An Exploration of Active Learning in Museums

Friday, January 18

S310T
Active Learning in Museums
Professor: Shari Tishman

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Ju-Hye Ahn and Zoe Silverman

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How do different learning experiences alter visitors' perceptions of what belongs in a museum?

INTRODUCTION

John Dewey distinguished everyday experiences from educative experiences (Dewey 1938). According to an interpretation offered by Hein (1998), an educative experience is "minds-on": active, transformative, and growth-oriented. In order for an experience to be educative, it must be organized and structured with learning and experience goals in mind. Furthermore, a successful educative experience is grounded in a complimentary theory of learning. Museum can serve as laboratories for exploring models of learning and teaching, since they are designed to communicate what is important to learn and how learning should happen. At a fundamental level, the structure of a museum, and learning experiences that happen within it, embody theories of learning (Simon; Tishman, 2005).

According to social constructivism, learning is a process in which individuals make sense of the world in relation to their previous experiences and the knowledge that they already have constructed. A constructivist approach sees knowledge as being constructed in the mind of the learner with new information being integrated into an individual's existing cognitive schemata, and validated not by conforming to '… some external standard of truth, but whether they "make sense" within the structured reality of the learner' (Hein, 1998, p. 34). Hein (1998) explains that constructivist exhibitions enhance learning by enabling visitors to both validate and re-think their own interpretations of a subject by allowing them to consider other interpretations, perspectives and ideas about a topic. Museum learning experiences provided under a

constructivist framework would encourage learners to use both their hands and their minds to experiment with the world and reach their own conclusions (Hein, 1998). Hein (1991) states that learning is the construction of meaning and argues that meaning making is an essential part of constructivism.

With well-known, highly visible works of art, visitors can access myriad external resources to make meaning, including printed text, cultural memory, and, often, juxtaposition with other works of art in a gallery space. Sometimes, however, museum visitors experience dissonance between the artwork, the label, and visitors' previous knowledge. Additional confounding factors include visitors' expectations of the museum visit and divergence perceived within the artwork based on an individual's personal, idiosyncratic taste. Falk, Mourssouri, and Coulson (1998) have studied the effect of visitors' agendas on museum learning, and it is clear that expectations and dispositional perspective impact the type of learning experience one can have (Ritchhart, 2007). When visitors encounter works of art that conflict with their perception of what art is or what belongs in a museum, visitors can struggle to understand what they are seeing.

This study investigates the impact of active learning experiences on the visitor's perception of what belongs in a museum. By offering two different types of structured learning experiences, this study seeks to understand how active engagement with work advances a visitor's understanding of the artwork and enhances her aesthetic perception.

The Artwork

Like many artists of the 1980s, Felix Gonzalez-Torres used ordinary materials to extraordinary ends. One of his works, *Untitled (Last Light)* is on display by the entrance to the first-floor gallery at the Sackler Museum (**Appendix A**). The piece's location, at

the entrance of the gallery, implies that it is to be viewed by all who enter the exhibit. In all his works, Gonzalez-Torres wished to include the viewer as an active agent in producing the work's meaning. He set private memories and nostalgic journeys into the public sphere, hoping to help viewers transcend the personal to arrive at a collective experience about the social good and the human spirit.

The context of the piece is an essential aspect of its meaning. Gonzalez-Torres used strings of light to evoke a complex set of interrelated ideas and emotions. Gonzalez-Torres began using light bulbs in 1991, the year that his partner died from AIDS-related illness. The fragile nature of the material suggests death, while the artist's instructions to replace burned-out lights gestures toward renewal and eternity. Whereas the original piece was hung on a white wall, the Sackler has chosen to install this work on a maroon-colored background, infusing the piece with warmth. The glowing lights form faint halos against the dark background, casting shadows while illuminating the space. Though the museum does provide wall text and offers an audio guide through an individual phone service, we wanted to challenge viewers to think more deeply about what is on display in museums and to confound their assumptions and expectations.

The Experience

Before encountering the work, visitors were handed either an Information Handout or an Activity Handout along with a survey. By offering two options to the visitors, we invited them to actively examine and expand their own observations, impressions, and thoughts, and act on them to form new ideas. Our goal was to contribute to a broader understanding of when art functions as a work of art by applying the Transformational Learning Theory developed by Jack Mezirow (1991). We invited the

participants to look for evidence of critical reflection in terms of content, process and premise. We believe that both handouts offer active learning opportunities through reflection, and each cognitively advances visitors' understanding of conceptual artworks beyond their immediate emotional responses. We suspect that this study would challenge their long held beliefs and critiques, and engage them to think deeply about the kind of objects that are on display in museums.

In this paper, we will discuss the methodology we used in this study in greater detail. Then, we will highlight the most significant findings from our data. This will be followed by a discussion of our results, and we will conclude with some observations and questions for further research.

METHODOLOGY

Our sample includes 23 participants at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum with different levels of education and habits of visiting museums. Out of 23 participants, 11 were given Activity Handouts and 11 were given Information Handouts. The data collection of these participants involved a survey that ranged from 5 to 30 minutes for completion. Five participants were invited to the event with prior notice, and 18 participants were asked to participate in the activity as they walked into the gallery space.

The Information Handout (**Appendix B**) provides additional information to the wall text that implicitly justifies the work's place in the museum. The handout situates Gonzales-Torres in relation to well-known art-historical movements, explains his choice of materials, illuminates the piece's emotional and conceptual content, and highlights Gonzalez-Torres's awards and credentials. The Activity Handout (**Appendix C**) uses the Reasoning Routine developed by the Visible Thinking Program. The

Claim/Support/Question protocol was chosen in order to encourage visitors to develop thoughtful interpretations and reason with evidence (Ritchhart and Perkins, 2008; Palmer, Perkins, Ritchhart, and Tishman). The routine was edited to ask visitors to "make a claim" about why *Untitled (Last Light)* was in the museum. While the Information Handout is didactic and expository, the Activity Handout is inquiry-based. Additionally, each participant was asked to respond to a survey (**Appendix D**). The survey results are illustrated in graphs in **Appendix E.**

When conducting the analysis, we first sorted the respondents according to their age and gender. We composed a thematic summary for each, attaching further descriptions to the labels. We then engaged in a rigorous analysis of the data, seeking information about respondents' museum experience and their level of engagement with the work. Drawing on the thematic summaries, we developed a coding scheme for data related to their museum experiences and coded the survey, sorting respondents' explanation to whether or not the work belongs in a museum by cross-cutting themes such as museum contexts and concept/theme. These data were analyzed using grounded learning theory and the comparative method. In this approach to the analysis of qualitative data, the theory is generated from the data, or if existing theories seem appropriate, then they are elaborated and modified against them.

FINDINGS

Our findings are summarized in **Appendix E.** Only one participant asked to withdraw from the study due to her lack of time with her company and their level of English proficiency.

- The average age of the participants was 34 years;
- 59% of the participants were female and 41% were male;
- 82% of the participants considered themselves as museum goers;
- 59% of the participants visited the Sackler Museum for the first time;
- The average time spent with the work of art was 6.6 minutes;
- The average rating of the experience was 3.4 on a 5 point rating scale.

Since we had two different handouts, we used different coding schemes to sort out the results from the survey. These codes were determined impressionistically, and then revised several times to reflect the true range of responses. Responses were coded with as many labels as were appropriate. There are repeated themes found in the results from both handouts. The Activity Handout participants were exposed to thinking about what belongs in a museum by making their own claims. We suspected that their thinking could have triggered them to think more deeply about the last question of the survey, "Does this work belong in a museum? Why or why not?" On the other hand, the Information Handout participants were provided with background knowledge that enhanced their understanding of the work.

Chart One illustrates eight themes that were found in the Information Handout participants' response to whether the work belongs in a museum.

Chart 1
Responses of 11 Informational Handout participants who were asked, "Does this work belong in a museum? Why or why not?

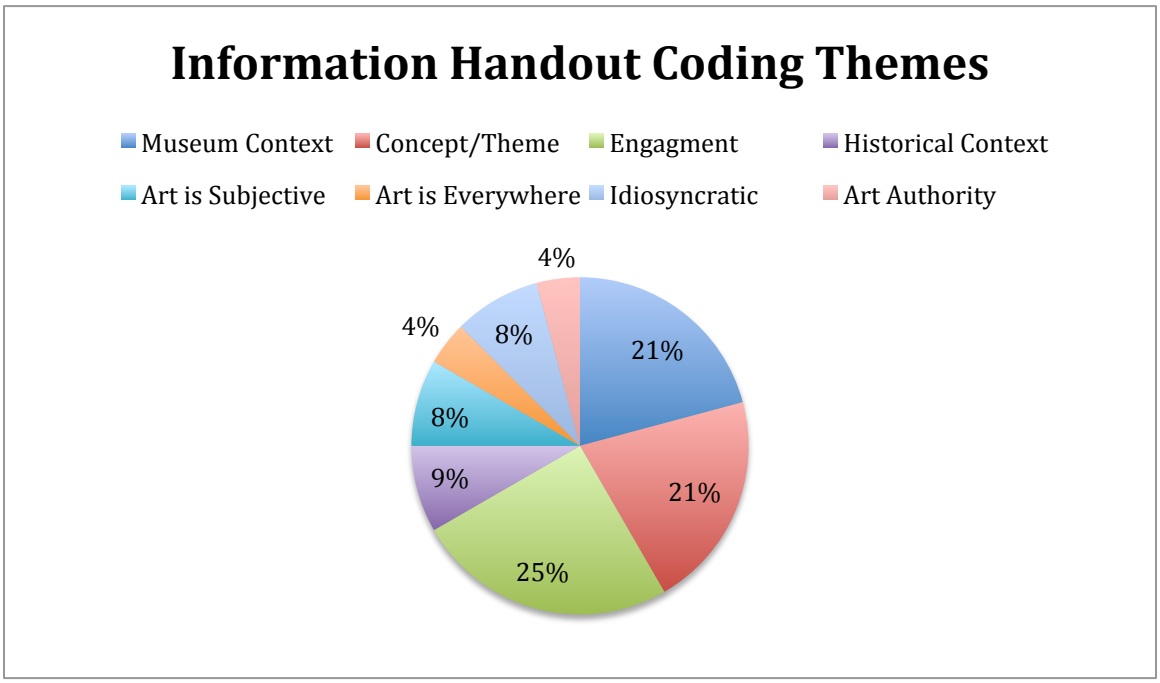
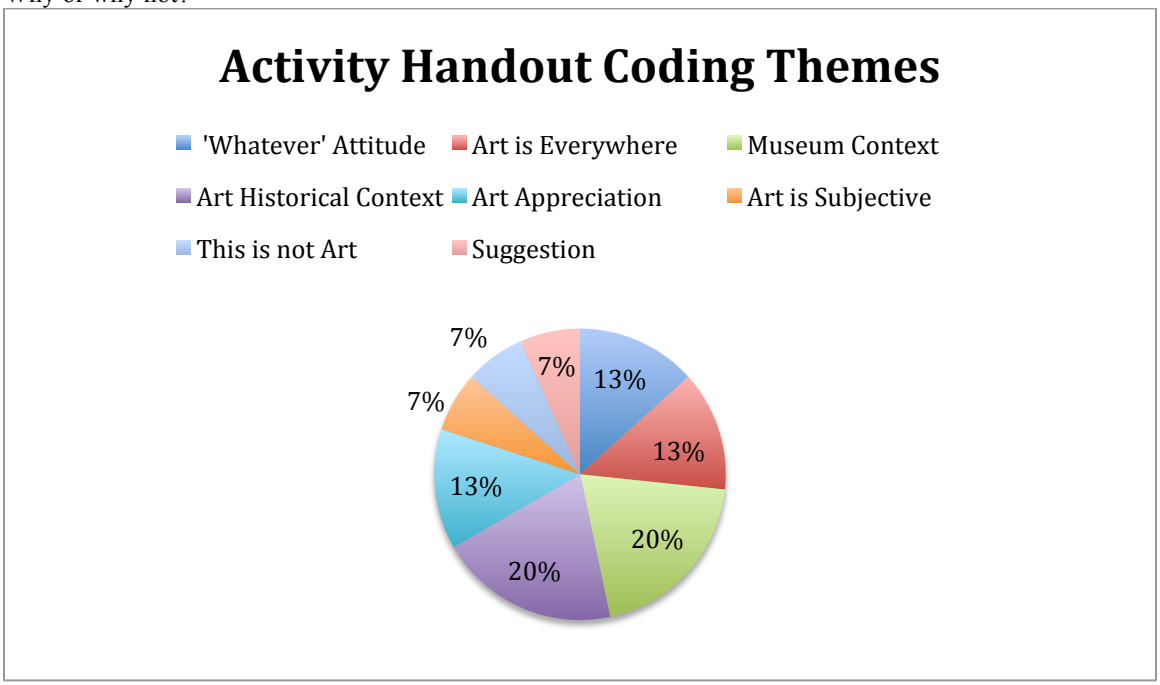


Chart Two illustrates eight themes that were found in the Activity Handout participants' response to whether the work belongs in a museum.

Chart 2
Responses of 11 Activity Handout participants who were asekd, "Does this work belong in a museum? Why or why not?"



Those who were given the Information Handout thought the concept of the work was relevant to its presence in a museum. 21% of the participants said they were engaged with the work of art because of the additional information provided. For those who were given Activity Handouts, their answers showed more skeptical views of contemporary conceptual artworks and questioned the validity of such works of art. Some overlapping themes were the categories of art is subjective, art is everywhere, and museum context. 41% of the participants overall treated museum context as the highest validation, since they believe museums and collections validate artists' status, thus making the piece an important work of art. 32% of respondents who answered that art is subjective or art is everywhere indicated that, to be able to understand and appreciate contemporary art, one has to have an open mind.

DISCUSSION

Participants expressed a mixed set of positive and negative personal judgment of the work. Their attitudes towards a conceptual modern art was measured as well as their evaluation of the activity suggested by us. The participants reported the skeptical view of modern art consistently, though some described the importance of contemporary art and artists and our evolving understanding of modern art. Very few (< 3) were dismissive of the piece entirely ("I can go to Home Depot and buy Christmas lights"). Over 80% of participants considered themselves museum-goers, which may have had an impact on their interpretation of the work. It is likely that many participants had been exposed to other examples of ready-made art and so were prepared to see a work like this in a museum.

Although each handout generated a similar range of responses, only participants who received the Information Handout cited the concept of the work as a reason why it was in the museum (21%). The Information Handout provided a range of interpretations of the work, which were reflected in the sophistication of participants' answers to this question. These explicit conceptual links likely account for the high number of appeals to personal engagement in this group; viewers who were *told* that the artist invited the active participation of the audience might have *felt* invited to participate. One individual from this group appealed to art authorities as a justification for the work's place in the museum. However, in an act of circular logic, about a fifth of respondents in both groups cited the museum context as a reason why this work was in a museum.

Whereas the Information group tended to agree on major themes (museum context, concept, and engagement), participants who received the Activity Handout were more likely to submit unique responses (3 of the codes had one respondent each). Otherwise, their responses were spread more evenly across the spectrum. Only members of this group dismissed the work as "not art," likely because they lacked the reinforcing message of the information sheet. A surprising number, however, cited the art-historical context of the work as an important factor; this information was alluded to on the wall label. Overall, respondents in this group appealed less to authority than to personal experience and interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1995) discuss applying their research into motivation for learning to museum settings. They suggested that if a museum visitor was

both interested and engaged in an exhibition they would be ready to experience an intrinsically rewarding, optimal experience, which they called "flow". Studies in museums have continually demonstrated that if people are not interested either in the content or the look of an exhibition they will just walk past without engaging with it. By handing visitors an activity that piqued their interest in the work, we were able to instantly engage them in the exhibit. A handful of participants reflected on their experience in dialogue with us, and they reported something akin to "flow." One respondent, a woman in her 50s, reported that she usually does not like contemporary art, but that the activity forced her to look at the work closely. After sitting with the work for about five minutes, her attitude toward it changed considerably. Another respondent asked if there were more worksheets to fill out for other works in the gallery, and was disappointed to find out that we were only studying one. A few participants were eager to know how others had responded to the last question on the survey, and freely shared their opinions and reactions with us.

This study has taken a small snapshot of active learning that take place in museums. The method we used was particularly useful for exploring participants' knowledge and experience. Given the limited time frame and data collection, the purposive sample of participants precludes us from generalizing to all visitors at the Sackler Museum, or visitors in similar museum settings. However, the respondents' accounts and appraisals of their experience are nonetheless informative. The accounts can also guide us in further museum research to successfully create active learning to take place in museums to enhance visitor's experience.

Many participants were eager for more information about the work, even though they did not choose to use the cellphone tour. Having additional information easily available in print form enhanced the experience of some participants. Additionally, the final question on the survey was surprisingly generative for conversation and dialogue. Even though the instructions on the handouts did not suggest conversation, we observed several participants discussing their responses with their companions. Simply asking the question, "Does this work belong in a museum?" stretched many of our participants' thinking, and the range of responses outlined above is a testament to their creativity of thought. Visitors drew on available information, prior experience, outside knowledge, and personal conviction to justify the inclusion of a fairly pedestrian object (a string of lights) in a world-class, encyclopedic museum (the Sackler). The study indicates that a well-structured learning experience, as explained by Hein, Tishman, Ritchhart, Simon, and others, will turn an afternoon at the museum into an active, transformative, and creative adventure. We intend to take these findings to the Graduate Student Gallery Teacher and Task Force program at the Harvard Art Museums, in order to inform our education practice in the future.

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Zoe Silverman's Reflection

Originally, I was interested in investigating the museum as a site of knowledge-production. My interest in this topic was piqued by the Trofenenko article assigned for class this J-Term. Although the study we conducted does not explicitly address the museum as a knowledge-creator, the responses to our survey reflect an awareness on the part of our participants that, by simply placing an object in a museum, *some* authority is making *some* claim about its cultural significance. I was surprised by how convincing this argument was for our participants, and how few people interrogated the legitimacy of curators as arbiters of culture. As the Sackler undergoes physical renovation, it is taking stock of its mission and message. There is a new interest in curatorial authorship and transparency, led in large part by Ethan Lasser and his young curatorial colleagues. If museum educators feel a need to teach people *how* to see, this new push is intended to teach people *what* to look for. Unlike Sarah French, Trofeneko's precocious the fifth grader, not every museum-goer knows instinctually that knowledge is power. I suspect that the landscape of responses to our survey would look very different if were we to conduct this study two years from now.

Additionally, in this study, we obliquely sought to explore the participatory museum model as a means of enhancing visitors' meaning making (Simon). By standing in or close to the gallery, Ju-Hye and I invited conversation and engagement. A few participants were interested to know what would happen to their responses after the study. Our handouts provided the only "active" opportunity available in the galleries that day. There was a palpable yearning for hand-on learning in gallery spaces; out of twenty-three participants approached for this study, only one turned us down. Furthermore, I suspect that participatory spaces can be effective tools for interrogating museum discourse and structure. I do not expect HAM curators to get on the participatory bandwagon. However, their ideological commitment to transparency and the deconstructionist opportunities presented by Simon's participatory museum model are harmonious.

Finally, I was pleased to see how generative our questions were for participants. Simply asking a question in a gallery space can be a powerful catalyst for creative and active thinking. The Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art at the MFA expertly exploits questions as learning tools. I hope the HAM, and other museums in the future, will recognize the centrality of inquiry to successful learning experiences.

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Understanding as Educational Goal – Looking at Conceptual Art: When is Art?
Personal Reflection as an Art Educator

Ju-Hye Ahn

If the mission of the museum is to advance our understanding of works of art in relation to the world we live in, how is it doing to enhance our experience to maintain its educational mandate? Background information and interest are critical components to understand a work of art. I think we all recognize the obvious fact that the experience of a work of art is a subjective one. What some of us find beautiful, interesting or compelling may be abhorrent to others. Especially when we encounter conceptual art, we get defensive because of our inability to understand why it is being referred to as art. We often overlook the intellectual labor of the conceptual artists and judge the work based on aesthetics and materials. As much as art is subjective, the subjective nature of museum experience lead to different and multiple interpretations as we encounter with museum exhibits. I believe it is important to educate the public audience to understand the aesthetic symbols furthering them from simply *likes* or *dislikes*.

Nelson Goodman argues that the central question in aesthetics is not *what* makes an object a work of art, but *when* it becomes a work of art. This indicates the need to provide the kind of information in terms of the context and vocabulary for the general public audience to understand works of art though they may not necessarily like it. A work of art does not have to be pleasing to make a significant contribution to the way we look at art. Art can contribute to the cognitive transformation of the subject who experiences it, and also, it contributes to cognitive advancement by exposing us to more possibilities of perception, reflection, and expression; and enhance our understanding of particular objects that are reconfigured in art.

With reference to Howard Gardner's lecture on the Disciplined Mind, we need to structure the *preposition-like* facts attained from looking and thinking about the artworks combined with our prior knowledge and experiences in a way that synthesize our own understanding of the world. I believe active learning in museums is active looking; it is offering multiple entry points for engagement and implementing a variety of ways of learning that is integrated with close looking. Just how artists recognize relationships among elements and organize them to create meaning, viewers must also embody this thinking that is required for artistic production, as they perceive artworks. Embracing the interdisciplinary mind as an educator, I hope to challenge the perceived stereotypes that prevent exploration and guide viewers to establish visual literacy.

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APPENDIX A

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Last Light)*, 1993. Photo courtesy: Harvard Art Museums: the Arthur M. Sackler Museum

APPENDIX B

Information Handout

"In this way…this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross [the artist's partner for eight years, who died in 1991 from AIDS] disappear day by day right in front of my eyes."

--Felix Gonzales-Torres

Like many artists of the 1980s, Gonzalez-Torres used the postmodern strategy of appropriating ready-made motifs and objects to create his art, thereby challenging the idea of the unique art object that was so much a hallmark of Modernism.

In all his works—including billboards, stacked prints, text installations, jigsaw puzzle photographs, strings of light, and found objects—Gonzalez-Torres wished to include the viewer as an active agent in producing the work's meaning. He set private memories and nostalgic journeys into the public sphere, hoping to help viewers transcend the personal to arrive at a collective experience about the social good and the human spirit.

However commonplace the objects with which Gonzalez-Torres worked, his art seems suffused with a poignant poetry. In this piece, Gonzalez-Torres used strings of light to evoke a complex set of interrelated ideas and emotions. Gonzalez-Torres began using light bulbs in 1991, the year that his partner died from AIDS-related illness. The fragile nature of this material suggests death, while the artist's instructions to replace burned-out lights gestures toward renewal and eternity. The Sackler has chosen to install this work on a maroon-colored wall, infusing the piece with warmth. The glowing lights form faint halos against the dark background, casting shadows while illuminating the space. The work is placed at the entrance to the first-floor gallery, inviting every visitor to encounter it and infuse it with meaning.

Gonzalez-Torres received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and participated in hundreds of group shows during his lifetime, including presentations at Artists Space and White Columns in New York, the Whitney Biennial, and the Sydney Biennale. Comprehensive retrospective exhibitions of his work have been organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Guggenheim Museum. Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related illness in 1996. In 2007, he became the second American artist to be posthumously selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale.

APPENDIX C

Activity Handout

✓ Take a few minutes to look at this work of art quietly.

✓ When you are ready, respond to the prompts on this sheet.

✓ Please return your responses to Ju-Hye or Zoe before you leave.

1. *Make a claim about why this object is in the museum.*

2. *Identify support for your claim* (things you see, feel, and know).

3. *Ask a question related to your claim* (alternative explanations, counter-evidence, puzzles, or challenges that could call your claim, or its support, into question).

APPENDIX D

S-310T Active Learning in Museums

For our research for this course, we will be conducting a study on active learning that takes place in museums. There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this research. The interview or observation will be kept confidential, with your name removed (a pseudonym will be assigned), and accessible only by us and the course's teaching staff. The whole process will take approximately 30 minutes. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, and you may stop the interview or observation at any point during a session. Thank you for your time and comments.

Zoe Silverman and Ju-Hye Ahn

Please take a moment to complete this questionnaire and return to us.

1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?
   Female Male

3. Do you consider yourself as a museum goer?
   Yes No

4. Is this your first visit to the Sackler Museum?
   Yes No

5. Which handout did you get?
   Information handout Activity handout

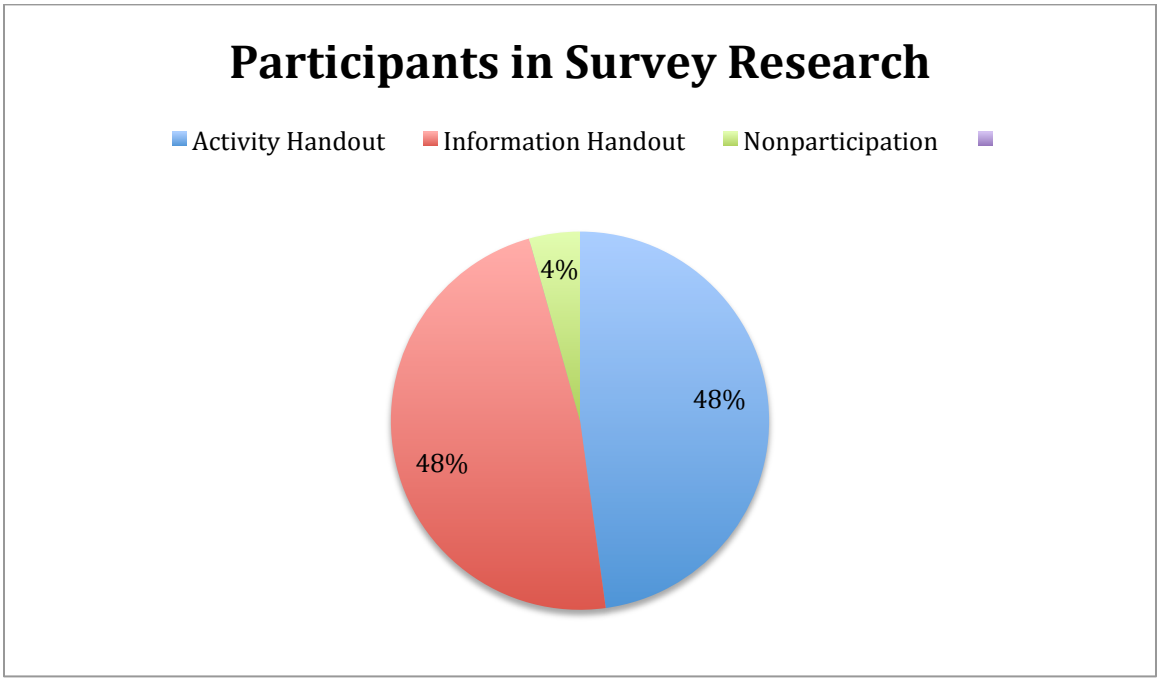
6. About how long did you spend with the work of art?

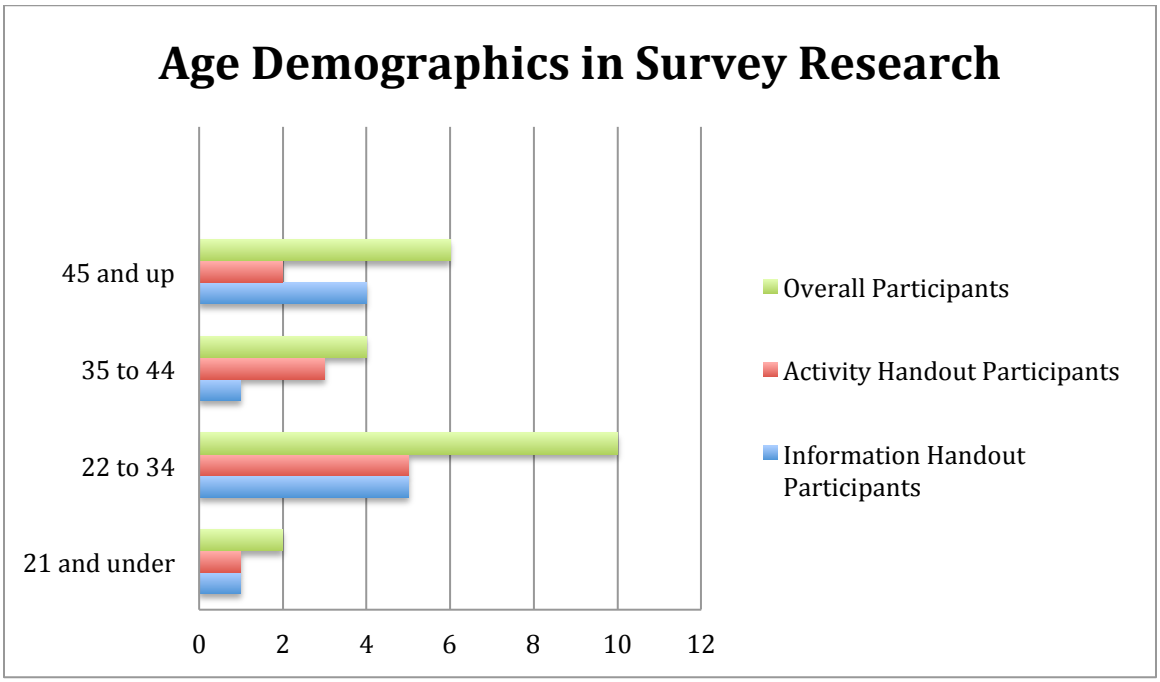
7. On a scale 1-5, how engaging was this experience?

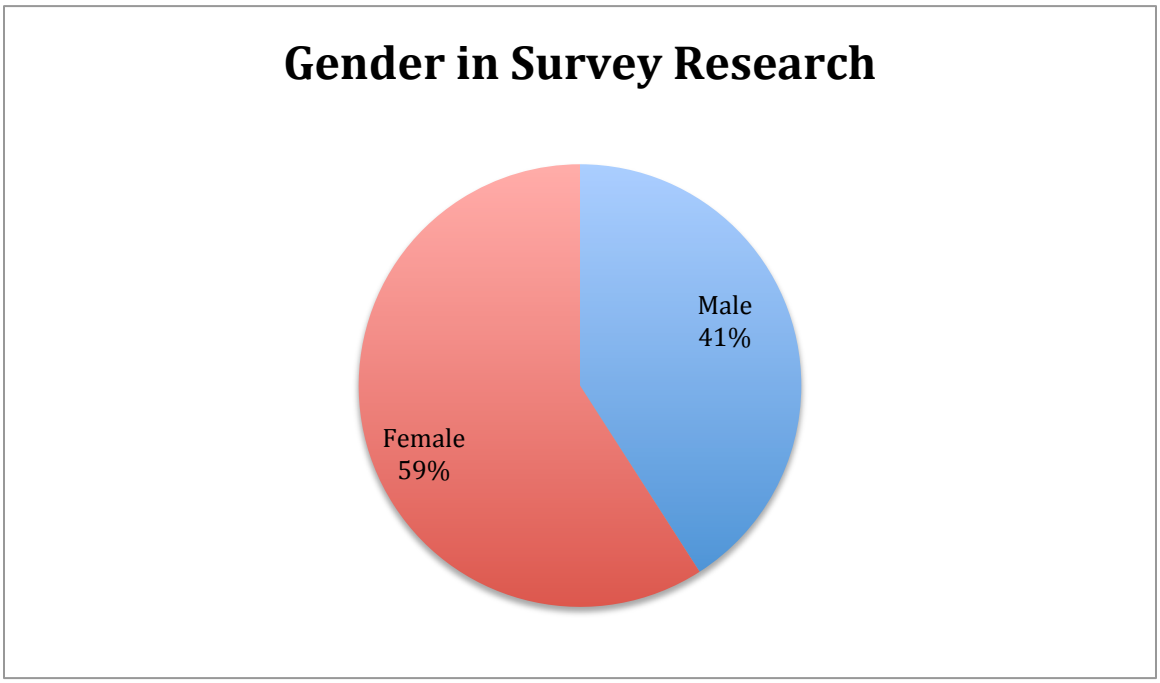
8. What did you learn from the handout?

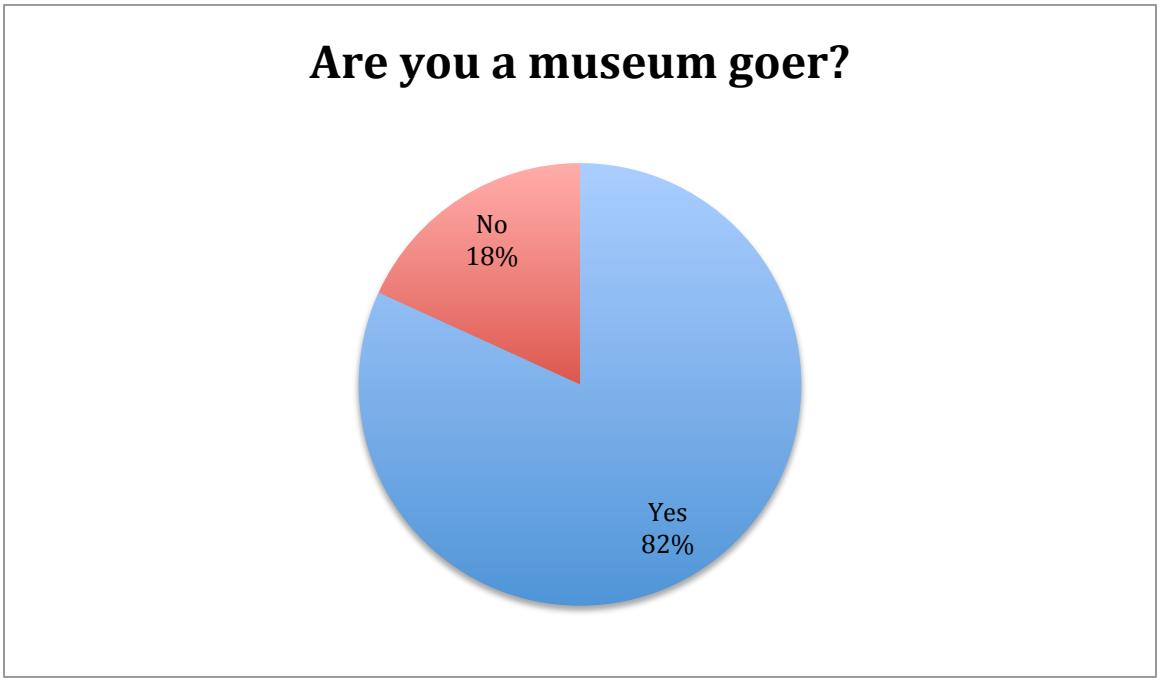
9. Does this work belong in a museum? Why or why not?

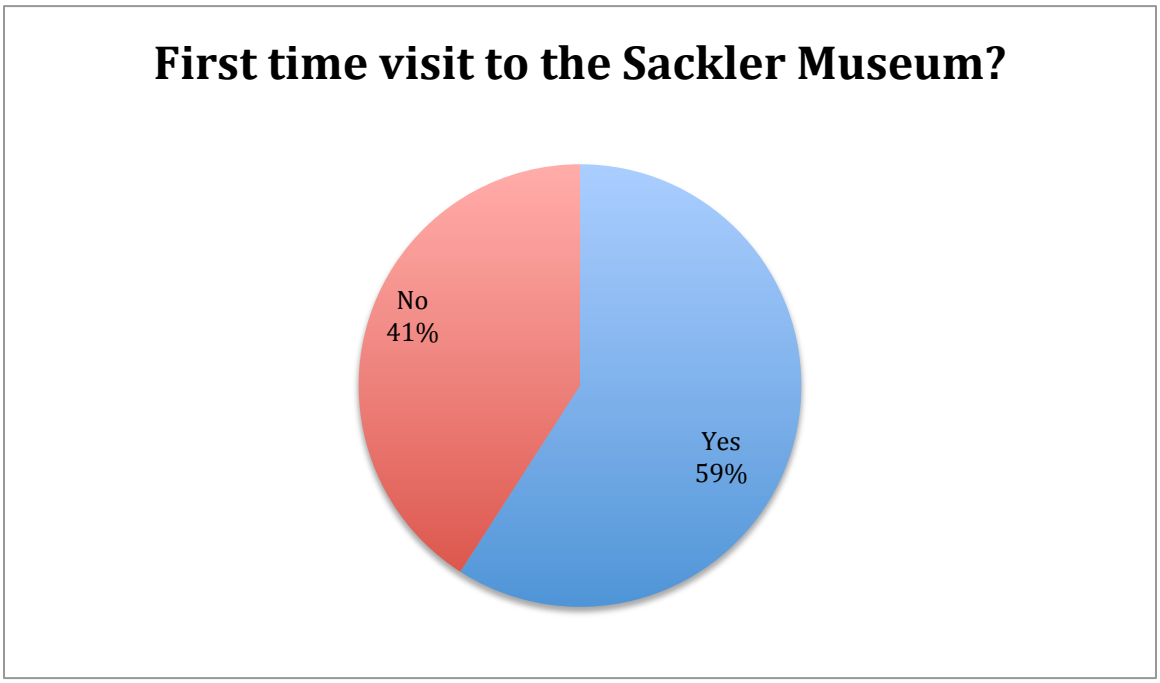
APPENDIX E

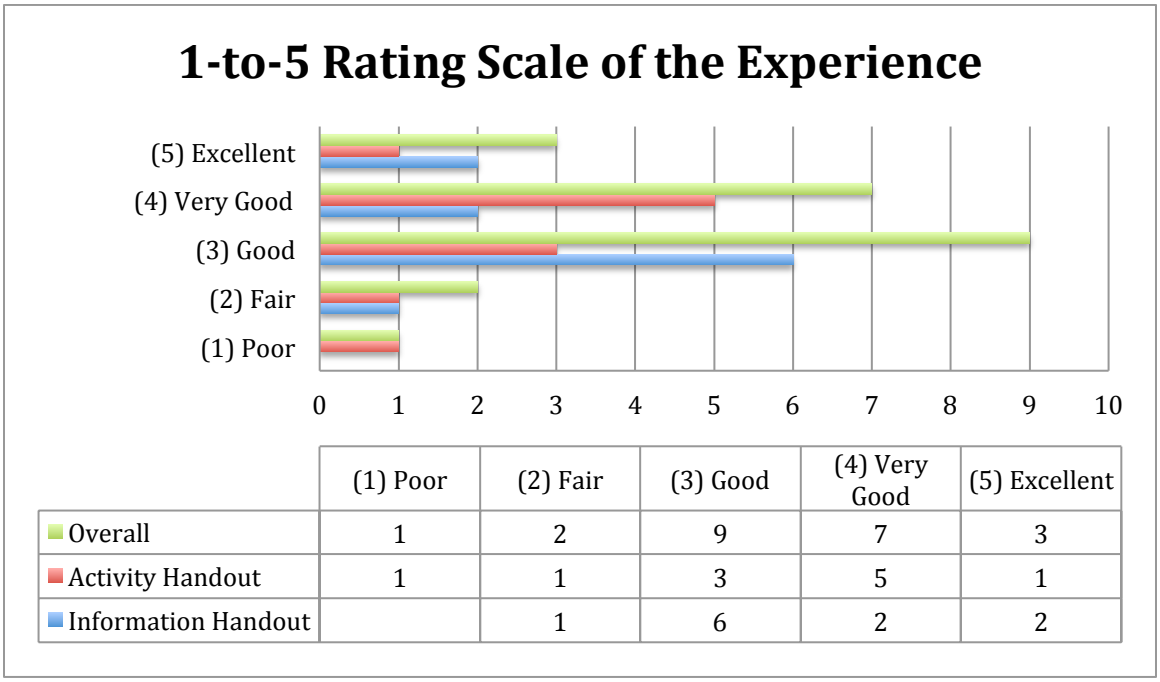

Participants in Survey Research
Activity Handout
Information Handout
Nonparticipation
4%
48%
48%


Age Demographics in Survey Research
45 and up
35 to 44
22 to 34
21 and under
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
Overall Participants
Activity Handout Participants
Information Handout Participants


Gender in Survey Research
Male
41%
Female
59%


Are you a museum goer?
No
18%
Yes
82%





	(1) Poor	(2) Fair	(3) Good	(4) Very Good	(5) Excellent
Overall	1	2	9	7	3
Activity Handout	1	1	3	5	1
Information Handout		1	6	2	2