argues that, ‘no doubt, once in the museum, the art object becomes superior capitalist material or property’. The aura of expectation produced in the art museum is again woven into the relationship with the art object. The art object is portrayed as something extraordinary by its mere presence in the art institution, a symbiotic relationship between museum and object each with referred importance one to the other. The object’s significance is affirmed by its selection into the art institution, and the institution’s ‘magical’ power affirmed through its ability to recognise and substantiate the value of the objects it possesses. This relationship may be the principle audiences recognise and as
they place their trust in the process, they abandon themselves to the liminal space that has also a quality of magisterial magic.

Each audience member who enters the gallery, enters the ‘magic kingdom’ and reacts to that environment in many different ways. They might acknowledge and appreciate the qualities of that environment, or they may be overwhelmed, and some may also feel intimidated by an environment that is alien to them. This does not negate the audience’s right to question qualities of beauty and skill present in the artworks. Never the less, affirmation of the artwork’s value is its presence in the art museum. The public recognises this code as a measurement of value both monetarily and by status. Status gained by an artwork is via the art institution, and is thus gauged by the arts specialists whose career it is to assess and decide which of those artworks are worthy of admission into the art museum. The artworks that gain entry have been recognised as possessing some quality that is valued as being representative of that culture, and worthy of recording. The arts professionals, who are often perceived as ‘gatekeepers’ of the art institution, have a powerful role in this rite of passage the artworks, and hence the artists must undertake to make their way into the ‘magic kingdom’ of the art museum.

Artists understand the value of having their work included in public collections. It is a way of validating their position as a professional artist in the competitive visual arts field. Describing the artists who do not have work in the museum as ‘underdogs’ and those that do as ‘top dogs’, Kuspit realises a battle appears to be constantly raging to gain entry and become ‘top dog’. He argues, however, ‘access is limited and some artists never have the right change to get in’. It is the distinction between inside and outside, accepted and rejected, important and that which isn’t, that forms a division the public recognises. When they choose to enter the art museum they are stepping into the world of the elite. They become part of that environment surrounded by valuable artefacts, enclosed by monumental architecture and are expected to conform to the rituals of viewing these precious objects. ‘Material dominance means that the media gatekeepers open their pearly gates to admit the art into their informational and opinionated heaven’, claims Kuspit.

However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to question the gatekeeper’s position, but rather to try to understand the public’s regard for those artworks accepted by the art institution and how that attitude extends into the viewing experience. The public does not always agree with the choices made by the arts ‘specialists’. The gatekeeper’s decisions, though final, are at times passionately disputed by the public. The public recognise that the artefact represents a common value system and will remain as a common one.

---

75 Kuspit, ibid, p.61.
76 Kuspit, ibid, p.60.
record of that system for all time. Therefore, when their personal value structure does not correspond, the public feels the need to question the validity of that judgement. The debate between arts establishment and the public over particular artworks is at times heated, especially when large sums of public money are involved. Though controlled by the Government, the money funding acquisitions is still considered, by the public, to be the property of the public. Therefore, public opinion demands to be heard when it is their personal criteria of taste that has been brought into question. Lindsay Barrett argues, ‘for Australians, the appearance of Blue Poles on the front pages of their newspapers was an event which cut across a number of related questions concerning representative democracy, public expenditure and good government, questions which were in turn related to primarily cultural issues of taste and value’. The purchase of Blue Poles was probably the most notorious in Australian history when the Australian government spent US$2million ($1.4 million Australian at the time) to acquire Jackson Pollock’s painting in 1973. Sandra McGrath wrote in the Weekend Australian in 1973,

Visitors to the National Gallery of Australia, where Blue Poles still hangs, are eager to know how much it is now worth. According to the gallery staff at that location, this is the most frequently asked question and inspires a degree of pride in its Australian audiences because they are able to relate to a monetary figure as an expression of value, whilst they still remain confused about its aesthetic value.

The public has the right to voice their opinion and, it seems, everyone has their own personal determination of ‘taste’. In 2000 the National Gallery of Australia purchased David Hockney’s A Bigger Grand Canyon for US $3 million. The question of value was hotly debated in the press and on television, and now spoken of in whispers by the public when they stand before the work between the sacred walls of the art institution itself. More recently, the work by Cy Twombly, Three studies from the Temeraire, was purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery of New South Wales supplemented by their foundation and private benefactors, reputedly AU$4.5 million, which again

---

77 Tracey Clement in ‘Ahead of the Crowd’ states ‘in recent years, the NGA [National Gallery of Australia] negotiated with government to raise the threshold at which acquisitions require ministerial approval from $450,000 to $10 million, effectively taking politics out of future art purchases’, Sydney Morning Herald, October 6-7, 2007, p.3.
78 Lindsay Barrett presents an extended argument on the subject in The Prime Minister’s Christmas card: Blue Poles and Cultural Politics in the Whitlam Era, Power, Sydney, 2001, this extract from p.104.
81 This information was gathered through informal discussion with three gallery guards at the National Gallery of Australia in May 2007. Each one suggested a different figure relating to its present worth in dollars while admitting many viewers expressed a state of confusion as to its ‘meaning’. NGA visit May 20, 2007.
83 Observations of audience reaction to this painting, displayed in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, were influenced largely by its poor positioning over a stairwell where it was partly obscured by beams and located in isolation from all other grouped collections. It went largely unnoticed by audience members as they passed by without a glance in its direction, on their way to different sites within the building.
triggered public debate. The art institution defends its decision based on the same beliefs Arthur Danto suggests here: ‘Federally funded artworks are similarly perlocutionary…: despite unpopular wars and policies, a government of, by and for the people is committed to the highest things permitted by the separation of church and state’. The government’s actions in acquiring works of art represents more than the mere purchase of the artworks, as Barrett had intimated and as Fleming suggests: ‘elites always manipulate culture, and museums are convenient (and all the more attractive through being publicly funded) vehicles for the promotion and glorification of minority tastes, which are perceived by their adherents to be superior and inviolable’. Noteworthy purchases of internationally renowned artworks fuel the belief that our public art institutions are repositories for our most valuable art treasures, regardless of personal taste. All objects are touched with the same magic wand as they enter this ‘magic kingdom’. It is from within the exclusive kingdom that the viewer is then able to, quietly, voice his or her own opinion as he or she negotiates the zone of interaction. The viewer’s attitude toward the artworks, either negative or positive, is permeated by an innate belief in the significance of that institution and a faith in the decisions made by the ‘gatekeepers’.

Interestingly there is a progression between subject and object in both artwork and institution. Subjective presence, manifest as discussion about the artefact’s cultural and aesthetic properties can, and does, occur outside the gallery precinct. However, when the artefact enters the gallery it goes through a process of objectification. The artwork materializes from subjective consideration, becoming the object when it is installed in the gallery. The museum, on the other hand, which had been an object, the building where the subject of the debate resides, is now the subjective influence over the public as they react to its subliminal authority. The audience responds to the art institution as they encounter the space where the art object is displayed. They come to pay homage to the selected items, behaving in ritualistic fashion as they negotiate the ‘magical kingdom’ that has changed painting, sculpture and readymade into valuable artefact.

How is the audience’s response understood? A work of art may be more ideological, more realistic, more believable than the next. When at least some objects pass the critical eye of the viewer as being acceptable, the viewer can be reassured that the gatekeepers at that institution are in agreement with them (the public) at least some of the time. As Brian O’Doherty argues, ‘In a peculiar reversal, the object introduced into the gallery “frames” the gallery and its laws’. If the viewer accepted all the

---

85 “Perlocutionary” is defined as speech that does more than convey information. The example Danto gives is ‘If someone confides that his nanny loved him, he is not just confiding the simple information the sentence contains; he is letting you know that his was a privileged childhood, with parents prosperous enough to afford a nursemaid and pretentious enough to call her a nanny’. Arthur C. Danto, The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and The Ends of Taste, G+B Arts International, Amsterdam, 1998, p.149.
88 Kuspit, ‘The Magical Kingdom of the Museum’, discusses this phenomenon in detail.
objects in the gallery, resigned to the judgement of the arts professionals, there would be no debate, no questions, no dialogue between viewer and institution. Theoretical debate opens new avenues between institution and audience. Does the art institution listen to the audience? Much of the audience does not have the vocabulary nor art historical knowledge to contend with the arts specialists who ultimately make all the decisions. Therefore the public must relinquish control to the art institution and in them place their trust, whilst importantly, the art institution is able to dismiss the public’s opinion for the same reason. There appears to be an opportunity for an interpreter between audience and art establishment to act as advocate, to relate opinion in a language the arts institution is willing to understand.

It is imperative that the public must also trust that a high standard of visual art is made available. Whilst providing artwork representational of their public’s ideals and culture, the arts professionals must offer the quality of artistic product that will challenge and expand the conceptual boundaries of its audiences. The temptation to compete with other public and private institutions for a share in visitation, Glenn Lowry and Philippe de Montebello argue, cannot be realised through a ‘dumbing down’ of content to pander to a wider audience. Likewise the institution cannot be dictated to by sponsorship deals in their thirst for monetary support. 

Artistic standards must be maintained to assure the viewing public of the institution’s credibility. It is critical for arts institutions to maintain the public’s trust. It may be a ‘magic kingdom’, but it must be believed to be built on the foundation of integrity.

The Artist as Proponent of Change

Questioning the position of authority the art institution is believed to hold has been responsible for changes in the relationship between art museum, artist and public. The art museum has not been an inert receptacle, but rather a site able to reflect the changes society has undergone. With the advent of modernism came the critical evaluation of the art museum and its connection to the art it championed. Marcel Duchamp first ‘stepped once and for all outside the frame of the painting and made the gallery space itself the primary material to be altered by art’. By installing 1,200 Coal Bags (1938) and Mile of String (1942), Duchamp questioned the space where, previously, artworks had hung on the walls or stood on pedestals, their relationship to the gallery unquestioned.

It is important to trace the relationship between the art and the site that contains it, not only as influenced by the arts establishment, but also as a product of the pressure artists exerted through their artistic interpretation. Nineteenth Century galleries, such as the Louvre, hung paintings ‘salon style’, where framed paintings covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Larger paintings were hung at the top and smaller at the bottom. Brian O’Doherty explains that there seemed to be no necessity to set them away from each other as the frames that surrounded each image isolated it from its neighbours and contained its individual perspective within. The painting below, rendered in the 18th Century, provides a record of a salon style hang with its wall to ceiling framed paintings and isolated sculptures contained within an elaborately decorated gallery of vast proportions.

Figure 20 Detail from Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Galerie de vues de la Rome moderne, 1799. Photo: J. Sager

What occurred to change this format of showing art? ‘Modern mankind found itself in the midst of a great absence of values and yet, at the same time, a remarkable abundance of possibilities’. The 19th and 20th Centuries saw the world, and how mankind perceived itself to be placed within it, change in ‘the maelstrom of modern life’, and the art museum was not immune to that change. Artists responded with new ways of presenting the rapidly shifting concepts of modern life, and the gallery became a site of expression rather than purely display. The walls were washed clean, reduced to a flat white pristine surface in an effort to establish a neutral ground. O’Doherty argues ‘the wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art. It is now impossible to paint up an exhibition without surveying the space like a health inspector, taking into account the aesthetics of the wall which will inevitably “artify” the work in a way that frequently diffuses its intentions’. The frames that had

92 Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, p.16.
94 Berman, ibid, p.16. A detailed and informative analysis of modernism appears in this publication.
95 O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, p.29.
encased every painting were no longer deemed necessary when representation became abstract and was later reduced to a minimal ‘Colour Field’ rendered on stretched canvas. The increased space between paintings was required to allow them to assert their presence without influence from the neighbouring paintings. The white space between the canvases became important punctuation in the narrative of display. O’Doherty argues that ‘all this traffic across the wall made it a far-from-neutral zone. Now a participant in, rather than a support for, the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies; and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it’. For the viewer this is yet another facet of their experience for which they must take account.

![Figure 21 White walled gallery space at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: J. Sager.](image)

The repercussions of this white walled gallery as both container and participant in the exhibition of artworks can also be perceived as a cold and uninviting environment by some of its patrons. The white walled gallery influences the hesitant viewer who believes they are not welcome in this stark setting, the ‘arctic’ environment does nothing to make them feel any more at ease. White walls as backdrop for contemporary art leave the new or infrequent viewer without connection to previous experience or recollection of other spaces more frequently inhabited. Gaston Bachelard suggests ‘all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home’, and for the viewer lost in a repetition of white walls

96 O’Doherty, ibid, p.29.
97 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Massachusetts, 1994 edition, first published 1958, p.5. John R. Stilgoe, in the forward to the 1994 edition of *The Poetics of Space*, states that ‘Bachelard reveals time after time that setting is more than scene…it is often the armature around which the work revolves’, p.x.
there seems no such connection and thus no comfort of the familiar. The white wall aesthetic, so common to contemporary art galleries, is questioned within this study as to its continuing relevance to today’s audiences.

Can, and should, the contemporary gallery provide comfort for their audiences as a fundamental ingredient of their experience? Can the demarcation between the familiar and unfamiliar be made less defined or less jarring? As Bachelard also argues, ‘memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening’. Can the environment of the art gallery assist the viewer in this endeavour? Some galleries where historical collections are displayed use colour schemes befitting the timeframe and aesthetics of the artworks. The viewer is not only made to feel more comfortable in that setting with the addition of a familiar colour scheme, but they are more likely to be previously acquainted with the artworks, and may even be knowledgeable about the historical context of those works. Maree Stenglin examines how colour, as a particular semiotic resource ‘can be used with the interpersonal function of establishing a relationship of comfort and security between an occupant and a space’.

Contemporary art is already an unfamiliar entity to most viewers, therefore, why does the environment in which those works are placed confirm a sense of alienation through the absence of colour reference? The institution is understood to be responsible for those sterile white walls and so in turn to be responsible for distancing the viewer, obstructing the formation of connections with the environment and in turn the artworks. ‘A stupid big blank wall with one small block of red in the middle’, was a comment made by an infrequent viewer when asked to give an opinion of contemporary art. The space of the gallery is a composite element of the viewer’s experience in which the artwork bears a shared responsibility of engagement with its audience.

The art institution must be accountable when the viewer is left ‘cold’ in the gallery. They are responsible for the environment in which the art object exists as much as they are responsible for the object’s presence in the institution. The white walled gallery emerged as a result of modernist aesthetics. It may eventuate that another spatial aesthetic develops as a result of contemporary artistic sensibilities in a postmodern society. Arthur Rosenblatt argues that the contemporary museum ‘clearly exposes the constant tension between the specialized needs of the institution, its unique requirements for exhibition,
preservation, and education, and the desire of the architect for an aesthetic statement'.

It is hoped the future of the art museum will evolve to consider the desires of its audience and their needs as benefactors of experience. It may be justified that our evolving social structure will fashion new sites of display. The author anticipates that the desire to reflect society’s engagement with the site of contemporary visual art will ultimately fashion a space responsive to those who use it. Now the gallery space is primarily a site for the display of visual art and its the public’s perception of that art which dominates their experience.

The Viewing Public

The viewing public needs to be secure in its belief that the artworks they have entered the gallery to see are the ultimate representation of what the arts profession has produced. The public place their trust in the arts institution to provide art that is avant-garde, the most up to date, the most contemporary art. The public must also believe that within that criteria the work they are viewing is authentic. Public trust is so closely associated with authenticity that if there is ever any question of a counterfeit, or anything less than original, the entire art world scrambles for justification in an effort to reassert its authority. ‘For starters,’ affirms Montebello, ‘and quite simply because, since what we promise is authenticity, that is what our public expects to find within our walls. So there must never be any question of a reproduction, a simulacrum, taking the place of an original work of art’.

This is significant within this discourse about the audience’s rapport with the art gallery and the artworks they come to view because every aspect of their association with, not only specific artworks, but also art in general feeds their attitudes and recognition of their own place within the arena of visual arts. Even the development of mechanical reproduction did not topple the original artwork from its throne, but actually increased the status of the original as a unique object. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain when ‘ordinary consumers can own a copy of the highly valued originals, the value of the original results not only from its uniqueness but its being the source from which reproductions are made’. The reproduction of fine art introduced specific artworks to the general public, it did not replace them. Just as the reproduction legitimised the original, it may also act as the hook to entice the public into the gallery to see the original. If the audience recognises an artwork once they are in the

---

104 Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics state that only 9.7% of museum objects and artworks were on display for public viewing in 2003-4. [www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats](http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats)
gallery it has the power to enhance the viewer’s aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{107} Many viewers, though not artistically articulate, may, through the reproduction, establish a rapport with the image before they ‘meet’ it. John Berger claims ‘we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves’.\textsuperscript{108} This is how we make meaning of our location within the world, within our culture and as individuals. The medium of television has allowed the fine art image to be reproduced many fold in the same instant, to enter the private, domestic environment of each individual’s living room. The same painting enters each home, is surrounded by the family, becomes their talking point and allows them to have a rapport with that image influenced by their own context. The memory of that painting is permeated with a personal connection.

Similarly, a post card of \textit{Blue Poles} is able to establish a relationship with the recipient as he or she studies it on the fridge in their kitchen. If they go to the National Gallery of Australia to see the original, it is only then that they can understand the different qualities of the reproduction and the original. ‘Alternatively’, Berger suggests, ‘one can forget about the quality of the reproduction and simply be reminded, when one sees the original, that it is a famous painting of which somewhere one has already seen a reproduction. But, in either case the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being the original of a reproduction’.\textsuperscript{109}

Dissemination of images in our society has increased the number of, and time spent looking at visual mediums as a result of the impact of visual technologies.\textsuperscript{110} It is hoped that Guy Debord is being overly pessimistic when he claims that ‘images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever’.\textsuperscript{111} By reattaching images back to the ‘magic kingdom’ of the art museum the status they acquire by being included in that collection, by being present in that exalted bastion of taste, is reasserted. There are instances that affirm a special affinity with the original that cannot be replaced by a flood of reproductions. There must be an element of magic conjured by the aura which surrounds the original. It may be that aura which explains why crowds thronged to the Louvre after the theft of the \textit{Mona Lisa} in 1911 to look at the empty space where it use to hang.\textsuperscript{112}

This surprising incident leads us to believe that the visual art audience interacts with art objects and their sites of display in many complex ways. Many of these we can only surmise the reason behind the outward manifestation of their actions. The theft, or absence of the \textit{Mona Lisa} allows us to deduce that the range of theories discussed in this chapter can be explained by connecting them to expressions of audience behaviour. The art museum, a monumental building permeated with the assertion of social


\textsuperscript{109} Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing}, p.21.

\textsuperscript{110} The changing relationship of arts audiences to contemporary visual art because of the development of new types and proliferation of mediums will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.


power, claims its dominance in matters of artistic taste and value. The *Mona Lisa* had been accepted and verified as a precious art object, praised by the art museum and its ‘priests’ of taste. Its theft only added to its value as desired object and reproductions of the image created a subjective life beyond its tactile form. The fact that the public felt an impulse to enter the hallowed walls of the art museum to pay homage to a treasure that was at the time absent, provides us with evidence of the recognition of that site and the influence it has over the public.

Just as the image of the *Mona Lisa*, even in its reproduced form, represents heightened aesthetic value, the image of the idealised art museum is used to confer the notion of taste and value. In the advertisement below the monumentality of the building portrayed with its great neo-classical columns in sandstone, an entrance punctuated with a red carpet and beyond, a white stone statue on an elevated plinth, create an aura of exalted value and inferred importance to the figure not visible in the picture plane. The advertiser is using the museum as a cultural signifier of taste and class, which is transferred to the celebrity figure about to enter. The advertiser has used this exact configuration of content and context in order to encode the Volkswagen with the same ideological attributes through association. It is also significant that the same semiotic messages appear to be recognised in a range of western societies. The advertisement is for a German car and it could be assumed that the building is in Europe. A car dealer in Penrith, an outer suburb of Sydney, Australia, has used this particular advertisement in a regionally distributed lifestyle magazine. There are no buildings resembling this in Penrith. It appears the advertiser is assuming a common knowledge of semiotic language pertaining to the monumentality of the building and the connotations of taste and value inferred by the visual representations, and that they will be understood just as well in Penrith as they would be in Berlin, Germany. The last line of the advertisement – ‘Volkswagen Diesels are as amazing on the outside as they are on the inside’, also refers to the museum’s grand façade, alluding to the magnificence of the treasures found inside. This is an presumption generated by the historical development of the museum in western society and one that is perpetuated by contemporary visual culture.

---

113 *Blue Mountains Life*, Vanessa Mace (ed), Vintage Press, vol 2 no 6, Dec.2006 – Jan.2007. The advertisement is a full page, glossy ad on the inside front cover of the magazine. Distribution is in the Blue Mountains, Central West, Nepean (Penrith) and Hawkesbury regions of New South Wales, Australia.
The visual language encoded in this advertisement is explanatory of contemporary societies relationship with the arts establishment through the branded image of the art museum. Symbols now understood to possess ideologies of exclusivity, value, quality, and not only in antiquity, but also as a format for the communication of new ideas, even radical ideas. The advertisement claims the product is ‘way ahead of its time’, whilst it is still visually linked to the art museum creating a direct association between the site and the notion that it is also where new ideas reside.

Because the viewer of contemporary art is also a member of society, a society within which notions of art and its relationship to its public are discussed, presented and encoded, he or she cannot stand in the space of the art gallery uninformed, nor untouched by the complex configuration of characteristics relating to its development and position in their social order.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the historical development of the art museum and the critical aspects of that development have had a direct influence on audience behaviour. It has been explained how the behaviour of an individual in a public setting, specifically in a public art gallery, is determined by a complex amalgamation of influences. Firstly there is response to the immediate environment, which includes the architectural formation of that space and the semiotic messages embedded there. These construct the framework on which the complex configuration of behaviour is built. Also, the audience’s response to the art gallery environment has been explained, in part, as a reaction to a grand civic space expressly allocated as a site for intense concentrated consideration of significant and valuable works of art, there value substantiated by the fact that they have been accepted into that art establishment.

Response to an art gallery environment can be both conscious and visceral. The viewers are seen conducting themselves with reverence, out of respect for this place of heightened aesthetic experience and the objects included in the ‘magic kingdom’ of the art gallery. The gatekeepers who decide which artefacts are worthy of inclusion have become the custodians of an exclusive realm and are responsible for the public’s trust in the value of, not only the works of art, but also the institution itself. Even as viewers move quietly about the gallery, talking in whispers and being careful not to degrade the works with any physical contact, their actions are influenced by each element of that environment.

The semiotics inherent in the physical construct of the art museum play an important role in determining the behaviour of the visitor to its realm. The art museum has evolved as a reflection of sociological developments, and those developments have shaped today’s art museums, even when they are presented in various guises. This study has embraced the notion of diversity within the art museum as place. To reflect that diversity, research has been conducted in a range of different sites, not all of them manifest as monumental civic buildings in neo-classical style. However, the sites used for this study, in their many different forms, have in common the ability to remind the viewing audience that the space where art is displayed is worthy of behavioural adaptations to reflect the heightened status of the art object and its location.

What this thesis is arguing is that the behaviours manifest by viewers of contemporary art are the result of a complex and diverse configuration of influences that depend, in part, on the physical manifestation of the art museum building and its historical development. Whether the building is of classical design or a temporary construction, it is the notion of the significance of the art establishment in general that has a direct influence on the participants. Importantly, the resonance of the art institution continues to influence the users of the zone of interaction. Chapter three defines and examines closely the space
known as the zone of interaction using theories of spatial dynamics, and situates it within the diverse range of sites presented. Significantly however, throughout this process, the author and reader remain conscious of the influence the historical development of the art museum, as site and institution, has had, and continues to have on its public.
CHAPTER THREE

The Zone of Interaction: Considering the Heterotopia

There are, therefore, common patterns in various experiences, no matter how unlike they are to one another in the details of their subject matter. There are conditions to be met without which an experience cannot come to be. The outline of the common pattern is set by the fact that every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives... An experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship.

John Dewey

This chapter defines the zone of interaction as a specific space recognised by the actions of the people who inhabit it rather than by the walls that enclose it. The author will argue that this space is recognised and defined by the manner in which it is used rather than by its physical appearance and location. John Dewey describes, in the epigram above, how experience occurs as a relationship between 'a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives'. We therefore are able to identify the creature as an audience member and the aspect of the world as visual art. These two elements are indeed essential and readily identifiable, whilst the experience that this study is examining consists of much more than those two elements.

The experience derived from being in a space where, not only the viewer and artwork exist, but where a multifaceted interweaving of relationships between various components of that space provides the author with information about the complex relationships that occur in the zone of interaction. The zone of interaction is defined so that it can be recognised in any environment in which the sum of its parts exist. Each component of that space is examined and explained in its most obvious and also most elusive details. The work of theorists Michel Foucault and Gaston Bachelard provide their rationales of spatial dynamics via their theories of heterotopology and topoanalysis, respectively. These terms will be explained and applied to the zone of interaction so that the interface between audience and art is understood through its intimate details. The word intimate alludes to a hidden or secretive relationship not obvious to the casual onlooker. It is indeed what is not obvious that gives shape to the interaction

that is being studied, and what is being argued is the importance of understanding the characteristics of
the viewing experience in every detail.

This chapter describes each of the sites where this study was implemented to provide evidence that the
actual location is not the defining element but merely the medium that provides the essential ingredients
to initiate the viewing experience. The contemporary art exhibitions presented in each of those locations
are also described, and included are the curators’ intentions in reference to what they hope to provide
for their audiences. This information informs the study, whilst the theory that the zone of interaction
occurs anywhere art and audience coexist is illustrated through a close examination of those sites.

How the audience, the focus of this study, experiences the space where contemporary art is displayed
is, as Dewey suggests in the epigram, ‘doing and undergoing in relationship’. The viewer is
‘undergoing’ a transformation in response to the environment in which he or she exists, whilst
simultaneously ‘doing’ particular behavioural roles inspired by, or in spite of, aspects of that same
environment. The responses viewers manifest are therefore in combination with and reflexive of
elements of that environment. The environment is thus an integral component of experience and is
deserving of an extended discussion of its makeup and relevance presented in this chapter.

The iconic art museum was discussed in the previous chapter to establish the relationship the viewing
public has with the art institution. Both the hierarchical influence and the imposing physical structure
establish a relationship that has shaped the audience’s perception of its stature, and impressed on
them as users ‘a special quality of attention’. Now the notion that the zone of interaction is able to exist
outside that paradigm will be argued. However, it must be stressed that the subliminal influence of the
art museum does continue to exert authority on viewers to a greater or lesser degree in the diverse
spaces where art is displayed. To test this diversity of location, the sites used for this study are
presented and compared in this chapter. Spatial theories, on which this argument relies, are shown to
support the notion that space is defined by the way it is used.

The principal concern of this thesis is the behaviour of audience members as they interact with
contemporary visual art. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues, ‘it is not the external conditions that count,
but what we make of them’. The relationship between contemporary art and the viewing public is
shown to rely in part on the quality, or texture, of the space in which it occurs. The word *texture* is
carefully chosen to inspire a sense of being in contact with something that requires more than a visual
connection. It requires the implementation of a combination of senses to realise the true nature of that
space. Here the focus is intensified to examine space as a metaphysical configuration consisting of, as

---

3 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p.44.
4 Role participation will be discussed in chapter six in detail.
Dewey suggests, ‘pattern and structure in relationship’.\(^7\) Patterns emerge and are identified as primary elements of the interaction between visual art audience members and their viewing environment. These patterns are not isolated, but rather remain connected to a wider network of society. It is the identification of patterns within the viewing environment and the understanding of how they connect to the broader structure of society that informs this thesis.

To set out a framework for the recognition of each site, in relation to what occurs there, Michel Foucault’s heterotopology, in conjunction with Gaston Bachelard’s topoanalysis, are implemented as working theories of spatial dynamics.\(^8\) The sites used for this research are presented as examples of how the theories of spatial dynamics have been employed. Variations of major contributing aspects of the sites, which include the artworks displayed, exhibition construct, architecture and location, demonstrate how recognition of the zone of interaction allows comparisons of behaviour between these divergent sites to be implemented. All the sites used for this study vary in their location and physical description. By establishing a constant, which is the definition of the space where viewing takes place, or the zone of interaction, the study is executed within clearly defined parameters. The definition of the zone of interaction can be applied to all sites, whilst understanding how each visitor forms their own relationship with the site is maintained as the primary focus.

### Spatial Theories

Gaston Bachelard presents the concept that space is a living entity within each of us.\(^9\) His theory allows a direct connection between the individual and the space he or she inhabits to be considered as a relationship existing within each individual, other than the one considered as a direct result of the immediate surroundings. If audience members make a connection with the zone of interaction because they have recollections of a past experience, ones that make a direct association with their present location, it is likely that they establish an instant affinity with the space in which they exist, even when they have never been there before. Understanding, or at least being aware of, what is not seen, such as these recollections, assists in the explanation of what is seen. To successfully navigate inhabited space, Bachelard suggests ‘we must go beyond the problem of description – whether this description be objective or subjective, that is, whether it gives facts or impressions – in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of

\(^7\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p.44.  
\(^8\) Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’ and Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.  
\(^9\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. 

81
inhabiting’. Understanding invisible qualities of an encounter is an essential attribute of this study that assists the ethnographer to determine the structure of the experience.

Bachelard argues that we are influenced by an affinity we have with the spaces we inhabit, and Foucault speculates on how each space we inhabit is recognised as a heterotopia because of the way we use it and how it connects with society. Both theories provide an understanding of the complexity of the sites where interaction occurs. Bachelard offers an assurance of being able to reside in the comfort and familiarity of our personal experience while we are actually elsewhere, such as in the zone of interaction, while Foucault offers a means of identifying the zone of interaction in its many guises. The result is a way to understand the interconnectivity, while specialized nature of the space so it is understood to exist apart from all other spaces whilst still influenced by them. Foucault’s theory will be considered before a detailed explanation of how Bachelard’s supposition helps define our relationship with the zone of interaction.

Primarily, Foucault categorizes space as either a utopia or heterotopia. If a utopia is an ‘imagined perfect place or state’ with no real place, he concludes that a heterotopia must therefore be a distinct place defined by an accumulation of effects which are generated by the use of that particular type of space. Therefore a heterotopia is neither imagined nor perfect, but in every regard a specific place. Importantly, this specific place is not an isolated entity; it remains connected to all other places through a complex network. As Foucault argues:

>`The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.`

The zone of interaction is a specific place within the intersecting network Foucault describes. It is a heterotopia. Foucault defines the action of heterotopology as the ‘studying, analysing, describing, “reading”…of the space in which we live’. Therefore, Foucault would describe a study or a reading of the space inhabited by members of the public who are viewing visual art, as a form of heterotopology, whilst the more specific term of ethnomuseology has been applied, by the author, to the exact space where visual art is examined by members of the public.

To examine in detail what Foucault means by a heterotopia and how he employs heterotopology, a closer look at the ways in which he has analysed space pertaining to these principals is presented. The

---

10 Bachelard, _The Poetics of Space_, p.4.
12 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.22.
13 Foucault, ibid, p.175.
14 Foucault, ibid, p.179.
same principals are then applied to the space where art is presented. Because an art environment can include anywhere art is publicly displayed, being able to read what constitutes that environment provides a ‘constant’ for this study.

The first principal Foucault cites is ‘spaces which connect to all society but whose roles are changing in time’.\(^\text{15}\) He uses the cemetery as an example. ‘The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces’.\(^\text{16}\) The cemetery is a place where members of the family have been buried and thus everyone knows someone in the cemetery, and it is a place everyone will eventually be, therefore creating a connection between the space of a cemetery (in whatever physical form that may have taken) and society. However, there has been a change in beliefs over time, from a trust that there is ‘life after death’ beyond the mortal realm, to the atheistic interest in the ‘afterlife’ where spirits are thought to exist within our midst.\(^\text{17}\) What was perceived as a ‘permanent resting place’ has altered with changing beliefs, and therefore, how society perceives the cemetery. It still exists as the ideological connection with ancestors, while attitudes towards the dead have altered in time.

A national art collection is considered, especially by the gatekeepers of the arts establishment, to be representative of that nation’s society and culture and thus a connection with the society it represents. The art museum maintains this connection with its society while its role has altered through time. For example, Bernice Murphy, author of *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context*, writes ‘museums – especially art museums – have become much more complex public institutions’.\(^\text{18}\) For example, the art institution has become a more accessible public space over time. The elimination of admission charges, in many cases, has removed the financial barrier making them more accessible. Also an increase in education as programs to encourage participation have been instigated not only through schools, but also through public programmes initiated by the institutions themselves. Public comment is also encouraged (people’s choice at major prize exhibitions is one example) and increased media attention, both negative and positive, concerning current trends and acquisitions provides society with an evolving commentary. Control of public art institutions has been wrested from the hands of a male upper-class enclave, and exclusive patronage by the upper classes no longer exists. These factors are seeing the role of the art gallery changing over time placing it within Foucault’s heterotopian guidelines.

The second principal Foucault suggests is ‘contradictory spaces’, another form of heterotopia being spaces that represent the larger world in a much smaller area.\(^\text{19}\) Foucault sees the garden as a representation of nature and a carpet as a representation of the garden and thus the world in a room.

---

\(^\text{15}\) Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.25.
\(^\text{16}\) Foucault, ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Especially with the proliferation of television and cinema depictions of the ‘dead’ remaining in our midst for forces of evil or good with examples from ‘Casper the White Ghost’, to ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’.
\(^\text{19}\) Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.25.
Likewise, a cinema represents a three dimensional space, but is found on a two dimensional surface - the depth of the real world contained on the flat surface of a screen. The contemporary art gallery is a space of contradiction where concepts of life, conflict, emotion and upheaval are represented between four white walls. A blank space is allotted the outrageously colourful and complicated expression of mankind, making it a contradictory space.

Foucault also cites the museum as a particular heterotopia - a place where the movement of time is halted because what the movement of time has produced is shut away, ‘a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages’.\footnote{Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.26.} Once an art object is acquired by the art museum, it is removed from time’s influence to remain forever the same as it was at that moment when the gallery acquired it. The art object becomes a record of what society has produced (the artist as representative of that society), and as a consequence of that society’s development. The art object is unaltered from that point on and becomes a record that remains outside the onward movement of time.

This line of thought coincides with that of Donald Kuspit’s, in reference to ‘The Magic Kingdom of the Museum’, discussed in the previous chapter, where he argues that the art object becomes frozen in time when it is acquired by the art museum.\footnote{Donald Kuspit, ‘The Magical Kingdom of the Museum’ in \textit{Artforum International}, April 1992, vol. 30, no. 3.} The art museum celebrates the passage of time through the evolving art works, but by doing so halts their evolution by displaying them as representative of an era, whilst they are outside that era which they represent. A contemporary art exhibition is a record of the movement of time as well as the present moment in time. It notes the development of the work of the artist up to that point, while acknowledging that that particular moment is now a record, up to that moment and not beyond. It is a point in time when the artist has to relinquish ownership of the artwork.
He or she has had total control over the product, to alter it at their volition, until that point when, once it is displayed to the viewing audience, it must remain exactly in that form for as long as it physically exists.\textsuperscript{22} It is now a permanent record of that artist’s expression. Even though the artist may go on to evolve in his or her art practise, the works contained in the gallery’s collection are frozen in time. They are forever locked in the present. A heterotopia is created within the space of the contemporary art exhibition.

A heterotopia can also be described as a ‘space linked to slices in time.’ An example used by Foucault to explain this space is a vacation village where the participants are able to step into another time outside the reality of their own for a week or two, where they become Polynesians living on an island paradise for that slice of time.\textsuperscript{23} This concept, in relation to the art museum, was raised in chapter two as a discussion concerning the audience member’s reaction when entering the gallery space – they enter a liminal space, a space different to the reality of their lives outside the gallery, a space configured in a specific way to evoke a change in the way they perceive themselves and in the way they react to the space. The time they spend in the gallery becomes a slice of time unlike others, while the act of observing, which defines it, connects it to the objects of their observation that are representative of society. The observers step into another reality beyond the everyday for that time they spend in the artificial environment of the enclosed art museum, a time spent in their own personal reverie.

Another heterotopia Foucault refers to is the space that requires the user to submit to some kind of alteration in behaviour when they enter, such as ‘the space which has a system of opening and closing making it penetrable yet exclusive.’\textsuperscript{24} The example Foucault uses is the prison that has compulsory entry and demands a strict adherence to a behavioural code. The church or temple is another of these spaces where entry is open but those who do enter are required to perform certain acts such as removing shoes, kneeling, chanting, singing or remaining silent. The actions displayed in the church or temple have been compared to the expected behaviour in the art gallery.\textsuperscript{25} The gallery is open to the public yet is exclusive to those who comply with the code of expected behaviour of being quiet, moving slowly and refraining from touching any objects. They are asked to refrain from eating or drinking or performing any action that would interrupt the contemplative environment of the gallery. A contemporary art exhibition is also defined as a heterotopia that has a system of penetrable exclusiveness because the users are invited to attend but are required to behave in an acceptable and appropriate way.

Finally, there is consideration of ‘heterotopias which have a function in relation to the remaining space.’\textsuperscript{26} This may come about in two different ways. Foucault believes they are either the creation of ‘a

\textsuperscript{22} Personal experience as a practicing artist and discussion with other artists has constructed knowledge of this issue.
\textsuperscript{23} Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.26.
\textsuperscript{24} Foucault, ibid, p.27.
\textsuperscript{26} Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’.
space of illusion which denounces all real space’ such as Disneyland, or, ‘a different real space as perfect’ with the intention of being better than the real world, such as some of the religious sects in the United States. 27 This may be how the contemporary art audience perceives their experience to be - a space of cultural exposure, social interaction and intellectual stimulation, rolled into one intense bracket of time. The contemporary art audience may see this space as an escape from the everyday for a short, intense period of sensory stimulation. A space, not defined by physical partitioning, but by a psychological effort of concentration or quiet repose. If so, the art gallery would be one of these heterotopias. A visitor to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (MCA) described her experience there: ‘I tend to change my behaviour to be more discreet and attentive to my surroundings’, while another visitor explained how he ‘was looking into the meanings of the displays more than I would in the outside world’. 28 Both these audience members recognise the art gallery as being different to the remainder of spaces they frequent.

Foucault argues there is no defined progression of orderly events so that we are able to make a precise account of our world in an organized fashion. 29 Clearly we become more aware of the intricate connecting and overlapping of the contents of our lives when we try to unravel them. However, with every attempt to do so, the skein, to which Foucault referred earlier in this chapter, grows larger and more entangled. It is inevitable that some of those threads start, end and intersect in the contemporary art exhibition. By likening the many clarifications of what constitutes a heterotopia to the space known as the zone of interaction, it is clear that this zone is a complex configuration of social and personal variations that appear also to resemble a skein. The different threads that converge in that space simultaneously define it and connect it with the society in which it exists.

Society is understood to exist as human activities functioning interdependently and occurring without the specific need for physical containment. In fact there is a realisation of the absence of physical description when locating the heterotopia. Spaces are often seen to occur and be bound only by the way in which society constructs and uses them for a specific purpose or configuration of purposes. It is the human activity allotted to that space, rather than a building or location that can define it. Therefore, the process of identifying a heterotopia can be applied anywhere at any time. By using Foucault’s theories of spatial dynamics the actions of the viewing audience define the site of the study in the ways they use that space. The zone of interaction is therefore able to occur at any physical location and at any time without having to be defined by the physical space that contains it. The galleries included in this study, though contained by physical structures, are primarily recognised by the activities carried out within the space where interaction occurs.

27 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’.
29 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p.23.
Foucault’s theory of what constitutes a heterotopia provides a means of identifying the zone of interaction.\footnote{Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’}. For the researcher these descriptions of spaces permit ease of access to clear and precise identification of each or any zone of interaction because of the way in which it is used rather then its physical configuration. Because the sites used for this study are diverse in every respect it is necessary to have a means of identifying them for inclusion in this study. It is far too general a categorization to use ‘art gallery’ or ‘art museum’. Each art gallery or museum is endowed with its individual set of descriptors, which may not necessarily be the same for each site.\footnote{The stereotypical architectural configuration of the art gallery was discussed in chapter two, however it will be shown in this chapter that this characteristic design is not necessary to identify the zone of interaction.}

The physical appearance, or architectural design, may be very different, both externally and internally, and their location within region or streetscape also diverse.\footnote{Examples of this diversity appear in this chapter.}

Foucault provides recognizable patterns to which the zone of interaction can be applied, while Bachelard presents a theory of internal structure of experience within the zone of interaction.\footnote{Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’ and Bachelard, The Poetics of Space.} He reminds us that ‘in its countless alveoli space contains time. That is what space is for’.\footnote{Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, p.8. Alveoli are millions of microscopic air-sacks in the lungs.} He believes that our memories of past space inform us when we inhabit the spaces of our present. He has given the name topoanalysis to the study of these spaces; ‘topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives’.\footnote{Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, p.8.}

The public viewing of art may not, on first consideration, fall into the category of an intimate act. Yet it is through memory and recollection of past sites of experience that we gain an understanding of the present experience within the present space. The space where interaction with images and objects takes place brings with it recollections of previous intimate knowledge and generates new understanding between that art object and the viewer. The intimate experience of interaction with art occurs as much in the mind of the viewer as in the space that is identified as the zone of interaction.

The experience of the viewer can be influenced by past encounters he or she may have had in an art gallery. Alternatively, the viewer may have had past experience with a similar site, which was not necessarily an art gallery, yet that past experience never the less informs the present. If the theoretical gallery being discussed is housed in a 19\textsuperscript{th} century building of grand proportions, and the viewer had previously visited a space of similar configuration, this may evoke the feeling the viewer had when he or she occupied that previous space. If it were a courthouse where the emotions of fear and panic had been predominant, those same emotions may pervade the viewer’s experience. The white walls of the gallery could, to yet another viewer, remind him or her of a space previously experienced in a hospital where a sense of loss and helplessness prevailed. How do the viewers negotiate the spaces of their memories while living the present? Bachelard argues that:
In the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability.\(^6\)

Carried through life, buoyed by experience, informed by memory, the zone of interaction is one space in the parade of many that is influenced, not only by the present context and what is physically present at the time, but by the network of past experience as each individual has lived their life. The present experience of interacting with contemporary art becomes an addition to the onward motion of the accumulation of life’s experience. Each new encounter is another thread connecting with Foucault’s metaphorical skein.

A practical application of Bachelard’s theory is the understanding applied to the viewer’s familiarity with the space of interaction and the idea of providing a lasting memory of the experience for viewers to take with them when they leave the gallery. The importance of making the first time gallery goer’s experience a positive one can not be stressed enough in its ability to build a positive ongoing relationship. All relationships with spaces are pertinent to the individual. Bachelard was inspired by the domestic setting of the home when he considered the poetics of space - ‘the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time’.\(^7\)

This is pertinent to the gallery where an overall impression of the site is recorded in memory as well as a body of images provided by the artwork displayed within. When we are asked to remember a particular thing, we locate the item mentally by recalling firstly the room it may be in and then its exact location within the room. As an example, to recall where we left a comb, we would firstly remember the green walled bedroom, then the dressing table, and then the exact drawer where we last saw the comb. The trail is remembered with support from mental images, colours, sounds, even smells. It is harder to remember or locate something within a space devoid of all other stimulus. It would then follow that to recall a specific artwork within a continuous white walled space would be a difficult proposition and may be directly responsible for the lack of memory of certain works within the white walled gallery. In the art gallery, if the viewer is unable to locate the space in which the work was last seen, recalling the work itself becomes difficult. In a gallery of multiple white-walled rooms, the viewer may wander aimlessly without connection to space, without connection to art object located within that space, and leave without memory of experience because there has been no definable location to which memory is attached. This behaviour is seen in the MCA when viewers wander back into previously visited rooms and take some time to realise they have been there before. They then stop, looking for some invisible path from which they have strayed, before turning to retrace their steps.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Bachelard, The Poetics of Space.
\(^7\) Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, p.3.
\(^8\) Behaviour noted at MCA during fieldwork observations, August, 2006.
A large gallery may assist its audience in the process of memory collection by providing visual prompts. The most obvious would be to colour the different rooms.\textsuperscript{39} This in itself is open to much debate based on the white cube theory and the aesthetic beliefs of the gallery staff. Nikos Papastergiadis states quite clearly the reasoning behind a white walled space as ‘a place where the perception is meant to occur without the interference of any exterior elements, where the significance, ambience and resonance of art can register without distraction, contamination or dissonance’.\textsuperscript{40} However, to give audiences a prompt for memory it may be as simple as adding an item to the room; a blue skirting board or yellow lounge, an ornate doorway. Something recollectable can define one room from another and thus enable mental tracking of memory to lead the viewer back to a particular room and then to a particular work. For some sites the architecture of the building provides visual stimulus enough to define its’ location and set it apart from other buildings so that that particular gallery becomes a space of memories for the viewer. The memories the viewer arrives with are superimposed on that space, while additional, fresher, even more intimate memories are being collected as the viewer lives within that space. ‘By recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams’.\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{41} Papastergiadis, ibid. p.6.
Recognising the Art Museum

There are layers of visual information audience members must decipher as they negotiate the space where contemporary art resides. To determine the basis of particular behaviours, an understanding of how viewers might interpret the many layers of visual information that encase the art objects is required. The semiotic interpretation of various sites where contemporary art is presented provides part of the holistic knowledge required. Architectural theory argues that the exterior of a building may allude to the function of the interior space. Robert Venturi discusses the analogy of the ‘duck’ and the ‘decorated shed’ in *Learning from Las Vegas* when he discusses postmodern readings of architectural form. His theory is that a building’s form either alludes to its function, or there is a sign attached to the building that describes the function of that building, the sign may be in text or a symbolic form. This may be a simplification of the reading of architectural form, but the complexity is realised through individual codes of reference brought to that site that enable interpretive readings of symbols by members of the public. A personal reading evolves through the individual’s context and experience of architectural form. Venturi would refer to the grand classical edifices of large public galleries housing national collections, those built throughout the late 18th, 19th and early 20th Centuries, as ‘ducks’, in so far as they announce the intentions of the buildings’ function as repositories for a refined and conservative collection of valuable artefacts that represent the best of societies fine art. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates designed the Sainsbury Wing of London’s National Gallery (pictured below), built in 1991, using a visual connection to the original building imitating the columns from the National Gallery’s portico, and applying them as relief decoration to the façade of the new adjacent wing. The architectural form declares the buildings function and connects it visually with the original building of the National Gallery without duplicating it, but by merely attaching the same symbol referents that connote ‘museum’. Douglas Davis suggests the design ‘playfully appropriates elements of William Wilkins’s soft grey porticoed and pillared 1838 “original”’.
Conversely, Venturi’s ‘decorated shed’ would be a nondescript building emblazoned with a sign advertising the function of that building. For example, a shop operating as an art gallery in a row of similar shopfronts would be ‘decorated’ with the text GALLERY on its exterior. The sign would inform passers by of its purpose, without which they would be unable to visually interpret that shop’s function from the exterior design.

An understanding of how the public recognise the art museum, or any space used for that purpose, is an important contribution to the body of knowledge encompassing audience behaviour. Because a wide range of sites is included in this study, it is relevant to understand how the visitors to those sites
interpret their own encounters. It is impossible to tell how each individual identifies with each site, so the alternative is to describe those sites and suggest how the public may interpret them.

Figure 26 Front aspect and main entrance of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (MCA), is an imposing building that announces its civic importance in its size and location. Approached from Circular Quay, it stands as a solitary mass. A grand facade faced with Maroubra yellowrock sandstone and detailed with polished Rob Roy red granite at its base and main entrances. The ‘H’ plan building was designed by W. H. Withers and D. Baxter (MSB Design Offices) in 1940-44 but was not constructed until 1947-52 because of the intervening Second World War. ‘By the time the building was completed, fashion had changed, and it was considered an Art Deco dinosaur’. The windows are encased in bronze, (surprisingly cheaper than aluminium as originally planned at the time), the foyer is clad with polished Wombeyan marble and edged with green marble quarried near Mudgee in New South Wales.

47 The Museum of Contemporary Art has been briefly described in chapter two.  
49 Jahn, ibid, p.156.  
50 ‘Museum of Contemporary Art: History of Site and Building’, notes from the Museum of Contemporary Art library archives, accessed on Thursday 1st November.  
The location of the MCA within the Sydney landscape is impressive, where it looks out across the harbour to the white glinting sails of the Sydney Opera House, flanked by the massive structure of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to its left and a forest of giant glass and steel skyscrapers pushing into the clouds on its right. It stands solidly six stories tall on a steel frame encased in concrete, rising from the trimmed grass and gardens that abut the paved esplanade of the quay, where buskers and tourists congregate forming a loud and bustling crowd. It is significantly placed in the company of the famous Australian icons of the Opera House, Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Harbour.

![Figure 27 Museum of Contemporary Art with Sydney Harbour Bridge to its right, and the cityscape to its left. Photo: J. Sager](image)

The impressive structure of the MCA creates an aura of austerity befitting a civic building, yet lacks those design features that would allude to the presence of great works of art, which are the neo-classical columns most frequently used to denote cultural buildings. However, the shape of a monumental building proclaims its civic importance, which would identify it as a ‘duck,’ according to Venturi; while it also requires a ‘decoration’ to publicize its precise function as an art museum. Thus the MCA employs signs attached to its façade. Small signs at the front of the building and large banners attached to its exterior walls, which turn it into what Venturi would describe as a ‘decorated shed’. Hardly a shed when its stature signifies that it is sanctioned by the government, and thus has an important role to play in Australian society.
In stark contrast to the MCA, is the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery located in Windsor, a small urban centre on the outskirts of Sydney’s sprawling suburbs, known for its historical relevance in the early development of colonial Sydney. It was then, in the 1800s, an agricultural outpost on the banks of the Hawkesbury River supplying produce to the growing city of Sydney. Much of the town centre is preserved and heritage listed to maintain the appearance of the original era. Deerubbin Centre, in which the Hawkesbury Regional Art Gallery is located, opened in 2005 as a purpose built complex housing the Hawkesbury Central Library, seminar rooms, women’s health centre and café, as well as the regional gallery. Hawkesbury Regional Gallery is the State’s newest public gallery.

52 The author’s grandmother traveled from Surry Hills, inner city suburb of Sydney, to Windsor on Cob and Co. Coaches as a young girl in the early 1900’s to visit relatives who grew oranges for the Sydney markets located on the banks of the Hawkesbury River.

53 ‘Deerubbin’ is the name given to the Hawkesbury River by the Boorerboorongal clan of the Durag tribe, the traditional owners of the land.

Designed by architects Pont, Williams and Leroy Pty Ltd, it is a contemporary brick, steel and glass construction. The scale, materials, textures and colours of the exterior of the building harmonise with those of the surrounding buildings, with particular design features reflecting elements of the old hospital building [nearby]. The result is a building that fits comfortably within the town’s urban fabric. The size of the centre is noticeably larger than nearby structures, which is befitting the importance of this community centre. It is also positioned in an open area of lawns inferring its stature as a civic building. The absence of advertising logos, commonly associated with commercial buildings, also implies that it is a public building. However, the absence of signage is problematic for this gallery as it is only through a series of deductions that the visitor is informed of its presence. There are some signs, which are easily missed and not readily identifiable with the particular part of the building housing the art collection. To build patronage from the local regional population it has been suggested that the goal of marketing should be ‘about nurturing an appreciation and understanding amongst existing and potential audiences’. One of these strategies should be making the actual location of the gallery more obvious to potential audiences both local and other.

---

55 The Deerubin Centre Grand Opening Commemorative Booklet, Hawkesbury City Council, Windsor, 2005.
56 Ibid, p.4.
This gallery is most often approached by car and the small signs located on the streets are inadequate for the driver of a moving vehicle to be able to recognise. The larger banner on the actual building is too far from the street to be of assistance to a passing vehicle. Within the design of the building there is little architectural detail that indicates its specific function.

The louvred glass and steel façade along the northern side is an energy saving design feature – ‘the atrium louvres are fixed to deflect direct sunlight from the building’s interior, reducing the radiant heat entering the building and the window louvres adjust automatically, depending on the angle of the sun, to provide maximum light and minimal impact on the building’s cooling system’. This feature also gives the building a notable characteristic divergent to traditional government buildings in the area and may suggest a site created for a non-traditional role, but this is merely conjecture.

---

Once inside the centre a feeling of expanded space befitting a public building is created by the open design of the foyer, or atrium. An internal area consisting of flights of stairs, central lift shaft, mezzanine
floor, seating areas and glassed entrances to the library and gallery, all of which are swathed in light from the extended three-story glass wall. The actual entrance to the gallery itself is a blank glass wall, beyond which the reception desk can be seen. ‘Hawkesbury Regional Gallery’ in white lettering adorns the door.

![Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, front door. Photo: J. Sager](image)

As one of forty-three public galleries operating in New South Wales, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery’s mandate is to ‘provide a regularly changing program of exhibitions and events that reflect the area’s unique heritage via contemporary and traditional art’. 59 ‘The gallery features changing exhibitions by regional and national artists, and has positioned itself at the centre of a vibrant cultural development program and growing cultural tourism industry’. 60 ‘Every exhibition is accompanied by a program of artist and curator talks as well as workshops for young people and adults, film screenings and guided tours’. 61 There is no admission charge and the gallery is funded by local and state governments. 62 The floor space of the gallery is 692 square metres with 120 linear metres of hanging space. This is a small area in comparison to the MCA, while it is considered sufficient for a regional gallery. 63

There are fundamental similarities and differences between all sites where contemporary art is displayed and this is why a diverse range of sites are used in this study. This, of course, adds to the notion that the zone of interaction can be recognised by the way in which it is used rather than the

---

59 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, promotional pamphlet available from the gallery, 2006.
60 Art of New South Wales: A Guide to Regional Galleries, Regional Galleries Association and Tourism New South Wales, a booklet, p.23.
62 Interview with director of Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Ingrid Hoffman, March 2006.
63 Ibid.
physical configuration of the site. The Hawkesbury Regional Gallery is the smallest space chosen for this study, which sets a stark comparison with the internationally recognised sites of the MCA, Documenta 12 and the divergent sites of the 2006 Singapore Biennale. What Hawkesbury Regional Gallery does have in common with one particular site used for Documenta 12, the Aue-Pavillon, is that they were both designed and constructed for the purpose of housing art exhibitions. Hawkesbury Regional Gallery as a permanent site and the Aue-Pavillon to temporarily house contemporary works of art for the 100 days of Documenta 12.

The Aue-Pavillon, designed by French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philipp Vassal, covered approximately 9,500 square metres, constructed in steel and plexiglass consisting of 63 modules 9.6m x 20m each. The original plan was to make the greenhouse-like structure reliant on natural light and airflow. However this was not possible and large air-conditioning plants were added to control the internal environment, plus extensive curtaining was used to reduce glare from the transparent walls. Overhead track lighting was then installed to spotlight art objects that did not receive enough natural light.

Figure 33 Map showing the location of gallery sites used for Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, 2007. Map from [www.documenta12](http://www.documenta12).

---

64 Information and description of Aue-Pavillon can be found at: http://translate.google.com.au/translate?hl=en&sl=de&u=http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E0C39FC065156484B2A65C398FF53EB9~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=10&ct=result&prev=/search%3Fq%3DAue-pavillon%2BAanne%2BLacaton%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DG.
The Museum Fridericianum, Documenta-Halle, Neue Galerie and Schloss Wilhelmshöhe (Castle) were the main venues for Documenta 12, all situated in Kassel and within 300 metres of each other, except Schloss Wilhelmshöhe situated on the outskirts of the city. Research for this study was focused on the sites of the Aue-Pavillon and Museum Fridericianum with much less time spent at the other venues, only briefly described here. The contrast between Aue-Pavillon and Museum Fridericianum provided insight into similarities and differences in the behaviour of audience members within the two spaces. Response to a specific site can be judged as being pertinent, while the measure of that response can only be gauged through comparison. These sites provided a platform for this qualitative measure. The Aue-Pavillon was a vast open space designed to accommodate 13,000 visitors per day, whilst the Museum Fridericianum consisted of many rooms opening from corridors and stairwells over three levels, a building that has been used as a museum for more than two centuries.\(^{65}\)

Simon Louis du Ry was commissioned in 1769 to build the Museum Fridericianum, which is disputed to be the earliest independent museum building open to the public. On one side of the Friedrichsplatz (town square) stands the Museum Fridericianum, 80 metres long with wings extending 41 metres to the rear, ‘a large self-contained building with a front of nineteen bays. It is articulated by giant Ionic pilasters rising from the ground and has at its centre a portico of six unfluted giant columns carrying a pediment.’ The portico is ‘crowned by six statues representing architecture, philosophy, painting, sculpture, history and astronomy sculpted by Heyd and Samuel Nahl the younger.’ This building is unmistakably cast in the form most representational of the museum, its basic design is repeated in national museums throughout the western world. The portico in Neo-classical style, reiterated in so many museums including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (built 1904-09); the National Gallery, London (built 1838); and the Glyptothek, Munich (built 1816-30).

Figure 35 Museum Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: J. Sager

66 Watkin et al, ibid.
The following extract provides a detailed description of the interior configuration of the Museum Fridericianum highlighting the progression of individual spaces through the building in which were displayed the works of approximately fifty five artists during Documenta 12.

The ground floor had large rooms with columns dividing them into three naves. The Antique statuary was displayed here. The left corner and left back wing held natural science, minerals, maritime plants, butterflies, etc. On the upper floor the long front housed the library. The left back wing had mathematical and physical instruments and above, on the top floor, mechanical and musical instruments. On the upper floor of the right back wing, finally, the Landgrave had a private study. Above this were, besides arms, waxworks.

The image below shows the work of Iole De Freitas, *Untitled*, installed in what would have been the library, now an open, light filled room ideal for the display of contemporary artworks. Also note the colour of the walls. Green walls were in each room on this level, a design tactic that aided in identifying the level of the building on which the particular works were located. Painting the rooms on each level the same colour was an element of the gallery design that assisted with 'way finding' through the many rooms and levels in this museum.

---

70 The relevance of this artwork to the perceptions of audiences appears in chapter five.
The other sites used in the Documenta 12 exhibition were, briefly, Documenta Halle, built in 1992 as an exhibition space during Documenta 9 that also shows art exhibitions throughout the year and houses administrative offices for Documenta. Neue Galerie (New Gallery), when not in use for Documeta, houses collections of German paintings and sculpture from 1750 – 2007, plus a collection of international contemporary art including key works from Documentas since the 1960’s. Schloss Wilhelmshöhe by Simon Louis du Ry and Heinrich Jussow, built 1786 – 1792 is a vast construction in neo-classical style overlooking Kassel from its vantage point above the city. Schloss Wilhelmshöhe houses a permanent collection of old masters and sculpture which made way for only a small collection of contemporary artworks for the Documenta 12 exhibition.

The main site for the Singapore Biennale 2006, also in neo-classical style with design similarities to buildings used for Documenta 12 in Kassel, was City Hall in Singapore. The long façade adorned with Corinthian columns was designed by Gordon and F. D. Meadows and completed in 1929. The City Hall was built as a municipal building and has housed the Prime Minister’s Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the former Ministry of Culture and the Supreme Court. Because the Supreme Court moved into new premises in 2005, City Hall was available for use during the Biennale. It is also significant that City Hall has been earmarked for conversion into Singapore’s National Art Gallery by 2012. Using the building for the biennale has provided insight into how the public reacts to that site prior

---

71 Architect and date built unable to be found.
72 www.kassel.de/cms02/englisch/history accessed 5/11/07
to its conversion. Twenty-nine artists installed their work over one floor, with a single work made accessible from a lower floor, and most artists were provided at least one entire room in which to install their work.

The other primary site for the Singapore Biennale was Tanglin Camp where a further thirty-two artists displayed work in the decommissioned barracks that were first established in 1872 for the British Army. Much of the square support columns and French-tiled roofs of the original buildings were preserved during renovations that saw some of the structures torn down to make way for new concrete buildings in 1934-6. The scattered buildings had been repainted, air-conditioning was installed in some of the larger buildings, and pathways and drainage improved to accommodate the exhibition. Other sites used to display work for the Singapore Biennale included many religious buildings, the National Library, the National Museum and commercial and residential sites. Research for this thesis focused on City Hall and Tanglin Camp.

A conscious decision to include the most diverse range of sites and buildings in this study was made by the author. The objective was to test the validity of this research model, the focus of which is on the behaviours of the participants, rather than the site. The choice to study contemporary art exhibitions in metropolitan and regional Australia; the city state of Singapore in Asia; and in Kassel, Germany in Western Europe, has provided a diverse scope of locations to illustrate the propensity for ethnomuseology to be practiced anywhere the heterotopia, defined as the zone of interaction, occurs.

The Exhibitions

When discussing a space that is not defined by its ‘walls’, the provision of a description of the circumstances that have attracted visitors to that site underpins their response to that site. The exhibition itself is, in most cases, the initial element that attracts the majority of the audience to enter the zone of interaction. A brief introduction to each of the exhibitions used for this thesis provides an overview of what may have attracted the audience initially to the site and a brief insight into the curatorial construct for each viewing environment. The director and/or curator presents a body of work with a particular framework in which each object is able to exist in relation to the other works in the exhibition.

\[6\] Slater, Belief: Singapore Biennale 2006, p.158.
However, Documenta 12 was presented by its director, Roger M. Buergel and curator Ruth Noack as not complying with this common curatorial construct, as they state in the catalogue preface,

The big exhibition has no form. This trivial fact made us seek to combine precision with generosity. More often than not exhibitions come with a theme or are dedicated to a particular artist, a certain era or style, however the documenta's inherent formlessness contradicts any such approach.

It is true that art is not without context; each work is attached to a local history. However, exhibitions are only worth looking at if we manage to dispense with preordained categories and arrive at a plateau where art communicates itself on its own terms. This is aesthetic experience in its true sense: The exhibition becomes a medium in its own right and can thus hope to involve its audience in its compositional moves.\(^7\)

The presumption that this ‘formless’ exhibition construct would ‘involve’ the audience is precisely why the author believed it necessary to include Documenta 12 in this research. The other exhibitions, described here are based on a theme, collection, or locality. Documenta 12 has tried a different approach, basing their over arching concepts on three questions: “Is modernity our antiquity?”, “What is bare life?” and “What is to be done?” By asking questions of the audience, ‘we’re trying to involve

people in a composition of ideas in relation to what they are seeing whilst they make their own connections and conclusions about the work as an exhibition’.76

Documenta is an exhibition that has been defined as ‘the most important and most spectacular of international art events’.77 Documenta is an international exhibition of contemporary visual art held in Kassel, Germany every five years. ‘The documenta is regarded as the most important exhibition of contemporary art, drawing attention from all over the world. It was initiated in 1955 by the artist and art educator, Arnold Bode.’78 ‘[Documenta] was meant to reconnect Germany with international modernism and break with a dependence on national tradition’ following the near total destruction of Kassel by allied bombing during World War II.79 Large audiences are drawn to Documenta every five years because of the reputation it has established worldwide since 1955. Crowds come to view what has been selected as representative of contemporary art’s finest, or, more precisely, those works that the director and curator feel are befitting their estimate of what is ‘contemporary art in all its complexity’.80 Noack suggests that audiences are drawn to Documenta rather than permanent exhibitions of contemporary art because they believe they are being ‘informed about the state of the arts and the state of the world’.81

Figure 39 Audience at Documenta 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

Noack believes visitors often attend Documenta in preference to permanent collections of contemporary art, which are always accessible. The selection of artworks, because they are considered to be representative of avant-garde practices in the visual arts, are often contentious and may be disputed, as was the case for Documenta 12. The exhibition in Kassel in 2007 solicited comments as diverse as British art critic Richard Dorment’s opinion that it was ‘the single worst art exhibition I have ever seen anywhere, ever’, to Holland Cotter from the New York Times stating that ‘it has a mystique of its own’ and Jackie Wullschlager of the Financial Times (London) announcing that ‘Documenta 2007 is the most enlightening, thrilling art show in the world because it is genuinely of the world, rather than a Euro-American take on global culture’.

The publicity Documenta 12 generated prior to, and throughout the 100 days of the exhibition contributed to the record numbers of curious audience members. There was an increase from 650,000 visitors in 2002 at Documenta 11, to over 770,000 in 2007, which included 15,537 journalists. They were there to see the more than 500 works by a diverse collection of international artists. ‘With around 150 participants, the roster is fairly modest in size, but its geographic range stretches from the Canadian Arctic (with the Inuit painter Annie Pootoogook) to Southeast Asia (with the Singapore-born Simryn Gill, who now lives in Australia). With such diversity of works, displayed in nine locations across Kassel, the audience were given ample opportunity to experience this exhibition within multiple and varied environments. Observation of the audience’s relationships to and within those spheres of experience provided evidence that the zone of interaction was an identifiable emplacement within Documenta 12.

Figure 40 Audience at Document 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

---

Ruth Noack, ibid.

Holland Cotter, ‘Asking Serious Questions in a Very Quiet Voice’. Included were a small number of works that could not be described as contemporary such as drawings and paintings from the 14th to 16th-centuries, a 19th-century carpet and early 20th-century paintings also included.
Although research for this study was undertaken in only one site of the many utilized for the 2006 Biennale of Sydney (16 venues were used across Sydney), close examination of the viewing behaviours in response to the works within the Museum of Contemporary Art provided evidence that the zone of interaction was able to be identified as a specific phenomenon and allowed for comparative analysis with other zones of interaction. The artistic director and curator of the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, Charles Merewether, titled the exhibition *Zones of Contact*. This is particularly significant as the title coincidently emulates the concept of the zone of interaction, being a point in a larger network of life’s experience and the response to that one place being in connection with all other experience. Merewether explains the choice of his theme and therefore the selection of the 85 artists represented in the exhibition:

> Some of the most interesting and challenging art today comes out of the daily experience, if not legacy, of cultures that have gone through very difficult experiences. Whether it’s a civil war, an ethnic war, occupation. I am interested in cultures, how they survive and get through this. It seems to me that artists and poets and filmmakers make a significant contribution to being able to articulate those experiences and memories that haunt cultures and, in so doing, create a distance from that experience.⁸⁷

Because the works included in *Zones of Contact* dealt with issues of human conflict, there existed opportunity for the audience to ponder their personal interpretation of place and its connection to culture, their own and others. Australia’s geographical isolation adds to the significance of the notion of contact. The presentation of artworks, that would otherwise not be seen in this country, provide an initial level of contact, that of being in touch with the world. The various issues that the artworks dealt

---

with, issues that are rarely confronted in mainstream Australian society, communicated unexplored layers of knowledge. Therefore, Zones of Contact established multiple levels of interaction for its audiences, allowing them to be as engaged or as critical as they felt motivated to be. Sebastian Smee, art critic for The Australian newspaper, wrote ‘at once provocative and poetic, the new Biennale of Sydney is a winner’, while John McPhee of The Bulletin was of the opinion that ‘sometimes it seems that concerns about political correctness have won out over good art and much of what is presented looks banal rather than insightful’. Difference of opinion over the success of the curatorial outcome appears to be a standard response to major art exhibitions.

The Singapore Biennale 2006 was the first international biennale held in Singapore. It was titled Belief and utilized nineteen different sites to show contemporary art produced by 95 artists from 38 countries and regions around the world. The title and theme of the first biennale was not restricted to religious belief, but embarked on a broad understanding of the concept of belief in values both personal and global in their perspectives. The artistic director, Fumio Nanjo, argues ‘the theme of an exhibition is always problematic because audiences are often bound by that theme when they see the works, but at the same time it helps an audience to see the work from a certain angle. Particularly, if the audience is

---

not accustomed to seeing contemporary art, he or she might feel more secure or comfortable with some kind of indicator’. It is unusual and refreshing to hear the director of an exhibition taking into account the audience’s ‘needs’, placing particular emphasis on understanding their audience. Nanjo goes on to say ‘of course the meaning of works of art is not simple to understand and artists may say that their works are not only about that [belief]. But an audience approaches the work from one angle and if they become interested they then may read the guide-book or other catalogues to learn more. Through that they will find other layers of meaning in the work’. Nanjo’s concern with audience connection arises from the fact that Belief is a new venture, the inaugural exhibition presented in such a large scale, offering Singapore with an unchartered artistic landscape.

In stark contrast to the Documenta 12 exhibition, with its 52 year history, Belief presented contemporary art to an audience that was largely unfamiliar with an exhibition on such a large scale. Singapore Biennale was offered as an ‘event for the people of Singapore and its theme sprang from Singapore’s cultural and religious diversity and the role that ritual plays in the daily life of Singaporeans’. 

---

91 Fumio Nanjo, ibid.
Though on a much reduced scale, but dealing with issues that arise from a wish to reflect the local community, two exhibitions at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery were chosen for this study. *Western Front: Synthetic Spaces* and, *Sydney Prints: 45 Years of the Sydney Printmakers*. Both were curated using local and Sydney based artists. *Sydney Prints* was a travelling exhibition from the S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney that ran for 30 days and consisted of 91 works from 68 artists who were members of the Sydney Printmakers Society. Anne Ryan, Curator of Australian Prints: Art Gallery of New South Wales, curated this travelling exhibition, which was also shown in Sydney (S. H. Ervin Gallery) and Tamworth (a regional centre in New South Wales). The prints in the collection ranged in subject matter with many unmistakeably Australian and a few based on Sydney scenes, giving it a local identity that connected with a local audience.

---

The other exhibition, *Western Front: Synthetic Spaces* was the second of a biannual exhibition shown in several public galleries across Western Sydney. This is an art event staged to support artists who live and produce work in Western Sydney and who wish to explore issues imbedded in the social diversity of that region. Hawkesbury Regional Gallery displayed the works of 6 Western Sydney artists who had developed their work for that specific show, curated by Kathleen Von Witt. The two shows at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, though based on the similar notion of presenting local and regional contemporary art to the people of the Hawkesbury region, were dissimilar in their presentation. *Sydney Prints* offered a relatively conservative exhibition of prints in two-dimensional format, while *Western Front* provided alternatives to traditional styles with a mixture of sculptural installation, video art and mural drawings that challenged controversial subjects of human sustainability and urban conflict and provided challenging examples of contemporary visual art.

Whether in regional or metropolitan Australia, Germany or Singapore, the existence of contemporary art exhibitions recognise the important role the visual arts play in the cultural development of each community. What must also be noted is the financial benefit cited as fundamental to the existence of those exhibitions. Singapore Biennale 2006, in particular, was discussed as ‘strategically coinciding with the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group, hosted in 2006 by Singapore’. This event was estimated to have brought 20,000 visitors to Singapore, which may have ‘allowed an element of piggybacking on funds but also skewed attendance figures and muddied the Biennale’s agenda’. The Singapore government strongly supports the arts, recognising the importance of developing a cultural profile, especially as a means of attracting tourist income, an important element of the Singapore economy. Caroline Turner and Glen St J. Barclay determine that ‘the National Arts Council, and other government bodies…have greatly increased and emphasised in recent years the significance of Singapore as a cultural as well as economic hub’.

Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, is also an important source of local revenue as it draws visitors from all over the world and is the single largest event on the Kassel calendar. The people recognise its value (in monetary terms) and take the opportunity to promote local business in the form of food concessions providing local dishes, public spaces used as dining facilities and citizens of Kassel encouraged to rent accommodation during the time of the exhibition, especially catering to art students and visitors who

---

34 Western Front: Synthetic Spaces Catalogue, Blacktown Arts Centre and Blacktown City Council, Blacktown, 2007.
36 Fairley, ibid.
37 Caroline Turner and Glen St J. Barclay, ‘Singapore: A Case Study’, in Caroline Turner (ed), *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, Pandanus Books, Canberra, (no date), p.267. They also go on to discuss the restrictive influence government censorship has on the production and display of contemporary art and how it affects activities in the local arts scene. The author has worked and exhibited in Singapore having first hand experience of the restrictions government censorship has on contemporary art production, whilst in comparison, financial support is more readily available to artists in Singapore than in Australia.
wish to stay longer than a day or two. The exhibition was an important economic boost to Kassel when unemployment in the region was at 20%.

Though it is also hoped that the Biennale of Sydney would attract economic revenue through visitation to the event, another advantage for Sydney, and Australia, is the access to significant international art that it would otherwise have to travel overseas to see and acquire. The Biennale of Sydney website states that ‘over three decades, the Biennale of Sydney’s regular importation and commission of major works of art have offered rare collecting opportunities to many public institutions across Australia. Works of substantial scale by artists of international renown, and which would otherwise have been out of the reach of local collections, became accessible.’ In reference to Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, the economic advantages are made obvious to local citizens who are supporting the existence of their regional galleries, the local council mindful of the contribution the visual arts makes to the financial wellbeing of the rate payers who support the provision of their regional galleries. The value of arts and events, publicised by Hawkesbury City Council, suggest that they ‘promote economic growth through arts related employment or new enterprise development, local festivals and events, and arts-focussed urban redevelopment strategies. Community based arts programs are powerful catalysts for developing healthy, viable communities.’

Though this study has been enriched as a result of being conducted in the diverse locations and spaces explained in this chapter, it remains the fundamental action of viewing contemporary art that is the dominant factor and of primary importance within to this study. The diversity of locations proves that the research model can be employed for the purpose of examining audience behaviour anywhere contemporary visual art is presented to the public. The zone of interaction, a space dependant on the act of viewing, is identified as a heterotopia. The character of this multifaceted heterotopia defines it and explains its uniqueness. It is not the same as any other space in society because the actions of the people within that space define the space and are defined by it. The site may resemble a shop, or a government building or a shed, but what occurs there defines it as a zone of interaction. This zone of interaction remains tied to all other spaces of experience, unable to exist in total isolation, yet an entity easily recognisable in its own right.

This study does not rely on the site of gallery nor museum to legitimise its implementation. It relies on the experience of those who are in a particular space and their relationship within that space. Therefore, to understand the audience’s actions and responses, indeed their relationship to the zone of interaction, this study has included a clear description of what constitutes the environment the audience frequents. Chapter three has provided information pertinent to the locations of the study and the theoretical basis for the recognition of the zone of interaction. The audience brings to the zone of

---

98 Documenta website included links to private accommodation offered for visitors to the exhibition.
99 Noack, ‘The Migration of Form’.
interaction their experiences and beliefs and use these as tools to negotiate the action of viewing contemporary art. The zone of interaction can exist in divergent sites and across international borders. Viewers of contemporary art are influenced by their environment and context, components of which may be common to all and, simultaneously, as individual as each viewer’s experience. Chapter four will extend the examination of viewing behaviour still further. The most elusive of factors affecting the behaviour of viewing audiences is their aesthetic experience. It cannot be seen, yet it influences the basic reactions each viewer has to the works of art. What constitutes the aesthetic experience and how it is the essence of viewing response is postulated in the next chapter, *The Aesthetic Experience: In The Mind of The Viewer*, as an integral component within the zone of interaction.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Aesthetic Experience: Understanding the Invisible

Each discovery affects the discoverer, transforming that person’s judgement and purposes and so the world in which he or she interacts. So understood, experience is a process, not a terminus. Ideally it is reflexive; guided by its goals, it looks back upon its course with newly illuminated foresight. Neither active nor passive exclusively, it leads the agent onward, linking past to future, into a world of new possibilities.

Hilde Hein

In this epigram Hilde Hein argues that it is the quintessential experience that constitutes the audience’s journey through an art exhibition. Qualities of a viewing experience are not often seen as an outward manifestation, such as the skin blushing, facial expressions changing, or a viewer throwing his or her arms in the air when they are in some way affected by what they see. The ethnomuseologist, the observer of viewers, is often unable to witness any evidence of an aesthetic experience. The experience, Hein argues, is of a metaphysical nature. It occurs within the psyche of each audience member and cannot be seen by the onlooker or observer. Therefore, close examination of theories and arguments pertaining to what constitutes an aesthetic experience is crucial for the informed study of audience behaviour. As an essential component of the study of audience behaviour, this chapter examines the ‘aesthetic experience’ of the viewer of art within the zone of interaction.

Aesthetic experience is at the core of viewing behaviour, existing as motivator and reward, and, as Hein suggests, may be actively pursued or occur as a consequence of being present within an environment. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term ‘flow’ as the ultimate aesthetic experience,² Karol Berger discusses aesthetics as a ‘mediation’,³ Janet Wolff as ‘the nature of art’⁴ and Norman Bryson as ‘perceptualism’,⁵ while Theodor Adorno has written a 526 page account of Aesthetic Theory⁶ and John

Dewey presents the definitive description in *Art As Experience*.⁷ There is no deficit of theoretical material on this subject and these theorists are only a few of the many. Within this debate is an important point concerning the implications of ‘beauty’ being tied to, even used synonymously with, ‘aesthetic’.⁸ The two will be shown to be distinct in meaning, and, aesthetic experience in particular, isolated from the notion of beauty. This chapter will debate these theories and others to provide a perspective of what the underlying motivation of audience response is through a clear explanation of what constitutes an aesthetic experience.

Previous chapters have explained the influence of environment on the behaviour of those who frequent the zone of interaction by firstly, describing the authority the art establishment has on viewing behaviour, and by arguing that the actual site of experience is a specific heterotopia recognised by the behaviour of its participants wherever it is located. The methodology for this research then explained why observation offered the purest of insights into the viewing experience once the site and the configuration of that experience is recognised. However, what must be acknowledged here is that a fundamental element of most viewing experiences is actually unable to be observed. It has also been argued earlier in this thesis that there is much more to the viewing experience than the pure aesthetic communion between audience and art. Interaction with art is irrevocably attached to the environment in which the experience occurs, as well as to the personal and social context of the viewer. As this chapter presents insight into what constitutes an aesthetic experience, it will also show how elements of the viewing environment influence that experience, and how, as Hein argues, experience leads the agent onwards into a world of new possibilities.

The act of viewing may simply be expressed as the shell in which the aesthetic experience resides. Examples of behaviours will furnish the reader with evidence of what is otherwise merely theoretical. Theoretical notions of aesthetic experience play an important role in suggesting the true nature of audience behaviour. Once an understanding of what an aesthetic experience is, observations of behaviour are mediated via that understanding. The difficulty with the portrayal of the metaphysical phenomenon of an aesthetic experience is it’s ephemeral nature, the fact that there is often nothing to see. Sandra McGrath described her aesthetic experience when she encountered Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles*.

It spins the spectator into its swirling frenetic surface like a piece of paper tossed into water. The movement and energy of the paint aggressively involves the viewer in a spectacle of drama, emotion and mystery. The painting seems larger than life - and is."⁹

If we were to observe McGrath at the time she encountered the painting she is describing, what we would see, most likely, would be a woman standing looking at a painting; nothing more remarkable than that. It is doubtful that she would be twirling around and flinging herself at the artwork in an attempt to act out her emotional reaction to it. The irony within this study, therefore, is that the pure emotional connection between the audience and the artwork is the element of viewing which is most elusive to the researcher who relies on observation as the primary method of gathering information. This chapter, therefore, presents...

---

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana Press, London, first published 1976, p 31
theoretical knowledge as a connection to, and explanation of, audience behaviour. Also, understanding what motivates viewers to be present, and what kind of relationship is established with an art object must therefore be discussed as components of the study of visual art audience behaviour.

Experience takes many different forms at an art exhibition, however, it is the possibility of an aesthetic experience that the arts institution offers its public. Visual art is provided so that the audience may examine, appreciate, criticise, and hopefully be moved by what they see. In 1993 the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Bernice Murphy, wrote, ‘art challenges our mind and spirit, at the same time connecting our personal experience to the wider world in which we live’. She believed the audiences at the Museum of Contemporary Art should feel this connection with the contents of that art establishment. This research does not profess to be able to ascertain if in fact the audiences there do accommodate feelings of personal connectedness with the artworks on display. What it does do is try to understand the encounter with contemporary art through knowledge of the underlying processes of aesthetic experience in general and with contemporary art in particular.

Contemporary visual art is manifest in many forms, which adds to the challenge of these encounters. The audience may be presented with mediums of sound, tactility, even olfactory information, and each audience member brings to the site individual character adding to the complexity of the experience. No one is excluded from the possibility of experiencing art. During fieldwork at a Sydney gallery, a blind woman was noted attending an exhibition where paintings were the dominant medium, her companion guiding her from work to work. They stopped in front of each painting in turn, the sighted companion describing and explaining each artistic presentation, while the blind woman then responded by discussing details of each work and appeared to be enjoying the experience of viewing through her mediator. The viewing experience takes many varied forms and the aesthetic experience is far from being as basic as gazing at a beautiful work of art.

Responses may also be manifest in many ways, and not always as profound as bringing one to tears; although there are viewers who have shed tears at the sight of particular works of art. In fact James Elkins has written a book on the subject, Pictures and Tears: a History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings, and it is not only paintings that have produced such an emotional reaction in viewers. Kaz Cooke, writer and radio presenter, when asked to name her favourite work of art, replied ‘Antoni Gaudie’s visionary Parc Güell in Barcelona. It made me cry’. These more dramatic reactions, though desirable from the point of view of the arts establishment, and indeed the artist, are so rare that they are seen as exceptions within an extensive study of audience behaviour. What can be observed and discussed are reactions such as interest and excitement, or disgust and shock. The latter two reactions are closely

12 Evidence of this behaviour was seen in a video recording taken during field work at TAP Gallery, Darlinghurst, Sydney, 2004 for ‘The Zone of Interaction: Investigating the Relationship Between Visual Art and It’s Audience’, a paper presented by Janine Fenton Sager at the Scholarship and Community Conference, University of Western Sydney, 2005. A woman wearing dark glasses and using a white cane (signifying she is visually impaired) was directed through the gallery space by a companion.
associated with audience response to contemporary art in particular. Contemporary artists are known to produce work to inspire disgust and shock. “We want them to be disturbed for a minute”, explains Gilbert, of artist duo Gilbert and George, who use nudity and excrement to generate reaction from their audiences. There is extensive historical commentary on artworks that do shock - what is shocking, why it is shocking; but little on the actual effects on the viewers, except to pronounce that they were shocked. Susan Best suggests ‘the lack of concern about affect in contemporary art history is the direct consequence of what has been termed the anti-aesthetic impulse in modern art’. It may be that the contemporary arts establishment considers a description of shock and disgust, in response to art, may render the wider public opposed to a genre of art, especially for those viewers who have not yet experienced it. The widely believed notion that art should be ‘pleasant to look at’ in order to be ‘enjoyed’, surely needs to be more aggressively debated in the public sphere so that would-be-viewers are more receptive to a wider range of experiences when viewing contemporary art. Contrary to the adage that ‘any publicity is good publicity’, negative publicity (implying that to be shocked is a bad thing), may not be perceived as good publicity when contemporary art establishments are trying to encourage wider and larger audiences.

Those members of the public who do choose to attend an art gallery make their decision for many reasons. To be shocked by the art may be one rarely acknowledged, although commentator and critic Matthew Collings believes ‘we find we want to be shocked by art’. It is not clear who his ‘we’ are, but everyone does make choices concerning art gallery going, other than the accidental viewer who tags along with others, or the confused tourist and over zealous reveller who stumbles through the door. The predominant reasons for attending may include: a particular exhibition by a specific artist or artists, a collection of work on a specific theme or period, or the attraction of the gallery as architectural form, such as an icon of a city that ‘one must see!’

This study was conducted, in the main, at international contemporary art exhibitions, where the audience attended the sites to view a significant collection of international contemporary art presented in a single location. The variety of artworks presented in these exhibitions is rarely, if ever, brought together other than at a biennale, triennale or Documenta. An opportunity, provided only every second, third or fifth years respectively, for local residents as well as international travellers to witness these events, provides an attractive drawcard for would-be-viewers. Also, and significantly, there are audience members whose incentive for viewing is not to experience the artworks, but rather to acquire the accolade of having merely attended an art gallery or particular exhibition. These motivations for attendance are relevant to this research, because they are the lure to entice members of the public to become members of the viewing audience as they participate within the space of interaction. Whether viewers have chosen to attend an exhibition to see international contemporary art, or for social kudos, or any of the many other reasons that

16 From an interview with Gilbert and George in Matthew Collings, This is Modern Art, Watson-Guptill, New York, 2000, p.78.
18 Susan Best, ‘Rethinking Visual Pleasure: Aesthetics and Affect’.
20 Collings, ibid, p.64.
21 During the Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay, participants in nearby celebrations entered the gallery and as they wondered through they were heard to ask a visitor services officer where they were. They had come in with no knowledge as to the purpose of the building, but seemed happy to take a perfunctory look around before leaving.
22 Exhibitions included the 2006 Biennale of Sydney Zones of Contact, Singapore Biennale 2006 Belief, Documenta 12, and The Hours – contemporary art from Latin America.
represent a desire to frequent a gallery, once inside that gallery the relationship between the viewer and the artwork has the potential to become a very personal one. Very personal because no two people are the same and thus no two experiences identical. This is theoretical, of course, just as the aesthetic experience is theoretical, ‘experiences are subjective phenomena and therefore can not be externally verified’.

How then is this experience to be championed as a desirable activity? Each person is the only one who knows and understands, and not always the latter, what accumulated experience and knowledge has allowed him or her to arrive at this point where he or she acknowledges what they see, what they experience and how that affects them. In the course of fieldwork studies, theories presented by philosophers, historians, critics and social commentators provide insight into the aesthetic experience that is occurring in each location. The overlaying of observed behaviour with theoretical insight provides the researcher with an informed empirical and intellectual validation of what constitutes the viewing experience.

Witnessing the viewing experience alone is not able to reveal the emotions of the viewing audience. What we do understand, mainly by our own experience, is that emotions are often evoked by memories. Memories can elevate our spirits sending them into a joyful reverie, and just as easily drag them into a chaotic confusion. Our mood, our attitude, these are imperceptibly attached to past experience. We make sense of what we see because of what we have seen prior to this point in our lives. When trying to make some kind of a connection with a particular work of art, if the viewer is unable to make sense of what is before him or her, then that too is a personal, sometimes silent indication of a gap in their knowledge, often expressed with a comment of ‘I don’t get it’. This reaction is usually followed by a shrug of the shoulders as he or she moves onto the next work. All these encounters, and so many more, occur as viewers of contemporary art are affected by each artwork within the zone of interaction. As the author portrays these outward expressions of behaviour, their motivations are also analysed and described.

Therefore, it is necessary here to clarify the term ‘aesthetic’, as it is bandied between contexts and disciplines and used in a variety of forms. The word seems to take on altered meaning depending with whom it is discussed, be that arts worker or audience member. The constant factor in the experience is that it is initiated by the perceiver. To begin to clarify, Raymond Williams, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, explains that its origin is from the Greek *aesthetics* - “the conditions of sensuous perception”, though by mid 19th century an association with beauty, and with art had evolved. This reference to art and its appreciation evolved from aesthetic in its use as a subjective activity when the viewer is looking at the particular object in reference to the ‘quality’ of the object rather than the object itself. Today, Mitchell realises the conflict arising from a clear understanding of this words’ application when ‘politically committed art, conceptual art, performance, installations, process art and other experimental movements have eroded the dominance of a “purist” aesthetic that equated the highest value with a compelling formal, virtuosic achievement within a traditional medium such as painting or sculpture’. Because the inference of ‘aesthetic’ has been tied to ‘beauty’, and more specifically the beauty of art, viewers of contemporary art

---

23 Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*.
24 Observed behaviours during fieldwork for this study.
26 W. J. T. Mitchell, in Tony Bennett (et al.), *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Blackwell Publishing, Carlton (Victoria), 2005, in a translation of Alexander Baumgarten’s use of the word aesthetic in the 18th Century.
27 M. Fried, Art and Objecthood, sited in Tony Bennett (et al.), *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, p. 2.
may be confused when an aesthetic experience can also describe the relationship with an artwork not thought to be ‘beautiful’ in any way, and quite often the opposite.

When a viewer recoils from an artwork with an outward exclamation of displeasure, this response in the negative would hardly be believed to be an outward display of an aesthetic experience. Yet Theodor Adorno believes the aesthetic experience does not need to be one of pleasure at finding beauty, as the commonly accepted meaning of aesthetic implies. Adorno presents a discussion of the aesthetic experience as it has evolved through the modernist development of art. Modernist principals questioned and clashed with the accepted forms of artistic presentation and content, as the artists themselves questioned their own existence. This resulted in a conflict of artistic values. Much of society grappled with the concept of the ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘shocking’ in art, and still do, while others evolved with the changing ideologies of artistic representation. Because of this there has been a development, for some, of an appreciation of art that challenges, rather than delivers a sense of pleasure at witnessing beauty. The dissonance arising from a confrontation with values outside what is the accepted range of normal allows, as Adorno describes it, ‘the beguiling moment of sensuousness’ to be created through the realisation of pain, thus entering a state where pleasure and pain coexist. Adorno states that ‘this is an aesthetic phenomenon of primal ambivalence’. An ambivalence experienced by most contemporary art audiences as they struggle with the visual impact of the unpleasant. The true aesthetic experience created by Adorno’s ‘ambivalence’ may only be experienced by those art viewers educated in the appreciation of art in its many and most recent guises.

The contested notion of art and beauty being implicated with the notion of aesthetics has much to do with the reason why Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson chose to base their informed analysis of the aesthetic experience on information collected from museum professionals rather than the general audience. They considered arts professionals ‘who spend their working lives identifying, appraising, and explicating works of art’ were better able to explain their receptive experience than either artists, with their vested interests, or the general public. ‘The point of the study was not to understand the average viewer’s response to art but to construct a model of the ideal experience based on the highest forms in which it can be expressed,…making the experience more accessible to everyone’. From this we are able to deduce that the average gallery goer is not able to explain such an experience, even if and when they experience it. What Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson found was how the experience developed from encounter to response, and the elements necessary to accomplish a state of communion with a work of art. Their definition of the aesthetic experience is ‘an intense involvement of attention in response to a visual stimulus’. This explanation finds similarities with previous interpretations. But what they also discovered was that the consequences were ‘intense enjoyment characterised by feelings of personal wholeness, a

---

28 The Oxford English Dictionary states: aesthetic – concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty, having such appreciation; sensitive to beauty, in accordance with the principles of good taste, the philosophy of the beautiful, esp. in art, a set of principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty.
29 Detailed descriptions of this topic are found in many publications including Matthew Collings, This is Modern Art, Watson-Guptill, New York, 2000 and Robert Hughes, Shock of the New, Harper Collins, London, 1981.
30 Notions relating to education and status are also involved in this process and will be discussed later in this chapter, however here Adornos’ theory continues to evolve.
32 Adorno, ibid, p. 21.
34 Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, ibid, p.xiii –xvi.
sense of discovery, and a sense of human connectedness’, and these made possible by ‘the challenges contained in the object and the skills of the viewer’.\textsuperscript{36} If Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson consider that challenges and skills need to be balanced to achieve a focused attention, then the consequences for contemporary art appear dire. When the average gallery goer is confronted with conceptual art that even the most skilled interpreter is unable to understand fully, what is to be achieved by knowing that they do not have the skills to initiate the aesthetic encounter? The choice appears to be to educate the viewer, or enhance the environment to induce heightened experiences best suited to any level of artistic expertise.

Arts commentators John Walsh and James Elkins have proffered suggestions for an improved museum experience.

John Walsh wants to, ‘address those deep experiences and how museums might make them easier to have, rather than more difficult. That is the greatest challenge for our museums beyond sheer survival, but it is the least acknowledged’.\textsuperscript{37} James Elkins believes we have a better chance of having a meaningful experience if we follow his practical suggestions about viewing practices, which are presented later in this chapter. He also, quite surprisingly perhaps, suggests that knowledge may also dull the intensity of the experience.

Each idea from a book is like a little tranquillizer, making the picture easier to see by taking the rough edges off experience. Anyone who has even glanced at a museum label or opened an art book is incrementally less able to be really affected by what they see. I don’t deny that historical knowledge paves new roads to the work, deepens and enriches the work, and helps make sense of unfamiliar paintings. But it also alters the relation between the person and the painting, turning seeing into a struggle.\textsuperscript{38}

Elkin is investigating a particular type of viewing when he makes this comment. He is interested in an emotional engagement with a work of art, so intense, that it results in the shedding of tears. The ultimate aesthetic experience seems dogged by conflicting information about just how much information is enough. At this point the argument that much of contemporary art is only for the artistically educated with their privileged entry into this particular aesthetic experience requires further debate.

The notion that art viewing is tied to education is not a new one. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel revealed class based differences in art museum attendance, which were judged on levels of education, in France in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{39} The surveys showed a correlation between education and frequency of attendance suggesting the higher the level of education achieved, the more likely the person was to attend an art gallery. This led to assumptions concerning this connection. John Carey however, points out that there is no evidence that education in the arts leads to an overall increase in intellect, only that it develops a more


refined process of analysing art.\textsuperscript{40} This is relevant for the general viewing audience as it is the arts professionals, educated in the arts, who construct the environment and perspective in which art is viewed. Therefore, one would hope that these professionals also possess a sharpened sense of what constitutes the aesthetic experience as they weave the larger image that makes up the overall gallery going experience. It is relevant to note that each viewer approaches the gallery from his or her individual circumstance, which includes intellectual ability. Therefore, the aesthetic experience is an intensely personal experience and differs for each individual.

Richard Lachapelle writes about \textit{Aesthetic Understanding as Informed Experience: The Role of Knowledge in Our Art Viewing Experiences}, presenting his theory on how and why there is a definite connection between knowledge and viewing experience.\textsuperscript{41} Lachalelle states ‘works of art must be experienced. Learners must not only look at the work of art, but they must also take the time required to really see it and respond to it’.\textsuperscript{42} This may appear a naive statement yet it is pertinent to the audience’s behaviour in particular. Many viewers walk through the gallery, but not all will have an aesthetic experience as it is defined here. In fact some may be as Benjamin Genocchio describes, ‘they breeze on by, on their way somewhere else, unaware they are even in the presence of an artwork’.\textsuperscript{43} The reasons for variations in response are many and complicated, as complicated as the experience itself, for it depends on the viewer’s involvement as an individual. What is of interest in this process, is understanding precisely what aspects of the viewing process enhance experience and if these elements can be provided or modified by the art museum.

Promoting Aesthetic Experience

Whilst speaking with Ulrich Schotker, the Head of Education for Documenta 12, he described changes made to the format of their tour groups, ‘there is no standard, each tour is different’ because the members of the tours are encouraged to ‘make a relationship between themselves and an art piece’.\textsuperscript{44} In comparison to other guided tours of exhibitions or galleries where the guide leads a group of viewers from work to work describing in detail the history, context and presentation of each object, at Documenta 12 the ‘mediators’ would ask the viewers what they thought the works were about and encourage discussion between the viewers. ‘We consider the audience the experts, for their own life, for their own profession. [As an example] a person can add information because he is a pharmacist and he knows a lot about colours of pills, that there are systems behind that, then it is interesting for the whole group’.\textsuperscript{45} By encouraging the viewers to

\textsuperscript{42} Lachapelle, et al, ibid, p.85.
\textsuperscript{44} Ulrich Schotker, Head of Education, Documenta 12, from transcript of interview conducted by the author at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, August 13, 2007, Appendix B.
\textsuperscript{45} Schotker, Appendix A, Documenta 12 interview and notes.
participate in their own reading of the work a new direction or connection between audience and art can be established. Schotker argues,

This Documenta is arguing in a way, that there is a difference between the discourse and the artwork itself, and it tries to figure out this time much more than last Documenta, that the direct confrontation with the art piece should say more about your aesthetic experience than any text or information can produce because we have to know that there is a difference between information and aesthetic experience.\(^{46}\)

Memory of experience is able to generate new experience as a connection to, or entry into, visual images. Just as Gaston Bachelard argues that ‘flashes of daydreams...illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected’,\(^{47}\) the image acts as a trigger for the viewer to initiate a journey of meaning making. Therefore, each individual viewer has the propensity for interaction. When viewers share their response with other viewers, there is increased opportunity to establish connections with the work, as appeared to be the case at Documenta 12.

Being involved in a group or tour group is one form of establishing a point of entry into the artworks. But what about the remainder of the audience, those who do not join the tour?\(^{48}\) They also have the ability to make meaning, but often need the assistance of some form of ‘key’ to enter the work. Information does not replace the aesthetic experience, but provides access to it, as Schotker alluded to. A text panel next to each work is one way, and usually the only way, of providing information to viewers. This is, not surprisingly, an area of conflicting viewpoints within the art establishment.\(^{49}\) When the question of whether titles contribute to the meaning seen in paintings, a limited study showed that when viewers were offered two titles for the same work the viewers description of the work did alter, although the ‘change of title does not affect where viewers look or, by implication, how they organise the visual array’.\(^{50}\) Subjects used for that study were not highly educated in the arts and the authors conceded that the outcomes may have been altered if more sophisticated viewers were asked.\(^{51}\) This information highlights the complexity of the viewing experience, and again emphasises the realization that there is no single outcome for all audience members.

The link between artwork and text is part of the viewer’s experience and the question therefore remains as to how much information should be provided about the work? Is the bare minimum – title, artist, date and medium, enough? After conversing with a range of arts practitioners on the subject of text panels, or, more precisely, how much information is required, some are adamant the viewer must work at their own speed and level of expertise to unravel the meaning of the work without the prompting of any additional information. Others believe the provision of contextual information allows the viewer a starting point from which to enter and engage with the complexity of the work.\(^{52}\) Even the smallest amount of added

\(^{46}\) Schotker, Appendix A, Documenta 12 interview and notes.
\(^{48}\) The author was unable to join a tour group at Documenta 12 as there was not an English speaking tour available whilst she was there, they were few and fully booked. Although, observation of groups and their reactions informed this study.
\(^{50}\) Franklin, et all, ‘The Influence of Titles on How Paintings Are Seen’, p.108.
\(^{52}\) Lecturers in Fine Arts at the University of Western Sydney, who are themselves practicing artists; art historians and writers; curators working in the field, all have differing viewpoints and offer various degrees of input on the subject.
information can aid the viewer. Alternatively, if the viewer is not provided with what he or she considers to be pertinent information, an abrasive precedence may be set for the ongoing engagement of that viewer with the exhibition. An example of this came to light at Documenta 12 when Richard Dorment, art critic and journalist, expressed his grievance at the absence of information concerning the ‘country of origin’ of the artists:

I know where Gowda and all the other artists in the show come from because the information is buried deep inside the catalogue, not because the viewer can find it on the labels. The organisers believe that the artist’s nationality should not come between the art work and the viewer’s response to it. But nationality is often vital to the context in which we view a work of art.  

Another point that Dorment makes is that this information, the nationality of the artist, was available to the selectors and so should have been made available to the viewer so that he or she could build a more cogent relationship with the work. It does seem ironic to the author that Documenta 12 supplied less information about the artworks than either 2006 Biennale of Sydney or Singapore Biennale 2006, both of whom provided the artists nationality and place of residence on their text panels. The irony is that the curator of Documenta 12, Ruth Noack, in a lecture presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney four months prior to the opening of Documenta 12, explained that artists were being asked to display contextual documentation with their work so that ‘development and connections are shown pictorially’. This sounded, at the time, to be a revolutionary curatorial pretext that had the potential to provide a point of entry into the works for all audience members to engage with the artistic process in a way that had not been provided previously. However, this was not to be. There was no supporting material and the barest minimum of information on text panels displayed with the works. By not presenting supporting material at Documenta 12 there may have been an opportunity lost, although to do so would have been radical within international curatorial practice.

The author is perplexed by the notion that contemporary art is championed for its innovative and radical presentation, whilst contemporary curatorial practices seem mundane and parochial in contrast. However, there are sound arguments for and against additional information being presented with the artworks, and each art gallery has their own policy applicable to this issue. Paul Gardener in ‘Do Titles Really Matter’ wrote: ‘a few galleries have stopped putting title labels along side the work…It’s a trend that artists as well as viewers deplore – and, as for the titles, most artists feel that they’re important enough to be up on the wall’.

It is not only the amount of information provided to the viewer that is of significance to his or her experience of the works but the form that information takes. At the Museums Australia National Conference in Brisbane in 2006 Jennifer Blunden, Editor at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, presented a paper which discussed a pilot study into the degree of comprehension the average audience member has when reading the text

54 No other major international exhibition has shown contextual or developmental documentation with the artworks to the knowledge of the author.
accompanying art works in the gallery. Blunden has revealed that the choice and use of words favoured for the writing of text panels is not generally understood outside the arts community. Ironically, it is members of the public outside the arts community who are in most need of help in the acquisition of support knowledge. ‘For non-arty people, the language of art is not just heavy going; it can be utterly impenetrable. The view that “art speaks for itself” has mellowed, replaced instead with a growing acceptance that visitors both desire and benefit from information that provides context to the works they are looking at’.  

Blunden does not suggest a reduction or ‘dumbing-down’ of language, but a sparser use of the more specialized words, ‘and when they are used, to define them explicitly or ensure that the context makes the meaning clear’. If the gallery is to support the learning experience using text panels they should be alert to their successful implementation.

One thing seems to be apparent, and that is, it is difficult to find the perfect degree of information provided on text panels accompanying the work, because it is different for all viewers. Australian art critic John McDonald, when writing about the 2006 Sydney Biennale, on the provision of information on text panels, commented sarcastically, ‘once we have read all about a particular video and know that it documents poverty, injustice or oppression, we are expected to experience a form of enlightenment. “Ah-ha!” cries the hypothetical viewer, whose boredom is magically transmuted into the keenest sympathy and understanding’.  

McDonald goes on to criticise the work in the biennale for being devoid of visual interest and thus being unable to deliver, ‘the conventional experience of art, (which is) that the viewer is arrested by a first sight of a work and compelled to spend time unravelling its complexities’. Only then should the viewer read the additional information offered, believes McDonald. Does Lachapelle agree when he suggests the viewers experience can be intensified when they are privy to pertinent information about the artwork they are viewing? One point that does pertain to all ways of approaching the aesthetic experience when viewers encounter visual art, is Elkins’ opinion on this point in so far as the viewing encounter is, and will always remain, a personal affair between artwork and audience.

What behaviours resulted from the viewer’s use of text panels? When observing audiences and their use of text panels, those viewers who displayed characteristics of the infrequent or first time visitor, appeared often to be more diligent about reading text panels. They read the text panel, they looked at the work and then went back to the text panel, possibly to reaffirm what they had read earlier, or in search of more information that would aid in unravelling the mystery of what the work was offering. It is possible to provide more information to those who want it without an explanation of the work, but rather offering to the audience what the artist’s inspiration for the work was. There are catalogues available that provide additional information for those who want to pursue it. However, the first time or infrequent viewer is unlikely to invest in the purchase of a catalogue, and even those viewers who have the catalogue with them do not generally refer to it at each work.

---


57 Blunden, ibid, examples of these are provided in her paper.


59 McDonald, ibid, p.17.


61 Characteristics that suggest the viewer is an infrequent visitor have been presented in chapter two.


63 Discussion of catalogue reading behaviour is presented in Janine Sager, *Singapore Biennale Audience Reception: Report for National Arts Council, Singapore*, 2006 (unpublished). The purchase of catalogues has multiple deciding factors. These may include
The wants and needs of each viewer are different. The type of information that is not made available and yet would be enlightening for a wide range of audiences is information of a more general or ‘functional’ variety. This would be information about the medium used and/or the way in which the actual artwork was created. Knowledge of this type can provide, not only a link to the work, but a form of respect for the artist’s skill where there may not be any connection with the artist’s concept. An audience member may not understand the ‘abstract message’, but that would not preclude them from being in awe of the artist’s ability to produce the object. The physical process of creation may just as well initiate an aesthetic experience as any other component, for who is to dictate which attribute of an artwork inspires a metaphysical connection?

There is, of course, experience of viewing beyond additional information about each work, which is the immediate response to artworks. From within their personal space each viewer who enters a gallery is exposed to the influence of the artworks as each painting, sculpture, video or installation exerts some degree of emotional attachment, which may attract, or repel. An audience member explained her approach to viewing an exhibition: ‘When I first walk in I go straight to the work which has the strongest attraction for me so I can spend time there when I’m fresh, rather than following along the normal path looking at everything in turn and spending time on those works I’m not really interested in. I prefer to let the works draw me to them because of something in them I’m emotionally attracted to’. This viewer allows herself to be compelled, and propelled, by the aesthetic experience, manifest as an emotional attachment to particular works; works that build a personal connection via an undisclosed element residing within each work.

This viewer’s experience is one which David Finn, author of *How to Visit a Museum*, would be impressed with. He instructs viewers how to make the most of their art gallery visit and believes a preliminary look through an exhibition, followed by a return to spend more time with those works that were the most interesting, enables the viewer to see the exhibition while still providing time to commune with some of the works. It is the notion of ‘spending time with an artwork’ that is in line with other theorists. The outward manifestation of this behaviour is one that can be observed in galleries everywhere. The length of time spent at a particular artwork appears to increase with the relevance of the work to that viewer. The viewer may move about looking from various angles, squinting, discussing, or sitting motionless before the work.

---

64 During observations at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery on 14th February 2007, an audience member offered this insight into her viewing experience.

A viewer at Documenta 12 was observed examining at length every detail of Mary Kelly’s *Love Songs*, 2007, an installation connecting different events of women’s emancipation through text and light. To access everything Kelly had written within the work, the viewer was required to take the time and engage with all facets of the installation (pictured on the previous page).

This relationship between experience and time has also prompted John Walsh to write:

> Typical of good gallery experiences, they prompted meandering thoughts, stabs at association, and – some of the time – discoveries. When we visit museums and don’t pause long enough to let these thoughts rise, if instead we just move along taking mental notes, will the revelation come later in the car or the shower? Will we be changed after the fact? Maybe; most likely not.\(^66\)

Walsh makes a pertinent point here. If we do not take time to spend with a work or works of art, are we in fact having an aesthetic experience? For example, a viewer entered the work of Jane Alexander, *Verity, Faith and Justice*, 2006 (pictured on the next page) installed at City Hall, Singapore, glanced around, took a photograph of one element of that installation, and then left the room.\(^67\) Was he deprived of an aesthetic experience because he did not stay long enough to engage with the work? The photograph he took with him would be unable to replace the actual experience, no matter how much time he had to look at that photograph later, because a true aesthetic experience is only possible in the presence of the actual work of art.\(^68\) In this particular case *Verity, Faith and Justice*, requires exploration of the multiple elements that combine to create its dialogue.

---


\(^{67}\) Observed on video footage taken at City Hall, Singapore, October 2006. See Appendix A : Singapore Biennale – Video Footage.

\(^{68}\) Walsh, ‘Pictures, Tears, Lights and Seats’, p.79, is adamant that this is the case and so is Lachapelle, ‘Aesthetic Understanding as Informed Experience: The Role of Knowledge in Our Art Viewing Experiences’, p.84.
An image of, or quick glance at, one of these elements does not provide entry into this work. There would be no ‘experience’ for that viewer. ‘The best moments usually occur’, according to the theory of ‘flow’ postulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile’.  

To achieve this optimal experience of ‘flow’, which Csikszentmihalyi suggests is a true aesthetic experience, the viewer must actively pursue an interpretation of the imagery in its every detail. Therefore, to accomplish this state the ‘object must contain a set of visual “challenges” that engages the interpretive skills of the beholder’. Contemporary art should, in that case,

---

provide the best possible opportunity for viewers to attain an optimal aesthetic experience because of its propensity to present intricate and difficult, even confronting concepts woven into the work that may not be readily or easily accessible to all viewers.

And not all viewers will try to engage with or ‘take in’ the artworks in the time they have allotted for seeing the exhibition. Time spent viewing art competes with other leisure time activities, making it sometimes difficult to give into the pleasure of a lengthy museum stay. However, it takes time to really ‘see’ a work of art. John Dewey, eminent author of *Art As Experience*, suggests:

> Experiences are also cut short from maturing by excess of receptivity. What is prized is then the mere undergoing of this and that, irrespective of perception of any meaning. The crowding together of as many impressions as possible is thought to be “life,” even though no one of them is no more than a flitting and a sipping.\(^{71}\)

This passage evokes the image of the viewer almost running from one artwork to the next, trying to form an inventory of all parts of the exhibition, and in doing so, not being able to recollect any single work to reflect on. This is not an unusual behaviour in the context of gallery going. It may be one of Finns’ viewers rushing through to survey the work before returning to engage with their favourite piece. In reality, it is usually the unengaged viewer who mistakenly believes seeing a little of everything is better than spending that time with only a few works in an attempt to interact on a more intimate level and to actually have an aesthetic experience. One viewer confided that he ‘felt an urgency to see everything the gallery was showing and not miss a thing, even when I have to rush to do it’\(^{72}\).

There has also been a conditioning of viewers to follow a story line presented by the curator, or to follow chronologically located works as a form of educating the public. This curatorial practice, which has become a common mode of presentation in art galleries, and history museums in particular, has a detrimental affect on viewers who have grown use to this practice when they are confronted with an exhibition of random works. The exhibition at the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, *Sydney Prints: 45 Years of Sydney Printmakers*, does not follow these constructed story lines. The curator, Ann Ryan, installed the works with the creation of the best visual impact as her motive, using groupings and feature works to construct the exhibition.\(^{73}\)

---

\(^{71}\) John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, Pedigree Books, New York, 1934, 1980 edition, p.45. Even though Dewey wrote this more than 70 years ago, his argument remains pertinent to the same experience today.

\(^{72}\) In conversation with a viewer at the Art Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, August, 2008.

\(^{73}\) Ingrid Hoffman, director of Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, related this information during discussions about the exhibition.
Whether works are installed chronologically or randomly in an exhibition, there are ways to enhance the method in which they are viewed, suggests Walsh. To provide the best opportunity for the average gallery goer to experience the strongest encounter with artworks, he recommends viewers follow these directions:

- Attend the museum alone so that you can concentrate.
- Don’t try to see everything - choose one or two rooms and concentrate on only one painting.
- Minimise distractions by going where or when there are few people.
- Take your time – stand in front of it, step back, look again, sit down, relax, get up and walk around, come back and look some more. It may take longer than this visit alone.
- Pay full attention – concentrate on understanding what you see enough to cross the boundary between your pictures world and your own.
- Do your own thinking – when it comes to looking, ignore what you’ve read and just look and make up your own mind.
- Be on the alert for other people who are really looking – if they take a break go talk to them as they usually have interesting stories to tell about the painting they are looking at.
- Be faithful – once you’ve spent time with a painting go back and see it again.

These instructions offered by Walsh are only possible within certain time and location configurations, and realistically, would not be desirable for the majority of viewers to perform, even frequent art gallery goers. To experience most of these strategies at Documenta 12, for example, would have been impossible because of the presence of such large numbers of audience members throughout the exhibition spaces. The opportunity to sit quietly contemplating one work would exist only within a constantly milling audience as they came and went in close succession, each viewer spending different lengths of time with each work. The possibility of carrying out Walsh’s suggested viewing practice would be possible only for a very few, if any, conscientious audience members, considering the self imposed time constraints brought about by competition for leisure time and other pressures of contemporary society placed on the public. How the arts institution could adjust the viewing environment to provide better opportunity for audiences to commune

---

74 Walsh, ‘Pictures, Tears, Lights and Seats’, p.79.
75 Walsh, Ibid, p.86.
with art was suggested, again, prior to Documenta 12 when Ruth Noack described how space would be allocated to hold only one work so that audience members would have opportunity to spend time with that work without the distraction of other works nearby. This scenario, though sound in its concept, was difficult to achieve.\textsuperscript{76} There were occasions when audience members were observed staying for an extended time with a particular work, however, doing this in isolation was not possible.

What was interesting was how the majority of viewers at Documenta 12 moved through the gallery spaces at a similar speed. In fact, on many occasions the author noted the same viewers maintaining the same pace throughout the galleries, familiar faces reappearing at intervals during the viewing experience.\textsuperscript{77} Viewing practices appeared to be similar in style for many audience members.

The word \textit{practice} is a point worth discussing. The saying that ‘practice makes perfect’ implies the more one does a particular thing, the better one becomes at doing it, whatever it is one has been \textit{practising}. In the case of viewing visual art, this may not be the case. A viewer may have their finest viewing experience at the first exhibition they attend, and this for a variety of reasons. It could be a personal connection with the subject matter, delight in the atmosphere within that particular gallery, the pleasure of being with the person they happen to be with, the attitude of the gallery staff and a host of other reasons, all of which could aptly apply to the tenth time that person attends an exhibition. It is the quality of their experience and their criteria of judgement that contribute to the aesthetic experience, not a definitive number of visits. If it does not depend on how often one attends a gallery, then this is a significant point to make. For many viewers there are other elements of gallery going that attract them and inspire revisitation. There are so many variables within the parameters of ‘gallery going/art viewing’ that the experience can be as individual as, each

\textsuperscript{76} An objective of Documenta 12, announced by Noack prior to the exhibition that did appear to be realized, was the provision of discussion circles where audience members and educators, or mediators, sat in a circle to discuss their experience of the exhibition and artworks. These circles were roughly modeled on community meeting places in Africa where villagers came together to sit in the shade of a tree and discuss different topics.

\textsuperscript{77} Observations made at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, August, 2007.
individual. If the criterion for a successful viewing experience is dependant on the degree of enjoyment or pleasure one derives from a single viewing experience, it should stand that each viewing experience has the potential for success.

Another assumption that needs to be addressed is the belief that gallery goers need knowledge in order to view art, or that one must gain knowledge as a product of the experience. One would hope that this would occur, but it is not on any unofficial checklist that I am aware of. As an example of viewers assuming they need knowledge to view art, a group of university students attended the 2005 Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as a compulsory component of their unit of study. When asked if they would visit the gallery again, Kathryn answered, ‘Yes, it feels like I am now part of the culture which is so well known and portrayed in the media – it makes me feel “part of the loop” – relevant.’ She had made a decision to return dependant on her newly acquired knowledge of art. On the other hand Chris replied ‘Probably not, as it is difficult to understand some of the art I saw’. Chris made a direct association between the amount of knowledge he thought was necessary to understand the works and the reason for attending. Therefore, if he had no desire to learn more he believed he was not welcome in that environment. These were characteristic of a majority of replies. The attitudes towards visiting practices were inspired both for and against by a ‘knowledge based’ yardstick. However, what type of knowledge were they referring to: knowledge of art history, the reading of visual culture, art gallery etiquette or the knowledge prior experience creates?

According to Gérard Artaud there are two types of knowledge: ‘experiential knowledge’ and ‘theoretical knowledge’, the two merge in a third phase ‘integration’. If integration is the aesthetic experience, to arrive at that point one needs to be open to the process and allow that process to be reflexive. These forms of learning are part of the art viewing process as Lachapelle postulates, ‘It is a self-guided, active learning experience in which the learner constructs new knowledge based on an encounter with an art object and other related sources of information.’ The viewer looks at the work, forming his or her own interpretation of that work as ‘experiential knowledge’. They may then read the text panel or catalogue that sometimes provides an art historical context to the work, gaining theoretical knowledge; the two forms of learning integrate to construct their own interpretation of that artwork. In this way the act of viewing is the learning process resulting in the acquisition of knowledge. Why is it that those students, and other members of the general public, mistakenly believe one must have knowledge in order to view art? They either feel accepted into the art establishment because they have knowledge, or excluded because they do not. The truth lies in the actual experience itself. ‘The responses of novice and expert viewers alike are considered to be essentially aesthetic in nature if they pertain to works of art’, argues Lachapelle.

The answer most often given by a variety of members of the public when asked why they do not, or rarely, attend contemporary art exhibitions is related to their lack of knowledge of the subject of art. Marita

78 The Archibald Prize is for contemporary portraiture held annually at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.
79 The unit of study was Media and Visual Cultures at the University of Western Sydney and these students were in their first year of study. Field notes – Art Gallery of New South Wales, March, 2005.
81 Lachapelle, ibid, p.80.
82 Lachapelle, ibid, p. 83.
83 People, when randomly asked if and why they do or do not attend art galleries, most often reply they do not because they don’t know anything about art.
Sturken and Lisa Cartwright support this belief ‘that meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment they are consumed by and circulate among viewers.’\(^{64}\) Elkins’ belief that a deep aesthetic experience may be had by anyone willing to spend time and effort forming a connection with a work of art should be, in the authors’ opinion, the more common concept circulating in the public sphere. Even John Dewey, a specialist in the field of art experience, argues:

> The scope of a work of art is measured by the number and variety of elements coming from past experiences that are organically absorbed into the perception had here and now. They give it its body and its suggestiveness. They often come from sources too obscure to be identified in any conscious way, and thus they create the aura and penumbra in which a work of art swims.\(^{85}\)

The key to engagement, the inspiration for aesthetic experience, originates from within the viewer. All the specialists cannot be wrong. What are the viewers thinking as they commune with art? The viewer, as consumer of visual product, projects his or her own desires and reveries into the reading of the image as he or she tries to make meaning from the artwork. The viewer is at liberty to construct different meanings than were originally intended, or even imagined by the producer of the artwork. The artwork is read within an altered context to the one in which it was produced, be that in location, time or society. The readings viewers create and take with them as a lasting, remembered record of that work are of their own making. They construct meaning as a result of their aesthetic experience, their engagement with that work singularly, and as part of a progression of works as they move through the gallery. The very act of progressing from one work to another has the affect of mixing and connecting the works in a marbled flowing involvement, the residual evocation of one work slipping imperceptibly yet definitely into the next. This relationship of viewer with artwork is one that is changing with the progression of time. Gene Sherman argues,

> Twenty-first century technology and the resultant global interactivity offer new potentialities for our particular historical and art-historical moment. Once traditional genres had collapsed –and environmental art, installations, performance art and happenings entered the range of expressive possibilities – aesthetic experience was extended, social change became more overtly incorporated into artists’ practice, and the boundary between art and life became, and remains, increasingly blurred.\(^{86}\)

The public’s relationship with visual representation has moved beyond the art gallery and into every facet of our contemporary life as we slip into the globalise 21\(^{st}\) Century. The image has become the catalyst to persuade us what to buy, what to eat, how to dress and how to conduct our relationships through television, the internet, mobile phone, magazine and billboard. Visual culture constructs our world as we rely on images to show us who we are. It would be hoped that we would be able to interpret them intelligently. Anne Bamford argues that education is falling behind in its responsibility to provide children, and adults for that matter, with the ‘ability to interpret content of visual images, examine social impact of those images and


to discuss purpose, audience and ownership’. Visual education in Australia, Bamford suggests, is quite good in comparison with other countries, though still not up to the desired level. Therefore, if we raise the next generations to be visually literate, would it not stand to reason that they will be better equipped to recognise, interpret and connect with the artworks in our galleries? They may be, however, there is a possibility that they won’t want or need to come to the gallery. In the December 2006 issue of Museums Australia newsletter the statistics show that ‘the Australian Museum website attracted 24 million “virtual” visits annually, compared to 300,000 visitors who came through the front door’. This is testament to the growing reliance on internet ‘experience’ rather than ‘the real thing’. As our younger generations become visually literate they are also finding sites to exercise their new skills of visual interpretation other than in an art gallery. This seems ironic, as the same skills needed to generate a true aesthetic experience in the presence of a work of art are being taught to the users of the technology that is implemented to replace the actual experience with flat-screened images accessed outside the art museum. Many of the major art institutions around the world offer ‘virtual tours’ of their galleries via the internet. The Tate Modern in London had even installed a live web-cam on its website, ‘enabling viewers all over the world to see museum visitors spat out of the tubes’, in reference to Carsten Höller’s Test Site, 2006; 90 feet high, 182 feet long curving tubes down which visitors were invited to slide. Of course being able to watch others experiencing this interactive artwork cannot replace the actual experience of sliding down the tubes, ‘we can talk about what occurred with others and compare notes, but in the end, the experience is intensely personal’.

Adaptations are always needed within the art museum when audience interaction is constantly evolving. The new technological era has also realised changes in art museum audiences, ones which may have a profound influence on viewing practices, if or when art museums are alert to there existence. Robert Kelly wrote, in 1985, about the notion that an increasing number of audiences visit art museums to ‘attain a state of having been there’. His argument is based on the precedent of the need for a recognizable symbol of status. Pre industrial revolution saw higher status allocated to those who had wealth and leisure time. Those of lower status had neither wealth nor leisure time. The demarcation between the two was obvious. With industry came the opportunity to accumulate wealth through long hours of work in order to obtain material symbols of status. The technological revolution, Kelly argues, saw a redistribution of leisure time and wealth so that the allocation of status was blurred. Owners and management were required to work longer hours and workers could afford both material and leisure activities previously exclusive to the upper classes. Quality rather than quantity of leisure time became the new status symbol. Status has become embedded in the types of leisure activities chosen, such as attending the opera, the symphony or the art museum. Being involved in these activities signals a higher status, whether attained through birthright or education, the pleasure derived from these activities is linked to ‘taste’ and ‘attempts to counterfeit taste are

87 Anne Bamford, “The Importance of Visual Literacy” in NAVA Quarterly, National Association for the Visual Arts, December, 2006, p.4. Bamford is a research professor at the University of the Arts in London, where she is director of the Engine Room – a major knowledge transfer and research initiative in the arts.
88 Bamford, ibid. p.5.
89 Bamford, “The Importance of Visual Literacy”, p.5. There is more discussion on ‘visuacy’ presented in the conclusion.
91 The Louvre, Guggenheim, etc.
93 Birnbaum, ibid.
much less likely than attempts to counterfeit wealth’.

Therefore, the status associated with visiting art museums affords the visitor ‘the state of having been there’ to be flaunted as a signifier of their good taste and thus their status in society.

How does this use of viewing in art museums as social indicator of taste impact on the behaviour of the viewers? If visitors are doing so to fain a non existent knowledge of the arts, then their preliminary visit is important in two respects: firstly to provide the feeling of having been involved in an activity that lives up to their expectations, and secondly and most importantly, to not be ‘scared off’ by finding themselves ‘out of their depth’ and lost in an unfamiliar environment without direction or information, two factors that initiate a negative experience. The reason for attending an art museum should be immaterial once the visitor is inside the galleries, in the zone of interaction. The dilemma with this scenario is, however, the need for the art institution to maintain their symbolic status that is accredited to them by their maintenance of elitist art practices, which is what provides the lure for those who wish to ‘attain a state of having been there’. Therefore, what attracts the visitor may also be what repels them.

Importantly, a form of acquiring this status without actually having to be there has eventuated, which is merchandising. Non-gallery goers can acquire the status of having been, without actually engaging with the art, by purchasing memorabilia in the form of “authenticated” cultural or artistic objects’. Kelly describes an incident that illustrates this phenomenon.

Upon being discharged from a tour bus, occupants entered the museum foyer; they searched for and found the museum shop; they purchased some objects in the museum shop representative of (usually labelled by) the museum or its best known objects; and then returned to their bus without ever entering the museum galleries. They were quite eager to get on with their next cultural experience!

These visitors are definitely excluded from having an aesthetic experience. However, it is at this point where museum management may be missing an opportunity to involve visitors who would not otherwise be interested in viewing the artworks. A retail marketing strategy, according to Paco Underhill, is to place the most popular items further from the door so that shoppers must pass through the store, past the shelves of goods and back again to the checkout, as a necessity. Every time that occurs there is opportunity for those shoppers to pick up something else along the way that they happen to notice they need or want. That is why the milk is always at the back of the supermarket. If the museum shop were to be situated at the back of the museum, visitors would have to look at the artworks on their way to and from the shop. The alternate scenario is that merchandise generates significant revenue for the art establishment and therefore they may not want to risk that revenue by making access to the shop ‘difficult’. There is also the factor of

96 Kelly, ibid, p.12.
97 Kelly, ibid, p.22.
98 Kelly, ibid, p.22
100 Strategies such as channeling visitors through museums will be discussed in the conclusion.
maintaining a ‘safe’ environment for the artworks. Additional traffic past the artworks, categorised by the management as ‘non-essential’, could put the safety of those works at risk.\(^{101}\)

Branding of items with the name of the exhibition is a valuable marketing tool and was employed at Documenta 12 and Singapore Biennale as a functional component of those exhibitions. Both produced bags with their ‘brand’, as well as other merchandise that was functional and easily recognised so that the wearer or user could be acknowledged as having attended that exhibition.\(^{102}\) They had acquired the status of having been. There are obviously those museum or exhibition managements who embrace notions of branding and other strategies to attract and accommodate a variety of visitors other than the ‘religious’ gallery goers,\(^{103}\) who would go anyway. Kelly realises that ‘some museum professionals are staunch traditionalists who refuse to modify their collections, exhibits or programs in order to attract a wider range of visitors’.\(^{104}\)

Attracting an audience is not the same thing as providing an environment that will be ultimately beneficial to the betterment of the aesthetic experience. John Walsh has presented what he sees as being *obstructive* to successful visual art viewing experience. As Director Emeritus of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Walsh would have had ample opportunity to witness the behaviour of his audiences. He defines them (not the audience but the impediments to their experience) as: ‘Obstacles’, which are then categorised as ‘distractions of sight and sound, including other people; visual overload; linearity and the promise of a story line; and discomfort’.\(^{105}\) Discomfort is an element of viewing that is constantly offered in comments by members of the public when in conversation about this research. Usually without being asked, people will suggest what they think is wrong with art viewing: ‘There are never enough seats! Why is that?’ they ask. There is no explanation for them, other than curators and artists believe they may obstruct the artwork (the seats that is). In my experience, viewers want to sit and contemplate an artwork for a greater length of time, if they have the opportunity. The exertion of walking around and standing for long periods, which is normal gallery behaviour, results in museum fatigue. Museum fatigue can leave the most hardy of viewers in need of rest once in a while. Seating, as a component of this study will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, but as reference to the aesthetic experience, seating can be a critical element to facilitate that state.

---

\(^{101}\) This debate is theoretical, though could be engaged with by staff of art galleries willing to discuss this as hypothetical options.

\(^{102}\) Further discussion on marketing strategies used, and also opportunities lost, appear in the conclusion.

\(^{103}\) ‘Religious’ in reference not only to the way in which they behave as worshippers of the art objects, but also to the regularity of their visits to the museum.


\(^{105}\) Walsh, ‘Pictures, Tears, Lights and Seats’ p.88–98.
‘Distraction of sight and sound’, another of Walsh’s obstacles to viewing, includes the presence of other viewers and the noise they create. At large events, such as the Biennales and Documenta 12, there seems no alternative when so many people want to visit these exhibitions within the limited time they are open. Documenta 12 was going to try to address this by constructing purpose built, multiple roomed pavilions. Each room was to hold a single artwork providing members of the audience with an opportunity to view works unobstructed. This was another strategy Ruth Noack had presented prior to the exhibition that did not eventuate, and, having attended that exhibition it was obvious, because of the numbers of audience members present throughout the exhibition spaces, there would have been little to no opportunity to provide solitary viewing. With a total of 774,228 visitors in the 100 days of the exhibition, there would seem no ‘private space’ available. However, audiences appeared to be adaptive and resilient, maintaining their composure and going about their viewing experience seemingly unperturbed by the various conditions presented. As components of an overall experience, be it crowding or lack of seating, each element adds to the all-encompassing experience of viewing art within the zone of interaction.

Even though Documenta 12’s primary concern was heralded as a shift away from the artist in an attempt to establish the experience of the audience as the focus, it is questionable if this was actually achieved through the strategies they believed would realize this goal.
On the poetics of documenta 12: we conceive of the exhibition as a medium. This takes us away from the mere representation of the “world’s best artists” to the production of experiential space, in which it is possible to explore the terms “art work” and “public” in stark juxtaposition. What is contemporary art? What is a contemporary public? The experience of art is always the experience of life. If we wish to redefine this relationship we require a medium to remove us from our immediate “living context”. The aesthetic experience, which begins where meaning in the conventional sense ends, could be such a medium.¹⁰⁶

Here the aesthetic experience is perceived to be the medium through which meaning embedded within an artwork is transmitted to the viewer. This is what, theoretically, occurs when the right conditions exist for a relationship between audience and artwork.

Conclusion

Experience, therefore, must be the privileged element when presenting contemporary visual art to its audience. Contemporary art reflects changes occurring in our world and thus must draw a direct connection between our lived experience and our experience of art. The experience we have with art is described as an aesthetic experience, which differentiates it from other experience. The outcome of the investigation of aesthetic experience in this chapter is the realisation that there are conflicting opinions on how to achieve that experience while viewing art. The conflict arrises within the disparity over the amount of knowledge the viewer is thought to require in order to initiate an aesthetic experience and therefore how much information should be provided. Some theorists believe that to engage with an artwork the viewer must have a point of entry attained through knowledge of art, either pre-knowledge or knowledge gained at the time of viewing. Supporting information locates the artwork, providing the beginnings of a framework on which a relationship with the artwork is able to develop.

Contrary to this assertion is that of James Elkins who argues knowledge can veil the pure emotional experience. The more you know about art in general, or the art and artist in particular, the more of an impediment it can be to experiencing a naïve instinctual pleasure, an instant emotional reaction leading to a deep involvement with an artwork. Elkins believes ‘once your head is filled with all kinds of fascinating bits of information, it gets harder to see anything beyond the labels, the audio tours, and the exhibition catalogue’.¹⁰⁷

What Impact does this have on the viewing audience in general? To possess artistic knowledge can be an advantage, having no or little knowledge has an advantage also. The problem is the second group believe they should be in the first group. How to inform the second group that knowledge is not a prerequisite, and what measures, when implemented, may afford them an exhilarating aesthetic experience, remains a difficult task for the arts establishment to communicate to their audiences. Actually, it is also a concept that requires wider acceptance by the arts establishment themselves before it will be communicated adequately to the viewing and future viewing audiences of contemporary visual art.

There are many aspects of viewing contemporary art that are problematic for established audiences, infrequent audiences and non-audiences alike. A great deal has to do with the way the public perceive their relationship with the art establishment. Chapter five takes the reader into the zone of interaction to examine the influences of visual culture and how the semiotics of the actual site dictates particular behaviours. It examines responses of viewers to the art museum and viewing environments, offering explanation and counsel for an improved aesthetic experience.
CHAPTER FIVE

Contemporary Museum Culture: Viewers Making Meaning

Plunged into darkness, deprived of perceptual cues, blasted by strobes, he frequently watches his own image chopped up and recycled by a variety of media. Art conjugates him, but he is a sluggish verb, eager to carry the weight of meaning but not always up to it. He balances; he tests; he is mystified, demystified. In time the spectator stumbles around between confusing roles: he is a cluster of motor reflexes, a dark-adapted wanderer, a vivant in a tableau, an actor manqué, even a trigger of sound and light in a space land-mind for art.

Brian O’Doherty

Brian O’Doherty described the viewer’s experience of the modern art gallery when he wrote Inside the White Cube in 1976. However, it can be equally as timely a description of an interaction with contemporary art occurring in any one of today’s exhibitions. The relationship the audience has with the sometimes confusing and often confronting works presented at international contemporary art exhibitions via a range of images, objects and electronic media can be an overwhelming experience for any viewer, and especially so for the new or infrequent viewer. Therefore, by studying the environment where contemporary art is presented, the researcher is able to identify specific characteristics that either aid the viewer, or hinder their relationship with contemporary art. This chapter contends that the audience’s encounter with the environment where contemporary art is presented can be better understood through recognition of how those audience members derive meaning from that environment and their encounter with it.

The researcher is aware that involvement of the audience with the viewing environment is reliant on a process of semiotic interpretation initiated by each member of that audience. Therefore, making sense of what they see and how they see it provides an understanding of their reactions, or better yet, how to elicit a better reaction. Sturken and Cartwright, when discussing practices of looking, suggest that ‘our visual experiences do not take place in isolation; they are enriched by memories and images from many different aspects of our lives’. Applying knowledge of what those initiators might be allows the researcher to making

2 O'Doherty, Ibid. He also argues that ‘the history of modernism is intimately framed by that space (the art gallery), p.14.
3 Opinions of infrequent viewers as a result of informal conversations during this study.
4 The research methodology was presented in chapter one.
sense of what the audience sees and better understand their experience. The making sense of what they see is therefore defined as their social and psychological patterns of looking.

There is no other way of understanding what the public makes of the spaces they frequent except observing their encounters and basing that empirical data on knowledge of how, and therefore, what meanings are made of those spaces by applying the same methods of visual analysis to that environment as would the viewers who use it. This chapter presents a visual reading of the spaces frequented by contemporary art audiences, and in particular, how signifiers of inclusion/exclusion construct a particular audience. This information supports a critical review of the evidence of audience development practices at the sites used for this study.

Paco Underhill, through observation, was able to identify shopping behaviours that related directly to specific characteristics of the retail environment, and once they were noted and understood, alterations could be implemented to make the shopping experience easier for shoppers. Implementing similar research methodologies to what Underhill used has the potential to create a similar positive outcome in the art museum. However, when offering suggestions for change one must keep in mind that there are viewers who are perfectly content with the relationship they have with the art institution and its contents. For these committed audience members, it is assumed they will be at ease with whatever modifications are made to improve the viewing experience for others because they, as viewers, do not perceive that any barriers or impediments apply to them, and their experience is focused almost entirely on the art presented. For the infrequent or disinclined viewers who are dissatisfied, frustrated, annoyed or left feeling rejected by the institution, there are measures that could and should be implemented to improve their relationship once the causes of those rifts have been identified.

Visual Culture

Just as the presentation of images is changing, so too is society’s ability to interpret them. The ever-increasing number and variety of visual images the average individual is expected to interpret each day has increased dramatically as a result of living in a technologically adept consumer society. Television, the internet, magazines and newspapers, billboards, posters; popular culture and advertising bombards today’s society with images. Each image is deliberately encoded with signifiers that ‘hail’ members of the population in either an overt or covert manner. In other words, if you use the same product as the beautiful Hollywood actress you could look like her, or imbedded in the beer advertisement is the offer of a life-style of camaraderie and good times when you consume that particular brand of beer. Movies and television

---

6 This is manifest in the large volume of dialogue referencing the artworks and artists, in comparison to that of audiences of those artworks.
programs are constructed to appeal to the masses and create ideologies of what the viewer thinks they want to be. Contemporary society is becoming more and more visually literate as a necessity to understanding the language of, not only advertising, but all forms of media that use images to communicate. Those images, of course, include visual art. All members of society interpret images and make meaning from them dependent on their personal context and the context in which they see the image. ‘Meanings are the product of a complex social interaction among image, viewers, and context’. The generation now being educated needs, more than ever, to be equipped with the appropriate skills to promote clear understanding of what it is that they are seeing, because it is this generation who has increased exposure to visual information. An Australian federal government report released in August of 2008 ‘argues for visual education, or “visuacy”, to take its place alongside literacy and numeracy as a foundation skill in compulsory schooling’. Karen Brooks also suggests ‘visual literacy is as relevant to their education and future as the more familiar times tables and spelling bees’.

Because members of contemporary society are being educated to make intelligent interpretations of the images they encounter, it would follow that skills appropriate for ‘reading’ works of art should also be finely tuned. This is hypothetical as there has been no research into this particular aspect of interpretation, though theoretically it is a sound appraisal. Although, Didier Maleuvre argues, plausibly, to the contrary. Her theory suggests ‘the visual education of today’s young is set by the videogame and the music video. It rewards single-focus action, and unlike the picture-book of old, thwarts unguided creative wanderings of the eye and mind. Stepping into an art museum today feels like crashing into an anachronistic time zone’. There is an expectation of instant reward incumbent with the proliferation of electronic media permeating every layer of our existence, yet we hope as part of this visual culture there is a more astute recognition of content. If we can persuade audiences to slow their pace of looking when they enter the art museum it may be that their more sharply honed eyes will capture what remains elusive to others because ‘the museum does give free time – freedom to loiter and tarry, to indulge the long double-take, the retracing steps, the dreamy pause, the regress and ingress of reverie, the wending progress that is the dress of genuine mental engagement’. The role of the art museum should be to slow the audience, to encourage ‘creative wanderings’, as Maleuvre describes them. For the audience to have a true aesthetic experience, which was discussed in detail in chapter four, they need to spend time looking and questioning what it is they see.

Andrew Frost, writer and presenter of The Art Life on ABC1 argues, ‘asking questions about art changes the relationship between the viewer and the artwork from one of passive reception to one of engagement’. By informing the public in general, and viewers in particular, to question the visual images they encounter in every aspect of their life, including contemporary art, the opportunity to engage viewers in an aesthetic experience is increased.

---

9 Sturken and Cartwright, ibid, p.47.
12 As far as the authors research has uncovered information relating to the subject she has not found research into this specific area of behavioural conduct.
14 Didier Maleuvre, ibid, p.167.
There is another aspect associated with the communication of contemporary art within our visual culture. There are specific artistic images recognized by most individuals, such as Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, or Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* and Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*.\(^{16}\) These images are seen in advertising, on t-shirts and calendars. They have been assimilated into popular culture, and as such are familiar representatives of visual art as a whole. If these popular images represent visual art and are accepted as familiar companions in the everyday, then contemporary art is fated to be excluded from mainstream popular presentation. The guidelines which construct the acceptability of contemporary art into the art institution, being works that ‘extend critical boundaries’,\(^{17}\) then these are the same guidelines that render contemporary art unable to be assimilated and viewed outside the art museum. Contemporary art is, by definition, *the art of today* constructed from ideas and ideals beyond what is thought of as conventional. Contemporary artists produce work outside their time, building unexplored notions on unfamiliar ground.\(^{18}\) By the time it is assimilated and accepted by mainstream society it is no longer avant-garde, no longer contemporary. The public is unlikely to see works of truly contemporary art in any other context other than the art museum/gallery\(^{19}\) so it is understandable that the encounter can be a very difficult one. Curator of the Biennale of Sydney, 2008, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev states,

I want people to be interested and engaged. Curating is almost like a magician’s trick that you have to perform, because there are so many different audiences – the specialist art audience, the artists themselves and the people who wander in and have no specific knowledge about the field. Then there are school children being introduced to art for the first time alongside older people who perhaps find the forms and ideas of contemporary art difficult. So the hard thing is to do something that is engaging for all of them’.\(^{20}\)

The public has been offered an art which is outside their experience, an art which is difficult to understand because of, not only the subject matter it debates, but also because it has been hidden within unfamiliar mediums. Often these works of art are displayed in art museums that believe providing explanation of the context from which the artwork originated is a ‘dumbing-down’ of their superior intellectual presentation.\(^{21}\) The viewers who choose to enter the zone of interaction are not only confronted with challenging visual images, but images that the majority of society is not trained to interpret.

Research has revealed that ‘all except “committed” visitors claim to prefer more traditional and representational art’.\(^{22}\) It appears contemporary visual art exists on the other side of a chasm, a chasm between ‘those who know’ and ‘those who don’t know’, which creates decreased accessibility to this form of art. The impediment to a broader understanding of contemporary art at times lies in the difficult modes of presentation that mediate the conceptual content of the works. But what exactly does the public understand

\(^{19}\) Contemporary art is less likely to be found in the domestic environment or in public environments other than in the art gallery because it is often not ‘aesthetically pleasing’ (discussed in chapter four) nor in a format that is easily installed in those environments.
\(^{21}\) The use of text, its content and language were discussed in chapter four.
contemporary art to be? For the purpose of research conducted for *The Great Indoors*, the following definition was provided in the audience survey:

Contemporary art and craft, that is visual art and craft that involves very new and different ideas, concepts and materials. It includes innovative use of paintings or sculpture through to the use of all sorts of objects, textiles, glass, photography, computer-generated images or a mix of those things.

The Museum of Contemporary Art presents guidelines to which their acquisition of contemporary art applies: ‘contemporary has always been given a framework of approximately twenty years up to the present time and has been confined to the work of living artists’.23 Beyond these specific parameters the contents of the actual works of art are described in terms of conceptual ideologies, such as:

...contemporary issues and experimental concerns. The museum is attentive to works that are not simply tilling well-established fields, but rather extending the critical boundaries of art, expanding or intensifying its expressive capacities, animating the dialogue between art and other forms of cultural statement.24

The fact that the public is presented with concepts embedded in formats not traditionally, or often never used before, renders this genre of visual art the most difficult to ‘read’ for the majority of the population. Reading the work often requires skills of interpretation not generally used in mainstream practice. Contemporary art, at first glance, appears only to be for the viewers who are either educated in the field of visual arts, or for the more adventurous and astute viewer willing to work at deciphering the ‘hidden meaning’. Whilst observing audience behaviour during the Singapore Biennale, video surveillance recorded reactions to an installation created by South African artist Jane Alexander, *Verity, Faith and Justice*. The work consisted of multiple elements arranged throughout a room of City Hall in Singapore where the original furniture and fittings of a now disused courtroom supported the concepts Alexander was presenting in her work. To access the multiple meanings present, viewers needed to explore the room and view each element as a component of the whole. While many viewers took the time to negotiate the entire installation, others would walk in, take a quick visual survey of the room and what they could see of its contents from where they stood, having entered no further they would then leave. The most credible reason for their inattention was the degree of difficulty to engage with the work in its entirety. A concentrated mental effort was required and many viewers were not prepared to make that commitment.

Installation art is one medium peculiar to modern or contemporary art and it presents the audience with particular problems. Installation has been described as ‘islands of understanding’ where each component is relevant to the whole.25 Often it takes far more effort to recognize the ideas being presented within that ‘island of understanding’ than it does looking at a two dimensional representational painting, especially when the viewer is far more familiar with the medium of painting, or in fact with a one dimensional surface

---

23 Bernice Murphy, *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context*, p.136. There is a qualification made that these guidelines are deviated from if there are ‘exceptional, compelling reasons’.
bounded by frame or four sides. *The Great Indoors* reports, ‘one “infrequent” visitor said, “Whenever I see
the word installation mentioned about an exhibition I immediately switch off”’.26 This attitude renders a
percentage of contemporary art inaccessible to some viewers. Provision of tools to unlock the secrets of
‘how to read’ an installation should be provided for the infrequent viewer, rather than maintaining a barrier
between ‘those who know’ and ‘those who don’t know’. This is where the provision of ‘mediators’27 or even
the provision of an educative video presented in a way that best suits the location could go towards
improving the audience’s ability to make meaning of contemporary works of art. Recommendations that can
be substantiated by observations made within the course of this study provide a case for liaison between art
establishment and audience that requires experimentation and an institution willing to experiment.

Amongst other mediums used to present contemporary art, there are those perceived by the wider public as
unusual, not contained within the familiar gold frame for instance, rendering them difficult to engage with,
and thus difficult to understand. Video art can be a format that produces negative comment from viewers
when expectations that the familiar moving image constructs a ‘story’ are, in most instances, unfulfilled.
Video art is often a non-narrative art form. It is purely another medium for the construction of concepts, just
as photography emphasizes the portrayal of ideas rather than ‘things’ when used in an artistic context.
Much of contemporary art is subjective rather than objective, while it is often the object that provides the
infrequent viewer with a focus for their appreciation. Many viewers value the skill in craftsmanship, as they
themselves have quite often been involved in arts and craft at some time or they simply appreciate the
talent in rendering a skillfully created object.28 It is this recognition of skill that works against the acceptance
of contemporary art in many instances because the ‘average’ viewer is commonly heard to state their
appreciation of a work because of the direct association between an accurate representation of a familiar
object or scene and the ‘quality’ of that artwork.29 The viewer is not always able to make a personal
connection with the unusual subject and presentation of contemporary art works.

When the viewer is able to relate in some way to the artwork, be it in content or construction, and within the
realm of his or her personal experience, the artwork becomes personal and realistic. It is able to resound
with familiar connections that have the opportunity to change into pathways to understanding. Again it is the
 provision of a link with the work of art through contextualization that provides the audience with a
connection and offers to improve the experience of viewing. The suggestion of lengthy explanation, either
written or vocal, is inappropriate and most often ineffectual, and may be ultimately detrimental, as Angela
Philp suggests, ‘the long didactic panels we’ve all seen in block-buster exhibitions noticeably consume the
time and attention of visitors to the detriment of ever actually looking at a work of art’.30 To negate the need
for these long written explanations, an alternate ‘visual’ approach is suggested.

---

26 *The Great Indoors*, p.4.
27 Mediator is the title given to staff members working at Documenta 12 in Kassel who opened discussion between audience members
rather than simply delivering information to the audience. ‘While visitors can expect the art education programme to provide informative
inspiration, it cannot establish absolute truth. Realising that art can never be fully explained was one of the experiences that visitors to
documenta 12 were intended to make, because this is where the true power of art ultimately lies’. Quote taken from the official
28 *The Great Indoors*, p.4. ‘a relatively high number of people (across all visitor groups) claim to practice art as a hobby’.
29 In the author’s experience talking with, and overhearing viewers comments, this is an accurate translation of common viewing
beliefs.
and New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand, 2-5 December 1999.
The addition of contextual information offered in the form of images and working diaries, provided by the artist, can be an extremely informative addition to contemporary works of art. Supporting material provides access to a narrative in which the major work has a place, rather than it being presented as an isolated incident, its reason for existence only to be guessed at by the viewer. There are no works of art that exist as a single manifestation of an artist’s ideas. Every work of art is representative of a period within the artist’s journey through life as a practicing artist, and that same work is a catalyst for his or her onward journey. An artwork is not an isolated, uninspired incident, therefore, contemporary art viewers would be richer for having been given the opportunity to understand, at least part of that journey, to help formulate for them the ‘context’ that artwork is a product of. Not all artists would be willing to accommodate this strategy, and, in practice it would not always be practical. However, it remains a strategy that can improve the viewing experience for a wider contemporary art audience when given an opportunity to be implemented. This is a strategy that has the potential to equalize the chasm between those who know and those who don’t know making contemporary art more accessible to all members of the public.

Accessible Versus Inaccessible

The zone of interaction appears to be thwart with difficulties for the average viewer, remembering that the committed viewer would presumably have advanced visual literacy skills and comply automatically with art viewing etiquette having been immersed in the museum environment on many occasions. The remainder of audience members may not only be aware of, but respond to codes and traditions that appear to them to mark the difference between themselves and the other ‘competent viewers’. What can be done to negate the differences, these codes or signifiers that connote a state of accessibility or inaccessibility? Mark O’Neill notes this difference and calls for ‘the social purpose of the art museum….to contribute to the definition of what a socially inclusive museum might be’. He also calls for a ‘commitment to social inclusion by museums [which] may help create museums where the encounter between objects…and the citizens who own them is not thin and adulterated but rich and full of genuine vitality’. A genuine vitality can only be created from an open and frank relationship between the art museum and its audience. David Fleming is also straightforward in his criticism of the sector when he states ‘museums have restricted themselves to serving the interests of an educated and prosperous minority, which has jealously guarded its privileged access’. However, he does go on to suggest ‘in creating a museum that inspires and uplifts people, that confronts them with ideas, that helps them understand a little more about themselves and their surroundings, you are doing the best a museum can do’. The point remains that these qualities offered by the museum are not automatically accessible to all.

31 Where this form of display has been utilized, the author has found the presentation to be more engaging than if the final work alone had been offered, and the supporting material did not detract from the major work, if anything, making it stronger. In particular Grounded; Art, Activism, Environment, 16 Feb - 6 May 2007 at Campbelltown Arts Centre, NSW, Australia.
33 O’Neill, ibid, p.39.
How can museums achieve audience interaction equitably? The relationship the public has with an art institution begins with the decision to enter, or not. This decision is based on many factors both complex and simple. Describing particular attributes of art museums, both intentional and subliminal, illustrates how semiotic messages communicate to members of the public notions of exclusion or inclusion in the art-viewing environment. This is significant when it is the hesitant first-time viewer who can be easily deterred from entering if and when he or she encounters any perceived or real impediment to their inclusion. Statistics allude to the existence of limiting factors and therefore the need for this research. A division in the Australian population between those who go to contemporary art exhibitions and those who do not indicates there is some kind of deterrent to attendance. According to statistics presented in *The Great Indoors: Developing Audiences for Contemporary Art and Craft in Australia*, 54% of people claim to have experienced contemporary art at some time (only 31% of those having done so in, at least, the last two years) and 46% had never been. Therefore, if 23% of Australians say they have been sometime, add them to those who admit they have never been, then there must be 69% of Australians who are not attending. It appears that members of the public believe contemporary visual art is too ‘difficult’ and they feel ‘alienated’ from the institution displaying it.

Why do so many members of the public feel ‘alienated’ from the public art museum, and in this instance, the contemporary art museum in particular? The assertion being presented here is that both physical and metaphysical manifestations of the viewing environment convey notions of exclusion. Both intentional and unintentional semiotic messages are conveyed to the public, and both have a profound effect on viewing audiences and those who have the potential to become viewing audiences. Subliminal messages are also conveyed in the attitude of staff members, some of which reinforce the perception of an exclusive space. The genre of contemporary art itself can be an isolating factor inhibiting engagement by the viewer. Comments such as ‘weird, elite, difficult and extreme’ have been used to describe contemporary art by less frequent and non-visitors. Accountability for the reaction of the public, both positive and negative, of course, does not lie entirely with the arts institution. There are members of the public who will not be swayed. There are however, many who could be encouraged to become viewers, or, more avid viewers. By observing audience behaviour in response to the viewing environment and, importantly, providing an understanding of how the audience perceives that environment, suggestions for improvements are offered.

It is essential to believe there are members of the public who would visit if they felt welcome to take from the viewing experience whatever they personally felt was right for them. That is if they felt at ease to do so, rather than feeling burdened with the requirement that they must have knowledge, or gain knowledge, as a prerequisite of visiting an art museum. Surely any experience can be a legitimate outcome of viewing art, be it an aesthetic experience or simply one of pleasure when beholding an artwork. Hilde Hein argues that ‘if the exact nature of the experience that art elicits is hard to pinpoint, all the more so is the satisfaction derived from that experience. Perhaps satisfaction - fill in the kind – simply is the experience, sufficient unto

---

35 *The Great Indoors*, p.4. These are the most recent statistics on contemporary art specifically.

36 *The Great Indoors*, p.4 and 5 present opinions given by members of the public when interviewed in relation to the subject of attending contemporary art and craft exhibitions.

37 *The Great Indoors*, p.5.

The suggestion that the audience should be able to derive from the gallery-going experience a form or degree of ‘enjoyment’, which is of a purely personal nature, is an important factor in developing
audiences, and one arts professionals tend to overlook in their effort to provide what they believe to be of
importance. Susan Oberhardt also champions this point of view, suggesting audiences ‘whose reading and
viewing of art museums may be fashioned more by pleasure and curiosity than by striving for cultural
salvation, prestige, and empowerment’ have been overlooked in most descriptions of fine art consumers.
The common description of fine art audiences is predominantly ‘people who are rich and educated’. Australian statistics reveal it is those who are educated professionals who make up the majority of
contemporary visual art audiences, 53% of ‘committed’ visitors are tertiary educated. Therefore when
Sturken and Cartwright argue that ‘institutions like museums function not only to educate people about the
history of art, but to instil in them a sense of what is tasteful and what is not’ they are suggesting that the art
museum perpetuates the assertion of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory that ‘taste is a gate keeping structure that
enforces class boundaries’. Taste alone does not drive participation if 47% ‘committed’ visitors are not
tertiary educated. Therefore, why does the environment in which committed visitors view art appear
welcoming for them alone? What factors, other than education, are therefore deterring members of the
public from a continued relationship with the art museum? There is clearly a spectrum of reasons why this
would be, and many of them are not within the ability of the art institution to change. However, there are
options that are available that the art institution can adopt to make the viewing environment a more ‘user
friendly’ space.

One element of the viewing environment that may be an important factor in decision making for viewers,
repeat-viewers, and would-be-viewers, is the notion of exclusive/inclusive space and how they identify it as
such. To examine this notion critically, it must be argued that if the art gallery space projects exclusivity,
then the ‘included’ may wish it to remain so. The ‘other’, or excluded, may also use the prestige of attending
an exclusive site to improve their own status, as was discussed in the previous chapter. The zone of
interaction seems not to be able to deliver everything to everyone. What is being suggested here is that
many contemporary art sites have the potential to improve their relationship with more diverse audiences,
and the ability to accomplish this with minor alterations to the existing paradigm.

An individual’s relationship with visual art, either good or bad, is primarily initiated as a consequence of their
personal context. This relationship between viewer, space and artwork has been the overriding factor in the
development of this thesis, and continues to be an integral component when evaluating an audience’s
affinity, both initial and ongoing, with the viewing environment. Critical views of the public’s attitude towards
the arts, in general, were published in *Australians and the Arts*, commissioned by the Australia Council for
the Arts in 2001, the most comprehensive research project into audiences to date. The public’s attitude to
the arts (within which visual art is included) is interpreted here as a reflection of the art establishment’s
attitude toward the public. The figures show that 66% of Australians (fifteen years and older) agree that
they would feel more positive toward the arts if there were “less elitist attitudes within the arts” and 81%

---

41 Oberhardt, *Frames Within Frames: The art Museum as Cultural Artifact*, 35.
42 *The Great Indoors* figures show 53% of ‘committed’ audiences are tertiary educated and 73% are white collar workers, p. 38.
agree that there should be “a greater sense that the arts are available to everyone”. This suggests that there are barriers to access for some, but not for others and that the Australian population is aware of this anomaly. Why are these barriers not visible to those who created them? Or are they? The feeling that the arts are elitist and not accessible to the majority of the public is a disturbing thought. By looking critically at how members of the public approach the site and, once they are inside, how they interact with visual art, certain ‘truths’ about the notion of accessibility are exposed.

This study presents evidence to substantiate claims of exclusion within existing art establishments. Both the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney and the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in Windsor, described previously, are presented as examples of two very different sites within the same national and societal framework. As the largest art museum specializing in contemporary art in Australia, the MCA provides a continuous program of national and international exhibitions. Located at Circular Quay in the busiest and most frequented tourist destination within the inner city of Sydney, the MCA was named as Sydney’s favourite museum/gallery, although this survey is highly questionable in the author’s experience. When a photograph of the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay was shown to a group of approximately sixty adults who had all been to Circular Quay, at least two thirds did not know what the building was, many not even recalling that it had been there, and only approximately 20% had been to the museum at one time in their life. Whilst 50% of the same group had been to the Art Gallery of New South Wales also located in the Sydney central business district. It seems erroneous that the MCA is advertised as ‘popular’ when so few people even know it exists.

Hawkesbury Regional Gallery ‘showcasing the new and original’ provides a contrast as a smaller and less frequented public gallery located in a regional town on the outskirts of metropolitan Sydney. Both galleries have at their core a collection that is primarily contemporary. By observing members of the public and their reactions to these buildings (and later the other sites used in this study), their precincts, and ultimately their art collections, much can be discovered about the nature of the complex relationship between gallery and viewer.

The two art museums mentioned are both public institutions that provide entry without fee or restriction to any member of the public. Or do they? Firstly the subject of public space, in relation to the public art museum, requires clarification. The notion of public, in relation to space, is clearly defined by Lewis W. Dijkstra when he states public space ‘must be accessible by all’. One would agree that the public art museum is open to anyone who wishes to enter. Any member of the community, and any visitor from

45 Costantoura, Australians and the Arts, p.27.
47 City Poll March 2007: Sydney’s Favourite Things, Sydney Chamber of Commerce, Sydney, 2007. The author believes these results to be erroneous as the parameters of the survey are questionable and it is unknown where or how the survey was conducted. The only information supplied was that 385 people in the CBD were surveyed. www.thechamber.com.au Accessed 20/01/2008.
48 This group consisted of university students at the University of Western Sydney across a range of subjects and aged between 18 and 35. At least half these students did know the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which is also situated in Sydney. August 2008.
49 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery pamphlet produced by Hawkesbury City Council.
50 ‘Their art collections’ does not refer to an analysis of specific works as such, but to the collection being ‘contemporary’ in particular.
51 The Museum of Contemporary Art sometimes presents a traveling exhibition for which there may be an entry fee. These are located on the top floor of the gallery spaces, separate to the major exhibition spaces below that are always free to enter.
outside that community, either from this or any other country, would be welcome to enter the museum for the purpose of viewing the art objects within. However, the simple becomes complex on closer examination because all ‘public space covers a variety of subjects that are analytically distinct but at the same time subtly - often confusingly – overlapping and intertwined’, suggests Jeff Weintraub. 53 Such is the case with the public art museum; classified as public, whilst perceived by some as exclusive, proclaimed to allow entry to all, yet distinctly unwelcoming to some. Before entering the site where art is displayed, the public make judgments about accessibility and their decisions are based on a plethora of influences generated by a complex range of personal and social responses and by the site itself.

![Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager](image)

Figure 52 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager

Why do some people pass by the art museum, whilst others enter? For example, why did a woman with small active children, who was observed outside the museum, decide against approaching the museum? It could have been attributed to semiotic signifiers present in the building and/or her knowledge of ‘acceptable’ viewing behaviour. The austere façade and blank openings, such as small and shuttered windows and darkened entrance, signify a guarded space, which is the opposite to an inviting space that is bright and ‘open’. If the woman had past experience or even an acquired knowledge of museum behaviour,54 the prospect of trying to keep small children quiet and still for long periods of time would have acted as a

---


54 This behaviour was discussed in chapter two and refers to the reverential behaviour of, not touching, not talking out loud, moving slowly and not doing anything to draw attention to ones self.
deterrent that excluded the woman with children from the museum. Alternatively, there are members of the public who choose to enter the art museum, many observed by the author approaching the museum with the obvious purpose of entering, and their progress was not distracted or altered by the surrounding activities, nor by the appearance of the museum. It is important to understand what prompts the public to make their decisions. If the space of interaction is the focus of this research then why some people choose to enter that space, and why others choose not to, requires closer scrutiny.

Paul Costantoura suggests that ‘many social factors, customs and unwritten rules have a strong effect on people’s perceptions of arts activities’. He goes on to recommend that ‘these factors need to be reviewed in relation to each arts activity, organization and venue with a view to eliminating unintended obstacles to people feeling welcome to be part of the arts’. To eliminate unintended obstacles, the authoritative members of that institution must first be aware that they exist. For the act of viewing contemporary art to be ‘exclusive’ there must be those who are included, those who do have access. How does the public differentiate signs displayed by the art museum that suggest the site is either welcoming and inclusive or an alien environment which is difficult to penetrate?

_Australians and the Arts_ statistics tell us that 25% of Australians are ‘disinclined’ toward the arts. ‘They do not see the relevance of the arts to their lives personally and they fail to see how the arts make a broader contribution’.

Worse still, a further 12% are ‘disengaged’ and fail to see any benefit from the arts.

Therefore, even if these people were walking by the art museum, it is unlikely they would enter. The same body of research shows that 16% of Australians are ‘art lovers’, which includes ‘those working in the arts and avid attendees at arts events’.

The remaining 47% of Australians make up the ‘satisfied’ and ‘interested’ segment who may be encouraged or deterred by first impressions. For these people the semiotic coding of the museum’s physical features (the building and precinct) determine the degree of accessibility that space engenders. Carol Duncan suggests art museums represent ‘beliefs about the world, its past and present, and the individual’s place within it…and are especially rich in this type of symbolism’.

If these messages are encoded in the museum, how does the passer-by recognize them? The association the public has with monumental civic structures has also been described by Duncan as, ‘carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention’.

The inference that a ‘special quality of attention’ is required of those who enter may be inviting to some and a deterrent to others, especially to anyone not familiar with the ‘expected’ code of conduct.

---

55 Observations of people within the public spaces outside the MCA revealed this, among other behaviours. There were also visitors with children observed inside the MCA, the children being either asleep in prams, held by parents or kept close by whoever was with them at the time.


57 Costantoura, ibid, p.331.

58 Costantoura, ibid, p.336.

59 Costantoura, ibid, p.319.

60 Costantoura, ibid, p.322-330.

61 Carol Duncan, _Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums_, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p.8. These concepts were discussed in chapters one and two.

62 Duncan, ibid p.10. Discussion on this subject appears in chapters two and three.
The ‘welcoming face’ of an art museum is, initially, determined by its physical appearance and configuration, the precinct surrounding it, signage for way-finding and, the expressions of the gallery staff as visitors enter the museum. How these factors are presented to the public combines to express to them notions of accessibility. What then can be learnt through observing the publics’ reaction to public space, either within the art museum or to public space in general? William Whyte, in his study of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* found some spaces were frequented by many, while others remained unused, though they had similar physical elements such as sun, shade, seating, etcetera. What he discovered, by careful observation, was the significance of other users of that space being present. The presence of others was the factor that generated the greatest attraction potential.

What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people. If I belabor the point it is because many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true, and that what people liked best were the places they stay away from. People often do talk along such lines; this is why their responses to questionnaires can be so misleading. How many people would say they like to sit in the middle of a crowd? Instead, they speak about getting away from it all, and use terms like “escape,” “oasis,” “retreat.” What people do, however, reveals a different priority.

In relation to the study of the zone of interaction, what is of interest in this statement is, firstly, the fact that Whyte used observation to detect the true nature of what was occurring in a given space and, secondly, his findings that the presence of people appears to attract other people.

---

64 Whyte, ibid.
We are social creatures, in the true sense of the word, as we live our lives in the company of others. In public spaces we encounter others and learn to respond to these encounters in particular ways. It is both instinctive and learnt behaviour which instruct our reactions. Therefore, if someone else is in a particular place and appears to be safe and comfortable, it follows that it would be safe for the onlooker to enter that space also. What may have been an act of self-preservation in long past eras, now equips the urban dweller with social survival skills. The art museum is often an enclosed space, its covered windows and darkened doors act as impediments to these social skills. For example, the MCA does not allow the passer-by even a glimpse of what is happening inside. There is no way of seeing that other members of the public are safe and enjoying the act of viewing. For this particular building the primary instinct of wanting to be where others have dared to go has been negated by the physical barriers of wall and shuttered window.

Would the hesitant passer-by be tempted into the art museum if they were able to see others inside, other members of the public engaging with art objects and interacting within the viewing environment? Another example that clearly illustrates this particular social behaviour is the pedestrian looking for somewhere to dine in an unfamiliar area. He or she walks past a selection of restaurants looking through the windows at other diners. The rule of social survival, which is generally followed in this situation, is to choose the restaurant with the most diners. If popular opinion suggests one is better, then we tend to follow the crowd. Again, this is a case of visibility acting as a catalyst for collusion. It is therefore argued here that provision of visual access to an art gallery space can enhance the initial relationship between zone of interaction and audience.

Members of the public have been observed approaching, looking in the direction of the museum, and merely passing by. What do they see and what impressions could they be deriving from that site? The Circular Quay frontage of the MCA is an uninviting and/or easily overlooked space, according to comments made about its presence - both gallery-goers and non-goers, have expressed surprise when informed where the MCA is situated, many stating, ‘oh, I wondered what was in that building,’ or, as stated before, the building isn’t even noticed. Alain de Botton, in *The Architecture of Happiness*, argues that ‘of almost any building, we ask not only that it do a certain thing but also that it look a certain way,’ so that we take comfort from knowing the purpose of the buildings we see. The public are reassured when their understanding of codes within visual language are correct. They are, therefore left confused or ignorant when codes are absent.

---

65 An opportunity at Documenta 12 was provided for would-be-viewers to see other viewers inside the gallery space of the Aue-Pavillon before they themselves entered. This, however, was unable to provide any insight into its effect as there were such a large number of audience members attending that any one influence segregated from all the others was impossible to judge.

66 The author accompanied three friends who had never been to the Museum of Contemporary Art before and allowed them to respond unprompted to elements of that site. They all stated that they would not have recognised it as being an art gallery and had not known that it was there. Also, some people known to the author who frequent the Art Gallery of New South Wales did not know where the Museum of Contemporary Art was located, obviously never having been there.

There are entrances on both the southern and northern sides of the MCA building. The majority of visitors enter via Circular Quay as this is where the heaviest pedestrian traffic occurs with people emerging from ferries, trains and buses nearby. George street entrance is an unremarkable glass fronted passage that directs visitors to a lift or stairs. Both entrances provide access to the foyer on the lower level. The southern façade (Circular Quay) is often in shade and is adjacent to a large area of unremarkable lawn bordered by cement paths.
People gather at the waterfront along the promenade that runs between the lawn and the water’s edge to watch the buskers perform, or to simply take in the vista of Sydney Harbour. Few onlookers, if any, choose to sit on the grass directly in front of the museum, even though there is a spectacular view of the Opera House across the water. It may be that the austere façade of the museum that stands guard over its domain renders this space undesirable, especially if we consider that we project human qualities on our buildings and ‘vertical windows reflect the upright human figure’, the analysis proffered by James Kunstler. The vertical windows in the façade of the MCA could therefore signify the imagined standing figure keeping watch over his domain. The horizontal window, Kunstler suggests, signifies the recumbent figure or the connotation of passive submission.

The building also dominates the skyline standing in isolation, grounded and commanding, yet easily overlooked, it seems, by passers-by intent on more familiar landmarks and vistas across the water of Sydney Harbour. The building that now houses the MCA was originally designed to accommodate the Maritime Services Board and would have been an ideal location to look out at the seafaring traffic in the busiest section of the harbour.

Attendance figures at the MCA did rise from 230,000 in 2000 to 420,000 in 2007, the increase attributable to the introduction of free entry, not however to any change in the exterior appearance of the building. There will be ‘a major redevelopment of the Circular Quay site in 2009’ apparently adding space at the northern side of the existing building. The director of the MCA, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor stated, ‘I want to create the atmosphere of a kind of “come in and check it out place”’. It will be of interest to the author what difference to the attitude of the audience this development makes, and if indeed it does fulfill the expectations of the museum’s director.

Figure 56 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery is not visible from the exterior of the building as it is located on the top level of the solid brick walled wing of the building pictured here. Photo: J. Sager

69 Kunstler, ibid.
Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, although newly constructed, has missed an opportunity to provide a ‘clearly’ discernable connection with its public. Its location prevents the onlooker or passer-by from seeing into the gallery, and the ‘accidental visitor’ becomes an impossibility because of its out-of-the-way location.

The gallery has been positioned on the top level of a civic center, above the library, where one must climb two levels of stairs (or take the lift), and then only a glimpse is available into the gallery through the glass front reception area. Only those visitors who know this gallery exists can easily find it. Signage for way-finding, in this instance, also acts as a deterrent to access because the signs are small and compete with other advertising. There seems nothing to distinguish the gallery from the neighbouring spaces and therefore communication via semiotic signifiers is absent, leaving the would-be-viewer unrewarded and the gallery wondering why there are not more visitors.

Figure 57 Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, showing entrance to the foyer of the gallery, ground floor entrance to the building and signage on main road and inside the building. Photo: J. Sager

72 A detailed description and additional images appear in chapter three. Having observed Hawkesbury Regional Gallery and the social behaviours of visitors there, it would have been of far greater benefit to the gallery had it been located on the ground floor where the library is and the library located above. Visitors are able to look down into the library from the foyer of the gallery and this would have provided a direct visual engagement with the gallery and its contents without the public having to go out of their way to find the gallery had they been able to look in from the library.
In contrast to the MCA and Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, there were other sites included in this study that had the advantage of being housed in the more traditional architectural style of neo-classical columned and porticoed frontage with grand stepped entrances. City Hall in Singapore and Museum Fridericianum in Germany are both buildings in this style. Being easily recognized as cultural centers, in both cases, is an advantage, however it was the installation of an artwork to create a visual connection between outside and inside that made these sites exceptional. This strategy exemplified how other art museums could create a visual connection with the public. The installation of an artwork on the exterior of both sites not only drew attention to the buildings, but also, the artwork created a visual connection from exterior to interior.

All the windows on the front wall of City Hall in Singapore were covered with pink boards on which Takafumi Hara transcribed texts and images, produced by a cross-section of Singaporean citizens whom he interviewed about their beliefs and values. The pink boards were then placed over all the windows in the front of City Hall. The distinctive pink works ‘advertised’ the presence of more than the usual civic activities situated there.

---

73 This architectural style is discussed in chapter two.
Iole De Freitas installed a sculptural work of steel pipes and polycarbonate panels on and in Museum Fridericianum that appeared to penetrate the front wall of the museum flowing ‘through the walls’ with apparent disregard for the solid structure of the building. Both works, De Freitas’s in particular, offered a visual connection to approaching viewers with a tempting taste of what lay within. This strategy is one that could be implemented to the advantage of other art museums.

The Welcoming Gallery

Another point of demarcation that is important to the gallery-going experience, and one which was noted as being significant in a majority of the sites of this study, is the point where the audience enters the gallery. After passing through the transition zone, visitors firstly confront the receptionist or gallery staff located behind an official barrier in the foyer of the museum. The ‘front of house’ staff member could either be perceived to be a person who is in a position of authority, able to challenge anyone entering the gallery, or someone who is there to provide help to visitors entering the foyer. For the infrequent or first time visitor, the attitude of this staff member can mark their visit with the most potent impression of their entire stay. A first impression has the power to disarm the most apprehensive visitor with an inviting smile and welcoming comment that puts them at ease. Alternatively, what is too often the case, an alienating glance with no comment from a staff member suggests the visitor does not deserve their attention, which immediately establishes a communication barrier. Not only a barrier to communication, but this initial reaction can leave

---

76 The ‘transition zone’ is described at length in chapter three.
such a profound influence on new or infrequent visitors that they are deterred from bothering to revisit that venue again.\textsuperscript{76}

A superior attitude broadcast by any member of staff at any time during a visit reinforces the ‘elitist’ labeling of the art institution. Surprisingly, it is often the unpaid/voluntary staff member who provides the warmest welcome to visitors, while employed staff seem more likely to be disengaged from their task of providing a ‘service’ to the gallery visitors, choosing instead to prioritize their organizational responsibilities and the safety of the art objects, (safety of art objects need not be compromised with the addition of social graciousness).\textsuperscript{77} The reason for this is most likely the volunteer is able to relate to the viewer on a similar level with nothing to lose by speaking in a conciliatory fashion and able to relate personally with the role of viewer. This was noted at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery where volunteers man the front-of-house, welcoming and directing visitors, answering the phone and attending to the needs of the audience. Their attitude toward audiences is open and friendly, putting viewers at ease. Also, volunteers at the different venues of the Singapore Biennale were very helpful going out of their way to assist viewers with directions and explanations of artworks where required. This attitude of staff members does much to help viewers feel at ease in the zone of interaction.

Alternatively, employees of art institutions are generally well educated in the arts and it may be that they wish to be seen as protectors of the elitist principle and therefore the valued artifacts take precedence over the public. The notion that the staff is there to ‘serve’, which implies an inferior status, prompts their reaction to try to appear superior in some way to the visitor. What they do not seem to understand is a friendly face is one of the most important keys to drawing visitors in and having them leave with a positive impression of their visit, which is more likely to result in a return visit in the future.\textsuperscript{78} Incidents during observation have highlighted the need for training of gallery staff to respond to any given situation in a way that does not intimidate the viewer, but instead to use any interaction to reinforce a positive attitude to the museum/visitor relationship. This has much to do with the ‘culture’ or collective attitude of the staff of any institution.\textsuperscript{79}

Attitudes toward the public are one form of subliminal message that can broadcast notions of inequality. Fran Tonkiss argues that ‘while concepts of public space are meant to capture certain principles of equality and inclusion, the real life of public spaces shows how social distinctions work through spatial exclusions’.\textsuperscript{80} What Tonkiss is suggesting is the theoretical notion of ‘public’ being available to all, while in practice this is overruled by the practical application of indicators of accessibility. There need not be implementation of physical barriers or signs to emphasize a division between who is welcome and who is not. Therefore, it is interesting where the MCA café is located.

\textsuperscript{76} This has been the reaction of one-off visitors whom the author has conversed with on the subject stating they did not wish to be where they did not feel welcome.
\textsuperscript{77} These observations have been made at many galleries over many years of gallery-going by the author. For this study, comparisons were made across all venues in reference to staff attitudes toward the audience.
\textsuperscript{78} The comparison was made between Visitor Services Officers at the MCA who were particularly ‘cold’ towards their visitors and are predominantly arts professionals, and the Singapore Biennale where the staff at front of house and through the exhibition spaces were volunteers that were friendly and approachable, although many were undergraduates in the arts and knowledgeable on the subject.
\textsuperscript{80} Fran Tonkiss, \textit{Space, the City and Social Theory}, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p.79.
The cafe could act as an intermediate point, a place of transition between the art gallery and the flow of passers-by. Although it appears a desirable place to stop for coffee whilst taking in the panorama across Circular Quay, it has however been carefully designed to deter the spontaneous visitor.

To access the café, patrons must enter through the front door of the museum and negotiate the foyer, locating the café entrance, which is difficult to find amid an array of different entry points and, interestingly, no obvious signage is used to direct patrons to the café. Unlike many other public art galleries, the café is not ‘part of the art gallery’, because its location does not require visitors to walk past artworks in order to get to the café.\(^1\) The notion that ancillary services, such as café and shop, can be thoughtfully positioned in an

\(^1\) The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Modern Art Queensland, Art Gallery of Victoria, Australian National Art Gallery have all located the café ‘inside’ the building where visitors must walk past at least some of the artworks on display to get to the café.
art gallery to seamlessly incorporate viewing with more familiar activities of eating and shopping has been discussed in chapter four.

The activities on the esplanade outside the MCA appear to draw larger crowds than enter the museum. What makes the activities outside more popular than the ones inside? The activities outside are performed by talented artisans who busk for monetary donations. Their activities range from juggling, playing instruments, miming and even creating visual art such as chalk drawing on the paving or Aboriginal painting on bark. Audiences gather to watch, and at times even interact with the artisan as the performance evolves. There are no obligations placed on the viewers to be versed in any way about the form of art being presented. In reality the audience for street art is expected to know nothing or very little about the art-form being presented so that the expertise of the artisan impresses their audience. The audience is merely offered an opportunity to observe, to be impressed enough to stay, maybe even participate or comment, and show their appreciation by applauding, praising, or even better, by ‘throwing money in the hat’. However, there are no obligations enforced and the public is at ease to enjoy the spectacle occurring in a public space. The factor of social behaviour noted by Whyte previously is again in play here; people like to be where other people are.82

Not being able to see other people in the art museum, enjoying themselves, could act as a deterrent for members of the public to enter that public space. A public space, however, where there are also particular rules that apply as a condition of entry. The conditions of entry regulate accessibility, and in doing so assert control. Tonkiss believes 'such spaces (pseudo-public spaces) signify in a language of design and

discrimination that serves as well as any door policy’. There are expectations of a particular code of conduct placed on those who choose to enter the art museum. Within this debate the visible representation of exclusiveness is the reverential behaviour acted out by those who understand the rules of conduct instilled in the art institutions’ invisible code of behaviour. The ‘other’ can be identified as those who do not comply, who are unsure of how to behave, or those who realise there are codes of behaviour that they do not want to act out and they choose not to attend the art museum.

Each individual who does enter the museum is expected, by the staff of the museum and other viewers present, to behave in a quiet, subdued manner. A reverential disposition of talking in whispers so as not to disturb the quiet atmosphere and other viewers, and moving slowly, stopping momentarily to wrest one’s gaze on each work of art in turn and perhaps read whatever information is available on each text panel, is customary gallery behaviour. Behaving in this manner is understood to be a condition of entry. Those who do not comply are thought of as the ‘other’ and deemed ‘undesirable’. When viewers do not follow the accepted behavioural formula the gallery staff and fellow viewers openly show their disapproval and discomfort in their terse glances and brusque comments.

For example, whilst tracking visitors at the MCA, the author observed an otherwise indistinguishable male youth striding into the gallery. It was obvious he was not behaving in a customary way as he moved from gallery to gallery at a fast pace, darting from object to object in no apparent sequence, leaning in ‘too close’ to art works and talking to random viewers and staff. He was not deterred by their perfunctory replies, or by their alarmed expressions as he expressed openly his pleasure in looking at the objects and his admiration for the artist’s skills. From the vantage point of the researcher, it was not his behaviour that posed a problem, but the reaction of others to this bright, cheerful, open expression of pleasure derived from being within the zone of interaction. If this particular viewer felt the need to react openly and share his thoughts with strangers, should that behaviour be perceived as a negative? This gregarious viewer was not complying to ‘accepted’ behavioural standards and the negative reactions of others; such as some viewers stopping what they were doing to look at him, then looking away when he approached; viewers and staff members grimacing when he spoke; and staff members using conciliatory rolling of the eyes when he wasn’t looking in their direction and trying to look elsewhere so as not to attract his attention when he did look in their direction. These responses served to accentuate the difference between his behaviour and that of other viewers. Each attempt this viewer made to draw a staff member into conversation about the work was met with a perfunctory answer. It seems contradictory that it is within precisely the site of the art museum where Elaine Heumann Gurian believes, ‘increasingly, museum leaders are also asserting that museums can become…, meeting grounds for diverse peoples, and neutral forums for discussing issues of our day’. It appears museum leaders and staff want these open exchanges of ideas to occur, however, only when they have made arrangements for them to take place and not spontaneously within the regimented space of their galleries.

83 Tonkiss, Space, the City and Social Theory, p.74.
84 These codes of conduct were discussed in chapter two.
87 Many examples of lost opportunities by staff members have been observed by the author in the course of this study. In particular, if a viewer accidentally goes too close or tries to engage with a work in the wrong way (whatever that may be) there is an opportunity for explanation and discussion instead of chastising or making a viewer, who knows no better, feel as though they have done something
To speak openly and try to draw other viewers into discussion about the complex issues being presented in the contemporary artworks on display seems to be in opposition to the doctrine of the museum. Maintaining a hushed silence appears to take precedence over open dialogue. This is precisely why Ulrich Schotker, Head of Education for Documenta 12, argued that the steps they had taken to encourage vocal interaction of audience members was revolutionary in art museum practice.⁸⁸ ‘Mediators’, rather than tour guides, were employed to conduct open debate with and amongst their groups of viewers about artworks chosen at the viewer’s discretion as they negotiated the exhibition of Documenta 12. When these groups were observed by the author, there appeared to be eager involvement by the participants, at times accentuated with outbursts of applause when their appreciation of the process was openly expressed.⁸⁹ For some audience members the pleasure they derived from this new form of involvement was so positive that they returned repeatedly to experience a variety of groups and the diverse reactions and comments other viewers and mediators had to offer.⁹⁰ It would be hoped that other art institutions will implement the same model once they are informed of the success of this innovative process of audience engagement.

The reluctance of the art museum to ‘allow’, or even promote, spontaneous overt displays of appreciation or condemnation, regarding the artworks they present, adds to the accusation that ‘the arts’ is elitist, elitist in the sense that all participants are expected to behave in a manner dictated by the arts establishment. If there were to be open dialogue promoted between arts staff and the infrequent or unengaged viewer in particular, and all viewers in general, such as was the case at Document 12, the difference between those who know and those who don’t know has an opportunity to be bridged. The notion of gallery ‘guard’ doubling as ‘mediator’ appears to have some merit in providing a more informed experience for all viewers. However, by forcing all viewers to comply to the same set of behavioural standards, the question arises; are members of the public who frequent the galleries, namely those who know, being protected from those who don’t know; protected from the outspoken, the inquisitive, the loud and spontaneous viewer, at the detriment of both? Advise from Costantoura may well be heeded; ‘people involved in the arts need to examine every aspect of the presentation of their work, their management practices, communication, advertising and public statements and ask: Are we making people feel welcome to be part of the arts, either as observers or as participants?’⁹¹ Costantoura has apparently answered his own question, judging by the results of his research, and the answer is ‘no’.

These advertisements for the MCA, recently published in a major Sydney newspaper, the Sydney Morning Herald, appearing in the arts section of the Saturday edition, demonstrate how uninspired the marketing of experience can be.

---

⁸⁸ Ulrich Schotker, Head of Education, Documenta 12, from transcript of interview conducted at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, August 13, 2007.
⁸⁹ The enthusiastic participation of viewers in groups supported by mediators at Documenta 12 were observed over the course of the field work at that exhibition.
⁹⁰ Ulrich Schotker, opcit.
⁹¹ Costantoura, Australians and the Arts, p.7.
The signifiers of isolated object, minimalist painting, and few visitors, contained within a white cube, tell the public that this museum has not altered its approach to presentation of contemporary art. The space where changing expressions of society are presented remains itself unchanged. Surely there could be a more stimulating campaign to generate renewed interest in an inspiring and dynamic space? (If, indeed, it were a more dynamic and inspiring space.) These advertisements show, for those we wish to encourage to visit, a bleak and uninviting environment. The committed gallery-goer will continue to visit and is not dependant on advertising to tempt them into the gallery. Hence the argument for an advertisement that will attract infrequent viewers. As Whyte suggested, the user of public space is more likely to be attracted to a space that is being used by others. The space of the gallery should be shown as an environment where pleasure is to be found in the company of other viewers, as well as the artworks. Just like the restaurant window beyond which the diners unanimously represent the success of the establishment, an advertisement depicting satisfied viewers can act as that window. In the first advertisement a child is seen writing on paper, an adult looming over her. Would this scenario be enticing for either child or parent? Again it has a distinctly solitary, even threatening appearance accentuated by the long shadows across the floor. Not a space that a parent would feel encouraged to take their child.

These advertisements signify that the art institution continues to support and encourage viewers who are already committed. The glimpse of artworks in these images reinforces the notion that what the museum is offering is ‘difficult’ and only those who can easily interpret the work are welcome. The second ad supports the unspoken ‘code of conduct’ by showing conservatively dressed solitary viewers either standing or walking from one object to the next. This expected conduct is not in itself right or wrong, but excludes a more comprehensive interpretation of what can be offered as a viewing experience. The museum’s focus is

92 Advertisements from ‘Spectrum’ (arts section), Sydney Morning Herald, Sat 12 and Sat 26 Jan, 2008.
dependent on the committed minority instead of developing a wider audience. The institution’s undertaking is, however, to offer contentious subjects to be deciphered by their audiences. In 1995 Jeff Koons *Puppy* was displayed outside the Museum of Contemporary Art. The advertisement for the exhibition associated with the installation of *Puppy* provided an initial introduction to an artwork with a difference, though it did not represent the richness of the actual work.

![Image of Puppy advertisement](image)

Figure 64 Museum of Contemporary Art advertisement from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1995.

At that time, people who may have been firstly attracted by the advertisement, people looking for a new experience, arrived to find *Puppy* sitting on the previously unused lawn outside the museum. Alternatively, the public who frequented Circular Quay may have been surprised to see the giant flowering form of *Puppy* looming in the previously empty space outside the Museum of Contemporary Art.

---

94 *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 9th December, 1995, p.16. Having searched Sydney newspaper archives for advertising about *Puppy*, this ad was one of the very few ‘representations’ of *Puppy* that were published at that time (meagre though it is). There was only one photograph of the installed *Puppy* as a photojournalistic impression and it seemed to the author that a great promotional subject was under utilized by the museums marketing department at that time. It also appears that the image of *Puppy* outside the MCA could continue to be used in their promotional material as it is certainly a one of a kind event and stands to remind the public that contemporary art has and can connect with audiences outside the ‘white cube’.
This work not only connected passers-by with the notion of work that was accessible to all, but also work that was ‘fun’, which provided a possibility to extend audiences, new audiences beyond the committed. ‘Puppy appears to be eliciting joyful emotions in many who stumble across it. It’s fun to stop before it for a few minutes and wonder why one feels so good in its presence’ was how Waites described the work in 1995. Art collector John Kaldor also gave a positive description of the work, ‘It is a happy, glorious piece…it creates an emotional response. Good art always has to engage the viewer and Puppy engages people, it brings out a response’. The visitor’s perception of the austere, unwelcoming façade of the MCA was altered by the presence of a likeable bright sculpture which had the potential to change their relationship with the gallery.

The photograph above, of a young girl standing in front of *Puppy*, is a reminder of the positive experience that girl had in the presence of *Puppy*. Even though it was taken so many years ago, and the girl is now an adult, the evidence remains of her encounter. Her recollection of that experience, even though she was quite young at the time, is one she recalls with pleasure and her experience has resulted in a positive reaction to that museum today.\(^97\)

It is the uncommitted viewers who can be attracted by something more approachable and less threatening, something to entice them into the gallery. Once inside, new viewers could be made to feel comfortable when met with a welcoming smile and, as they progress through the unfamiliar environment, it would be a more pleasurable experience to be offered directions and explanations, ones that enrich their experience. The encouragement of open dialogue between staff and audience and between audience members, or simply knowing that it is possible to do so, encourages all participants in the zone of interaction to be aware of and communicate within their visual culture.

\(^{97}\) Sarah Warby, when asked if she recognized a picture of the Museum of Contemporary Art, responded by stating that that is the place where she had seen *Puppy* when she was a child and was happy to supply me with photos of herself with *Puppy*. 167
Discussion among visitors and with staff seems a plausible addition to viewing experience, as was found to be the case with the mediation model at Documenta 12. Why then is open discussion deterred? Too often the gallery staff is not prepared to enter into an impromptu dialogue with an outspoken visitor, or with any visitor, when the visitor would be better informed and other visitors could take the opportunity to become involved in a discussion, or benefited from overhearing a discussion, especially if the staff member was generous in provision of a wider knowledge of the subject being discussed. Most exhibitions, and in fact all the exhibitions studied, did not provide more than the minimum amount of factual data on their text panels and relegated contextual information to the pages of their catalogues. The catalogues are an expensive addition to the museum visit and quite often out of the financial means of many patrons. Decreased access for some to catalogues may be another form of exclusion being practiced, for which the museum has the usual explanations, such as the cost of producing catalogues and the on-going debate on the subject of ‘too much, versus too little information’ provided on text panels, which was discussed in the previous chapter. All forms of exclusion/inclusion are in need of reassessment by the arts institutes.

Conclusion

When all members of society are welcome to enter the gallery, when all viewers are at ease within the zone of interaction, when an effort is made to provide the best possible access to forming a relationship with the artwork, only then can the ideal user-friendly art museum exist. This study and its methodology are well placed to provide insight into the audience/museum relationship and expand this important debate. However, it is more action than words that will provide a ‘clearer’ way ahead for the viewing audience, in every sense of the word. The following and final chapter describes an interpretive language of viewing that the ethnomuseologist can use to mediate between the audience and the arts establishment. In order to relate what the researcher is observing, there must be a common language of viewing. Chapter six formulates this specific mediation bringing together all the concepts related to viewing behaviour that have been presented in this thesis, and applying them within a wider social structure that renders them accessible to the arts professionals who possess the power to improve and develop audience relations.

It is the viewer’s perception of their gallery experience that is central to this thesis. The stage has been set, so to speak, where the individual is invited to take his or her place where the viewer becomes the actor, and the researcher the audience watching every movement and nuance of behaviour. Previous chapters have provided explanation of how the art institution has been shaped by historical development and its evolution as a setting for aesthetic experience. The stage where viewing takes place has been defined as a specific heterotopia. A heterotopia where the action of viewing art distinguishes it, whilst the many and diverse connections with society integrate and identify it as the zone of interaction. Just as this thesis relies on observation to develop an understanding of the visual art audience within the zone of interaction, that same

98 Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney Catalogue was $55, Documenta 12 Catalogue was $60 and Singapore Biennale Catalogue was only $10.
audience also relies on their own observations to make sense of the site and its contents. Visual interpretations are not only made concerning the artworks, but also of the art museum as a site when the would-be-audience member approaches it and enters its domain. The language of semiotics communicates to him or her pertinent information concerning the site where art is displayed. By recognizing what exactly is communicated to the public through the visual language inherent within the sites of this study, the researcher has identified and discussed issues of limited accessibility and how it can be improved.
CHAPTER SIX

The Social Life of The Art Museum: Mediating Viewing Experience

…..creative space in a museum or cultural environment is primarily the audience’s space. It is a space that resonates with them and their lives, a space where they can learn, explore and be inspired, a space as much in the audience's mind as it is physical.

Stephen Greenberg

Predicting which way a viewer will turn when he or she enters a gallery, understanding the importance of where a seat is positioned, or being aware of how viewers perceive their own body space, are useful insights for any arts professional. Therefore, if arts professionals were offered a method of understanding the needs of their audiences, they in turn, would possess the potential to improve the viewing environment for the enhancement of viewing experience. This chapter presents a means of communicating what the audience wants and/or needs from their gallery-going experience by interpreting viewing relationships within that environment. By analyzing how viewers actually negotiate the zone of interaction, elements of their viewing experience are identified and judged as being either beneficial or detrimental to that experience. The ethnomuseologist responsible for interpreting audience behaviour becomes the audience’s advocate by providing the arts establishment responsible for that viewing environment with knowledge that is informative and constructive, knowledge that supports the audience’s unspoken claim for an improved viewing environment within the art museum.

In order to understand the audience’s experience of viewing, to understand what is in the mind of the viewer, which Stephen Greenberg argues is where the creative space of viewing exists, the ethnomuseologist implements the research methodology constructed for this purpose. What is observed is then interpreted within the framework of knowledge based on expected museum behaviour, social role enactment, and the individual’s personal response to that environment. The zone of interaction does not exist as an isolated vacuum where viewers behave in response to the elements of that environment alone. Their behaviour must be understood to be a continuation of what constitutes the wider society, of which these

individuals are members. Again the threads of Foucault’s skein, discussed in chapter three, connect and create the heterotopia that is the zone of interaction. Greenberg, in the epigram, recognizes that it is the audience who creates the space of viewing and that space, therefore, ‘resonates with their lives’. Essentially, a viewer’s behaviour describes his or her relationship with the art object, the physical space in which the object is located, and with their co-participants, all of which are an extension of their existing personal and social experience. This chapter discusses how those complexities are manifest in the behaviours enacted by the audience members. The key to explanation of audience behaviour is noting that actions are not monomorphic in their composition, but a mixture of behavioural responses, both inspired by the site and by social relationships with others, all of which evolve within the timeframe of viewing.

Behaviours are expressed in a movement, a glance, the positioning of one’s body in space, the placement of a belonging. Actions reveal or express an individual’s role within the viewing environment. What the audience is unable to express verbally the ethnomuseologist is able to interpret and use as a tool for audience development. Body language betrays much about an individual’s response, acceptance, rejection, focus of attention, mood, and a plethora of other responses toward fellow viewers and aspects of the physical sphere they share. The work of Erving Goffman and Dominic A. LaRusso are instrumental in providing interpretation of social behaviour. Goffman, sociologist and author of many texts on the subject of human behaviour, and particularly relationships in a public context, provides invaluable insight into the subject. Using Goffman’s descriptive terms of public relations as a foundation, this chapter provides an interpretation of viewing behaviours and the roles each individual plays within the arena being observed.

The role perspective has definite implications of a social-psychological kind. In entering the position, the incumbent finds that he must take on the whole array of action encompassed by the corresponding role, so role implies a social determinism and a doctrine about socialization. We do not take on items of conduct one at a time but rather a whole harness load of them and may anticipatorily learn to be a horse even while being pulled like a wagon. Role, then, is the basic unit of socialization. It is through roles that tasks in society are allocated and arrangements made to enforce their performance.

One would have to agree with Goffman that the individual in a social context must be, and is, able to act out more than one role at a time if he or she is able to fit seamlessly into the complexity of social interaction. For the author to explain or describe the many overlapping

---


layers of behaviour they must initially be presented one at a time. There are three distinct roles manifest by viewers to be considered in the context of art viewing. Firstly, members of society play out particular codes of conduct whilst in public places so that interaction among others can be carried out with the least conflict and within an environment of mutual respect. Secondly, there is an expectation that the gallery-goer will behave in response to the art museum milieu by adapting his or her behaviour according to the expected reverential demeanour taken on by viewers in general and which may be evident as an increased degree of awareness within their surroundings. This heightened awareness is often manifest through reverential, even ritualistic behaviour toward the site in general and the art objects in particular. Thirdly, conduct of a personal nature is enacted when the individual must also maintain a role that requires their judgment and action according to personal boundaries of behaviour.

Expressions of these overlapping roles are witnessed occurring with a parent in relation to a child, or an individual in response to their partner. For example a mother will stop her child from touching a stranger because it is not acceptable social behaviour, whilst talking to the child in a whisper to maintain a reverential demeanor in the hushed atmosphere of the art gallery, and, she will act out the role of a responsible parent as she quietly reasons with the child on the repercussions of the child’s behaviour. Likewise, a couple moving through the gallery space together maintain an appropriate distance from the artworks, whilst taking the opportunity to come into physical contact with each other as an act of intimacy. As participants in a role enacted in a public space they must, however, refrain from passionate embraces that would be deemed socially unacceptable in an art gallery setting. For the mother and child, and for the couple, it is a balance of public, personal and gallery behaviour that combines to direct their individual roles.

A combination of public social behaviour, museum behaviour and personal behaviour provides evidence for the researcher within the zone of interaction. Therefore, at any one time, an individual, or a with (two or more people who are ‘with’ each other as a unit), or a group may be acting in response to any, or a combination of these roles. The predominant factor for the researcher is isolating the response in relation to the act of viewing and the environment in which it occurs, because, whichever role the viewer is responding to has significance within the social role of viewing.

5 Although, as an exception, in Paris, acts of intimacy between lovers have been noted to occur in many public locations, including art galleries.
6 A ‘with’ occurs in a number of different configurations, such as; a couple, two or more friends sharing the same experience, a family unit of one or more parents and their children etc.
The work of Goffman, mentioned earlier, is useful in providing a clear analysis of social behaviour in public places. In the preface to *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, he states:

> The dealings that any set of actors routinely have with one another and with specified classes of objects seem universally to become subject to ground rules of a restrictive and enabling kind. When persons engage in regulated dealings with each other, they come to employ social routines or practices, namely, patterned adaptations to the rules — including conformances, by-passings, secret deviations, excusable infractions, flagrant violations, and the like. These variously motivated and variously functioning patterns of actual behaviour, these routines associated with ground rules, together constitute what might be called a 'social order'.

The ‘patterned adaptations to the rules’ of viewing within an art gallery construct a framework of viewing behaviour and constitute a social order. In previous chapters influences of behaviour specifically in response to the art museum context have been discussed. In particular, there has been discussion of reverential conduct, the isolated aesthetic experience and the semiotics of inclusion/exclusion. Armed with the clarification these elements provide, descriptions of observed viewing behaviours within the zone of interaction provide a detailed account of the social order of viewing. The word *order* is significant in this context as it implies an organised, orderly, even systematic arrangement of activity. The viewer may approach their viewing experience with a plan of action in mind, or, the subconscious reaction to a given set of circumstances. Viewers, when commenting on their experience say, ‘I adjusted my behaviour to suit what the gallery’s atmosphere was like’, and ‘I am more quiet and very observant of all the artworks surrounding me. As I’m a very loud and outgoing person, I’m more calm as I enter the art gallery’. Viewing behaviour has been the subject of a limited range of studies designed to recognise the most commonly adhered to set of behaviours in response to the art museum paradigm. Analysis of statistical data that previous researchers have used to reveal particular anomalies has been a valuable addition to this study.

For example, Melton and Underhill both observed more people turn right when they enter a gallery or public space in the United States of America, while Underhill and previous research by the author of this thesis discovered in Australia more people turn left when they enter a shop or gallery. The significance of this action is that more time is spent looking at works

---

8 Responses of viewers at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, September, 2008.
9 Many of these studies have been listed in the introduction.
along the wall that is visited first. The works on the opposite wall will be viewed for less time due to another phenomenon Melton described when he noted that visitors spend progressively less time with each work as they go through the gallery because of what may be a combination of factors he isolated: ‘museum fatigue’ (any visitor after a prolonged time viewing multiple art objects is prone to suffer this condition); ‘decreasing attraction potential of numbers of similar objects’; and ‘exit attraction’ which is ‘the means to the end of exploration, satisfaction of curiosity or a desire to see that which cannot be seen’ referring to what is in the next room. Melton used specific research methods of tracking and statistical analysis to acquire this information. To expand on his knowledge, additional methods have been utilized in this study.

Video footage provides opportunity for the ethnographer to recognise what was previously unseen. The significance of particular behaviours, behaviours important to the ethnographer, may not be immediately obvious to the participant observer who is immersed in the same situation. At times it is only through the capturing of these behaviours in a format removed from ‘real-time’ that they can be recognised. Goffman also identifies this phenomenon believing ‘much of expressive behaviour disappears from mind as soon as it is observed’. This must also be true of the observations made by the flâneuse, which is why findings are supported with digital recordings of sample behavioural data wherever possible. This allows the researcher to examine closely particular actions and provides opportunity to see what has not been seen when the researcher was immersed in the situation.

The Photographer/Viewer

For example, video footage of Jane Alexander’s *Verity, Faith and Justice* installation in City Hall during the Singapore Biennale 2006, reveals an unexpected insight into photographing behaviours. It is the reflex action of trying to remove one’s self from, or trying to avoid the space between photographer and object. People duck and scuttle away, walk in reverse, stop and lean backwards or make an obvious decision to adjust their previously chosen path to circumnavigate the photographer and his or her line of vision to the object being photographed. Noticeably, the same behaviour does not occur if the viewer is not holding a camera in the process of taking a photograph. The viewer standing back from an artwork,

---


merely looking at it, is not afforded the same extreme actions of diversion as when a camera is involved. The video footage revealed how disruptive photograph taking is beyond the mere interruption to the line of vision. Not only do other viewers go to extremes to avoid the camera lens, but also their own viewing is disrupted and minimised to accommodate the photographer. It was noted that if viewers have had to move out of the way, they are unlikely to return to examine the work they missed, they merely move on to the next artwork. Therefore, one person’s permanent record has the potential to counteract others’ attempts at viewing.\(^{14}\)

The disruption caused as viewers duck and weave to avoid the photographer’s lens becomes a behaviour worth investigating. Why do viewers go to such lengths to avoid the camera lens? It may be the notion that a photograph can be a permanent record, while the gaze of a viewer is ephemeral, replaced in an instant, literally with the blink of an eye. Whether the concern is directed toward the photographer and his or her time and effort at having to retake a photograph when someone ‘gets in the way’, or that the person who is accidentally in the photograph does not want to appear in a stranger’s photo album, is uncertain. What is certain is the disruption it causes to productive viewing behaviour. It seems contradictory that the viewer who takes the photograph can rob another viewer of a memory when, as John Berger states ‘the camera relieves us of the burden of memory’.\(^{15}\) When this is the case, both parties stand to lose what could have been a ‘memorable’ viewing experience, all the more pertinent because they are the memories able to be recalled at will from the amazing personal album of the mind.

All these actions occur without a word being exchanged, which is a phenomenon of human communication. The potency of body language allows communication on a social scale that transfers complex information between strangers. Dominic LaRusso suggests that ‘while the more mundane activity of talking is needed to sustain life, the more humane experience of communication is that which solves the problem of human proceedings’.\(^{16}\) The video camera is able to record this non-verbal communication. Footage taken at the Singapore site, also of the work of Jane Alexander, revealed an unexpected anomaly. Many audience members (who can’t be described as viewers) were seen to enter the installation, scan the components that were visible from that single point, choose one element, take a photograph of it, and then leave without having explored the multiple elements that made up the work. It may be that the photographing audience intends to scrutinize these images at a later time when they are able to do so in their own home at their leisure when their ‘burden of memory’ has been downloaded onto their computer and the action of revisiting each image becomes their gallery experience.

It appears that there are different motivations for taking photographs and these are amended between countries, galleries and types of exhibitions. The photographing frenzy that was evident during the Singapore Biennale (the first of its kind in that country) was replaced by a different style of photographic behaviour at Documenta 12 in Germany (the twelfth Documenta since 1955). The photographing at Documenta 12 appeared more selective, with the most popular subjects being the art objects that appeared to viewers to be most ‘photogenic’, meaning the craftsmanship or conceptual expression of the work was easily captured in a single image. For example, the constructions of Romuald Hazoumé as described in the catalogue: ‘they peer down at us, *Dogone* with its plaits, *Citoyenne*, with its long watering-can neck, *Agassa* whose hair looks like a spider, or the punk-rock *Moon*’.¹⁷ Disused water canisters transformed into characters reminiscent of the artist’s African traditional tribal masks were both humorous and disturbing. The traditional masks of the Dogon that were coveted and collected in the age of Modernism are now constructed from detritus of the modern world. Viewers gathered in front of this work, the majority taking photographs, jostling for the best angle. Each mask was easily captured in a close-up shot, the subject matter recognizable from a single image, providing easy access for the viewer to ‘enter’ the work and explain their understanding of that work when later revisited through a digital or printed image.

*Figure 67 Audience members photographing the work of Romuald Hazoumé at Documenta 12. Photo: J. Sager*

Photographing was not permitted during the Sydney Biennale and thus comparisons are difficult and outcomes vary dramatically.¹⁸ What is interesting is that galleries in the popular Parisian art museums are active with camera use, where the viewing populations are largely

¹⁸ A more detailed discussion of behavioural comparisons of viewing audiences in general between various countries will be presented in the conclusion of this thesis.
tourist, such as the Louvre, the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Orangerie. Behaviours include posing in front of many of the artworks as well as images of the artworks themselves. However, the photographers also take time to view the works at length so that their only memory is not the digital image in their camera.

The rules pertaining to the taking of photographs in art galleries are becoming more blurred and it is at times confusing for the audience when they are permitted to do so in some galleries, whilst not in others. At the Tate Modern in London taking photos is not permitted. A guard was quick to stop a viewer photographing a work of Joseph Beuys in the permanent collection, while another guard at a temporary exhibition, when asked the policy on photographing, suggested there was little hope of stopping everyone from doing it and if they did take photographs, she was willing to turn a blind eye.

What has become apparent through this study is the taking of photographs can alter viewing practice and have a profound effect on viewing experience. Some may believe that it is preferable to have a meagre involvement of merely recording images on a camera in preference to none at all. For the sake of attendance numbers it is definitely advantageous to have these visitors through the doors. Obviously, the visitors themselves believe their limited involvement is superior to none. The question is, are they indulging in a diluted art viewing experience or is it merely tourism driven behaviour where major attractions are included on a list of sites that must be visited for the sake of being able to say that they have been? How we go about improving the viewing experience for these gallery goers, or indeed, whether they would want their experience to change, becomes the subject of speculation.

How Do We View

The intensity of the aesthetic experience can be increased by a prolonged interaction with a particular work, as was discussed in chapter four. Advocates of this practice are James Elkins and John Walsh. As flaneuse, the researcher observed viewers engaged in prolonged, focused periods of direct eye contact with particular artworks. The average time spent looking

---

19 Observations made by researcher in those galleries, August, 2007. Fellow viewers were heard conversing in a range of languages other than French.
20 The configurations of contemporary art audiences in different countries visited in the course of research for this thesis, exhibit similarities and differences that will be discussed at length in the conclusion.
21 Casual conversations were held with staff members at the Tate Modern, London on August 26th 2007.
22 The relevance of attendance numbers is discussed in the introduction.
at one artwork, from a progression of many, is 30 to 60 seconds.\textsuperscript{24} Prolonged attention can be categorized as the study of a single artwork for 3 to 5 minutes, and is sometimes longer in the instance of a multiple element installation or video art.\textsuperscript{25}

Figure 68 Viewer of \textit{Sydney Printmakers Exhibition} at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: J. Sager

At Hawkesbury Regional Gallery a female viewer was observed gazing intently at works from the \textit{Sydney Printmakers Exhibition} for long periods of time, seemingly oblivious to other viewers in the vicinity.\textsuperscript{26} She engaged with particular works for extended periods, passing by other works at a normal pace taking enough time only to assess them. It appeared those works that captured her prolonged interest were so engaging that she only moved on hesitatingly, reluctant to break from their allure. During informal conversation with this viewer at the end of her visit, she expressed the great pleasure she gained from looking closely and intensely at a selection of prints and confessed it was her second visit to that particular exhibition because she enjoyed it so much. What was also established from that conversation was her involvement as a printmaker herself ‘many years ago’.\textsuperscript{27} This personal involvement was a strong tie to the intensity of her experience as she could appreciate the skill of the printmakers and the printmaking process. Often it is the case that a personal involvement provides a foundation for an increased appreciation and intensified experience with certain artistic genres. The \textit{appreciation} of art has been linked to education and the attainment of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} This is an average time over a variety of exhibitions among a random sample of viewers conducted from 2006 to 2008.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Sydney Prints: 45 Years of the Sydney Printmakers}, a travelling exhibition of the works of printmakers from the Sydney Printmakers Group between 1961 and 2006. Exhibition at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, Windsor, March 2007.
\textsuperscript{27} Informal conversation with audience member about her interest in the exhibition.
\end{flushright}
knowledge about the subject, artist or artworks. Knowledge can be employed as a channel into an enhanced aesthetic experience. This viewer is an example of what Lachapelle, et al, have suggested as an ideal viewing experience enhanced by knowledge.

Knowledge about art can be acquired in many ways. Direct experience in producing art, and thus an admiration for the skill taken to produce the works, is one way. Mary Pat Fisher and Paul Zelanski have written on the subject of The Art of Seeing and express their belief that: ‘responding to art is also an acquired sensitivity, based on exposure and expanded knowledge. The purpose of the book is to expose you to a wide range of great artworks, beautifully reproduced, and to provide information that will increase your awareness of and responsiveness to what you are seeing.’ The problem with this information is that most people who attend art galleries would not take the time to read a book on that specific subject prior to attending. Appreciation of art can be in reference to varied past knowledge and experience, dependent on each viewer and their personal history, which does not necessarily rely on artistic knowledge. Discussed in the previous chapter, the visual literacy of the viewer is a personal characteristic dependent on the context of each individual.

Overriding factors that may or may not ultimately affect the viewing experience, such as the level of education or styles of looking, are not recognizable when observing audience members in the gallery. It is the actions of viewers as an expression of their relationship to that space that provide credible information about their experience. Melton described the actions of viewers in practical terms, such as relating movements through the gallery as ‘stops and stays’, which obviously describes the propensity for viewers to stop in front of a work, and if they stay or move on. This behaviour expresses both the attraction potential of the work and the interest reaction of the viewer. For the curator or artist this behaviour may provide a ‘result’, an expression of popularity or degree of interest in a particular work dependent on the degree of audience reaction to it.

If gallery staff were alerted to the occurrence of these behaviours it would enable them to place objects appropriately to divert and attract viewers, to retain or re-ignite interest throughout the exhibition. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), which has been studied during many exhibitions over the last three years, has available to them the resources to reconstruct exhibitions in a responsive format rather than rely on the more traditional installation of two-dimensional works around the walls, video projections in isolated rooms.

28 Discussion of this phenomenon appears in chapter four.
30 This theory has been discussed at length in chapter four.
and three-dimensional works positioned within an open space of the gallery. The MCA seems to rely on a well-used formula of display for all their exhibitions. Escaping from this formulaic configuration of displaying contemporary artworks provides a new dimension to the viewing experience that has the potential to re-ignite and/or capture renewed interest from audiences. At Documenta 12 the integration of video art within open gallery space added texture to the exhibition layout and improved interaction.

Alternatively, exhibitions held in diverse locations (that is other than the traditional art museum configuration of significant civic building discussed previously in this thesis) have an advantage of maintaining the viewers interest in the site as well as the works of art dispersed through that location, such as Tanglin Camp in Singapore when it was used as a site for the Singapore Biennale 2006. Viewers at this site remained animated throughout the process of viewing as they explored the many buildings and grounds of the ex-army camp to discover the artworks located throughout the configuration of multiple structures. A combination of exploring the previously unseen and discovery of a diverse range of artistic formats within the site of Tanglin Camp provided an example of a zone of interaction that usurped the usual ‘museum fatigue’. The provision of an informal setting in which viewers felt at ease, being able to take time out from viewing to sit, chat and relax without feeling pressured to move on, was a distinct advantage in this instance.

Figure 69 Audience members at Tanglin Camp, Singapore during Singapore Biennale 2006. Photo: J. Sager

The Significance of Seating

There are, of course, specific reasons why particular artworks require particular installation, however, it is conceivable that alterations to some of the exhibition formats at the Museum of Contemporary Art could be implemented if the audiences engagement was taken into account.

Detailed description of this layout appears later in this chapter.
The provision of seating to allow prolonged viewing, or for respite from viewing, is a significant factor within the museum milieu, and within audience development specifically. Therefore, particular attention was paid to the influence seating, or the lack of seating, had on audience behaviour within each site of this study. At Documenta 12 in Kassel, an artwork by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale*, provided an opportunity for the author to observe the significance the provision of ample seating has on the audience. The work consisted of 1,001 wooden chairs from late Ming and Quing Dynasty (1644 - 1911) placed in clusters throughout Museum Fridericianum and Aue-Pavillon as a more permanent reminder of the 1,001 Chinese residents who traveled to Kassel, Germany during the first month of the exhibition. The influx of so many people from China created a temporary demographic shift in the small city. A spokesperson from Ai’s studio stated, ‘the project is about a new way to communicate, to participate, a new spiritual condition’. This component of the project was intended as inspiration for both the Chinese participants and the local population to consider notions of place and identity. The same considerations could conceivable be transferred to the second component of Ai Weiwei’s work – the installation of the 1001 chairs.

Figure 70 Detail of installation of Ai Weiwei’s *Fairytale* in Museum Fridericianum during Documenta 12.
Photo: J. Sager

38 The residents of Kassel had been amazed by the appearance of so many people from China and it had prompted much conversation between citizens on the subject whilst they were there. Information was gathered in informal conversation with Helga on 14th August at her home in Kassel.
The 1001 chairs remained for the 100 days of Documenta 12. Strangely out of place, while at the same time the chairs became a familiar companion to viewing. As the viewers made their way through Documenta, the chairs became recognizable and familiar components of every site. They were paradoxically a reminder of the past, whilst an integral component of a very contemporary visual experience. Also as a utilitarian device they provided much needed seating for the audience throughout the vast exhibition. However, it was not merely seating that was offered. The chairs had been arranged in groups to provide “circles of enlightenment” where guided groups could sit together and talk about their viewing experience, an intentional component of the curatorial and educational construct of the exhibition.39 The guided tours of the exhibition, which lasted a minimum of two hours, made regular stops at the “circles of enlightenment” (Palmenhain). This was a designated area within the exhibition space devoted to the concentrated study of and collective engagement with art.40 The “circles of enlightenment” were assembled using Ai Weiwei’s chairs. The chairs also provided time out from viewing and an opportunity to relax while also observing other viewers. The opportunity for each viewer to reflect on his or her situation in the exhibition was offered. When discussing this work Ai Weiwei suggests that it enables all visitors to Kassel a time to consider their own place, ‘I think that past and future, these two realities which are both internal and external to each person, are all integrated in very different forms and possibilities that make each individual unique, with his or her own life, landscape, possibilities…”41

Ai Weiwei’s chairs worked on multiple levels as an integral component of the exhibition reminding viewers of the presence of an ancient Chinese culture and the individuals they referenced as each chair was noticeably different and bore the signs of habitation through

40 Excerpt from the official Documenta 12 site http://documenta.de/fuehrungen0.html?&L=1
centuries of use. The provision of a resting place offers not only respite from viewing, but it also offers an opportunity to relax from the role of audience member. To momentarily revert from audience member to family member, partner, or any number of roles an individual enacts when taking respite from the intensity of the principal role of viewer. It was most fortunate for the management of Documenta 12 to be provided with such a large volume of seating in the work of Ai Weiwei’s 1,001 chairs, that was able to be, not only incorporated into the exhibition site, but also become an integral component of the audience’s experience of that exhibition. When a representative from the Documenta 12 curatorium was asked what would have been done had those chairs not been included, he replied that it was just fortunate they weren’t faced with that scenario.42

Seating is a subject the broader public has clear views and opinions on.43 Discussion on the subject reveals seating to be an element of art galleries that members of the public feel quite strongly about. As an example, whenever the author describes the outline of this research to strangers, many comment, unsolicited, on the lack of seating in galleries and are at a loss as to know why that is and are hoping that an answer to the conundrum may be forthcoming.44 The art institutions, when asked, volunteer reasons of aesthetics and obstruction. Aesthetics as a way of suggesting seating degrades the ‘look’ of the gallery space, that seating may clutter the clean aesthetic of the pristine white cube.45 Also that seating can detract from the works of art, posing as an added and unwanted element, which may be true in some instances of installation art, however the author feels confident that in all other cases seating would not be confused with the art objects it is located with.46 As an obstruction to movement, a seat would not be a problem to anyone who can make their way through a restaurant or café and may become a problem to navigation only when placed in a position where it would create a problem. This research suggests that the act of observing viewers movements can quickly and effectively identify if such a problem exists and suggest ways of overcoming it. As yet, there has been no incident of too much seating causing problems for viewers. Even 1001 chairs were assimilated and well used by audience members in Kassel.

42 Comments taken from an interview (conducted by the author) with Ulrich Schötker, Head of Education for Documenta 12, Wednesday 15th August, 2007, Kassel, Germany.
43 A subject often raised by audience members, and often viewers have been observed seeking out seating in galleries.
44 Friends and acquaintances ask why there isn’t more seating in galleries in the hope that this research will find specific information on the subject.
45 The white cube aesthetic was discussed in chapter one, and see discussion in Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, University of California Press, 1976.
46 The author, as a freelance curator at diverse contemporary galleries in Australia, has asked directors and owners their reason for providing minimal seating in their galleries. The replies have been, as well as those proffered here, lack of funding to purchase more, the thought that what was there was ample for the space or they hadn’t considered seating was a problem.
The seat not only performs as a resting place to prolong viewing interaction time, it also becomes an extension of the viewer’s personal space. Described by Goffman as a ‘stall’ the seat acts as a ‘well-bounded space to which individuals can lay temporary claim’.\(^{47}\) This temporary claim is made by either the viewer’s presence or can also be made by leaving a personal object on the seat, such as a handbag, jacket or newspaper, which stakes a claim for that space. The claiming or ownership of a space is an important component of social behaviour and allowing this role to be played out by members of the viewing audience provides a degree of autonomy over their viewing environment. LaRusso suggests the constant interruption of personal space in today’s congested society ‘fosters a low-level degree of nervous-muscular “avoidance” posture’ manifest in body language of ‘pursed lips, quick pace, collected posture and habitual frown’.\(^{48}\) Viewers come to an art museum in order to escape the fast pace of life, to move slowly about the gallery, able to sit for long periods engaged in reverie. If that is their desire, the museum has an obligation to provide that opportunity. The notion that the art gallery provides a space of quiet contemplation can be better accommodated if there is somewhere to sit and quietly contemplate.

Why is it that so many art museums provide so little seating? It may be a legitimate observation that the art establishment does not want the public to linger too long in the viewing environment. By providing more, or adequate seating, viewers can linger in the gallery space spending longer periods of time, either engaging with the works, entering into discussion with other viewers, watching other viewers, or simply enjoying being in the zone of interaction.

---


This study recognizes, through observation and comparison, that there are a substantial number of viewers who wish to stay longer in the galleries. Where there is seating, they do remain longer. It is the opinion of the author that audience members generally want to stay longer and would, if they could sit whilst looking at artworks for long periods of time, whilst discussing their experience with others, whilst observing the actions of others, or resting from the physical demands of standing for long periods of time. Lack of seating is an impediment to the viewing experience and may therefore be included in the discourse of exclusion/inclusion because the lack of seating is a deterrent to members of the public who cannot or will not stand for extended periods of time.

The viewing time at a single artwork is between 30 seconds and 5 minute when standing. This time frame is much longer when the viewer is seated and especially when multiple works are visible from that one seat. Viewers have been observed sitting at a particular work for 10 – 15 minutes and up to 30 minutes when seated with a general view of the gallery.
The Experience of Space

Performing as a viewer is a defined role imbued with particular actions and relationships. It is evident that a definite role exists when viewers, such as those at Documenta 12 and other exhibitions, required respite from performing that role. What are the behavioural characteristics of that role and how does the audience know to behave in specific ways? One audience member, when asked how she adjusts her behaviour, replied, ‘as soon as I enter any gallery I tend to act a little more mature, becoming respectful to the people around me, looking at the artwork’.\(^50\) Another viewer responded by saying, ‘I feel that it is more relaxed and comfortable in the museum than the outside world. In the gallery I feel that there is some invisible route for me to follow’.\(^51\) Audience members have either been in that space, or a similar space before and, if not, they may follow the lead of other viewers who are in the same space. Viewers may also take their cue from the semiotics of the space, such as the large, open civic structure or the hushed atmosphere. Some viewers may have seen the way people behave in galleries and museums on movies, documentaries, television, advertisements or have even read in a book how others behave in a gallery. In whichever way they are informed, it is obvious that most viewers are compelled to comply with the accepted role of audience member while in the act of viewing in an art exhibition. The general museum behaviour becomes the dominant role enacted by most members of the viewing audience.

As Goffman suggests, whilst a dominant role is being performed, other influences are also enacted by individuals in that space. The principal role, in most instances, is one of quiet, slow, concentrated focus on the art objects in an orderly progression through the gallery space. This occurs whilst taking care to perform the social role of engagement with strangers when it needs to be applied. Engagement with strangers requires social skills that are applied in any public space. Such as ‘turn taking’ when the usual behaviour of ‘first in first served’ applies. This can be witnessed at the cloakroom counter, the reception desk and at the gallery shop check out. It is, however, modified within the zone of interaction where viewers already looking at an artwork will adjust their position to allow the next arrival to have equal share of viewing access. Also, adjustments are made according to height of the viewers.

\(^{50}\) Comment by audience member at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 5\(^{th}\) September, 2008.
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
Shorter viewers, especially children and shorter women, will be given priority of view by people taller than them, which is identified as gallantry in a wider social context.

Figure 74 Audience members at Documenta 12, Germany. Photo: J. Sager

One viewer commented 'you also give others space to view the artworks privately and in their own comfort, without interruptions and someone in their way'. However, when the number of viewers at one artwork is too large to accommodate this movement or adjustment of positions, the social rules of 'body space' are relaxed to allow more viewers to move closer together than would normally be acceptable so that a greater number of viewers have an opportunity to acquire visual access to the artwork.

'While the degree of felt intimacy varies with each culture (and between individuals within a culture), any uninvited intrusion of this [body] space is inclined to be met with hesitation if not total rejection', suggests LaRusso. This is true of gallery behaviour as any physical contact by a stranger in the course of viewing is met with hostility. Looking over the shoulders of others is permitted, although it would be objected to if there were ample space for adjacent viewing. Allowing or disallowing these behaviours is dictated by the body language conversation between all the participants. A disapproving glance over the shoulder communicates clearly that the person behind has entered an unacceptable body space and should move away immediately. Alternately, a smile and sideways step invites a fellow viewer to move in closer. Goffman refers to this body space as 'the sheath', the closest body space or personal space 'anywhere within which an entering other causes the individual to feel encroached upon…the special demands directly in front of the face being larger than at the

53 Comments from an audience member at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 5th September, 2008.
back’. An audience member explained that ‘within the gallery, you also give others space to view the artworks privately and in their own comfort, without interruptions and someone in their way’. The audience member viewing an art object would expect their personal space to include the area between themselves and the object they are engaging with. Any disruption or broach of that space becomes a personal affront to the viewer, which is why, when his or her line of view is acknowledged, extraordinary measures are taken to avoid it (such as was described as a consequence of photographing actions).

Some areas of the body and indeed where the body is placed in particular environments are of great interest when studying human movements. Underhill isolated the exception taken by shoppers to others being in close proximity to their back when they examine merchandise, described in Chapter One as the ‘butt-brush effect’. Underhill also states that ‘butt sensitivity of women also establishes a relationship between store design and typeface: the narrower the quarters, the less time a woman will spend there, so the clearer and more direct signs and other merchandising materials must be’. He found this applied to the labeling on health and beauty products where ‘91% of all drugstore [chemist] shoppers read the front of a package and 42% the back’. To stand and read the packaging takes time, and space in which to do it without being jostled by other shoppers passing by, thus store design must accommodate this user inspired need.

During the Sydney Biennale 2006 at the MCA, a recurring problem came to light as a consequence of routine tracking and participatory observation. Role behaviour of a specific type acted out at a particular point within the gallery was noted. The author has coined the term ‘Make Up My Mind Place’ or MUMMP to describe this phenomenon. The MUMMP was observed within an area just inside the entry to a gallery room. A ‘bottle neck’ formed as viewers entered and stopped, followed by other viewers who stopped in the same area. Each viewer would stop, firstly to adjust to the new environment, and secondly to assess the personal relevance of the artwork, before they decided to either proceed further into the room, or turn and leave. The first viewer or ‘with’ to stop caused the next to move beside and so on until entry was blocked and subsequent viewers were forced to peer over the shoulders of those in front. Any subsequent viewers were unable to enter, having to turn and leave immediately after realizing their access was blocked by the accumulation of viewers just inside the door. This occurred predominantly in rooms showing video art, because new arrivals did not want to interrupt the view of the audience already in the room by standing between them and the video projection. Once the viewer did move further into the room they

56 Comments from an audience member at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 5th September, 2008.
58 Underhill, *ibid*.
59 From tracking diagrams at the Museum of Contemporary Art during the Sydney Biennale 2006.
60 The transition zone has been described in detail in chapter three.
were then committed to spending an *acceptable* amount of time there before interrupting other viewers again in order to leave the room.\(^{61}\)

The MUMMP phenomenon was initially noted in a gallery room where three video art projections were installed. Călin Dan’s *Emotional Architecture 2: Sample city* 2003 (11:40mins), *Emotional Architecture 1: sony/wmf/pp* 2003 and *Trip* 2006, were, respectively, projected on a screen at floor level angled toward the room with the sound track available through 4 sets of headphones. The second video was on the entire back wall with the sound track audible throughout the room, and the third smaller video format was on the left hand wall with headphones hanging next to it.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 75 Călin Dan, *Emotional Architecture 2 – Sample City*, 2003, video still, (from Zones of Contact 2006: Biennale of Sydney, Biennale of Sydney Ltd., Sydney, 2006, front cover).

The configuration of visual and audio information was confusing. It was initially difficult to recognize which video the audible track was meant to match, where viewers could position themselves to see all the projections and, most importantly how to negotiate the seating and audio equipment provided. All these factors accumulated to leave the audience, in general, confused as to how to proceed into the room. The seating consisted of one bench seat and three beanbags, which was totally inadequate for the volume and configuration of the audience members. The majority of viewers *could not* (older or infirmed), or *would not*, use the beanbags, which in turn decreased access to the audio track for one of the works (the headphones for *Sample city* were located on the floor with the beanbags). To use the one and only bench seat in the room, viewers were forced to cross the viewing path of other viewers to reach it, and then face either one or the other of the projections. This lack of access and confusing configuration of elements added to the presence of the MUMMP and its obvious negative effect on access to viewing. Tracking movements in this room saw 70 people enter in a half hour period. However, less than half that number ventured further into the room to sit

\(^{61}\) Socially acceptable amount of time is dependant on the particular situation and is often dictated by the expected degree of aggravation caused by one individual in relation to another member of the situation.
or stand for a period longer than a few minutes.\textsuperscript{62} An extract from the field notes indicates the initial impressions of the effect these elements were having on visitor traffic.

The seating is very problematic as the beanbags block the movement of viewers into the room and add to a bottleneck. A small projection is where the build-up is creating uncertainty and annoyance. People try to sit at either end of a bench seat, which has one end “blocked” by butting it up against the central pillar. The artist would be unhappy with the configuration of videos as it is difficult to see and hear, and the sound of one impacts on another.\textsuperscript{63}

It was interesting to compare accessibility in the other rooms at the MCA during the same exhibition. Another was Hassan Khan, \textit{The Hidden Location} 2004, a 52 minute, four-channel video installation where a large format projection appeared on all four walls. There was a bench seat in the centre of the room. Over a half hour period 87 people entered, more than half staying for more than a few minutes. The MUMMP was of less significance as most viewers moved further into the room in order to see all four projections and many sat to take in the work. In this room seating was far more effective, not only seating more people because they were able to sit all the way around the bench, but it was accessible and did not create a barrier to movement. Viewers were also able to stand around the room while not obstructing too much of other viewers’ vision because all four walls were covered by the video work turning the room into an animated light-filled space.

An audience member brought to the attention of the author another impediment to viewing due to the use of side rooms for video work at the MCA. This particular viewer confided that ‘I also found I didn’t walk into rooms unless there were some other people in there or I had seen people come from the room. This was because sometimes I wasn’t sure I was able to go in there or if it was off limits.’\textsuperscript{64} This confession from a first-time viewer highlights the need for greater understanding of the audience’s experience within the zone of interaction so that every aspect of that experience is recognized as part of the whole, and fashioned to achieve the best viewing experience possible for all levels of gallery-going expertise.

As a comparison to the viewing experience of video art at the MCA was the presentation of video work in Aue-Pavillon at Documenta 12, which provided more possibilities for viewing interaction. Four temporary walls had been erected to form a large square space in a central area of the site (see map: 1D on following pages, reference No.14 - the artists Dias and Riedweg). On two opposite walls a large format two-channel video was projected, one wall was left blank and its opposite wall a mirrored surface. In the center of this constructed space was an oversized, square, fabric covered, soft ottoman on which up to 12 viewers could sit and/or lounge to watch the video at any one time. Remaining space between the ottoman and

\textsuperscript{62} Field notes and tracking diagrams from the Museum of Contemporary Art during the Sydney Biennale 2006.
\textsuperscript{63} Field notes, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney Biennale 2006.
\textsuperscript{64} First time viewer at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Biennale of Sydney, 5\textsuperscript{th} September, 2008.

190
walls provided enough room to enable other viewers to stand without interrupting the line of view of those seated, while even more viewers were able to linger and observe from the wide openings at the corners of the space.

Figure 76 Audience members viewing Maximale Gier, video installation, 2003 by Dias and Riedweg in Aue-Pavillon at Documenta 12. Photo: J. Sager

This particular configuration provided a more accessible viewing environment, and notably, also used less space for a single video work than had been accomplished at other exhibitions. This was only one type of configuration for the viewing of video art at Documenta 12. All video art presented at this exhibition provided ample seating and ease of entry into the spaces, thus avoiding the creation of a MUMMP. The audiences at this exhibition were willing to enter and inhabit the spaces provided. Such as the video work in Aue-Pavillon, This Is How We Walk On The Moon, by Johanna Billing, which offered open access and ample seating easily available to the audience who chose to come and go at self regulated intervals without interruption to other viewers.65

65 Audience behaviour observed by the author, August, 2007.
Large numbers of viewers, European audiences in particular,\textsuperscript{66} the configuration of gallery space, were all contributing factors resulting in a well-inhabited exhibition space during Documenta 12. There appears to be notable principal differences and similarities in behaviour within audiences of contemporary art. In the instance of Documenta 12 the dominant behaviour was the willingness to enter and inhabit a space, which is likely to be, in part, the result of the makeup of that audience. Firstly, 14% of the audience was from the local Kassel area, two thirds of the entire audience was German and the majority of the remainder were from Europe.\textsuperscript{67} These statistics suggest that a large proportion of the audience may have been familiar with Documenta and many may have attended Documenta on previous occasions, considering Documenta has been presented in Kassel since 1955 and is ‘regarded as the most important exhibition of contemporary art’\textsuperscript{68} and that ‘the enterprise assumes greater and greater significance as an arbiter of contemporary art styles and markets’.\textsuperscript{69} What also is evident is the vast majority of viewers (and all the staff members) did, of course, communicate in their native language of German. The air of familiarity provided an ease of transition into audience member role as viewers negotiated the exhibition spaces. The minority of viewers from other nations, who were more likely to be unfamiliar with Documenta, were able to emulate the dominant behaviour. As a result, what was observed was a cohesive audience that moved seamlessly through the exhibition.

\textsuperscript{66} The accents of the viewers were mainly German with others such as French, Spanish, Italian etc.
\textsuperscript{67} http://documenta.de ‘That was documenta 12’ – from 16 June to 23 September 2007 – a review. Accessed 26/09/07.
\textsuperscript{68} http://documenta.de ‘about documenta’. Accessed 18/10/07.
\textsuperscript{69} Walter Grasskamp, ‘’Degenerate Art’ and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed’, in Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (eds.), \textit{Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles}, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994, p.163. The author spoke with fellow passengers on the train from Frankfurt to Kassel who were traveling there to attend Documenta 12 and had also visited the last Documenta. The author’s landlady in Kassel had attended Documenta previously and also took her two sons this year, 2007.
The design of the exhibition spaces also contributed to the cohesive style of viewing. In particular, the purpose built Aue-Pavillon (refer to map: 1D below), provided large open areas while onward progression was easily directed from entry to exit. Each work was given sufficient direct viewing space and ample seating was available.
Even though the audiences were large at Documenta (754,301 paying guests and nearly 20,000 invited guests attended during the 100 days it was open) there was little evidence of the MUMMP phenomenon. Viewers showed little hesitation when entering a room because there was, most often, an exit point in addition to the entry, which allowed a flow through effect. The direction of traffic was easily accommodated in both directions at once due to this layout.

Specific elements of an exhibition, such as layout and/or provision of seating, have a definite influence on the viewing experience. In the case of Documenta 12 these elements provided a positive outcome, while at the MCA during the Sydney Biennale there were obvious ways these components could have been improved to aid the movement and comfort of viewers. An example of inadequate use of seating at the MCA was observed when a single bench seat had been placed at the back of a large room where a single, large format video was projected.
on one of the walls of that space. A gap was left behind the bench seat for viewers to enter, although a MUMMP created near the door blocked that pathway and because a single seat added to the dilemma, very few people sat. Many stood along the back wall but would not move any further into the large space of the room, even when there was an accumulation of viewers who, it is probable, would have moved further in had they had ample seating.

The reluctance to inhabit a room is dependent on a complex understanding of relationships, especially implied relationships with strangers. Not wanting to be ‘thought’ to be associated with a stranger sets up particular avoidance tactics by some viewers. Why some people won’t share a seat with others can be explained by Goffman’s assertion that,

What seems to occur in middle-class society is that arrival creates sequential relocation but departure leads to somewhat more complex behaviour, since an individual who leaves his current niche to take up a freed one produces an open that he is disinclined to be as close to his neighbor as he was. (When the two are [male and female], there exists the added complication that failure to move away when possible can be taken as a sign of undue interest.)

These reactions are even more pronounced in the gallery situation because viewers come and go according to individual requirements. The viewing time is determined by personal taste, rather than the beginning or end of a journey, as it would be for instance on a bus or beginning and end of a movie in a cinema. Each individual spends more or less time with an artwork appropriate to their personal preference rather than the work providing a beginning and an end of viewing. The video viewer is conscious of the effect their physical placement will have on the other viewers and, especially as Goffman has suggested, on how it will be perceived by others when the viewer leaves without excuse or indication from the work being viewed. Leaving a video work has the potential to either create an uncomfortable moment, or provide an opportunity for silent protest. The moment chosen to leave can be in reaction to what appears in the video. In this case the departure may be accentuated with bravado and an extension of stature, rather than a physical shrinking to try to minimize the disruption to other viewers. In this way a viewer is able to make a statement concerning the work without uttering a word and the remainder of the audience has opportunity to agree, through imitation of that behaviour, or ignore the outburst completely. There is opportunity to interact with other viewers in many unspoken ways. The dominant response from viewers is their awareness of others and their understanding of their role within the zone of interaction. One viewer argued ‘other members of the audience also adjust their behaviour to correspond with what is socially accepted behaviour within a public place such as a gallery. It is seemingly appropriate to be considerate towards others who are also sharing the same space’. 

---

70 This was a room at the Museum of Contemporary Art during the Biennale of Sydney 2006.
71 Goffman, The Goffman Reader, p.47.
72 From dialogue with audience member, Museum of Contemporary Art, September, 2008.
An individual will enter the zone of interaction with his or her personal perspective and experience. They will also have a greater or lesser degree of understanding of the circumstance they are expecting to encounter. When they do enter, the worst scenario is if the experience they have within that space is a negative one. A negative experience can be generated by the viewer being restricted from behaving in a manner that they are comfortable with, or simply, by not finding what they had expected.

Experience - the meld of what the current scene brings to him and what he brings to it – meant to settle into a form even while it is beginning, finds no form and is therefore no experience. Reality anomically flutters. He has a “negative experience” – negative in the sense that it takes its character from what it is not, and what it is not is an organized and organizationally affirmed response.  

This negative experience is often found in the gallery environment when viewers are unable to, or unwilling to, conform to the social role being acted out around them. This may be manifest for some as small annoyances, or for others an overall feeling of being ‘out of place’. Members of contemporary art audiences may feel out of place as a response to any one, or a combination of influences. These can range from a reaction to obvious structures of exclusive space (discussed throughout this thesis and specifically in chapter five), to simply not being able to find, or navigate one’s way through the museum. The nature of contemporary art can also add to a feeling of exclusion because the very nature of the artworks’ oblique conceptual presentation confounds the audience member. The physical space, its contents, and the behavioural role of visual art audience members can generate negative experiences. The viewer who does not want to be quiet, who does not understand contemporary art, who finds the space intimidating, their actions and responses create variations in behaviour within the zone of interaction.

Goffman argues that it is within the ‘role distance’ - ways in which the individual performs outside the expected role situation - that he or she shows their personal self, their individual style of behaviour. Therefore it is important to note that the conduct shown, other than the expected role of ‘viewer’, is that which reveals the ways in which personal imprints are placed on the basic action being performed. They give the situation character and express personally motivated reactions, such as the young couple painfully aware of each others compliance with the situation while maintaining their ‘role distance’ through acts of intimacy such as prolonged eye contact, or the light but lingering physical touch. They are performing the role of viewing while simultaneously applying their role as intimate lovers without usurping the dominant action. Likewise, a group of friends who wish to discuss the artworks - and at times find themselves to be debating loudly, laughing and calling to each other as they move through the gallery – will try to contain their outbursts by drawing each other’s attention to the volume

---

74 Goffman, ‘The Manufacture of Negative Experience’.
of their communication. They are aware of the dominant role expected in the hushed gallery space while also allowing their personal flamboyance to create a ‘role distance’. If no opportunity exists for the viewer to project their personal social role on the situation the possibility of a negative experience is more pronounced. The art museum staff needs to be aware of these dual roles and allow opportunity to accommodate them.

In some instances there may be differences in needs between members of a couple or group. One member may choose not to spend as much time as their partner, or choose not to even enter the gallery space. Members of the public were observed sitting on the one bench seat provided in the foyer of the MCA waiting for their friends or partners to emerge from the gallery. Some of these people were waiting for longer than half an hour, and by their facial expressions, were not particularly pleased with the situation. Acknowledging the existence of those people who do not want to enter the gallery space, for whatever reason, creates an opportunity. This situation can be used to the art museum’s advantage by creating a more pleasurable experience for those waiting. Providing seating in the foyer equipped with reading material, video art projection, or installation with an explanation of that work’s development and context so the disinterested party has an opportunity to leave better informed than they would have been had they been left to just sit and wait.

When a disinterested party is coerced into viewing, he or she may all the time be resenting the demands being placed on him or her and be silently reacting in a negative way to the fleeting views of works they do not understand. It is better to provide an easy starting point, an entry into the creative process of at least one work of art. It may alert the interest of the non-viewer, leave him or her with a niggling thirst for more that could be satisfied and expanded during their next visit to a gallery. What it can also do is be empowering. Information gained inadvertently whilst waiting, can be the basis for shared discussion with their viewing partner. The committed viewer also has an improved experience, being able to view at their leisure in the gallery, rather than hurrying to finish because they are conscious of keeping their partner waiting. Various methods to establish a relationship with the art museum’s infrequent visitors could be implemented.

There are more ways to stimulate a relationship with an art object than simply presenting it. All levels of viewing expertise need to be acknowledged and catered for in a responsible art gallery environment. Members of the public should be offered information that they can relate, at a level they feel comfortable with. Initially, to raise their interest enough to inspire an extension of their personal journey of discovery and interaction with visual art. For example, an abstract painting within many abstract paintings and other objects can be frustratingly

---

75 Observed behaviour across most galleries.
76 See chapter five for examples of interaction between gallery staff and viewers.
77 These observations were made inadvertently when the researcher was herself sitting in the foyer for long periods of time in order to observe the behaviour of people as they approached and entered the museum.
ambiguous and appear pointless to the uninitiated. By placing a storyboard with a particular work, constructed by the artist or curator, showing the process of, not only how the paint was applied, but what thought processes were instrumental in arriving at the end product, valuable understanding and a grounding of knowledge is offered. The viewer doesn’t have to agree with the artist’s concept to appreciate the work, though demystifying can put the viewer at ease.78

In the contemporary art museum it would be advantageous to demystify a challenging artistic medium such as installation, or video art. Clear explanation of installation art, for example, can change the viewing experience from a negative into a positive. For the non-art-viewer left in the foyer on a comfortable seat with audio visual equipment located conveniently close by, time can be well spent listening to the simple explanation of how installation art is viewed as an accumulation of elements that interact with each other to form an entire picture, the viewer and how they interpret the work becomes an integral part of that end result. Just the fact that there may not be a definitive reading of that one artwork, but that the interpretation of the viewer is essential to the work, can alter a viewer’s perception. By giving the would-be-viewer ideas of how they can interpret visual signs within any work of art, they are empowered, not only for a particular gallery and/or a particular work, but also for any encounter with visual art. Meanwhile, the art viewer released from obligation to their non-viewing partner, is able to relax and devote their entire attention to the personal experience of interaction. There is an advantage to creating an environment where avid viewer, not so avid viewer and complete novice can be acknowledged and accommodated.

Figure 80 Museum of Contemporary Art foyer from above showing the location of a video monitor to the left of the exit/entrance. Photo: J. Sager

78 Students of ‘Media and Visual Cultures’ expressed a positive change in attitude toward some of the artworks when they were shown how to extract meaning from the image or object during a fielstrip to the Museum of Contemporary Art.
It is interesting that the MCA has provided a video monitor in the foyer of their museum to show footage of artists explaining their work. What is of crucial importance is where they have placed it. Firstly, it is in the transition zone rendering it invisible to all those entering. This particular zone is just inside the front door where visitors entering do not notice anything other than their own onward movement, while those leaving are in a state of sensory overload or suffering from museum fatigue and are not inclined to stand and watch a video monitor. For visitors sitting on the only seat in the foyer, the screen is too far away to be seen (the seat is at the bottom of figure 13 out of view). If a visitor does choose to stand at the monitor, which is the only position from where it can be viewed, they soon find they are in the way because it is in the busiest thoroughfare between the front door and entrance to the galleries. In light of all these observations of social dynamics at work, the selection of the placement of this viewing aid seems perfunctory and uninspired. This is an example of an instance where the ethnomuseologist could offer helpful advice to gallery staff for provision of a more user-friendly environment.

The Tate Modern in London, England has implemented what appear to be successful strategies to provide two levels of audience interaction within the one site. Two video monitors are installed in the open area outside galleries where their permanent collection is exhibited. A compilation of historical/documentary footage is presented on the monitors, covering pertinent events that occurred during the same timeframe as the artworks installed in the nearby galleries. This information adds an important element to the work for those who are not familiar with the historical context of the different art movements and the socio-political events that provoked many of the artists to create the work they did. There are viewers who do not require this extra layer of information, whilst it is an asset for those who do. A couple was observed parting company when one entered the gallery space leaving her partner to look at the monitors. Later, when the viewer emerged from the galleries to rejoin her partner who had been avidly watching the monitors, both moved on mutually pleased with their varied, while associated experiences and both left better informed in their own ways. Providing more than artworks appears to be a bonus which any art establishment could offer their audiences. However, it seems there is not enough effort being made by the arts establishment to satisfy all competency levels of viewing audiences. Research in Australia into contemporary art audiences has revealed, 'while half the galleries say they are primarily driven by customer satisfaction, little work is undertaken to obtain visitor feedback. Few galleries conduct independent audience evaluations and only 27% conduct frequent visitor research.'

79 A detailed description of the transition zone appears in chapter three.
80 The author visited the Tate Modern, London in August 2007 where these initiatives were observed and noted.
Conclusion

The interpretation of viewing has been based on the understanding that the behaviour of audiences must be viewed with respect to the multiple components of public, personal, and gallery inspired roles. Each role is distinct while simultaneously overlapping and merging in response to the environment that inspires those behaviours. When the complexity of situational roles is unraveled, the ethnomuseologist is able to recognize characteristics of behaviour that are a direct result of a gallery configuration. Identifying these anomalies can facilitate recommendations for change, not only in that environment, but also in a range of galleries with similar configurations of engagement. Only a few examples of these phenomena are the multiple instances where seating in galleries requires revue, where there is inadequate provision for video art presentation, the need for a constructive diversion for non-viewers, and forms of mediating information about how to extract more from the experience of viewing. Clear evidence of what, why and how viewing behaviours occur lays claim to a viable testimony for implementing change in the zone of interaction.

The aim of this study is to develop an understanding of the social life of the art museum. The participants express their attitudes in response to their experience through their actions, and the ethnomuseologist provides explanation of those actions based on knowledge of the environment and roles enacted within and reflexive of that environment. If art establishments do not know what their audiences require, then it seems there will be little motivation for arts managers to make provision for a changing and complex visual art audience. Understanding the audience is the secret to satisfying that audience’s viewing needs. A translation of viewing dynamics is presented as a way of connecting the audience’s experience back to the providers of that experience. When viewers inhabit the contemporary art gallery or exhibition space their language of viewing is spoken in gestures and movements, punctuated with eye contact and posture and, at times, illuminated with comment. This chapter has provided an interpretation of viewing as a connection from audience to arts professional. This means of relaying information provides a point of entry into the complex world of the viewer.
CONCLUSION

Things and People Make Space Happen

Who is this Spectator, also called the Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver? It has no face, is mostly a back. It stoops and peers, is slightly clumsy. Its attitude is inquiring, its puzzlement discreet.\(^1\)

![Figure 81 Viewers at Documenta 12, Germany, 2007. Photo: J. Sager](image)

Who is this person Brian O’Doherty describes in the epigram? He or she is ambiguous in form and faceless in appearance. What can we learn from such a person? This thesis argues that a modified retail research model produces results other research methods have not been able to achieve when studying contemporary visual art audiences because it observes what people actually do in response to that environment. The ethnomuseologist is witness to, and interpreter of, audience’s response to the site where contemporary visual art is displayed. The

complexity of the audience’s experience within the zone of interaction is interpreted as a direct result of the museum milieu, social behaviour in a public space, and the individual’s personal reactions to all elements of the environment. Because the ethnomusiologist is a specialist in understanding and interpreting audience response, she is well positioned to provide advocacy for the anonymous audience member.

The findings of the research outlined in this thesis are tendered here as, not only evidence of the successful implementation of the research model, but also an entreaty to the arts establishment to acknowledge the experience of the audience as a critical component of any contemporary art exhibition. The arts community may well acknowledge that ‘the abyss between the audience and artwork has been growing wider’, but what has been done to bridge it? The implementation of the modified retail research model, the application and purpose of which has been presented in this thesis, offers a means of understanding the practical details of the relationship between art and audience. It provides the prospect of achievable improvements being made to that relationship. The experience of the audience is not static nor simple, but complex and challenging. Here is a call for the viewing experience, in part, to be recognized as being a direct consequence of the environment in which it is enacted. By doing so, there is opportunity to modify that environment to better suit the audience’s needs, rather than entirely attributing audience response to the ephemeral emotional reaction to the artwork that is neither seen nor heard and therefore simply understood to exist. The unseen response is nonetheless an important component of audience behaviour, and the author has argued that the viewing experience, as a personal response to artworks, is comprised largely of the aesthetic experience. An experience that has been theorized by philosophers and academics in an effort to fully comprehend it.

However, the author contends that the experience of the contemporary art audience is not limited to an aesthetic experience alone. The audience’s response to the environment where contemporary visual art is displayed is as much dependent on the combination of site, social interaction and individual response as it is to the aesthetic experience when an artwork is held in his or her gaze. ‘The “experience” is not limited to the art’, a factor recognized by Heather Maitland in her discussion of ‘customer experience’ in the arts sector.

The obligation of the arts establishment to better understand the actual needs of their audience and how to adjust the environment, over which they have ultimate control, is recognized as a significant factor within audience development. Because the audience’s reaction is to their environment, the ethnomuseologist specializes in acknowledging and analyzing the complex interwoven components of that environment to distinguish the individual response and what has triggered it specifically. Ethnomuseology has the potential

---

to fulfill the obligation to better understand, and therefore, better accommodate the audience as valued clients of the arts establishment. Viewing experience can be examined using the methodology presented in the previous chapters, and the findings debated and processed with due regard to past and present practical information concerning audience experience. The findings are then presented within art critical commentary to arts professionals who want to improve their provision of *art as experience*. The audience, perceived as an anonymous faceless component within art critical discourse, has been denied an opportunity to question, debate or defend their position within that discourse. The ethnomuseologist is able to interpret the actions of the viewers based on extensive knowledge of the site and their relationship to it and each other. The ethnomuseologist gives voice to their needs and concerns, as a museologist, ethnographer and practitioner within the canon of visual arts, and ultimately, as a consummate viewer of contemporary visual art.

The ethnomuseologist is trained in methods of identifying behaviuors, understanding what initiates those behaviours, and how to adjust the environment to improve the interaction between user and space. Achieving the best outcomes for the audience is the mandate of the research model. Significantly, the researcher must be a stranger to the site being studied, as a precaution against the observers judgment being clouded by familiarity and divided by loyalty to that particular institution. The researcher must, however, be a specialist in the field of museology in order to distinguish the audience’s reactions, and those reactions as a consequence of the museum environment in particular. Just as Paco Underhill devised his research methodology to identify responses of shoppers to the retail environment, calling it the ‘science of shopping’, ethnomuseology studies the museum environment with the intention of identifying viewer responses to the spaces where contemporary visual art is presented.

Ethnomuseology is not a replica of Underhill’s methodology transferred to the museum from the retail sector, though it does rely on what is also a fundamental principle expressed by Underhill when he argues, ‘we never quite know what we’ll find until we find it, and even then we have to stop and figure out what it is we’ve seen’. It is this sense of possibility, an openness to discovery that distinguishes this research method from others that have been tried previously. Incorporated in the methodological structure of this research model are strategies implemented by other researchers that have provided insight into the human being as a social creature. Firstly, what William H. Whyte discovered in public spaces is ‘what attracts people most it would appear, is other people’, which can be understood to influence the art gallery and has not been taken into consideration as a viable means to attract the

---

6. Methods most commonly used in visual arts research are driven by expected results where the researcher asks specific questions of the audience, an example is *Audience Research Made Easy*, Arts Victoria and the Australia Council, Melbourne, 2005.
public into the art museum, because, quite often, as Whyte discovered, the opposite is thought to be true. Also the work of Daniel Miller has informed the ethnomuseologist because his research methodology revealed a more intimate aspect to human behaviour can sometimes be exposed if the researcher expends more time and closer contact with subjects to discover hidden truths. Miller, as a result of the time he spent with families, in their homes and when they shopped, discovered ‘love has come to be primarily objectified through everyday practices of concern, care and a particular sensitivity to others, within which shopping plays a central role’. He saw the concentrated effort of the housewife as she examined the fresh produce to find the ripest peach or the heaviest lettuce, as a desire to provide the healthiest food for her loved ones. This can be a metaphor for the museum or exhibition staff who provide visual art. They should examine closely and choose wisely the elements of the viewing environment that serve the needs of the audience. If they place the audience first, make the viewers of the art their priority, the act of caring about their viewing experience and making it the best they know how has the very real potential to entice and sustain a larger, more involved, and ultimately more satisfied audience.

There is a case for the satisfied audience. Learning from the way in which Underhill has observed the behaviour of shoppers and altered the shopping environment to cater for their needs illustrates that there is always something to be learnt from observing what people do. To illustrate this point, an example of shopping interaction can be compared with two very different instances of audience interaction observed in the course of this study.

The trademark of The Gap and many other clothing stores is that you can easily touch, stroke, unfold and otherwise examine at close range everything on the selling floor. A lot of sweaters and shirts are sold thanks to the decision to foster intimate contact between shopper and goods. That merchandising policy dictates the display scheme (wide, flat tabletops, which are easier to shop than racks or shelves). It also determines how and where employees will spend their time; all that touching means that sweaters and shirts constantly need to be refolded and straightened and neatened. That translates into the need for lots of clerks roaming the floor rather than standing behind the counter ringing up sales. Which is a big expense, but for The Gap and others, it’s a sound investment – the cost of doing business. The main thing here is that it was a conscious decision.

—

In the instance of shopping behaviour, it was easy to determine that shoppers wanted to feel the merchandise before buying, especially something that would be worn next to the skin. Their needs were met within the terms described by Underhill above.

In comparison, the interaction with an artwork in *The Hours: Visual Arts Of Contemporary Latin America* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, by Ernesto Neto titled *Humanoid* is described. The humanoids ‘is a family of pear-shaped white blobs made from Lycra tulle, fabric, spices and Styrofoam balls’.

The soft figures are meant to be worn by the audience to experience their sensual enveloping qualities. The artist intended them to be interactive, however, the museum staff were instructed to protect them from the potentially destructive behaviour of the audience; the guard explaining to the author that they would be soiled and may be damaged if the public were permitted to ‘try the Humanoids on’. It was noted that the text panel with the work indicated that the Humanoids were intended to be worn. This is a case of the audience’s experience of art being circumvented, where a conscious decision has been made by the art establishment to err on the side of caution rather than adjust their resources to provide the audience with the optimum viewing experience, and one intended by the artist. Would it have been too difficult to provide two assistants to help the occasional viewer to get into and out of a Humanoid? Most viewers would be happy to watch others in the process, and be informed by the response of the audience member brave enough to do the interacting. It was an opportunity lost when the oddly likable *Humanoid* family remained as frozen as any marble statue would be.

---

The third example described in relation to audience interaction is a work by Japanese artist Takashi Kuribayashi, *Aquarium: I Feel Like I am in a Fishbowl, 2006* displayed at Tanglin Camp in the Singapore Biennale 2006. Tanglin Camp is a disused army camp twenty-minutes by coach from the city centre where decaying buildings lie scattered among tropical overgrowth (the buildings had been adequately updated with paint and renewed paving to effectively accommodate the exhibition). *Aquarium: I feel like I am in a fishbowl* was one of the thirty artworks at that location. It presented an opportunity to observe the reaction of viewers to an interactive work that revealed its significance only with the involvement of those viewers. Kuribayashi placed a large aquarium in an otherwise empty room. A smaller glass tank was visible within the aquarium.
From underneath that room, a ladder ascended through a hole in the ceiling and when someone raised their head through the hole, it appeared in the aquarium, much to the surprise, consternation then delight of the viewers above.

Figure 85 The previous three images are installation views of Takashi Kuribayashi, *Aquarium: I feel like I am in a fishbowl, 2006* at Tanglin Camp, Singapore. Photos: J. Sager
Once they realized the portal provided access to see and be seen, viewers would call out for members of their group to swap places and experience the work from both viewpoints. The building was ignited with squeals of delight, shouting and laughter, as all viewers, either individual or accompanied, contributed to the interactive experience. Unlike most static displays, this work inspired all viewers to behave in a conciliatory fashion with friends and strangers alike discarding the usual quiet demeanour, for open and vocal expressions of enjoyment. These behaviours were inspired by an accumulation of elements: the informal location, the interactive qualities of the work and the actions of other viewers. Individual audience response was initiated by this triangulation of elements, and provided a model example of a successful zone of interaction.

The outcome of this research is offered in the presentation of the above examples: attention to what the viewing public was doing within the zone of interaction provided evidence of what was working and what was not, and interpretation of the interactions provided an understanding of what initiated and sustained audience responses. In the Museum of Contemporary Art, the audience’s reaction was silent, short-lived and unengaged. At Tanglin Camp the audience was engaged, they remained for long periods of time and interacted with the work, the space and each other. This comparison of sites is a perfect illustration of how the zone of interaction exists and is identified anywhere the actions of viewing art takes place, occurring in this instance, both within and outside the traditional configuration of the art museum. The ethnomuseologist identifies the space known as a heterotopia, and recognises the influences of that construct both on the viewers and as a result of those viewers. Behaviours are enacted according to situational roles of public, personal, and museologically inspired responses.

In Tanglin Camp viewers were freed from the direct influence of architectural signifiers of the art museum, whilst still bound by its influence in their respect for the art object and its perceived value as representative of the authority of the arts institution. The power of the arts establishment as an overriding influence on audience behaviour was manifest in the quiet controlled way viewers initially approached the artwork. However, they were soon released from that constraint by a social camaraderie when individual viewers collaborated with others in the shared experience of open interaction with the space, the artwork and each other. The viewers were engaged in an aesthetic experience, defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as ‘flow’, because they have had to work to attain the point where they gain an understanding of what this work, Aquarium: I feel like I am in a fishbowl has communicated to them. They have not merely gazed upon an image and accepted its aesthetic challenge, they have involved themselves in the creation of a concept. In the process they have enjoyed the social interaction of communicating, either verbally or in universal body language. All audience

members in this zone of interaction could openly indulge in looking at others and also be the object of the gaze of others. Seeing and being seen is an element of viewing in a public space that is both subliminally manifest and, in this case, overtly displayed. Thus, the audience was influenced by the art, the site and the expected and accepted social roles within a public space.

The audience, as a consequence of the varied manifestation of contemporary art forms, is often expected to behave in uncharacteristic ways and it is this extension of behaviour outside the expected that creates increased interest in this specific area of behavioural science, such as recent discussion about ‘situations’, a relative newcomer to the contemporary art scene. A ‘situation’ occurs when and where the artist instigates an encounter with the audience in some way and therefore the responsibility to complete the situation is given to the audience. Juliana Engberg argues situations ‘are part of the context of the gallery or museum…they need the history of the gallery to provide the expectations of exchange. Situations replace the passive two-dimensional, non-confrontational art piece with a problematic, often humorous encounter that remains in the memory of the audience’.  

With new art forms evolving that personally challenge the viewer it is a demanding but very interesting era in which to assess the relationships the audience have with contemporary art. It is also significant to keep in mind the value interaction provides those viewers.

The value to the viewer when interacting with art is thought to be far greater than had been imagined as a recent study shows new neural pathways can be produced in the brain of the creatively active subject. Neuroscientist, Susan Greenfield, contends that ‘interacting in an enriched environment…results in modification of neuronal circuitry’. An interesting experiment she conducted to prove this theory was to involve three groups of adult volunteers who could not play the piano. They were involved in sessions over five days. The control group sat in a room with a piano doing nothing, the second group were taught to play five-finger exercises, and the third group were asked not to play the piano, but to imagine they were performing the exercises. Results of brain scans on the three groups showed no change in the control group, but marked expansion of ‘brain plasticity’ in both the players and the thinkers. This indicates one does not necessarily have to be involved in an activity to benefit from the mere thought of the process. The implication of this, as Greenfield points out, is that the viewing of art provides the audience with the benefits creativity provides.

When audiences are creating meaning from the artworks they encounter, they are just as likely to benefit from neurological activity as the artist who actively produced the work. Just as the

---

17 Susan Greenfield, I.D.: The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century, Sceptre, London, 2008. Greenfield also argues that the more neural pathways in the brain, the healthier it is, which is topical in today’s aging society when Alzheimer’s disease and other degenerative neuronal diseases are so prevalent and ways to combat them eagerly anticipated.
18 Greenfield, ibid, p.29-30.
19 Greenfield, ibid, p.28-29.
experimental group of non-piano players were told how to perform the exercises, but were allowed only to imagine doing it, the contemporary art audience need only be instructed on how to interpret meaning in a challenging artwork, and then practice that skill to achieve expanded neural activity. The experience of interpreting art has also been equated to the intensity of a true aesthetic experience.\(^{21}\)

Therefore, keeping in mind the value of the aesthetic experience, the suggestion that all children would benefit from the introduction of ‘visuacy’ into the school curriculum to instruct them in methods of understanding our visual culture, comes with added value. Highlighted is the need for all members of society, no matter their age, to be versed in strategies to unravel the complex construction of the visual world in which we live, and in particular the difficult multi-layering of meaning in contemporary art.

The curator of 2006 Biennale of Sydney, Charles Merewether, believes ‘it is important to provide audiences with some form of introduction’.\(^{22}\) However, he refers to the provision of catalogues and text panels, and as was discussed, few viewers were seen referring to the catalogue whilst in the zone of interaction and not all viewers took the time to read the introductory wall panels he refers to. Merewether expressed little understanding of the audience he was serving when he stated he would ‘allow them to encounter and experience the work of art in their own terms’.\(^{23}\) This instruction has relevance for the committed viewer who has the appropriate tools to unpack and examine the conceptual information. However, it did not help the viewers who were observed in that space making their way between the works with perplexed, or worse still, annoyed expressions. This study is able to offer alternatives to simply ‘allowing’ the viewer to encounter the work of art.

Learning from Documenta 12, strategies implemented there have the potential to improve the audience’s experience in other zones of interaction. The provision of ‘mediators’, rather than guides, at that exhibition altered the culture of the arts establishment in a way that opened a pathway of communication from audience to staff, and staff to audience in a mutual offering of opinion as the viewers were encouraged to create their individual interpretations of each artwork as an open dialogue between all participants in the discussion. This is a strategy of audience development easily adapted in its fundamental form to exhibitions at any location.


\(^{23}\) Merewether, ibid.
As has been argued previously, and is reiterated here, it is the details of behaviour expressed by audience members when they interact with artworks, the space that contains them, and the people present in that space that become evidence for the ethnomuseologist to decipher and transform into an understanding of audience needs and wants. People and things make space happen,\textsuperscript{24} therefore, how the two interact dictates the degree of success of that space.

There is no call to change the artworks, which has never been a suggestion nor consideration of the author, rather an entreaty to improve the culture of the institution in an effort to show the public, in fact the majority who are non or infrequent-gallery-goers, that they are welcome there. This change must come from the arts institution itself if they are to reinvent themselves as providers of experience,\textsuperscript{25} and that experience would be the richer if the audience’s perspective was taken into account and prioritised. There has been a concern in the Australian arts sector that ‘there would be a “dumbing down” of the arts through a strategy to make the arts more accessible to more people’.\textsuperscript{26} Certainly there would be no dumbing down of artistic content when it is the content that drives the forward motion of the contemporary art machine. The accusation of dumbing down sounds like a plea to keep the art institution elite, and suggests that the majority of the public don’t have the ability to interact with the contents offered by the arts establishment. Statistics gathered from a survey of the general public in Australia show those who are ‘disengaged’ make up 12% of the population, and 8% of the population ‘have other priorities’, however, 25% of the population are merely ‘disinclined’ to attend the arts.\textsuperscript{27} If this last group were more predominantly represented, or indeed represented at all within the arts sector, what their relationship is to the arts establishment

\textsuperscript{24} An extension of Brian O’Doherty’s theory that ‘space now is not just where things happen; things make space happen’, in \textit{Inside the White Cube}, p.39.

\textsuperscript{25} Experience refered to here is as an aesthetic experience (described in chapter four) incorporated in an overall experience of the site and does not intend to conjure images of carnivalesque activities intended to entertain.

\textsuperscript{26} Paul Costantoura, \textit{Australians and the Arts}, Federation Press, Annandale, 2001, p.5.

\textsuperscript{27} Costantoura, ibid, p.331-339.
and how it could be better catered for and improved, could serve as fuel to feed the fire of awareness within the arts.

Lee Weng Choy, discussing the 2008 Singapore Biennale argues ‘perhaps we might have “better” biennales, if our criticisms of them were also better’. But who reads these critical writings? Arts professionals. The artists want to hear about themselves or how they would, if they could, fit into the conceptual brief; the curators and directors are intent on feedback of what did and didn’t raise the critical eyebrow of the arts commentators as an ongoing dialogue that sees their professional prowess promoted. The audience is never heard from and infrequently referred to. Whether audiences attend or not marks one indicator of success of the exhibition, whilst the actual experience of the audience member is not expressed within public art critical dialogue. And why would it be when it is not they who are reading, and certainly not writing or in any way making public claims as to the value of their viewing experience within any or all of the exhibitions presented? In fact, does it matter what they, the audience, think? Apparently not.

The author lays claim to initiating a practical method of opening the dialogue between audience and arts professionals to give voice to concerns and assertions, both positive and negative, relating to the viewing experience. Awareness of the public’s actions and interaction with art is the first step to opening the debate on ‘what is the public’s experience and how can it be improved?’. An advocate is required to champion the needs of the audience, to give voice to their varied and complex needs, needs they may not even be aware they have. The author as mediator of that experience, armed with detailed knowledge of what constitutes that experience and how it is manifest within the timeframe and setting of its action, provides expert opinion required to elevate the audience experience into art critical commentary and open discourse with the providers of contemporary art.

Lee Suan Hiang, Chairman of the Singapore Biennale 2008 Steering Committee and Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Council of Singapore (and therefore representative of the people of Singapore), stated, ‘with the organization of just one biennale under its belt, there is still a lot more room for growth and advancement. The people of Singapore still have a lot to learn about contemporary art…I feel a sense of responsibility to continue to nurture arts appreciation among local audiences and to further deepen the experiences that the local community can gain through the biennale’. But what is the audience’s response when viewing the exhibition? What is the benchmark set if it is to be improved? Do we hear what

---

29 The most resent public forum at which the author presented a summary of this research was at the international conference *Art, Culture and the Public Sphere: Expressive and Instrumental Values In Economic and Sociological Perspectives*, Venice (Italy) November 4-8 2008, where it was enthusiastically received.
the audience has to say on the subject? Again it is the commentators who are called on to express views on the exhibition. Lee Weng Choy further argues that ‘the tendency to talk about these grand projects in grand terms often is at the expense of closer engagement – engagements which require time, and usually only yield very partial and incomplete understandings, which in turn may provoke us to spend even more time, trying to figure what these things called biennales really want from us’. What do we, the audience want from the exhibition? Lee Weng Choy, whilst I believe he is referring to arts professionals, could just as easily be referring to the audience when he calls for closer engagement that requires time. This opinion has also been offered by James Elkins\(^\text{31}\) and John Walsh\(^\text{32}\) when they call for slower, closer encounters with visual art. Surely this is one small example of advise for both viewer and researcher. This thesis provides evidence of what can be achieved when the ethnomuseologist takes time to engage in the study of audience interaction within the zone of interaction. The outcome is a means of communication between the audience and arts professionals.

Which brings us back to the mechanics of the research itself. Described extensively in this thesis is the methodology this study is reliant on. The fact that it is based on a retail market research model is both its salvation and its Achilles heel. Salvation because it has provided a model that has been successfully and seamlessly implemented in the contemporary art viewing environment to produce evidence and suggestions in favour of an improved audience interaction. Whilst its Achilles heel could be perceived to be its association with the retail sector and market research, suggesting consumer tactics and profit driven outcomes, which could see arts professionals take a wary stance when considering its legitimacy within the hallowed precinct of the arts establishment. After all, it is a particular site closely guarded against radical change. One only has to observe the static ‘white cube’ aesthetic that lingers on into the 21\(^\text{st}\) century when the postmodern view of overlapping and diverse modes of presentation and a ‘collapse of boundaries’\(^\text{34}\) should have had a degree of influence over contemporary art museum display and relationships with their audiences. Nicholas Tsoutas argues that ‘contemporary art spaces should be highly mobile places, unfettered by contemporary bureaucracy’ and in that light, when a means to improve the relationship between the contemporary art space and its audience can be implemented without disruption to their audiences, as is the case with this research model, then the bureaucracy should be pleased to accommodate it.

Studying the zone of interaction has provided an international comparison between the divergent contemporary art spaces and exhibitions in Australia, Singapore and Germany. The


influence of environment on the behaviour of those who frequent the zone of interaction is paramount to the analysis of those actions expressed by the audience. The different spaces observed in the course of this study have alerted the author to the diversity and similarities between sites and how particular strategies for success used at one site can be transferred and implemented in another site to elicit similar responses. All information, no matter how apparently inconsequential or obviously significant, becomes the inspiration for constructing a stronger relationship between arts institutions and their audience.

Dependent on the skills inherent or acquired by the individual viewer, each audience member is searching for, dependent on, or even unaware of, the varying amount and form of intervention in their experience. The committed or experienced viewer approaches and engages with the zone of interaction with confidence. Their expectations are to have a pleasurable and stimulating engagement with the artworks. These viewers, whilst they are engrossed in the act of interaction, appear to pay little attention to the site as a whole, including other viewers, and predominantly exhibit concentrated focus on the artworks.35 Alternatively, there are viewers in the zone of interaction who are tentatively searching for cues from other viewers or some indication from the space in which they awkwardly enter as to how to behave. It is this second group of first-time or infrequent audience members who are the ones whose needs require closer attention and implementation of strategies to aid their experience.

Figure 87  ’Miffy at the Gallery’ by Dick Bruna36

35 Behaviours observed in the course of this research.
Signage, Seats and Smiles

Even before they enter the gallery there are significant strategies that could be implemented or improved to help them. Way-finding aids are the simplest course of action that the art gallery can implement to instil confidence in the visitor unfamiliar with the site. Not knowing where to go or how to proceed is an impediment to anyone, whilst to the contrary, knowing how to proceed, knowing where one is going instils confidence. This seems so simple a notion, and yet it is so rarely provided to art gallery visitors. Too often the would-be-viewer is frustrated by their efforts to simply locate the art gallery, that they may give up all together before their viewing experience has had an opportunity to commence.

An example of poor signage for way-finding was observed at City Hall in Singapore. Looking at the front entrance to the building, the signage marking the exhibitions location at that site was very obvious. It covered the front face of the steps and a moveable sign marked the main entrance. However, for members of the public who approached the building from the side, which incidentally, was the direction people would come from the closest Mass Rail Transit station and central business and retail district, the signage was invisible to them as they turned the corner and looked along the front of the building. The author observed and heard comments from hot, weary tourists who were frustrated and annoyed by this detail of poor way-finding technique. Had the Singapore Biennale staff simply turned the sign to face the corner, would-be-viewers could have seen at a glance the direction to proceed to enter City Hall. This is an example of how the observation of behaviour by the impartial observer is able to recognise a small yet significant impediment to viewing that remained invisible to the arts professionals working at that site.

Figure 88 View of City Hall, Singapore from the front and along the side of the building. Photo: J. Sager
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, is also neglectful of their would-be-viewers needs when considering how they might identify the museum. Because it is such a monumental building positioned in, what would be considered, an obvious place at Circular Quay, there has been little attempt to make its presence, nor its function unmistakeably obvious to members of the public. As was stated previously, a large percentage of people who had been to Circular Quay were unaware of the museum’s presence and/or function as an art gallery. The addition of banners hanging on the façade of the building announcing the current exhibition are most often the only clue to what may lie within the austere building.\(^{37}\)

![Figure 89 Museum of Contemporary Art, Circular Quay, Sydney. Photo: J. Sager](image)

A simple technique used by the Tate Modern in London, implemented as a way-finding devise, could be easily employed at other venues, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and Hawkesbury Regional Gallery where locating the gallery is impeded by poor signage. Starting at the exit to the closest underground railway station to the Tate Modern in Bankside, London, and continuing all the way to the Tate gallery, lampposts are painted the same obvious bright red colour and are marked with TATE MODERN and an arrow pointing in the direction the visitors are to proceed. This simple intervention enables all visitors, both local and foreign, to easily find their way to the gallery, arriving unflustered and ready to experience what the gallery has to offer.\(^{38}\)

\(^{37}\) It may appear to the reader that the author has very little to offer in the form of positive opinion of the way the Museum of Contemporary Art fulfills their duty to engage their public. This arts establishment is a premium venue and the contemporary art they display is of the highest caliber. Because this study compares only a very limited number of contemporary art venues, the faults found at the Museum of Contemporary Art appear many in comparison to the other venues. How they conduct their audience development strategies is open to improvement, as are most visual art establishments. Their willingness to critically examine their interface with their audience in the future does however have the potential to establish them as an institution of excellence.

\(^{38}\) The author found this strategy to be very simple and effective. August, 2007.
The use of colour as a form of orientation for the viewer has been discussed in reference to Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany. The interior walls of each level of that building are painted a different colour to help the viewer to distinguish between floors as a way-finding tool. Significantly, however, the space where the least number of audience members appeared to have difficulty finding their way through the gallery space was in the Aue-Pavillon, Kassel, Germany. This space had no directional signage, no colour prompts, no sight of an exit to draw the audience on, and a map that did not give directions as to how to progress through the space. Surprisingly though, this space was the easiest to navigate of

39 Refer to chapter three.
any of the spaces offered to viewing audiences included in this study. Why would this be? In this instance the process of way-finding has been simplified. One entrance, and one exit. The space in between is a fluid evolving series of areas containing a spectrum of artworks, each one drawing the viewer on until all have been seen. There was no confusion as to the way to progress in this vast space⁴⁰ because one would simply move to an artwork that had not been seen before, until all the works had been seen, or simply all that the viewer wished to view. Milton would have described this behaviour as, ‘a desire to see that which cannot be seen’.⁴¹ This was the nature of viewing that drew audiences through this particular gallery. The viewer, as he or she progressed, was provided ample seating to rest and reflect before continuing the journey of discovery. When the single exit point was reached there was no impediment to the retracing of ones steps back through the gallery, if that is what the viewer desired.

Figure 91 Audience members in the Aue-Pavillon, Kassel, Germany. Photo: J. Sager


A contributing factor to the successful movement of viewers through Aue-Pavillon, the author determines, was the provision of chairs (the chairs Ai Weiwei provided as elements of his installation *Fairytale*). By making available ample respite from viewing, the audience was able to continue their viewing experience with renewed vigour whilst museum fatigue was curtailed.

What does the audience want from their viewing experience? From observations of viewing behaviour and candid comments made by participants in the zone of interaction, the author has discerned a trend of participation that relates to the congeniality of the space. The sites where audiences generally appear to be at ease with their environment are most often marked by the use of simple way-finding techniques, discussed previously, to enable, even empower audience members with autonomy within the viewing environment. Also, and more importantly, are the attitudes of staff members the viewer encounters whilst he or she is in the gallery.

As has been argued in this thesis, the attitude of staff members can be the single most significant element in an audience member's encounter with the zone of interaction. An encounter with staff that is marked by a negative countenance or comment is able to impart such a profound effect on visitors that it is able to tarnish their overall experience, and worse, it has the potential to dissuade a return visit to that arts establishment and in some cases to all arts establishments. It is also probable that the first time or infrequent viewer could be not only convinced not to return, but to dissuade others from bothering to attend. The attitudes expressed by staff members of arts establishments are often an indication of the culture of
that establishment. The *culture* referred to here is the same set of values shared by the members of an establishment, and in this case the staff of an art museum or gallery. Carolyn Taylor argues ‘culture is what is created from the messages that are received about how people are expected to behave in your organisation’. This suggests that it is not simply the individuals who exhibit particular behaviours within an organisation who are thought of as being responsible for their own actions, but significantly, that they are thought to represent the collective attitude or culture of that establishment as a whole. Taylor goes on to say that these signals - the messages we receive – come from many sources, and most are non-verbal. These messages demonstrate what is actually valued, what is important, and what people do around here to fit in. When we consider that the guards in some galleries project a superior, intolerant demeanour, what is that saying about the culture of the establishment? To the audience member who has been treated with disdain, the entire establishment is therefore considered to be arrogant and unwilling to consider the needs of the audience they profess to care about. ‘The attributed meaning goes far beyond the scope of the individual circumstance’.

To test this theory the author invited three women to attend the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney to observe their interaction with that particular space and later talk openly about their experience there. The most significant behaviour observed was that of the staff and their abrupt and negative attitude toward these audience members when, firstly, one woman approached a painting *too closely*, and secondly, when another didn’t know to remove her shoes when she lay on an interactive work that was signed with an invitation to do so. In both instances, the guard closest to them quickly alighted from the stool they had been occupying, calling to them, ‘don’t do that, you’re too close to that’, or ‘you have to take your shoes off’, both delivered with a stern unsmiling countenance. There was no explanation and no congenial conversation entered into. Simply the curt instruction as though the guard’s time was too valuable to spend explaining or trying to put the audience member at ease. What message does this behaviour send to the audience? It reinforces the belief that the arts institution is an elitist enclave unwilling to surrender their self imposed superior position. The void between audience and arts establishment is maintained in the stern look of a gallery guard.

The importance of simple body language, let alone tone of voice and delivery of comments, cannot be understated. A welcoming smile from the staff member who is at the reception point of a gallery, which has been discussed, is able to communicate the attitude of the entire establishment and sets the tone for the audience’s visit, and, as has been suggested, has the potential to attract or deter visitation. One of the singularly most important observations made

---

43 Taylor, ibid, p.6.
44 Taylor, ibid, p.7.
45 Museum visit in June of 2007.
in the course of this study has been the influence of the establishment’s culture or attitude towards the audience. It is the resonance of that message, usually silently broadcast by the staff or inferred in the semiotic configuration of the space, that has the potential to be improved with the application of this research methodology. A methodology directed to the understanding of behaviour within the arts establishment.

What is to be done? The answer lies in the creation of a culture of exchange. The exchange of opinions, strategies, needs, ideas. Each gallery, each museum, each exhibition has the potential for any element of the viewing process to be debated within a culture of exchange. To create that culture, the attitude of the arts organization must be responsive to the needs of the audience in an open on-going dialogue orchestrated by the expert ethnomuseologist armed with evidence of behaviours and delivered within a framework of expert theoretical and practical knowledge of the art museum milieu.

Shoppers leave the retail environment that Paco Underhill has influenced, not only happy with their purchases, but equally pleased with their experience of shopping.\textsuperscript{46} Contemporary visual art audiences leave the art museum where the ethnomusiologist has practiced, pleased not only with a memorable aesthetic experience, but with the knowledge that they were at ease to enjoy their viewing experience to the best of their ability and that they would be made equally as welcome the next time they entered the zone of interaction.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{miffy_at_galley.png}
\caption{‘Miffy at the Gallery’ by Dick Bruna.\textsuperscript{47}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{46} According to Underhill in \textit{Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping}.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Bennett, Tony, Grossberg, Lawrence and Morris, Meaghan, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Blackwell Publishing, Maldon (USA), 2005.


Carey, John, *What Good are the Arts?*, Faber and Faber, London, 2005.


Davidson, Kate and Desmond, Michael, *Islands: Contemporary Installations from Australia, Asia, Europe and America*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1996.


LeCompte, Margaret D. and Schensul, Jean J. (eds.), *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research: 1 Ethnographer’s Toolkit*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, California, 1999.


Widing, Robert; Sheth, Jagdish N.; Pulendran, Sue; Mittal, Banwari and Newman, Bruce I., Customer Behaviour: Consumer Behaviour and Beyond, Thomson, Southbank Victoria, 2003.

Williams, Raymond, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana Press, London, 1983.


Woodford, Susan, Looking at Pictures, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1983.


Newspaper Articles


Bennie, Angela, ‘Happiness is a Flowering Dog’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 8 December 1995.


Churcher, Betty, ‘Art was free, kids were quiet and weather just was’, Sydney Morning Herald, August 20-21, 2005.


Johnston, Anna, E-tags are another example of surveillance by stealth, Sydney Morning Herald, Feb, 2006.


**Journal Articles**


‘Artnotes’, *Art Monthly Australia*, No.188. April 2006.


Ingram, Terry, ‘Slippery Values in a World of Smoke and Mirrors: The Economics of Taste in Australian Art’, fuel4arts.com, Australia Council for the Arts, April, 2006.


Papers, Theses

Published


Unpublished


Commissioned Research Publications


Hodge, Su, James, Judith and Lawson, Amanda, Miles Ahead, Australia Council, Strawberry Hills, 1998.


McMaster, Brian, Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement, Department of Culture, Media and Sport, United Kingdom, January 2008.

Miles Ahead: Arts Marketing That Works in Regional Australia, Su Hodge, Judith James and Amanda Lawson, Australia Council, Strawberry Hills, 1998


Exhibition Catalogues


From Christo and Jeanne-Claude to Jeff Koons: John Kaldor Art Projects and Collection, Nicholas Baume curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1995.


The Deerubin Centre Grand Opening Commemorative Booklet, Hawkesbury City Council, Windsor, 2005.


Western Front: Art is a Social Space, Blacktown Arts Centre, Blacktown, 2005.

Western Front: Synthetic Spaces, Blacktown Arts Centre and Blacktown City Council, Blacktown, 2007.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Attached DVD/CD

Image and Video Files:
The information on this DVD is provided as a visual aid to the thesis because the nature of the research depends on observation. These images and video footage are an overview of the sites used for fieldwork at the four locations.

Document 12
Aue-Pavillon
Documenta-Halle
Documenta 12 interview and notes
Kassel
Museum Fridericianum
Neue Galerie
Schloss Wilhelmshöhe

Hawkesbury Regional Gallery
Hawkesbury Regional Gallery
Video footage – HRG

Museum of Contemporary Art

Singapore Biennale
City Hall
Tanglin Camp
Video footage - City Hall