

# Focus on the Detroit Institute of Arts

## Reinstallation Rorschach: What Do You See in the Renovated Detroit Institute of Arts?

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Before reading this special section of *Curator: The Museum Journal*, which focuses on the recent reinstallation at the Detroit Institute of Arts, you may want to drop by your local bicycle shop, which turns out to be a good place to think about audience-driven change in the museum field. Ask to see a new model called Lime, a bike from the Trek company. Lime is designed to appeal to people who don't ride—the kind of adults who haven't been on a bicycle since childhood. It may seem like an odd business strategy to try to sell bikes to people who don't think they have much use for them, but museums do something similar (from different motives, perhaps) when they talk about broadening or diversifying their audiences. In both cases the question is how to connect with adults who are currently getting their day-to-day needs met in other ways and may perceive the whole category (cycling, museum-going) as irrelevant, off-putting, or associated with not-so-fond memories from childhood.

Trek's solution, described in a column on innovation in *Fast Company* magazine (Prospero 2007), began with a type of audience research that was a departure for the company: "Trek's usual R&D was soliciting feedback from the likes of Lance Armstrong. 'We didn't know how to design for Sunday riders,' admits...Trek's lead designer on this project." There are obvious parallels to the art museum world, with its long-running debate about what kind of visitors the interpretation should be geared to and its historical tendency to favor the

expectations of the cognoscenti over those of other audiences. In fact, much of what Trek heard from these non-riders reads like an extended metaphor for what art museums have learned about non-visitors:

In focus groups with people who hadn't ridden a bike as an adult, Trek learned that no one equated bike riding with exercise. "They didn't see themselves in Lycra," Eckholm says.

[So] Trek designed a frame based on its comfort-bike series that also took cues from old-school beach cruisers.... The emphasis: comfort and stability when turning at low speeds.

...Casual riders also tend to carry stuff with them...but don't want saddlebags. The seat became a storage compartment.

Kickstands are normally sold separately; they're an easy source of revenue for bike dealers. But Trek designers insisted that one be built in to eliminate another barrier for nonriders (Prospero 2007).

Most radically, the designers built in a computerized system that shifts the Lime's gears based on the bike's velocity, an innovation designed to take one worry off the minds of uneasy riders. The new bicycle assumes less expertise from the consumer than traditional models did, meaning that less-expert consumers can feel comfortable using it. The don't-do-it-yourself shifting, though, was greeted with disdain by many of the salespeople at bike shops, most of

whom are (naturally enough) cycling enthusiasts for whom shifting is part of the elemental autonomy of biking. The salesman who showed me the Lime barely bothered to conceal his disdain for the computerized gears (perhaps because he had already identified me as a rider who was comfortable shifting for myself and not the target consumer for the Lime). To counter this resistance, Trek has begun an outreach program to educate its dealers about the new kind of buyers they'll be encountering and how to communicate with them.

An analogous resistance to visitor-centered innovation exists in and around art museums, of course, but since it has historically been associated with the most powerful internal and external stakeholders in the art museum community—curators, local or national art critics, and donors and trustees, many of whom are either trained art historians or experienced collectors, or both—its influence seems greater. Nonetheless, in the last decade or so a few major art museums in the U.S. and U.K. have ventured down paths not dissimilar to Trek's, rethinking their display and interpretation strategies to make at least parts their collections more accessible to more kinds of people—including people who aren't drawn to the familiar art museum model. Some of these projects were departmental or collaborative initiatives within existing museums, as with the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the new Center for Creative Connections at the Dallas Museum of Art. Only a few were museum-wide reinstallations in conjunction with the opening of a new or expanded building, as with the Denver Art Museum and the Detroit renovation under discussion here. But during the same period many more art museums—among them MoMA, LACMA, and the High

Museum—have reinstalled and reopened without taking concerted, evaluation-driven steps toward greater interpretive accessibility, preferring to let new juxtapositions of artworks—and the new architectural envelope in which they stand—speak for themselves.

So it's worth taking a moment to collect our thoughts and ask where the art museum field stands at the moment with respect to visitor-oriented change, and where it seems to be heading. Whether we frame those questions in terms of innovation and R&D, as I've begun to do here, or in the language of accessibility and relevance more familiar to museum professionals and scholars, what we're trying to understand is how progress—its motives, process, extent, impediments, and tangible results in the galleries—works and *ought* to work in today's art museums. The recent reinstallation at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) presents an ideal opportunity to grapple with those questions.

My fellow *Curator* editors and I have welcomed that opportunity by commissioning a round of papers about the project: two by insiders and three by outsiders. The view that emerges from these five articles is necessarily partial, in both senses of that word: incomplete and colored by the personal and professional biases of the authors. This subjectivity should be welcomed; after all, there can be no definitive interpretation of a museum installation, just as there can be no singular, objective interpretation of an artwork or roomful of artworks. The best course is to examine the reinstallation from a variety of angles, attempting to triangulate a meaningful picture as we go. We hope you'll read these papers not merely as a case study of a particular institution, and still less as a debate between insiders and outsiders about effectiveness, but as a represen-



The renovated Detroit Institute of Arts displays its new commitment to visitors.

tative, sometimes contradictory analysis of a fascinating moment in the history of the American art museum.

Our section begins with some context-setting by Jeffrey Abt, an art historian at Wayne State University in Detroit who wrote a book-length socioeconomic history of the DIA (2001). Abt's essay here places the DIA's latest transformation in historical context, describing the institution's many fiscal crises and governance transitions (which began almost as soon as the museum was founded in 1885) and offering a valuable recap of the tug-of-war between object-centered and education-centered museology that has existed since the earliest days of the public art museum in this country. Abt notes that the DIA has long been on the progressive side of those debates, although its novel, visitor-friendly experiments in installation and program-

ming were never enough to guarantee the visitorship and public support that would have steered the museum clear of economic turbulence. With all that context in mind, Abt sees the new reinstallation as "both radical and conventional": it uses interpretive techniques that are familiar from special exhibitions and other kinds of museums but deploys them to an extent and with a consistency that feels strikingly new. Whether that approach will lastingly transform the fortunes of one of America's great municipal art museums remains to be seen, but Abt's essay raises important questions about the external and internal forces that act on, and help shape, what we find in the galleries of our art museums.

A very different paper comes from David W. Penney, the DIA curator and vice president of exhibitions and collections strategies who led the reinstallation. He

offers a thoughtful, nuanced how-to manual that should be required reading for any museum professional immersed in—or even distantly contemplating—a major renovation. Penney describes the staff's struggle to scale up from the familiar task of planning a temporary exhibition to the *terra incognita* of a museum-wide rehang, along with the philosophical challenges of rethinking their assumptions, methods, and ideals in the area of interpretation. Penney's clear-eyed description of the stepwise, several-year process by which some longstanding frameworks in the minds of curators were modified under the dual influences of educational theory and visitor studies, provides the contemporary, local version of the historical, national story recounted by Abt.

The visitor studies Penney describes were led by two evaluators in the museum's education department, Matt Sikora and Ken Morris, working with three outside consultants, Daryl Fischer, Beverly Serrell, and Deborah Perry. These five professionals co-authored our next paper, a discussion of the roles that evaluation played in the museum's decision-making during the reinstallation process. Rather than presenting their research methods and findings, as so many papers in the visitor studies arena have done, Sikora and his colleagues have stepped back to take a broader, more reflective view of their process and the organizational dynamics in which it took place—and which it influenced. They have also valuably linked their DIA work to the theoretical literature about evaluation's purposes and impacts within institutions, giving additional resonance to what might have been merely an interesting dispatch from the front lines. In particular, their insistence that the evaluations be conducted not just by the evaluators and educators but by all members of the cross-

departmental planning teams—they estimate that “[e]ach project team member spent about 90 hours attending [evaluation-related] workshops and planning, conducting, and responding to evaluation”—seems to have paid impressive dividends in creating a museum-wide culture of interest in visitors, and it ought to become standard practice in the field.

We close the section with two articles describing responses to the installation by two very different kinds of visitors. First, veteran museum professional Marlene Chambers, who retired from the Denver Art Museum after its own reopening in 2006, offers a complexly ambivalent response to the new DIA based on a two-day visit she made to the museum recently. Her review brims with impatience at what she sees as gaps between progressive intention and all-too-familiar execution, such as labels that present “a puzzling array of unanchored facts and conclusions that seem to confer final meaning and preclude finding or trusting a personal response.” Penney's article has made it clear that the planning team viewed those facts as anchored: they chose them to create bridges between object and viewer based on common human experiences. But for Chambers the museum is still projecting its own, academically-rooted ways of seeing and valuing art onto its visitors instead of creating a space for dialogue in which the meaning of the artworks is questioned rather than answered. In her last few paragraphs, she raises important questions about what *wasn't* addressed in the course of the DIA's reinstallation, despite—or perhaps because of—its scrupulous attention to best practices. “Where,” she wonders, “is evidence that these practices themselves have been subjected to critical scrutiny?” Unwittingly echoing Abt's appraisal of the interpre-

tive strategies as familiar in kind if not in quantity, Chambers observes that the new galleries feel like “an encyclopedic display of current standard theories and practices,” which are employed in confusing profusion. She asks what the reinstalled museum might have looked like if the museum had seized the opportunity to reconsider not just its strategies and means of interpretation but its purposes in the first place—“the *work* of the museum” in today’s culture.

And finally, a former longtime DIA docent who has also volunteered at other museums, M. Lee Hennes, describes her delight at finding an old friend transformed in altogether positive ways. Writing as a lover of art museums rather than as a museum professional or critic, she praises the greater intimacy and rich ambience of the new installation and particularly the array of thoughtful interpretive devices, which “invite visitors’ participation and further engagement with the art before them.” For Hennes, the museum has managed to make art “fun and educational at the same time,” an appraisal that echoes the positive consensus of the popular media that have covered the museum’s reopening.

The diversity of perspectives in these five articles suggests that the new DIA is a kind of inkblot test for museum observers. How one reads the DIA’s reinstallation depends on where one stands with respect to a host of aesthetic, philosophical, pedagogical, cultural, management, and probably psychological issues. Our opinions reveal as much about ourselves as about the museum. You’ll draw your own conclusions the next time you visit what *Newsweek* called a “Motor City gem” (McGuigan 2007). For my part, having spent a day at the new museum in November of 2007, I came away deeply impressed at what the museum has

achieved but also wondering whether it will be enough—*different* enough, *energetic* enough—to somehow draw and engage the museum’s potential visitors in and around Detroit in a lasting way. Only time will tell, of course, and I join Sikora and his co-authors in looking forward to the findings from an upcoming summative evaluation. Meanwhile, though, the hypothetical questions are irresistible: What would it take for any art museum to ensure that kind of success among non-visitors—that not-since-childhood audience of city taxi drivers and suburban soccer moms? How different would the museum have to be from what exists today, even at the new DIA, and in what ways? And would those differences be anathema to the current audience, as the Lime is to regular bikers?

I don’t claim to have the answers to these questions, but even posing them calls our attention to an important distinction between two kinds of innovation: one that constitutes new progress along familiar rails and one that involves a switch to new tracks altogether. I’ll conclude with a few reflections on that distinction, offering a reading of the DIA project that is my own and doesn’t necessarily represent the views of my colleagues on the journal’s editorial staff or board.

The museum has taken a crucial leap forward by managing to think about interpretation holistically, bringing consistency in labeling, wayfinding, interactives, gallery design, and “voice” to the visitor’s experience across curatorial departments. This alone is more than most encyclopedic museums have been able to accomplish, despite decades of complaints around the profession about the artificiality of the boundaries between, say, paintings and prints (for example, Spalding 2002). More remarkably, by rooting its new interpretive

approaches in common human experience—that is, in areas *outside* the purview of art history proper—the museum has poked a few more holes in the hegemony of formalism, a commitment that became so pervasive in art museums in the twentieth century (see Duncan 2002; McClellan 2003) that we almost forgot that there were alternatives. At the DIA, art has reclaimed some of its social functions and contexts. I hope that both of these leaps will be emulated and extended by other art museums in the coming years.

And there is much else to praise, not least the sheer visual beauty of the reinstallation. The new approach seems to have pulled off a tricky balance: it increases the accessibility of the museum's collections to non-experts but does so in ways that will please, or at least are unlikely to offend, longtime visitors, members, and donors. This is no simple matter. Trek can sell different bikes to different kinds of consumers, but the DIA has only one permanent collection to present to all comers. The museum did what it had to do to meet a range of expectations.

Seen from a greater distance, though, the project may appear more incremental than revolutionary. Museum professionals, art critics, and other interested parties clearly experience the reinstallation as a striking transformation. *Newsweek* praised the difference as "radical" and described the renovation as "an attitude adjustment for the twenty-first century" (McGuigan 2007). The *Art Newspaper*, far less admiring, complained that the new approach "abandoned traditional art history" (Kaufman 2007). But what about people who don't often visit art museums and may not be familiar with—or care to learn—the conventions and codes of art museums? Without the benefit of a before-and-after

comparison, will the new approach "read" to them as a palpable change? Or rather, will the differences *make a difference* in their decisions about whether and how often to visit?

It's possible that, to such people, the reinstalled museum will still feel...well, like an art museum. Looking through the photos of the new galleries and interpretive elements that I took on my own visit, I find more than a few shots that could have been taken in any major art museum in the country: a tombstone label; visitors wandering in a hallway past decorative arts objects on pedestals and eighteenth-century portraits in ornate frames; Native American ceremonial objects in glass cases against a neutral background; and so on. Such images are generic to the category "art museum," with its attendant barriers in the minds of many. When I showed those photos to separate audiences of art museum professionals and anthropology undergrads interested in museums, asking each group to guess whether the photos depicted the museum in its pre-renovation or post-renovation state, both audiences got it wrong: they assumed they were looking at the old DIA. Of course, I also photographed the new interpretive elements, but even these are (as Penney himself points out, and the museum's director Graham Beal also acknowledges [2007]) mostly familiar techniques drawn from the last decade or so of special exhibitions. And on closer inspection, we may notice that even the substantive labels are written in the objective, dispassionate voice—albeit with clear, relatively informal language—that art museums have always used. Those labels may make links to common human experience through a refreshingly broad set of facts and assertions, but they're still mostly facts and assertions. (For instance: "What's Modern Art About? It's about taking risks

and breaking with the past. It's about innovative ideas and new forms of expression.") What if the planners had embraced their own subjectivity, instead? What if they had asked questions — not the rhetorical kind to which the museum knows the answer, but real questions that acknowledge the obdurate distance between an artwork and what we can say about it? What if the voice of the visitor herself were somehow incorporated in the interpretation, to stand alongside those of curators and educators? What if the installation weren't "permanent" at all but designed to evolve in intriguing ways, for instance in response to what happens in the galleries?

Would such approaches have represented an improvement? We have no way of knowing, and in any case it would depend on whom you asked. The point is that from certain angles the museum's "transformation" looks fairly modest, a matter of tinkering around the edges while leaving the core unchanged. To recast the distinction implicit in Chambers's essay, the DIA's innovation appears to have focused on process and means rather than on ends, so its progress, while real and vital, may feel to some observers like movement down well-worn tracks. If you are inclined to view those tracks as leading in an uninteresting direction, the forward motion isn't going to mean much.

It's worth asking whether there might be a connection between the reinstallation's purview and the ways in which the evaluation process was structured. Here the Trek Lime offers a subtle but telling contrast. The bicycle manufacturer's process began with exploratory research about why some people don't ride bikes. The designers made no decisions before they heard representatives of the target audience struggle to articulate why biking doesn't fit into their

lives and under what circumstances that might change. The corresponding qualitative research in the DIA project — a set of non-visitor panels held on three occasions during the planning process — appears to have begun *after* a considerable amount of work had been done by the steering and planning teams, including several "decisive steps" taken by Beal concerning "collection strength and logic of juxtaposition" and the drafting of "desired visitor outcomes" for the new galleries (Penney, this issue). The job of the panel participants was largely to respond to ideas and materials generated by the planning teams — an important function but one which falls under the heading of formative evaluation or testing, which often follows exploratory or "front end" research. What appears not to have taken place is the radically humble conversation with potential audiences that Trek had with those non-riders. The museum could have said, in essence, "We've got this great collection of art and we've got an enormous amount of knowledge about it. How might these objects and that expertise be made useful to you? How might they help you meet your needs... including, perhaps, needs you didn't know you had?" This kind of blank slate conversation almost never happens, of course, and the questions would need to be posed in very different ways in a research setting. But it would be a natural extension of the ethos of usefulness and relevance espoused by progressive museum commentators from John Cotton Dana and John Dewey to Stephen Weil and Elaine Gurian. It's also the kind of question that sparks genuine R&D, something which is all too rare in the museum field.

It's unrealistic to expect any major museum to venture out on that limb alone, especially an institution located in a city

with the economic and demographic challenges of Detroit. In a sense this isn't about the DIA at all; my questions are about how we, as a field, might work to free ourselves from what the Australian feminist philosopher Val Plumwood has called, in another context, "the tyranny of narrow focus and minimum rethink" (Plumwood 2006). Engineering that escape may require us to give up, temporarily and in selected instances, some of the skills we've acquired over decades of professionalization and some of our most cherished ideas about the "authorities of the art museum" (Wood 2004).

What if the installation and interpretation of art emulated more of the qualities of art itself—its mystery, eros, anger, skepticism, humor, and so on? What if the "big ideas" for organizing an art museum's permanent collection emerged from visitors and potential visitors rather than the staff? What if the process of selecting and interpreting artworks could somehow be opened to participation by audiences, as it was at the Brooklyn Museum's recent "crowd curated" photography exhibition (Johnson 2008)?

I'm not suggesting that all such risks would pay off, only that we would learn something truly new from the failures and the successes, both of which are necessary outcomes of innovation. The DIA has gotten it very close to "right," and in so doing has raised valuable questions about the nature of progress in the American art museum. Now what we need is an institution that can get it "wrong" in a hundred ways, some of which will propel the dialogue about possibilities and intentions in promising new directions.

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