Participatory Activities and the Art Museum: A Case Study of the Columbus Museum of Art

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

This research study attempts to explore the interactions that occur between participatory activities and art museum galleries. Literature suggests that museum’s use participatory activities as interpretive strategies to engage visitors and promote learning in galleries. The inclusion of participatory activities is representative of a museum's interest in cultivating visitor-centered experiences for audiences. This study seeks to investigate what if any impacts participatory activities have on the experiences of visitors to art museums.

This research is a qualitative case study of participatory activities at the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA). The CMA uses a series of installations called “connectors” to engage visitors in their galleries. Connectors are defined as anything placed in the gallery space other than art, including labels, wall text and seating. However, connectors also take the form of participatory activities, such as puzzles, games, or conversation boards. This study specifically examined participatory activities that allowed for tactile, hands-on interaction with visitors. Data was collected through an interview, observations of participants, and a survey of museum visitors. The collected data was then organized by themes and patterns.

Analysis of the collected data suggests that the majority of museum visitors chose to engage with participatory activities and that the activities have a positive impact on visitor experience. Visitors who engaged with the activities reported increased
appreciation for the museum’s artwork, and a more engaging museum visit. Interactions between museum visitors and participatory activities most often occur with social groups. These interactions are strongly influenced by the dynamics of the social group. Time spent in the galleries and with the participatory activities is most often less than five minutes.

Participatory activities are an opportunity for museums to enhance the experiences of their audience. Despite limitations in sampling and design, this study suggests that visitors respond positively to participatory activities and desire engaging and interactive experiences from their visits. Future research should delve further into visitor responses to the presence and use of participatory activities.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my friends and family, who have supported and guided me through graduate school.
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Fields of Study

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................. ii

Dedication .......................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgments .............................................................................................. v

Vita ....................................................................................................................... vi

Table of Contents ............................................................................................. vii

List of Images ..................................................................................................... x

List of Figures .................................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................... 1
  
  Background to Study ......................................................................................... 1

  Statement of Problem ....................................................................................... 4

  Research Questions .......................................................................................... 5

  Significance of Study ....................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................. 8
  
  What Has Been the Historical Museum Experience? ..................................... 8

  What Are Active Learning and Visitor-Centric Experiences? ......................... 12
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Methodology and Research Procedures</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Procedures</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Data Presentation</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview with Merilee Mostov, Director of Inclusive Interpretation</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observations of Participants</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey of Museum Visitors</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What major trends appear during visitor interactions with participatory activities?</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visitors Engage with Activities in Social Groups</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagements Are Primarily Momentary or Short Period Interactions</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visitor Response to Participatory Activities Varies Based on the Age Demographic of the Group</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Art as a Social Object</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participatory Activities Diversify Museum Learning Opportunities</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emergign Trend: The Caretaker Effect Among Groups with Children</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How frequently do visitors engage with participatory activities in art museum galleries? How do visitors reflect on participatory activities in art museum galleries? .................................................................85
Are visitors more likely to engage with participatory activities if they are familiar with the museum? .................................................................91

Chapter 6: Conclusion.................................................................96
Summary of Questions and Procedures...........................................96
Summary of Findings....................................................................97
Implications: Summary.................................................................102
Future Research Discussion.........................................................104
Personal Learning Outcomes.......................................................107
References...................................................................................109

Appendix A: Interview Questions: Merilee Mostov, Director of Inclusive Interpretation.................................................................114
Appendix B: Survey........................................................................115
List of Images

Image 1. Gallery 10 at the Columbus Museum of Art.................................35
Image 2. Puzzle of Francois Boucher’s *Vertumnus and Pomona*.....................36
Image 3. Join the Conversation Station in Gallery 10................................37
Image 4. Big Idea Gallery at the Columbus Museum of Art..........................38
Image 5. Tag It..........................................................................................40
Image 6. Drawing Station...........................................................................41
Image 7. Puzzle of Ralph Bell’s *Untitled*....................................................42
Image 8. Dogs in the City Game...................................................................43
Image 9. Join the Conversation Station in the Big Idea Gallery......................44
Image 10. Dog Collar Response Board..........................................................45
Image 11. Puzzle of Norman Rockwell’s *Soda Jerk*....................................46
Image 12. Digital Gallery.............................................................................47
Image 13. Big Idea Gallery Wall Text............................................................48
Image 14. Contemporary Wing......................................................................49
Image 15. Activity corresponding to Frank Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*........50
Image 16. Join the Conversation Station in the Contemporary Galleries............51
Image 17. Frank Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*...............................................84
List of Figures

Figure 1. Hein’s Educational Theories ................................................................. 13
Figure 2. Types of Engagement ......................................................................... 60
Figure 3. Time in Gallery .................................................................................. 61
Figure 4. Age of Respondents ......................................................................... 62
Figure 5. Engagement with Participatory Activities .............................................. 63
Figure 6. Respondents Who Engaged with Participatory Activities by Age Group .... 64
Figure 7. Average Rating of Participatory Activities by Age Group .................... 65
Figure 8. Participatory Activities Rating Based on Visitor Usage ............................ 67
Figure 9. Respondents Likelihood to Return to the CMA in the Next Year .............. 68
Figure 10. Respondents Likelihood to Ever Return to the CMA .............................. 69
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background to Study

As a student of art history, my experiences in museum settings were based around a contemplative museum experience, dependent on art historical tradition. The museum experience I was familiar with was a passive and self-determined walk through museum galleries. It was not until my undergraduate education that I became more aware of intention and meaning behind museum practices. Curation and educational programming each play a vital role in the overall experience a visitor has at a museum. The balance and emphasis of these elements by administrations produce different results for every visitor. Further, these pieces of a museum experience are manipulated to achieve the objectives of the host institution. The arrangement of art is itself a representation of the opinions of the curators, and the experience of the visitor results from journeys through galleries during which they observe and react to the art.

While interning at the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA), I became conscious of how the CMA frequently employs “connectors,” museum-designed installations, that pair with specific works or galleries to engage visitors with the art. Connectors act as an instigator of creative thought, tactile engagement or other activity, ranging in form from puzzles, to mini-art projects, to boards where visitors may place Post-Its with their thoughts. The connectors allow audiences to physically and mentally pause to express
their own thoughts about the artwork and its display. In the CMA, the traditional, passive experience of the museum is challenged by these small, self-contained installations. The visitor does not merely absorb the art and the narrative of the curator, but is encouraged to pause and have a self-determined interactive experience with the art.

Initially, I was confused by the engagement that the CMA sparked through the connectors that they developed and employed. I did not understand why installations were placed in the galleries, or why the museum wished for visitors to respond to the artwork. The concepts of creativity, expression, and play, sparked by the connectors, defied what I understood as the societal standards of behavior for an adult in the museum. The interactive opportunities that connectors provided challenged how I interpreted the art museum establishment.

While an undergraduate, I spent a total of twelve months working as an intern at the CMA. My time as an intern was split between the Marketing and Communications and the Curatorial departments of the museum. At the onset of my employment at the CMA, I was introduced to one of the museum’s main priorities, which is to support and nurture play and creativity in the visitor experience (About CMA, 2015). Play and creativity come in addition to the museum’s traditional role as a steward of art. The current mission of the Columbus Museum of Art summarizes their priorities succinctly: “Columbus Museum of Art’s mission is to create great experiences with great art for everyone” (About CMA, 2015).

Before beginning my internship, connectors seemed randomly placed in the galleries. However, while working at the CMA, I became aware of how the connectors work to fulfill the museum’s mission. The CMA is an example of a museum that is
moving beyond the historical concept of simply looking at art to become educated (Zeller, 1989) and instead is working to create a dynamic, interactive learning experience for the visitor. The CMA challenges the visitors to play and engage in a creative process during a visit. This interest and direct concern for the interactive process of the visitor exemplifies a larger trend in the development of visitor engagement and the potential for the development of participatory museums (Simon, 2010).

While in graduate school, I came to question how the active, creative process of connectors was developed at the CMA, and why? The ubiquitous status of connectors in the gallery spaces implies that the installations are fully embraced by museum administrators and are used as a tool to enhance the visitor experience at CMA. I became interested in exploring what forces moved the museum in this new direction, and how administration, exhibitions, and visitor experiences have been effected.

As part of my research for my thesis, my interest in connectors has evolved and reshaped. The first portion of research I conduct on this topic refocused my understanding of the connectors program at the CMA. I conducted an interview with Merilee Mostov, Director of Inclusive Interpretation at the CMA. Director Mostov is responsible for working with curators to create and implement connectors in gallery spaces. The interview provided me with the CMA’s definition of connectors. As an intern and a visitor, my understanding of connectors was synonymous with the participatory installations found in the gallery spaces. These include puzzles, crafts, Join the Conversation Stations, and other activities. However, I learned from Director Mostov, that the CMA itself defines connectors as “anything in the gallery other than art” (What is a Connector, CMA). This includes chairs, labels, and even the paint color of gallery
walls. This definition drastically expanded by understanding of connectors. The new information reshaped the language I used to describe my project, and further focused my research.

Instead of investigating connectors through my research, I examined participatory activities. While CMA includes seating and labels as part of their connectors program, I chose to investigate the CMA’s installations. I consider the concepts of labels and seating to be broadly established within the museum experience. I defined participatory activities as installations that provide opportunities for direct tactile engagement between the visitor and the activity.

**Statement of Problem**

Current research on the effects of including participatory activities in arts museums is scarce. Further investigation is needed to explore what effects, if any, participatory activities have on the experience of the visitor. Participatory activities specifically at CMA are used to support the learning objectives of galleries or exhibitions. While CMA has internally evaluated the success of connectors in relation to learning objectives, published, external research on their effects is needed. Participatory activities are placed directly in the path of visitors and are intended to be an integrated part of the experience. Simultaneously, tactile and intellectual, participatory activities invite the visitor to respond to art and exhibitions beyond the traditional receptive experience. This potentially adds another dimension to the visitor experience, and research must be conducted to investigate the process of interaction between guest and activity.

The use of participatory activities in gallery spaces is not exclusive to CMA. Participation and interaction are aspects of the art museum experience that are evolving
to be more inclusive and engaging (Simon, 2010). Museums and galleries may use participatory activities for a variety of purposes or learning objectives. However, research into the direct effects of participatory activities is still needed. Without evaluating the success of learning objectives, my research seeks to contribute to the general understanding of the phenomenon that occurs between participatory activities and visitors to the CMA galleries.

**Research Questions**

For this study, my primary research questions is:

*What major trends appear during visitor interactions with participatory activities?*

CMA uses participatory activities broadly throughout the museum with the purpose of forwarding the learning objectives and experiences of visitors. However, my research will explore if visitors engage with activities, how they engage with activities and how they reflect on their experience. This investigation will not evaluate the museum’s definition of success with participatory activities. Rather my research is seeking to explore what, if any, phenomenon occurs between the visitor and activity.

Possible sub-questions that may be addressed during my research include:

*How frequently do visitors choose to engage with participatory activities in the museum?*

*How do visitors reflect on the participatory activities placed in gallery spaces?*

*Do participatory activities in museum galleries have an impact on the experience of the visitor?*
Does familiarity with a museum influence how a visitor engages with participatory activities?

Significance of Study

Museum face negative perceptions that prevent individuals from choosing to attend. Individuals who do not attend museums cite, “restrictions on group social behavior and active participation,” as barriers to their attendance (Hood, 2004, p. 154). Including participatory activities in gallery spaces has the potential to break down this general perception of museum. My conclusions will add to the understanding of the phenomenon that placing participatory activities in art museum galleries entails.

Exploration in the phenomenon of participatory engagement has the potential to shed light on how museums can use participation to improve visitor experience. As Campolmi (2013) argues, the museum as an institution needs structural changes to create sustainable models of operation. The introduction and incorporation of participatory activities in the art museum has the potential to change the traditional passive structure of the art museum to enhance the engagement of visitors. The possible effects of this change require further research.

Art museums in major cities have the luxury of existing as tourist destinations, resulting in a steady stream of visitation through the year. However, art museums in smaller, regional cities cannot generate the same level of non-residential visitation. This leaves the regional museum to be patronized by its surrounding community. Therefore, the local perception of the regional art museum, and its established role in the attention of constituents is vital to the survival of the museum. Understanding if, how and why
visitors engage with participatory activities can strengthen a museum’s ability to appeal to its own constituents.

Scholarship delving into the potential to increase motivations of art museum patrons to visit the museum is scarce. Research on the purchase of museum memberships fails to sufficiently address how members of the public could expand their association with a museum. While scholars like DiMaggio (1996) have performed research into the existing museum attendee, little research has been done to explore expanding the audience. Scholarship has a distinct focus on using the museum membership program as a measure of a museum’s success and health (Anderson, 2007). However, research into the holistic experience of the visitor may provide a more accurate understanding of visitor motivations (Falk, 2009).

Understanding the motivations of museum visitors and how visitors engage with participatory activities will allow art museums to make strategic programming decisions. My research will add to the understanding of what visitors engage with in art museums, and what visitors want from their experiences. With this information, art museums will be a step closer to adapting their programs and customs to establish more engaging experiences for visitors. If changing art museum programming to a more active and participatory experience is indeed creating a more meaningful relationship for visitors, my research will provide insight into how visitors use participatory activities in museum galleries.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature that serves as the foundation for my study reviews the history of the museum to provide a groundwork for a historical museum experience. I also reviewed how participation in art museums has evolved and expanded over the course of American museum history. I defined active learning, visitor-centered experiences, and museum interpretation. Further, I have explored why individuals come to art museums, what they seek from their experiences and whether membership programs are a strong indicator of visitor motivations. I have reviewed how the museum can be a sustainable nonprofit organization and what role visitor participation plays in museum sustainability. Under the umbrella of sustainability, I have investigated how museums compete in philanthropic markets, and the ways art museums define success in practices. Finally, I have reviewed how the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) defines connectors, and previous evaluations of the connectors in the galleries. These topics create a basis of literature for my investigation into the phenomena that occurs when participatory activities are placed in gallery spaces at the CMA.

What Has Been the Historical Museum Experience?

The museum has the potential to work as a progressive institution, taking an active role in the education and participation of visitors (Simon, 2010). However, art museums in the United States have historically been realized in the vision of a bourgeoisie faction of society, mimicking the grandiose institutions of Europe (Wallach,
Museums have both an exclusionary and passive reputation, stemming from a deep historical tradition dating to the earliest institutions in the United States (Bennett, 1995). Further, the learning styles of early museums were largely passive and didactic in nature (Hein, 1998).

The general attractions of the museum were meant to be the curation of the collections and the nature of the physical buildings themselves (Gilman, 2012). Wallach (1998) illustrates the didactic nature of art museums (whether successful or unsuccessful) and the aesthetics they imposed upon visitors. The style of the early American museum was formed in the image of the palaces that housed great collections in Europe (Dana, 2004). These early museums established a standard and appreciation for high art in the relatively young nation of the United States (Dana, 2004). The institutions reflected upper class taste and aesthetics, acting as symbols of wealth and aristocracy (Dana, 2004; Bennet 1995). Sentiments of control and upper class dominance are recognized again throughout The Birth of the Museum (Bennett, 1995). Bennett (1995) relates the history of the museum through social ideologies and evolving political trends, and highlights and demonstrates the exclusionary history of museums through social ideologies such as racism and sexism.

By opening shelves to the browsing of visitors, John Cotton Dana’s interest in engaging audiences resulted in a now ubiquitous library paradigm (“A John Cotton Dana Library”, n.d.). Dana’s employment of the arts and crafts movement in the Newark Museum demonstrated a specific effort to break down the perception of art museums as “high art” institutions (Maffei, 2000). These changes to the displays of art had impacts on the social settings of museums, demonstrating a progressive pedagogy through which
Dana intended to bridge social gaps in museum attendance (Maffei, 2000). Dana also engaged schools with his work, contributing to the emerging role of art museums in education and expanding the established role of the museum in society (Roberts, 2004).

Scholarship distinguishes between formal and informal education within the museum. George Hein (1989) characterizes informal education as self-directed, and using materials – as per the traditional museum experience – whereas, formal education follows the didactic model of a school system. These models of education indirectly correlate to theories of learning which Hein (1998) identifies in the form of a continuum, with one extreme of learning being incremental and passive, while the other extreme is active. Hein’s (1998) learning theory coincides with the idea of progressive education in museums, implying that museums are moving toward the active end of the spectrum. The active incorporates the experience as part of the learning, while the passive is comparatively disengaged, and gradual in its realization (Hein, 1998). These two extremes, although not precise equivalents, correspond to the traditional passive museum experience at one end, and the participatory, highly active museum at another the end. The contemporary art museum, however, falls somewhere in between, attempting to engage both formal and informal learning, providing both active and passive aspects of its experience to the visitor.

By accepting education into a museum’s model, the museum arguably took on responsibilities beyond its original intentions and scope (Newson, 1975). Critics of educational practices in museums argued that education was a social and financial burden to the status of the museum, and that museums should not be required to take on the roles of classrooms in their practices (Newson, 1975). The general principle of art museum
education remained to inform the public about the art which the museum intended to preserve (Pitman-Gelles & El-Omami, 1988). Art educators faced opposition to the implementation of activities that distracted from the object (Roberts, 2004).

Over time, the museum adapted to suit the role of education as it emerged within the larger institution (Buffington, 2007). Six Themes in the History of Art Museum Education by Melanie Buffington (2007) illustrates the museum’s willingness to transition and adapt over the development of education. Buffington (2007) identifies how museums have aligned with classrooms to develop curriculum and improve educational efforts. These themes largely represent the establishment of education in the museum from the beginning of institutionalization of the museum into the late 20th century.

During the 20th century, a shift in the personnel composition began to take place in the museum. Art educators, among museum professionals, were encouraged to develop backgrounds in art history into the 1980’s (Pond, 1988). This represents the traditional hierarchy that art history held within the setting of the museum. Melinda Mayer (2005) explored the role of education in the museum between the 1970’s and 1990’s, finding that the makeup of the educators themselves evolved from primarily art history students to incorporate art education in the museum setting. Mayer (2005) writes, “…art museum educators moved the center of the educational endeavor from works of art to visitors, rewriting their beliefs and practices of teaching in the art museum” (p. 357). This transition among museum educators set the stage for visitor-centered museum experiences.
What Are Active Learning and Visitor-Centric Experiences?

Hein (1998) examines educational theories from continua of learning and knowledge theories, distinguishing the educational theories based on how each approaches the two concepts. Learning theory spans from a passive to active approach: in passive learning the knowledge is constructed incrementally and slowly over time; however, in active learning, the learner constructs knowledge (Hein, 1998). Hein (1998) describes the theory of knowledge continuum as spanning between the objective and the constructed. On one end of the spectrum, knowledge is constructed, personally or socially, by the individual. On the opposite end of the spectrum, knowledge exists objectively, outside of individual or learner (Hein, 1998).

Hein (2001) identifies four specific educational theories within the art museum: Traditional lecture and text, stimulus-response, discovery, and constructivism. Traditional lecture and text relies on labels, panels or other didactic techniques to incrementally relate knowledge to the learner (Hein, 2001). Similarly, stimulus-response assumes that learning is incremental, and relies on didactic techniques, but the theory allows that knowledge is socially or personally constructed (Hein, 1998). Discovery assumes that learning is an active process, but of knowledge that exists objectively beyond the individual (Hein, 1998). Constructivism contends that knowledge is socially and individually created, further, the learner actively builds knowledge through participation (Hein, 1998). Figure 1 represents Hein’s educational theories in relation to the continuums of knowledge and learning.
Active learning experiences allow for the individual to participate and build knowledge or understanding (Hein, 1998). Hein’s (1998) constructivist learning builds on the principle of active learning by requiring hands-on participation. The resulting knowledge is not dependent on external objective facts (Hein, 1998). Hein (1998) expands on this idea, writing, “The validity of ideas according to constructivists does not depend on their match to some objective truth… Rather, validity arises from the value of the concepts in leading to action (use) and in the consistency of the ideas” (p. 34). Museum’s may develop constructivist learning approaches by allowing for active and

Although there is not one definition of a visitor-centered museum, the approach is generally categorized by museums that equally prioritize the experience of the visitor and the importance of the artwork in a gallery (Samis & Michaelson, 2017). A visitor-centered experience means creating a welcoming and inclusive environment to attract and engage diverse audiences in the museum (Samis & Michaelson, 2017). At the Columbus Museum of Art, the museum has moved toward a visitor-centric model by emphasizing play, imagination, experimentation, and conversation (Mostov, 2014). The opening of the Center for Creativity at the CMA in 2011 allowed the museum to engage audiences by promoting creativity and imaginative thinking through activities and interactive opportunities (Trinkley, 2014). Participation and interaction can occur in galleries through small activities that allow visitors to engage with the artwork in a tactile manner (Harvey, 2014). Activities can assist in fostering conversation and interaction among engaging visitors (Harvey, 2014). Visitor actively seek out opportunities for engagement and conversation during their visits to museums (Falk, Scott, & Dierking 2004). By including these engaging activities, the CMA is meeting the interests and desires of visitors to have social and hands-on experiences.

**What is Interpretation in An Art Museum?**

Interpretation relates to communication between the visitor and the museum (Roberts, 2004). Museums can strategically plan how visitors will translate meaning and knowledge from their experience: this is known as interpretation (Roberts, 2004). Traditionally, interpretative strategies have been didactic features such as labels or text
panels (Roberts, 2004). However, participatory or interactive devices may also function as interpretative strategies in art museums (Harvey, 2014). The inclusion of participatory activities diversifies the learning opportunities for visitors, serving as invitations to visitors to engage with artwork (Lenz Kothe, 2016). Further, providing visitors with choices allows visitors to have more active experiences in the art museum (Denver Art Museum, 2007). Additionally, greater information leads to deeper understanding (Samis & Michaelson, 2017). An interpretive activity can be successful even if only a fraction of visitors engage with it (Fischer & Levinson, 2010). Further, art museum educators have had a substantial impact on museum communications and the visitor experience through interpretive strategies (Roberts, 2004). Museum educators have evolved to have a role in the selection of language used in interpretive techniques and the message that the museum chooses to communicate (Roberts, 2004).

Museums may also expand their interpretation practices by incorporating community and participant feedback into their evaluations. Villeneuve (2012) describes this process as supported interpretation. The concept moves beyond the staff of the museum to seek engaged and sustainable audiences (Villeneuve, 2012). Supported interpretation designs interpretative strategies through a collaboration between curators, educators and community members (Villeneuve, 2012). The exhibition itself acts as an interface between the visitors and the museum (Villeneuve & Viera, 2014).

**What Is Participation in the Art Museum of Today?**

“Unless ideas and objects are related to a visitor’s experience, feelings, and imaginative skills, the objects and ideas alone will have little meaning to the museum visitor” (Sternberg, 1989, p. 155). The museum can strengthen visitor experiences by
relating learning activities to the informal structures of the museum (Sternberg, 1989). *The Participatory Museum* by Nina Simon (2010) theorizes a museum setting that dramatically breaks with the existing paradigm. While museums are not likely to transition entirely to Simon’s (2010) interactive experience, *The Participatory Museum* demonstrates the potential implementations of participatory activities in museums.

In the setting of an art museum, the techniques presented by Simon (2010) represent a shift towards the action learning described by Hein (1998). Through the concept of a participatory museum, education and interaction can combine in an active learning experience (Simon, 2010). Not only does participation benefit the individual visitor, but Simon (2010) describes the participatory experience as an exchange between the audience and institution – in which each contributes to the other. While contemporary museums are offering visitors an experience which falls between the active and passive styles of learning (representative of the historical traditions of the art museum), Simon’s (2010) participatory museum completely breaks down the authoritative structure of the museum. Potentially, the principles and techniques of the participatory museum could usurp the bourgeoisie’s paradigm which still lingers in the museum setting.

The change in participatory practices at the museum level correlates to the development of participatory art in the western world following the overturn of communism in the late 20th century (Bishop, 2011). Participatory art is categorized by engagement among people and a collaborative process in creation, speaking to the involvement between a group over the process of an individual (Bishop, 2011). In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop (2011) highlights the tension between participatory art and the tradition of speculation, arguing that participatory art incorporates a larger narrative
by breaching the divide between the artist and the spectator. While Bishop (2011) recognizes the socially aware nature of art, participatory art extends past traditional authority of a single artist. The changing paradigm of art creation in the 1990’s allowed for art to be revisited and reassessed (Bishop, 2011). This represents a major change in the fabric of the exhibiting nature of museums. The museum was established with the principle of displaying and portraying long standing art historical narratives (Wallach, 1998).

Membership and Motivation – Who Visits the Museum and Why?

Membership programs and donor circles are ubiquitous among art museums. Donor circles often offer activities and events to individuals who give to the museum at specific levels. Art museums offer optional purchases of memberships to the public for benefits including better admission rates, discounts at the museum store, and special event invitations. Alix Slater’s (2003) *Users or Supporters? Understanding Motivations and Behaviors of Museum Members*, recognizes the lack of research on museum membership programs. Through a case study researching the motivations and usage of joining the membership program at a national UK museum, Slater (2003) concluded that there are a diverse range of motivations for joining the member program. Within the scheme of the broad membership program, museums have arguably adapted to many of the varying motivations for attendance (Slater, 2003). Membership programs frequently offer discounts for households, couples, or student demographics to directly meet the financial needs of that constituency. Slater’s (2003) findings suggest variation even within these individual demographics, requiring additional research to explore the motivations within each demographic of membership.
Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995) also found a diverse range of motivations for the usage of membership benefits in their case study. However, this case study also determined a correlation between prestige-oriented visitors and frequency of attendance (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). The authors found that visitors, primarily Caucasian and over the age of 50, were more likely to attend the museum regularly than visitors not motivated by prestige (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). Although the authors recognize the limitations of their own study, they did conclude that they could rule out satisfaction as the motivation for attending art museums, rather than prestige (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). This highlights a potential problem for museums in reaching the overall satisfaction of visitors. However, the importance of prestige in the motivation of attendees does correlate with the categories of museum visitors described by Falk and Dierking (2013). In their breakdown of museum visitor identities, the authors include prestige as a factor within their summary of visitor types (Falk & Dierking, 2013). However, further research is required to substantiate the findings of Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995), and then to investigate the potential results of their findings for museums installing participatory activities.

Looking specifically toward the visitor, Paul DiMaggio (1996) researched trends among art attendees, seeking out correlations in art attendance to social and political attitudes. In his study, DiMaggio (1996) focused on the differences between individuals who already attend art museums, and those who do not. The findings of the study reported that art museum attendees do skew towards what DiMaggio broadly categorized as a socially liberal point of view. DiMaggio (1996) suspects that the museum audience he sampled is inherently interested in supporting arts and inclined towards arts
participation. However, DiMaggio (1996) also notes that there is no reason to conclude that art museum attendance causes this trend among the audience. Further research is required to substantiate these findings (DiMaggio, 1996). Additionally, DiMaggio’s (1996) results question how museums may best address their primary audience and how museums may adapt their appeal to potential audiences to attract more visitors. If it is the socially liberal and art-appreciating individual who is attracted to the art museum experience, how can art museums alter their experience to appeal to audiences of different social attitudes?

Slater (2003), DiMaggio (1996) and Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995) all base their studies on objective demographics of participants, such as age or socio-economic status. Alternatively, John Falk (2009) proposes researching the museum visitor through a lens that includes the individual’s personal identity related motivations. Criticizing narrowly focused studies, Falk (2009) writes,

The museum visitor experience cannot be adequately described by analyzing the content of museums, the design of exhibitions, through easily quantified visitor measures such as demographics, or even by analyzing visit frequency, or the social arrangements in which people enter the museum. To get the complete answer to the questions of why people visit museums, what they do there, and what learning/meaning they derive from the experience, requires a deeper, more holistic explanation (p. 39).

The holistic experience of the visitor that Falk (2009) describes takes place outside of the museum, as well as within the institution. The author instead describes visitor’s identity-
related visit motivations, a model of thinking in which the identity of the visitor is the critical piece of the visit’s justification and plan (Falk, 2009). This multifaceted approach represents a potentially effective but complicated process of museum evaluation. By incorporating the personal experiences and identities of the visitor, Falk (2009) is approaching museum evaluation through the lens of the individual, rather than making conclusions about the individual from museum evaluation. Mastai (2007) has a similar regard for the general nature of the visitor and states that “individual visitors bring their own narratives to the museum… their paths of interest and desire lead them to land on various points of entry into relationships with our institution” (pp. 175-176). Both Falk (2009) and Mastai (2007) recognize the weight and complexity of the visitor’s personal identity, and the effects that identity will have on the individual’s museum experience.

Falk and Dierking (2013) propose seven large categories of museums visitors: explorers, facilitators, professional/hobbyists, experience seekers, rechargers, respectful pilgrims, and affinity seekers.

Explorers are curiosity-driven visitors with a generic interest in the contents of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their curiosity and learning.

Facilitators are socially motivated visitors. Their visit is primarily focused on enabling the learning and experience of others in their accompanying social group.

Professional/Hobbyists are visitors who feel a close tie between the museum contents and their professional or hobbyist passions. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective.
Experience Seekers are visitors who are motivated to visit because they perceive the museum as a must-see destination. Their satisfaction primarily derives from the mere fact of having been there and done that, an important goal for them. Rechargers are visitors who are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world or as a confirmation of their religious/spiritual beliefs. Respectful Pilgrims are visitors who visit museums out of a sense of duty or obligation to honor the memory of those represented by an institution/memorial. Affinity Seekers are visitors motivated to visit a particular museum or exhibition because it speaks to their sense of heritage and/or Big “I” identity or personhood (p. 62).

These categories provide a framework through which to understand museum visitors (Falk & Dierking, 2013). The foundational understanding of museum visitors that the categories create builds upon Falk’s (2009) argument for a holistic and encompassing analysis of visitors, including individual identity and personal history. The identity-related motivations recognized by Falk and Dierking (2013), largely align with the seven major motivations for attending museums recognized by the Urban Institute, which found that most visitors attend museums because of educational, aesthetic, affective, social, civic, economic, or cultural pride motivations (Ostrower, 2005).

Museums have the task of structuring programming that has the potential to appeal to a wide range of visitor motivations. Museums compete with other leisure activities for the time of their audiences (Hood, 2004). Leisure time is defined by the ways individuals spend their time away from work or other obligations (Smithsonian
Institute, 2007). Leisure time is presumed to be used for activities that are relaxing, enjoyable or fulfilling (Smithsonian Institute, 2007). Marilyn Hood (2004) identifies six major attributes to the activities adults choose for their leisure time. These attributes are, “being with people, or social interaction, doing something worthwhile, feeling comfortable and at ease in one’s surroundings, having a challenge of new experiences, having an opportunity to learn, and participating actively” (Hood, 2004, pp. 150-151). This understanding of adult leisure motivations provides insight into the ways museums compete with other leisure activities or institutions to attract visitors (Hood, 2004). The 2007 Smithsonian report on museum visitation recorded that only 12.6% of respondents reported attending a museum in the last year. This suggests that a relatively small portion of the public regularly attends museums.

**What is Success for an Art Museum?**

Major challenges facing contemporary museums include, “globalized competition, demographic shifts, electronic technology, audience fragmentation and the democratization of museum support” (Phillips, 2004, p. 367). Philips (2004) highlights emerging obstacles for museums which require a change in the current paradigm to sustain audiences. Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler (2004) recognize a change in the museum paradigm and a shift towards audience focused museums writing, “Whether the reason for the focus on audience (e.g. public subsidy and accountability, need to generate revenue, pressure to include under-served groups), museums are seeking ways to reach a broader public, forge community ties, and compete effectively with alternative providers of leisure and educational activities. Museums, decades ago, were content to reach a small, narrow and self-
selected audience. Their narrow programmatic focus in the past (i.e., the focus on collections and scholarly and professional activities) reflected their small, relatively homogenous constituency base. Today, museums are not only reaching out to larger audiences and building demand among new groups, they are designing proactively the arrangements, services and offerings which will generate satisfaction and positive outcomes for their visitors” (p. 167).

Janes (2004) echoes the importance of an audience focused museum, while also questioning how the existing museum can possibly adapt to the changing demands.

“Sustainability is at the heart of conservation – sustaining our shared cultural heritage so that is may be experienced and enjoyed by future generations” (Nunberg, Eckelman, & Hatchfield, 2016, p. 2). This interest in preserving heritage directly aligns with the art museum’s role in stewarding and exhibiting art to the public. In addition to competing for the leisure time of the public, art museums (and other nonprofit institutions) must sustain themselves in an increasingly competitive philanthropic market (Hood, 2004 & Campolmi, 2013). Competition for philanthropic support challenges museums in their efforts to obtain reliable and sufficient funding as nonprofits. Changes in a given political landscape can compromise the artistic principles of arts and culture organizations (Robinson, 2012). For example, Ballantyne and Uzzell (2011) consider declines in public funding the cause of changes to the museum field. The competitive nature of philanthropy makes the need to develop sustainable donor bases and means of funding critical to the survival of the museum (Campolmi, 2013). Campolmi (2013) argues that breaking with traditional beliefs will allow art museums to seek new structures of internal management which could benefit the stability of the museum. The
author identifies the museum’s growing status as a setting and instigator of cultural
dialogue, recognizing the museums evolution toward a participatory experience
(Campolmi, 2013).

Interest in reconfiguring internal practices and strategies in the museum is
especially relevant in the introduction of effective altruism into the philanthropic
community. Effective altruism seeks to maximize the possible effect from philanthropic
gift (MacAskill, 2015). Effective altruism as a theory of philanthropy reveals a weakness
within the museum philanthropic status, as well as greater arts and culture organizations.
It is challenging for the museum to create the same compelling argument for
philanthropic support as a medical or scientific organization. This weakness highlights
the need for change in the arts and culture packaging of philanthropic requests.

Sustainability is a single measure of the art museum’s effective and success in
general operation; however, there is no single established method of measuring success in
a museum (Anderson, 2007). Critical acclaim, membership purchases, attendance and
financial engagement can all be used to express the positive or negative status of a
museum (Anderson, 2007). The easiest way to gauge the outlook of a museum is through
quantifiable factors of the museum experience. However, looking strictly at the
quantifiable factors of a museums success ignores the quality and impact of visitor
experience. As John Falk (2009) argues that the visitor must be holistically evaluated,
Maxwell Anderson (2007) contends that the museum must also be analyzed through a
broad and encompassing lens.

Maxwell Anderson (2007) argues that museum evaluation is based specifically on
a quantifiable trio of measurements for museum success writing. He writes, “There are
three primary indicators of success in the nation’s largest art museums today: the number and marketability of major shows, the number of visitors, and the number of members” (p. 6). These indicators all relate to the financial stability of art museums, suggesting strategies that will best sustain the museum as an institution. However, this method of measurement in a museum ignores the qualitative experience and identity of the individual visitor. Anderson (2004) goes on to identify three keys for new methods of evaluation in the museum system, “In order to be worthy of adoption, these new metrics must have three attributes. They must: be directly connected with the core values and mission of the art museum; be reliable indicators of long-term organization and financial health; and be easily verified and reported” (p. 9). Anderson (2007) continues to argue that these changes in the museum evaluation method will better address causal issues at the museum and allow for the organization to address qualitative measures in evaluation. If indeed underlying aspects of the museum practices can address then by choosing to evaluate practices through qualitative measures, then the museum develop strategies to lead to sustainability of operation.

What are Connectors and How Does the CMA Evaluate Them?

The CMA defines connectors as any piece of interpretation in the museum galleries that is not artwork (CMA, What is a Connector?) Connectors are interpretive strategies that support the experience of the visitor (CMA, What is a Connector?). This includes aspects of the gallery such as the paint color on the wall, text panels, labels, seating, and interactive or participatory activities. Connectors are principally interactive devices that allow visitors to learn and engage in the museum galleries at their own pace (Harvey, 2014).
Producing evaluations and engaging with evaluation as a tool provides information that can guide museum decisions, the understanding of audiences, and the effectiveness of museum programming (Korn, 1989). Director Mostov’s team uses evaluation to investigate the CMA’s own programming. The primary report, which focused on the connectors, may be categorized as an evaluation. Evaluations focus on the assessment of a specific program, highlighting successes and failure which allow an institution to make informed decisions and refine their program, whereas, research “emphasizes the creation of new knowledge” using theory and hypothesis (Korn, 1989, p. 221).

The CMA has internally produced evaluations of their own connectors practices. Through external evaluators, Director Mostov and her team have analyzed the effectiveness of their learning objectives. The largest evaluation of connectors at the CMA was provided for this literature review by Mostov. The data was compiled and reported by Audience Focus – an external service provider brought in to access the Connectors Series. Evaluators conducted interviews and observations with visitors between October 2013 and June 2014. The evaluation examined the following questions:

Who is using the connectors, and why?
How much time do visitors spend at different connectors?
What do visitors do while they are there? Which learning outcomes are observed?
Do the connectors stimulate visitors’ creativity and imagination? If yes, in which ways? (Audience Focus, 2014, p. 3).

The evaluators questions investigated the nature of a visitor’s engagement with the connectors, in addition to the success of the connector in achieving the museum’s
learning objectives. Eight connectors were included in the study: Voting Station, Giant Heads, Mixed-up Animals, Dowel Rods, Colored Tape, Bellows Exhibition Game, Join the Conversation, Puzzle (p. 4). The results of the evaluation found that the learning objectives designed for connectors were being achieved, even if inconsistently (Audience Focus, 2014). Other highlights of the Connectors Report (Audience Focus, 2014) included use of the Connectors by both adults and children (62% of participants were adults and 38% were children), as well as, the prevalence of social groups among participants with connectors (pp.’s 21 & 113). Among the participants who engaged with Connectors, 64% were part of a group including children, 29% were part of an all adult group and only 7% of connectors participants were alone (p. 20). The Connectors Report (Audience Focus, 2014) specifies that most visitors to the museum, not just visitors engaging with Connectors, attend the museum in social groups.

The report found that visitors use connectors for many reasons, specifically, “following the interests of someone else in the group, following personal interests, desire to do something participatory and hands-on” as reasons to engage with the connectors (Audience Focus, 2014, p. 113). Variations in the amount of time spent at each connector were also found, with the average stop at a connector totaling 5 minutes and 30 seconds., with connectors such as puzzle, colored tape and dowel rod receiving more prolonged traffic than connectors such as voting station and Join the Conversation (Audience Focus, 2014).

The report splits its focus between the actions taken by the visitors to the connectors (how much time visitors spend, where visitors spend time) and investigation of the learning objectives that the CMA designed for each connector. Questions from the
evaluators addressed the reflections of visitors in terms of the CMA learning objectives.

For example, 63% of respondents indicated that the connectors stimulated their creativity and imagination (Audience Focus, 2014, p. 118). The evaluation selected a broad range of connectors to use within the study, however, each of the connectors selected falls within my definition of a participatory activity.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Procedures

Methodology

Coming from a background in Classics and Art History, I have primarily engaged in inductive, qualitative research throughout my academic career. An inductive approach is inherent in qualitative research, “from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspective of the inquirer” (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). As a researcher, I seek to address the “if” and “how” of my research questions. I identify as an interpretivist researcher, one who “accepts multiple meanings and ways of knowing,” operating through a primarily social constructivist framework (Levers, 2013, p. 3).

Ontologically, social constructivism recognizes the existence of multiple realities through the lives and experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Epistemologically, this belief in multiple realities corresponds to a recognition of a co-constructed reality between the participant and the investigator (Creswell, 2013). Methodologically, constructivism “suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). The constructivist bases inquiry in understanding and reconstructing a reality from respondents (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In turn, the validity and quality of the constructivist’s research relies on the authenticity and trustworthiness of the respondent and researcher’s interpretations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).
My research was designed as a case study at the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA). I determined this methodology would provide the most direct means of addressing my research questions. Case studies provide a scaffolding through which the researcher may perform an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The case study approach is appropriate because of the enclosed setting of my research. As Creswell (2013) describes, “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…” (p. 97). In my research, I investigated the phenomenon resulting from the incorporation of participatory activities in art gallery spaces at the Columbus Museum of Art. I approached the subject matter in an inductive way, selecting multiple research methods which contributed to my overall understanding. The case study provides a strong basis for exploration of a subject – allowing the researcher to have a more detailed and immersive experience than through quantitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

As reflected in the CMA’s mission statement, the museum specifically seeks to design programming to spark creative and engaging experience for visitors (About CMA, 2015). The CMA regularly employs participatory activities in their programming to achieve their desired experience for visitors. These techniques include the museum’s connectors. However, given the museum’s broad definition of connectors, my research focused on participatory activities. These participatory activities are inherently connectors in the context of the CMA. However, they allow for tactile engagement and interaction between the visitor and the activity. Participatory activities are spread across
galleries and exhibition spaces in the form of puzzles, dialogue stations, crafts, or other activities. Each activity is intended to encourage the visitor to interact and achieve the CMA’s learning objectives.

As an intern at the CMA, I formed relationships and connections with administrators that made my research feasible. I identified the individuals and resources that would best address my research questions. It must also be stated that as an intern at the CMA, I risk operating with a bias toward the principles and success of the museum. Within my research, I did not seek to justify the practices or the directives of the CMA, but rather to investigate the characteristics of interactions that occur when participatory activities are placed in the galleries.

I used multiple data collection methods in this investigation of the CMA to triangulate the most accurate conclusions possible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This reliance on multiple sources of data is consistent with the case study method, allowing the researcher to investigate the surrounding context and depth of the case (Yin, 2014 & Creswell, 2013). My data collection was primarily divided between an interview, a survey of museum visitors, and participant observations. In addition to these methods, the CMA provided me with several documents that I used as data. The documents contributed to my understanding of the museum’s goal’s through their connectors.

Research Procedures

Research Procedures: Interview with Director Mostov

I began my research by interviewing the CMA’s Director of Inclusive Interpretation, Merilee Mostov. I performed a semi-structured interview with Director Mostov. I prepared questions, (see Appendix A) but also allowed the interview to evolve
naturally throughout our conversation and venture into subjects that were not predetermined. In the interview, I primarily sought to establish the museum’s intentions for their connectors program, and provide context for the presence of participatory activities in the CMA galleries. This context included the history of participatory activities and connectors at the CMA, as well as, the criteria the museum uses to create and implement connectors.

Research Procedures: Observations of Participants

Observations of participants were the next piece of my field research. I intended to use observations to gather data on how individuals used participatory activities within the gallery spaces. For the purposes of my research, I defined engagement or use of activities as any tactile or hands-on engagement between a visitor and an activity. This definition encompasses a broad range of visitor use, from individuals who sat for hours with an activity, to those who briefly touched an activity and moved away. I did not include observation of the activities within my definition of engagement, as it is inevitable when visitors enter the space.

At no point did I interact with, or interrupt the participants, nor did I record identifying information beyond an approximate age and a description of the social group. I selected galleries with participatory activities and positioned myself to observe any tactile interaction between a visitor and the selected activities. Although I was interested in learning how frequently visitors engage with participatory activities, I focused my observations on how visitor use the activities in the galleries. Given that visitors may engage with activities at any point in their museum visit, basing assumptions about their frequency of usage from my position in a single gallery would not be the most valid
means of investigation. Instead, I chose to investigate how many visitors use the participatory activities through my survey, which allowed respondents to directly provide data on their experiences.

As I began my observations, I realized that most visitors I observed arrived into the gallery spaces in social groups. For this reason, my observations consist of a holistic interaction among an individual or social group with a single activity. For example, if a couple approached and engaged with an activity, my research recorded their engagement as one observation, despite there being two individuals taking part in the interaction.

I recorded 30 observations at three different locations in the museum across three days. I performed research in five hour blocks across the three days, spending one day in each of the galleries I selected. I created a basic field notes structure to organize and prioritize the data gathered in observations. Note pages for each observation recorded the location, activity, start and end times of the interactions, a description of the individual or social group, and an indicator of the presence of conversation. I then used a multiple column structure to record descriptive and reflective notes. My description of the individuals or social groups consisted of an approximate estimation of the individual participants ages, and how individuals interacted with one another if in their social group.

The galleries I selected for observations differed in theme and location in the museum. As I began my research, I realized that while some participatory activities included descriptions and names, not all activities included this information. For activities such as puzzles, it is possible that the museum did not feel it was necessary to provide explanation or instruction on the activity to visitors. However, other activities, such as a shape based activity I encountered in the contemporary wing, were simply
located on table in the gallery without any description or label. For these unnamed activities, I have provided descriptions and referenced the activities by the art piece with which they appeared to correspond.

The first gallery I selected was Gallery 10, located on the second floor of the museum’s old building. In fall 2015, the CMA opened a new contemporary wing adjacent to the existing museum building and connected by a new atrium. At the time of my observations, Gallery 10 was painted a light purple color and housed European Art dating from 1600 to 1800. The art and design of the gallery was based around the central theme: Power, Piety and Prestige. Labels within the gallery described their corresponding artwork in relation to these three words. Despite the frosted skylights in the gallery ceilings, Gallery 10 felt darker than the museum’s new atrium or contemporary wing. Paintings were the only art displayed in the gallery. Each painting was surrounded by thick, ornate, and often, gold, frames. The subject matter of each piece appeared to be mythological, biblical, or aristocratic in nature. Overall, the announced theme, gallery design, and artwork produced an experience that felt stiff and old fashioned compared to the rest of the museum.
On the day of my observations, two participatory activities were in the gallery.
1. Puzzle: Francois Boucher’s *Vertumnus and Pomona*

Image 2: Puzzle of Francois Boucher’s *Vertumnus and Pomona*
2. Join the Conversation Station: A table featuring questions related to Anthony van Dyck’s *Christian Bruce, Countess of Devonshire* and John Michael Wright’s *Lady with a Theorbo* on either side of the station

Image 3: Join the Conversation Station in Gallery 10

I performed the research on a Friday, which was the slowest day at the museum of my observational work. I positioned myself with my notes in a chair adjacent to the conversation station, which allowed me to easily observe most of the gallery space. Four attractive, cushioned chairs were placed around the conversation station, and cushioned stools were placed around the table that supported the puzzle. On the table, next to the puzzle, was a sign instructing visitors on how to use the activity. The sign indicated that visitors should observe the painting hanging on the adjacent wall to complete the puzzle. This was the only puzzle I observed that included instructions.
The second day of my observations took place in the Big Idea Gallery. The Big Idea Gallery is located on the ground floor of the museum’s old building. The walls were painted white and the floors were tile instead of the wooden panels that were used in Gallery 10. The Big Idea Gallery is a single stretch of hallway, extending between the museum’s atrium and creative studio. In the middle of the Big Idea Gallery, visitors have the option to exit the gallery and enter the Wonder Room – the CMA’s space dedicated to tactile play and engagement. While the signs for the Wonder Room indicate that the space is intended for all ages, I observed mostly children and parents entering the room.

Image 4: Big Idea Gallery at the Columbus Museum of Art
The Big Idea Gallery was curated around the theme “Dogs”. Each piece of art connected with this theme, with nearly every piece directly depicting at least one dog. While there were only paintings in Gallery 10, the Big Idea Gallery featured a variety of mediums. Paintings, videos, sculptures, and photographs were on display. Two cushioned chairs were placed in the middle of the gallery, on either side of a table that supported several books. Within the Big Idea Gallery eight different participatory activities were included.
1. **Tag It**: A box containing a variety of scripted labels which can be placed on hooks next to the art displayed in the gallery. Two boxes of tags and signs explaining their purpose were placed on either end of the gallery.

**Image 5: Tag It**
2. Drawing Station: A table with stools encouraging visitors to: “Select a card, use your imagination to complete the sentence, draw a picture to illustrate your idea.” Visitors could then hang their drawings above the table.

Image 6: Drawing Station
3. Puzzle: Ralph Bell’s *Untitled*

Image 7: Puzzle of Ralph Bell’s *Untitled*
4. Dogs in the City Game: Board game on two adjacent tables with instructions on the wall.

Image 8: Dogs in the City Game
5. Join the Conversation Station: Board asking the question “What role do dogs play in your life?” Visitors had the option to respond via Post-It’s.

Image 9: Join the Conversation Station in the Big Idea Gallery
6. Dog Collar Response Board: Three boards posted adjacent to one another, each displayed a dog collar. The board asked visitors to “Describe the Type of Dog You Imagine Wearing Each Collar” via post-its.

Image 10: Dog Collar Response Board
7. Puzzle: Norman Rockwell’s *Soda Jerk*

Image 11: Puzzle of Norman Rockwell’s *Soda Jerk*

Image 12: Digital Gallery

The Big Idea Gallery had a distinctly more playful feel than Gallery 10. This could be attributed to the comparatively large number of participatory activities in the space, the gallery’s adjacent location to the Wonder Room, or the accessible nature of the galleries theme. The language used in the wall text was comparatively short and
straightforward. An example of the gallery’s wall text is featured in Image 13. The entire panel is four brief sentences. The text encourages self-reflection and close observation in the gallery.

Image 13: Big Idea Gallery Wall Text

The third day of my observations took place in the contemporary galleries of the museum. The CMA’s contemporary wing consists of two floors. Unlike other areas of the museum, the CMA has not divided the contemporary wing into individual galleries with numbers or names. I completed observations on the second floor of the contemporary wing, in a location that allowed me to observe two participatory activities. The CMA provides visitors with backless folding chairs that they may take from stands and use as
seating anywhere in the galleries. I used one of these folding seats to place myself in the optimum position for observations. The contemporary wing felt much lighter than the galleries in the old building. The ceilings seemed higher, the floors felt newer and warmer, and natural light flooded the galleries. Two modern looking cushioned red chairs were placed directly in front of the space's largest artwork, and against a wall of windows overlooking Columbus’ Broad Street. The art itself felt more interactive, with sculptures jutting into the gallery spaces rather than strictly hanging on the walls.

Image 14: Contemporary Wing
Only four pieces of art were located within this smaller space. The galleries where I previously conducted observations featured dozens of pieces. Adjacent to these four artworks were two participatory activities.

1. Activity corresponding to Frank Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*: On a small table was a box of colorful shapes. Visitors could arrange the shapes on the table. The shapes mimicked the layers of metal from Stella’s sculpture.

Image 15: Activity corresponding to Frank Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*
2. Join the Conversation Station corresponding to Lorser Feitelson’s *Magical Space Forms*. The board asked visitors “What does it make you think of?”

Image 16: Join the Conversation Station in the Contemporary Galleries

*Research Procedures: Surveys*

I finished my field research by conducting a series of surveys. The survey asked visitors to reflect on their experiences and provide their reactions to participatory activities in the galleries. I designed a one-page questionnaire (see Appendix B) and approached individuals I assumed to be adults with a consent speech. Respondents to the survey were informed of the purpose of the research and its subject matter. I provided
respondents with a contact card through which they could contact the researchers or Ohio State’s Office of Responsible Research Practices. Only individuals who expressed that they were at least 18-years-old during the consent process were supplied the survey. The survey was not sensitive in subject matter and did not request identifying information beyond an age range and indication of whether the respondent was a member at the CMA. For these reasons, I received IRB approval to perform the survey with only oral consent. I administered the surveys over two days, on a Saturday and Sunday, on the second floor of the museum’s contemporary wing. I collected 60 responses.
Chapter 4: Data Presentation

I organized my collected data by identifying patterns related to my research questions. For each method of data collection, I separately coded the data. Observations allowed for up-close study of the interactions with which my research questions were concerned. However, observation does not reveal individual reflections or feelings, unless they are verbally or physically made apparent to the researcher. For this reason, I created a survey which was administered to 60 museum visitors. I triangulated data from interviews, observations, literature, and surveys. For my observational and survey data, I began by searching for patterns in the age, degree of interaction, and structure of the social group.

Interview with Director of Inclusive Interpretation, Merilee Mostov

The CMA uses participatory activities to achieve learning objectives that are designed through collaboration between the Learning and the Curatorial departments. Director Mostov considers the connectors (including all participatory activities) to be pieces that support the experience and the learning of the visitor. Her work at the CMA has revolved around developing visitor-centric programming that prioritizes visitor interpretation. Prior to the inclusion of connectors in the galleries, Mostov felt that the CMA was failing to structure active learning for the audience, “I walked around our museum, galleries 1 through 10, and I realized, oh my gosh! We know from research that people come to museums to learn, they say that, and they come in social groups,
overwhelmingly they come in social groups. Nothing we do in this darn museum is designed for that.” Mostov is critical of a passive learning experience in art museums. She views labels and wall text as old-fashion, didactic and unengaging. She expressed that she felt that education strategies based on these passive techniques was ineffective.

Mostov oversaw and advocated for changes to the museum, such as comfortable seating and interactive activities, in order to attune the CMA experience to visitor’s needs. Mostov sees a direct line between the way individuals learn, and the benefit and place of participatory activities in the CMA’s galleries. Mostov passionately defended the visitor-centric changes the CMA has made, saying, “Doing things that are manipulative, we know from research, will help people learn.” The interactive opportunities that connectors provide support visitor learning and visitor interest in social experiences. Mostov described the importance of “participatory connectors” in achieving learning objectives. Mostov used the term “participatory connectors” to refer to connectors that instigate tactile interaction. The use of “participatory connectors” specifically, allow for visitors to make tactile and interactive engagements that facilitate the learning Mostov values. What Mostov refers to as “participatory connectors” have been referred to as “participatory activities” throughout this thesis.

Transitioning staff to embrace connectors and a visitor-centered experience was a long-term process for Mostov. At the beginning of her time at the CMA, Mostov encountered hesitation and disinterest in connectors from her colleagues. However, over time the staff perspective on connectors has become more positive. Mostov recounted one of the earliest participatory connectors the CMA employed in the galleries. During an exhibition of Egyptian art, Mostov installed a replica of an Egyptian game in the gallery.
An ancient set of the game was featured in the show and Mostov felt she could add to visitor experience by providing an opportunity for visitors to play the updated game. During the show, a line to play the game wrapped around the entire gallery. Mostov received positive feedback from curators who encouraged her to purchase another table and game set for the gallery. The success of the installed game demonstrated the potential ability of participatory connectors to engage audiences in the CMA.

Mostov’s department now has a refined framework for designing connectors. Working with curators, Mostov uses an exhibition planning form to focus the intended outcome of an exhibition. This outcome or “big idea” is whittled down to single sentence that can be realistically achieved in the show. Mostov pushes for this single sentence outcome so that all staff, from the museum’s front desk to the marketing department, can easily and accurately provide descriptions of the exhibition. Once this single sentence is achieved, a collaboration occurs between curators and Mostov’s department to develop interpretation strategies that achieve the outcome. As Mostov stated, “So we really work to craft, realistic and reasonable outcomes that you can expect a visitor who might spend a half an hour in your exhibition or five minutes in the gallery will walk away with. And then we articulate, ‘Okay, what are we gonna do?’ That’s the interpretation piece right?”

Once the “big idea” or major outcome is identified the connectors act as pieces of interpretation that support the main point outcome.

Director Mostov demonstrates a strong interest in changing the way museums operate, consistently advocating for visitor-centric thinking in collaborations with other departments. However, she also candidly described the resistance to programming changes, mainly from the “art insiders” community. Mostov described how the museum’s
Executive Director, Nannette Maciejunes, faced criticism from wealthy donors who were opposed to the disruption of the established museum norm caused by connectors. Responses to the connectors included criticisms like, ‘It blocks my viewing experience… It clutters up my clean viewing experience.’” Some visitors expressed dislike of the changes that were implemented to make the galleries more inclusive. The CMA had a population of visitors who felt that the connectors were detrimental to their experience. The criticism from this sector of the audience represents the backlash that the museum faced by including participatory activities in gallery spaces that were established and comfortable settings to many visitors. However, the museum has stood by their inclusion of activities, believing in the ways connectors enhance visitor experiences.

Observations of Participants

I conducted my first day of observations in Gallery 10 of the museum. I defined engagement with a participatory activity as tactile interaction between a visitor and an activity. I intended to perform 10 observations in each of the three gallery spaces I selected. However, on my first day of observations, seven individuals or social groups engaged in tactile interaction with the two participatory activities in the gallery. I performed 12 observations on my second day in the Big Idea Gallery, and 11 observations on my third day in the contemporary wing. I recorded the time each group or individual spent in the gallery, as well as the approximate time of their engagement with the connectors.

The tactile engagement I observed ranged from a few seconds to over an hour with a participatory activity. To describe the degrees of engagement I observed, I created three categories that describe the interactions. The first category is Momentary
Engagements, these are tactile interactions between a visitor and an activity that were completed in less than 60 seconds. Frequently, I observed visitors moving around pieces of an activity, such as puzzle pieces or descriptive tag activities, then immediately moving on. Momentary Engagements are meant to cover these brief, but common interactions. The second category of interactions is Short Period Engagements, these are tactile engagements which lasted one to five minutes. The final category is Long Period Engagements, which describe tactile engagements lasting at least five minutes.

The Gallery 10 space was very quiet over the course of the day. The gallery is located in the museum's old building and featured dozens of European paintings, dating from 1600-1800. Most visitors to the gallery walked directly through the space, or quickly wandered through the gallery looking at the art. These momentary interactions consisted of participants approaching the puzzle, picking up or moving a piece, and then moving on in the gallery. Overall, visitor reactions were very composed. They spoke softly, appearing conscious of their surroundings.

The observable atmosphere of the gallery space was variant depending on visitors. At times, I overheard visitors expressing boredom with the art, or enthusiasm for the activities. Two visitors, who were in the gallery for only four minutes, engaged with the Boucher puzzle. As they approached the table, one visitor commented that he hated puzzles, however, both he and his companion engaged with the puzzle for a short period. These visitors moved through the gallery quickly, engaging in conversation about the art. Shortly before exiting the gallery, one of the pair loudly remarked, “I like that they have these kinds of things in here so that more people sit and they look.” This visitor appeared
to have garnered appreciation for the learning techniques that the interpretation team values so heavily.

My second day of observations took place in the Big Idea Gallery. The Big Idea Gallery is curated by Director Mostov, and contained significantly more connectors and participatory activities than other galleries of the museum. Eight participatory activities were located the gallery.¹ The Big Idea Gallery is part of the CMA’s Center for Creativity, which also includes the Creativity Lounge, Wonder Room, and Creative Studio. The atmosphere of the gallery, while open to all ages, felt much friendlier to children than other galleries of the museum. This impression could be due to the accessible theme of the gallery - Dogs - or due to the engagement that the numerous activities seemed to encourage. I recorded 12 observations in the Big Idea Gallery. Four of the interactions I observed were momentary, three short period, and five were long period interactions. Comparatively, five of the 12 groups contained children. No individual interactions were recorded, all participants were part of an apparent social group.

While the first day of my observations saw participants in groups largely stay together, there were several instances in the Big Idea Gallery when groups divided and later reunited. The most notable of these interactions was a group of two adults and two children. They entered the gallery and the adults encouraged the children to engage with the Drawing Station and later the puzzle. While one adult and the children eventually moved into the Wonder Room, the other adult stayed for 62 minutes, completing the Bell puzzle. At various times, the children or other adult would return to the gallery and go

¹ See Images 5-12
back to the Wonder Room. As the puzzle was nearly finished the adults allowed the children to place the final pieces. This interaction appeared to be consistent with how several groups with children used the spaces. Adults used the activities to encourage children and provided positive feedback to their engagement. However, children were drawn to the activities, often approaching the Drawing Station directly upon entry. The space overall read as a welcoming play space to children. To contrast the groups with children, groups or pairs of adults were largely subdued in the gallery, moving and speaking quietly.

The third day of observations recorded two momentary engagements, eight short period engagements and one long period engagement. All the engagements involved social groups, and each social group except for one contained children. Adults encouraged children to engage with the Stella Activity and the Join the Conversation Station in the gallery. Several adults used the Stella Activity in connection with the corresponding artwork on the wall, speaking to the children about the artwork. However, adults also frequently appeared to steer children on from the space. The third day of observations occurred on a Sunday, when the CMA offers free admission. On this day, the museum had the most traffic. It is possible that visitors were compelled to move from the gallery by the incoming presence of other groups. However, observations were recorded early enough in the day that the galleries were not saturated with visitors until the end of the observation period.
Figure 2 represents the breakdown of visitor engagements with participatory activities. Less than a quarter of the participants who engaged with activities spent more than five minutes with the activity. Over one-third of the participants only engaged in a momentary manner, spending 60 seconds or less with the activity. Throughout my observations, the majority of these momentary engagements were brief movements of puzzle pieces or shape activity pieces. 40% of the engagements I observed were short period, lasting one to five minutes.
Figure 3 represents the total time that visitors spent in the gallery during my observation. The proportional breakdown of time spent in the galleries does not greatly differ from the breakdown of time spent engaging with participatory activities. Relatively few visitors stayed in the gallery space for more than ten minutes. Nearly half of the observed groups remained in the gallery for one to five minutes. The total time spent in the gallery space did not differ greatly from the total amount of time groups engaged with activities. Only 12 of the 30 observed participants stayed in the gallery space for more than five minutes. Four of the total 30 were in the gallery for less than one minute total, and 14 of the observed groups were in the gallery for between one and five minutes.
Survey of Museum Visitors

Following my observations, I conducted a survey of museum visitors. The survey asked visitors to reflect on their engagement with participatory activities. I sought to gather information on how many visitors chose to engage with participatory activities, and how visitors reflect on participatory activities in the galleries. The one-page survey can be found in Appendix B. In the questionnaire, I attempted to give visitors the space to report their own feelings on the presence of participatory activities, by asking if the experiences enhanced or inhibited their experience. The data collection took place over two days, during which 60 responses were gathered. As a researcher, I attempted to keep participant selection as random as possible. Visitors were asked to indicate an age range at the top of each questionnaire. Respondents ranged in age from 18-year-olds to individuals in the 70’s. The age dispersion of respondents is represented below.

Figure 4: Age of Respondents
As shown in Figure 4, the most prevalent demographic was individuals in their 20’s, followed by individuals in their 30’s and 50’s. Visitors over the age of 60 only made up 10% of the respondents. Nearly 62% of respondents were under the age of 40. As I conducted my surveys, I was concerned that the data may skew slightly toward younger visitors, despite my efforts to keep the selection of participants random. The survey was conducted over a Saturday and a Sunday, possibly contributing to the age of the crowd.

Figure 5: Engagement with Participatory Activities

Figure 5 represents the breakdown of respondents who engaged or did not engage with participatory activities. Over half of the responders (33 out of 60) indicated that they did participate in activities at the museum. This participation was not specific to a single gallery or activity, but encompassed their whole visit. 43% of respondents did not engage with participatory activities. 2% of respondents did not indicated if whether they chose to participate with the activities.
Figure 6: Engagement with Participatory Activities

Figure 6 represents the number of respondents who indicated that they engaged with participatory activities and the number of respondents who indicated that they did not engage with participatory activities by their age groups. For each age group, the blue column indicates the number of respondents that chose to engage with the activities. The orange column indicates the number of respondents that chose not to engage with the activities. The grey columns indicate visitors who provided their age range but did not indicate whether they chose to engage with the activities. The chart shows that the decision to engage or not engage with the activities was usually evenly split among the age demographic. This relatively even split is shown among respondents aging from 18-19, 20-29, 40-49, 50-59, and 60-69. The only age group that showed significant tendency
to engage or not engage was respondents in aging 30-39. 13 total respondents indicated that they were in the 30’s. One of these respondents did not indicate if they engaged with the activities. Of the remaining 12 responses, two-thirds of the responses indicated that they chose to engage with the activities.

Figure 7: Average Rating of Participatory Activities by Age Range

Figure 7 represents the average rating of the participatory activities by each age range. The second question asked visitors to indicate how the participatory activities enhanced their experience by selecting a scaled number. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, 1 being not-at-all and 5 being very-much. The responses varied greatly in their indications. As shown the chart, the activities were received the most positively by individuals in the 30’s, 40’s, and 60’s. Each of these groups had an average rating above a 4 for the activities. Adults aging 18-19 had the lowest rating of the activities, averaging a 1. Individuals in their 70’s had the second lowest rating averaging a 2. Individuals in the
50’s had the third lowest rating averaging a 3. Finally, individuals in their 20’s had the median rating of a 3.3.

Following the question, the responders were asked to briefly explain how the activities enhanced their experience if they selected 3-5, or to explain how the activities inhibited their experience if they selected 1-2. In consideration of age, the responses varied greatly with responders of the same age category choosing very different ratings. No single rating was clearly the dominating choice. Further, in their written responses, responders indicated various reasons for their choices. Among the positive responses to the activities was that they engaged audiences, and deepened the visitor experience. Alternatively, among responders who gave the activities a 1-2 rating, two primary reasons were that the activities distracted from the art, or visitors indicated that they were unaffected by the activities.
Figure 8: Participatory Activity Rating Based on Visitor Usage

Figure 8 represents the difference in participatory activity rating between visitors who engaged with the activities and visitors who did not. Visitors who engaged with the activities gave an average rating of 3.97 to the activities. Alternatively, visitors who did not engage with the activities gave an average rating of 2.07 to the activities. This difference indicates that visitors who choose to engage with the activities have a more positive view of the activities and that they activities are enhancing the visitor’s experiences. Comparatively, visitor who do not engage do not report this same enhanced experience.

The latter half of the survey was intended to provide insight into the responders. The fourth question of the survey asked visitors to indicate if they were members at the
CMA. Only 3 of the 60 responders indicated that they were members. Overwhelmingly, the survey was completed by people who did not have a member relationship with the CMA. The fifth question asked visitors to indicate if it was their first visit to the CMA. 33 responders indicated that it was their first visit and 27 indicated that it was not. Meaning, the majority of visitors who completed the survey had no prior experience with the museum, and presumably, little introduction into the programming at the CMA.

Figure 9: Respondents Likelihood to Return to CMA in the Next Year

![Respondents Likelihood to Return to the CMA in the Next Year](chart)

- Return: 64%
- Not Return: 26%
- Possibly: 10%
Figures 9 and 10 represent a respondent’s likelihood to return to the CMA in the next year, or ever, respectively. Figure 9 shows that most respondents would return in the next year and that only 26% of respondents directly indicated that they would not return in the next year. However, Figure 10 demonstrates that the large majority of respondents would return to the CMA someday, if not in the next year. Only 3% of respondents indicated that they were never likely to return to the CMA. Most visitors who indicated that they would return would do so because they enjoyed the art and the museum. The majority of visitors who indicated that they would not reported that they were not from the Columbus area, and were visiting. Few visitors reported generally negative or dissatisfied feelings towards the CMA.
Summary

The CMA uses connectors (including all participatory activities) as vehicles to craft active learning experiences among visitors. Further, participatory activities support the social experiences that visitors desire in the museum. Most interactions with participatory activities (77%) occur in less than five minutes. When visitors engage with a participatory activity, the large majority spend less than 10 minutes’ total in the gallery. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they chose to engage with participatory activities during their visit. Visitors who chose to engage with the activities reported a more positive reaction to the activities than visitors who did not choose to engage with the activities. 55% of survey respondents indicated that it was their first visit to the CMA, suggesting that they had no prior introduction to the participatory activities. Of 60 survey respondents, only 3 individuals indicated that they were members at the CMA. The majority of respondents also reported that they were likely to return to the CMA someday, if not in the next year.
Chapter 5: Data Analysis

This study was designed to examine interactions between visitors and participatory activities in the galleries of the Columbus Museum of Art. I sought to identify major trends that appear during visitor engagements with participatory activities. I looked for patterns in interactions such as time spent engaging with participatory activities and the dynamics of social groups. Sub-questions of my study included: How frequently do visitors choose to engage with participatory activities? How do visitors reflect on participatory activities in the gallery spaces? Do participatory activities in museum galleries have an impact on visitor experience? Are visitors more likely to engage with participatory activities if they are familiar with the museum? The following reflects the results of my data collection, through an interview, survey and observations of participants.

What major trends appear during visitor interactions with participatory activities?

To address the major trends that occur during interactions between visitors and participatory activities, I analyzed 30 observations of participants in the CMA. The data from my observations suggests five trends and one emerging trend about the usage of participatory activities by art museum visitors:

- Visitors engage with activities in social groups
  - The Peer Interest Effect influenced group behavior
• Engagements with participatory activities are most often momentary or short period interactions
• Visitor response to participatory activities varies based on the age demographics of the group
• Visitors use art as social objects in gallery spaces
• Participatory activities diversify the learning opportunities for visitors in art museums

Emerging Trend

• The Caretaker Effect influenced groups with children

Visitors Engage with Activities in Social Groups

My research indicated that most visitors attended the museum in some form of a social group (see Figure 1). Social groups dominate museum audience as individual visitors are approximately 5%-20% of the total attendees (Hein, 1998). At the CMA, Director Mostov also has recorded the prevalence of social groups within the museum. Research conducted internally in the CMA has recognized a strong social trend among visitors. As Mostov stated in the interview, “We know from research that people come to museums to learn, they say that, and they come in social groups, overwhelmingly they come in social groups.” Museums have an opportunity to incorporate this understanding into the experiences they structure for visitors. Mostov’s statements are consistent with the importance of socializing in an individual’s use of leisure time identified by Hood (2004) and the Smithsonian report, Museum Visitation as a Leisure Time Choice (2007).

The preference for a social experience when visiting the museum is seen not only in museum attendance, but also in the use of participatory activities. Of the 30
observations I conducted, only 3 observations were of individuals. The remainder of the observations included pairs or groups entering the exhibition space together. The importance of social groups suggested by observation is consistent with Director Mostov’s understanding of visitor usage. Mostov emphasized the potential of participatory activities to increase conversation and collaboration. These factors create a social experience at the participatory activity. The dominance of social groups indicates that social interaction is also a strong component of hands-on participation at art museums (Simon, 2010). These findings suggest that while visitors choose to attend with companions, they also choose to partake in tactile engagement with companions.

Interestingly, observations revealed that a visitor’s decision to engage or not engage with an activity was influenced by peer interest from the greater social group. Based on the data from my observations I have labeled this phenomenon the “Peer Interest Effect.” During all 18 of the short and long period observations I conducted, visitors engaged with activities in groups. I also observed that if an entire group did not choose to engage with a specific activity, an individual from the group who may have been drawn toward that activity was unlikely to stay with the activity for more than a momentary interaction. For example, on the first day of my observations two adults entered Gallery 10 together. One adult immediately moved toward the puzzle and loudly stated, “I’m going to do this whole puzzle.” The individual sat down at the Vertumnus and Pomona puzzle table and began to work. However, the second adult did not express any observable interest and quickly stepped out of the gallery. After a momentary period at the table, the individual who expressed verbal interest in the puzzle stood and left the gallery. During another observation, a group of four adults simultaneously entered
Gallery 10. One of the adults asked the others if anyone in the group was good at puzzles. This individual fiddled with the puzzle pieces for a few seconds. However, the remaining members of the group gave no response and spread out throughout the gallery. The individual who momentarily engaged with the puzzle quickly moved away and wandered the gallery like his companions. After a few minutes in the gallery the group left together. This trend is consistent with existing literature that suggests that socializing and interaction play a key role in engagement with participatory activities, in addition to museum attendance (Hein, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 2013).

Art museums that structure participatory activities should be conscious of the social aspect of visitor behavior. At the CMA, Mostov has worked to alter the physical space of the galleries to include comfortable seating for social groups. For example, in Gallery 10 of the CMA, multiple seats surround both participatory activities that have been placed in the gallery. Four stools surround the table that holds a puzzle of Boucher’s Vertumnus and Pomona (see Image 2) and four armchairs are placed around the gallery’s Join the Conversation Station (see Image 3). This availability of seating allows for social groups to collaboratively engage with a single activity. During my observations, a pair of visitors began to work at the Vertumnus and Pomona puzzle. After a minute at the table, one of the pair remarked that he was bored, however, the visitors continued working at the activity for another 45 minutes, only exiting the gallery five minutes before the CMA closed. During their work on the puzzle, the pair engaged in quiet conversation, at times expressing audible frustration or joy with the success of fitting pieces together. The pair sat on opposite sides of the table, collaboratively engaging to complete the puzzle.
Engagements Are Primarily Momentary or Short Period Interactions

Most visitors will only engage with an activity for a momentary or short period interaction. The creation of participatory activities should include a realistic understanding of how visitors will use the activities in the gallery space. As I found from my research, 40% of interactions between visitors and activities were momentary, lasting less than 60 seconds, 40% of interactions were short period, lasting one to five minutes, and 20% of interactions were long period, lasting more than five minutes (see Figure 2). Further, I collected data on the total time spent by visitors in each gallery space. Data revealed that less than half of the visitor groups who engaged with the activities stayed in the gallery for more than five minutes (see Figure 3). Only 13 of 30 of the groups who engaged with activities stayed in the gallery for more than five minutes, and only five of those groups stayed in the gallery for more than 10 minutes (see Figure 3). Educators, curators and administrators need to be aware of trends of visitor usage when structuring learning objectives for their activities. For example, it is unrealistic for the CMA to create learning objectives for a single connector that requires 10 minutes of visitor interaction. Based on my research data, few visitors would stay in the gallery, much less at the connector, long enough to achieve the learning outcome the museum designed. As I learned from my interview with Director Mostov, the CMA is aware of the time restraints on visitor usage and implements multiple connectors to achieve a single learning objective. Director Mostov’s Interpretation department works with curators to create specific achievable outcomes for exhibitions and the corresponding participatory activities. Designed outcomes are then tied into multiple learning opportunities such as labels, puzzles, Join the Conversation Station’s etc., to increase a visitor’s likelihood of
achieving a specific outcome. Mostov designs learning objectives that can be reasonably achieved by a visitor who spends only a few minutes in the gallery. As Falk and Dierking (2013) found, visitors will not passively absorb all exhibits in a museum, reading every label and viewing every artwork. Rather, visitors will make viewing choices in art museums based on identity-related needs for their experience, selecting to view certain artworks or exhibits over others (Falk & Dierking, 2013). Ideally each connector in the CMA supports a learning outcome developed by the museum.

Museums must also structure experiences that attract the broadest audience. Hood (2004) identifies three distinct segments of the museum audience: frequent participants, occasional participants, and nonparticipants. Each segment of the audience evaluates the museum (choosing to visit or spend time elsewhere) based on six different aspects of their leisure experience, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Hood, 2004). The museum has the challenge of structuring experiences that will appeal to the desires of each segment of the population, bringing them into the institution (Hood, 2004; Falk & Dierking, 2013). Both occasional and frequent visitors desire a leisure experience that is relaxing and allows them to interact with others (Hood, 2004). As Hood (2004) writes, “If we museum professionals are concerned about reaching new audiences-the occasional and nonparticipants-we must appeal to them on the basis of what satisfies their learning criteria of a desirable leisure experience” (p. 154). As discussed in Chapter Two, Falk and Dierking (2013) identify seven categories of museum visitors that broadly encompass the museum audience. These categories of visitors have varying motivations to attend the art museum, and are each seeking a different result from their museum experience (Falk & Dierking, 2013).
Visitor Response to Participatory Activities Varies Based on the Age Demographics of the Group

Different behaviors were observed between varying age demographics that engaged with participatory activities. Groups with children more frequently demonstrated enthusiasm for tactile engagement with activities than groups of adults. Alternatively, adults did not express the same level of perceivable enthusiasm for the participatory activities. During my observations, 16 of 30 groups included both adults and children. Additionally, 14 of 30 groups consisted of only adults. Groups with children generally expressed visible enthusiasm for engaging with the participatory activities. For example, in the Big Idea Gallery, a group of two adults and four children entered the gallery together. The adults immediately moved towards the Tag It activity (see image 5) and passed out tags to the children, encouraging them to find artworks that suited their tag. One child expressed loud excitement at finding an artwork for her tag. The same group gathered at the Drawing Station (see image 6) and the adults explained the activity to the children, who promptly engaged with the activity. The group quickly moved down the hallway of the gallery. One adult stopped to help the children read the word “Dogs,” the theme of the gallery, prominently displayed on the walls. The adults also engaged with the Tag It activity, and shortly before exiting the gallery, one of the adults posted a response to the galleries Join the Conversation Station (see image 9). The data from this observation revealed a group of differing generations engaging with the participatory activities and adults using the participatory activities to encourage engagement among the children. The group worked collaboratively, with the adults assisting the children to
understand the activities. Together, the group moved through the gallery, communicating and interacting with the activities and one another.

Adult groups showed less outward enthusiasm for engaging with the activities than groups with children. Even as all adult groups chose to engage with activities in the galleries, the process was typically quiet and reserved. For example, during my observations in the Big Idea Gallery, a pair of visitors sat down at the Rockwell *Soda Jerk* puzzle (see Image 11) and spent 52 minutes working on the activity. At times, one of the participants stood and moved around the puzzle, or held up pieces of the puzzle, appearing to reference the *Soda Jerk* painting on the adjacent wall. While the two engaged in hushed conversation, they were inaudible throughout their entire time at the activity. The pair worked until they completed the puzzle, then stood and left the gallery. While other groups expressed satisfaction or joy in making progress with activities, the pair presented no visible reaction. Yet, the two visitors were social and collaborative throughout their time at the puzzle, demonstrating strong interest in the activity. Like the observation recorded at the Stella activity, the adults at the *Soda Jerk* puzzle closely observed the artwork that corresponded to their activity.

These findings from my observations are consistent with differences in behavior that Director Mostov has observed in her work. Mostov describes how she is cautious of creating children’s programming in the museum. She criticized the instances when the museum had previously structured “Family Programs” saying, “… we don't do anything to think about the adults [with] these children, whether they’re grandparents, the babysitter, the parents. We don't think about them.” For Mostov, the idea of only creating children’s programming through connectors excludes the museum’s adult visitors.
Therefore, the connectors are intended for a broad audience. Mostov has also found that certain activities attract different audiences. Regarding the use of activities, Director Mostov told me, “I'm here to say kids don't really get excited about puzzles, women my age get excited about puzzles.” This represents the CMA’s understanding and awareness of the usage of connectors among their different demographics. For Mostov, puzzles are a consistent means of facilitating close observation of the artwork among visitors. By creating a space for puzzles she facilitates conversation and collaboration in the galleries. This can be approached by visitors of all ages.

The use of puzzles Mostov described demonstrates how participatory activities may also be used as a tool to encourage learning. Hein (1998) contends that for museums to foster learning they must find ways of keeping visitors within the gallery space. Participatory activities are a means of inviting the visitor to engage within the gallery (Lenz Kothe, 2016). Participatory activities are an opportunity to engage visitors with an artwork in an extended, often social manner. The visitors who completed the Soda Jerk puzzle experienced extended and careful observation of the artwork that corresponded to their activity. As Falk, Scott and Dierking (2004) assert, visitors seek out hands-on experiences for the potential to have social, engaging opportunities. The museum provides an opportunity for visitors to have first-hand interactions with artwork, framed by the expertise of curators and museum administrators (Bell, 2011). The multisensory, interactive experience of the puzzle promotes a learning experience that is active and intellectually engaging with the artwork (Bell, 2011).
The Art as a Social Object

Artwork in the CMA frequently functioned as what Nina Simon (2010) describes as a social object, the focal point around which social conversation occurs. During an observation, three adults entered the Big Idea Gallery, and moved through the hall, quietly discussing the art. The surrounding participatory activities drew from the artworks, encouraging further interaction among visitors. Together, the group stopped in front of the gallery’s Join the Conversation Station, and one of the trio added a response to the board on a post-it. Next the group moved toward the Soda Jerk puzzle, where another individual shuffled around a few puzzle pieces on the table. Finally, the group member who posted a response to the Join the Conversation Station approached the Tag It activity at the end of the gallery. The visitor reached into the box of tags, presumably to read the tags, but did not remove any of the items from the Tag It box. The trio then exited the gallery. The group consistently conversed about the surrounding artwork and engaged with numerous participatory activities in the gallery. However, the participation they demonstrated was momentary, and the group did not have visible reactions of enthusiasm for the activities. The group remained together, communicating throughout their time in the gallery, using the artwork as focal points of conversation. Individual members of the group expressed interest in three of the activities in the gallery, however, the entire group never committed to engaging with an activity together. Studies suggest that visitors can use interactive activities to achieve learning outcomes in the museum setting (Falk, Scott & Dierking, 2004). However, visitors also enter the galleries with preconceived knowledge, interests and tendencies (Falk & Dierking, 2013; Falk, Scott & Dierking, 2004). While education is a major motivation for art museum attendees,
interest in aesthetic, affective, or social experiences at museums are also motivations for the majority of attendees (Ostrower, 2005). The group demonstrated a preference for the social and aesthetic opportunities of the museum experience.

Artwork has functioned as a social object in Director Mostov’s observations and research as well. She described the interactions that occur around participatory activities as a space to facilitate conversation and collaboration in conjunction with the art. She asserts, “My expectations were, I've designed this puzzle… but it also supported conversation. The people when they sat there it gave them permission and time and space for conversations to say things like, ‘Oh wait do you see those trees? Is that there? Is that a building back there?’ … So close observation, collaboration and conversation [were] happening at the same time.” The conversation and interactions that Mostov describes are centered around the art, but function as social experiences for the participants.

**Participatory Activities Diversify Museum Learning Opportunities**

Participatory activities are opportunities for museums to diversify the educational approaches used in a single gallery. During the interview I conducted with Director Mostov, she expressed how experiences at the CMA used to be passive and unengaged prior to her arrival at the museum. Visitors observed the artwork on gallery walls and possibly read the panel text or labels. Mostov was highly critical of this structure, as it was based on observation and reading, both passive activities. At the time of her arrival, the CMA did not provide audiences with other possible ways to experience the museum. This conflicts with a visitor’s interest in having choices and control of their own museum experience (Rand, 2004). Mostov’s personal research suggests that learning through a passive experience like reading is not as effective as learning through hands-on
experience, leading her to structure participatory activities as connectors, “And so what the idea of a participatory connector is, is to actually be true and honest and craft experiences that are actual learning experiences…” Alternatively, Hein (1998) contends that in didactic or passive educational experiences, individuals do learn. However, Mostov appears to be subscribing to learning theories that allow the visitor to construct knowledge. She uses hands-on experiences to create a transformation in the learner that is stimulated by the didactic setting of the gallery, where a narrative has been constructed through display.

The hands-on and active learning experiences Mostov described during the interview are consistent with visitor use of participatory activities. Observational data suggests that hands-on tactile engagement with participatory activities facilitated close observation. For example, in puzzle activities visitors were likely to sit longer and visually engage with the artwork as a reference for the puzzle. In other activities such as the Frank Stella inspired shape activity in the Contemporary Wing, visitors held up activity pieces to compare to the corresponding artwork. Visitors used the activities as tools to further investigate the artwork.

The learning experience at the CMA (or any museum) is the product of an amalgamation of learning theories, not a subscription to a single educational approach. Hein (1998) describes how theories of learning and knowledge intersect to form educational theories. The four educational theories Hein (1998) describes are traditional lecture & text, stimulus-response, discovery and constructivism. Traditional lecture & text learning is characterized by the assumption that knowledge exists beyond the individual and that learning is incremental (Hein, 1998). Stimulus-response, alternatively,
is categorized by the assumption that learning is incremental, but that the learner constructs knowledge (Hein, 1998). Discovery assumes that the learner constructs knowledge, however knowledge is an objective truth existing regardless of the individual (Hein, 1998). Finally, constructivism assumes that the learner constructs knowledge but that knowledge is personally or socially constructed (Hein, 1998). Each of these theories manifests through factors of the CMA experience. For example, labels and text explaining knowledge or objectives for a gallery demonstrate expository and stimulus-response approaches to learning (Hein, 1998); whereas, discovery and constructivism encourage exploration and interpretation within a gallery (Hein, 1998). The overall gallery experience of the CMA provides text panels that are didactic. However, text also encourages visitors to question and reflect on the art. Simultaneously, participatory activities offer an opportunity for visitors to create, question, and engage with a learning opportunity beyond reading. For example, the text panel of Gallery 10 discusses the gallery theme of Power, Piety and Prestige. In the same space, the gallery’s Join the Conversation Station encourages visitors to question and reflect on the theme, asking visitors, “What achievements signify power for modern day women?” While the CMA still presents a narrative to their visitors, they also offer an opportunity for visitors to develop and relate their own thoughts and opinions in the gallery.

**Emerging Trend**

*The Caretaker Effect Among Groups with Children*

Adults engaging in activities with children demonstrated the “Caretaker Effect.” The data from my observations showed adults repeatedly using the participatory activities to encourage engagement between the children of their group. Adults in these situations
did not demonstrate enthusiasm or interest in the activities for their own engagement. Rather, the focus was on the experience of the children. Based on the data from my observations, I have labeled this the Caretaker Effect. The adults, acting as the caretakers of the children, assumed the role of instigating engagement between the children and the activities, with minimal engagement among the adults themselves. This effect is seen in the previously described interaction between two adults and four children in the Big Idea Gallery. During another observation in the Contemporary Wing, a group of two adults and three children compared the shape pieces from the Frank Stella shape activity (see Image 15) to the corresponding artwork (see image 17). The children held up pieces from the activity reflecting on Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*.

Image 17. Frank Stella’s *La vecchia dell’orto*
One of the adults encouraged the child to manipulate the activity pieces on the table, saying, “Yes, you can make whatever you want.” Little conversation or social interaction occurred between the adults of the group. Rather, the adults allowed the children to engage for several minutes before the group gradually moved out of the space. Although the adults did not engage with the Stella activity, they were motivated to move the children to the table and encouraged their interest in the shapes. Using the activity as a focal point, the children stopped and spent time observing the corresponding Stella artwork. The children experienced a multisensory, active learning experience through close observation and tactile manipulation (Bell, 2011). However, the adults did not engage visibly receive the same multisensory benefits from a tactile interaction.

**How frequently do visitors engage with participatory activities in art museum galleries? How do visitors reflect on participatory activities in art museum galleries?**

The majority of survey respondents indicated that they engaged with participatory activities. Engaging with participatory activities enhanced visitor experiences in two major ways: intellectual stimulation/art appreciation and engaging/interactive experiences. Only one response directly indicated that the activities inhibited the visitor’s experience. This visitor described the activities as a distraction from the art. These topics were primarily investigated through a survey of 60 museum visitors. However, in the analysis of my survey I realized that the structure of my questions, specifically my rating scale, may have confused respondents. A number of visitors provided responses that did not numerically indicate their response to the survey question. My analysis removed rating indicators that departed from the numerical scale provided. However, this indicator allowed individuals to define engagement for themselves. The survey asked visitors the
question, “Did you engage with any participatory activities in the museum? (participatory activities include puzzles, conversation stations, crafts, etc.)” Throughout my observations, I used tactile interaction as a marker of engagement. However, during the survey, visitors had the opportunity to interpret their own meaning of the question.

The data from the survey indicates that there is a slight preference to participate with activities among visitors. When given the option to participate, visitors chose to engage with activities in the galleries. This is consistent with the findings of Falk, Scott and Dierking (2004) who suggest that visitors who engaged with interactive activities in the museum demonstrated changed perceptions of the museum. The authors also suggest that visitors seek out, understand and value interactive learning experiences in the museum (Falk, Scott & Dierking, 2004). Interactive experiences offer more engaging and potentially social ways for visitors to spend their time in the museum (Falk, Scott & Dierking, 2004). The general value principle suggests that visitors will be drawn towards art or activities that they perceive to be worth the cost of choosing to engage (Bitgood, 2006). This cost could occur in time, effort to move the activity or other factors (Bitgood, 2006). For visitors who engage with participatory activities, the benefits of exploring or spending time with the activities are perceived as worth the time and effort to engage.

Visitors who indicated that the activities enhanced their experience provided a variety of insight into how the activities achieved this effect. The two major themes that emerged among the survey responses were: intellectual stimulation/art appreciation and interactive/engaging experiences. Visitors who cited intellectually stimulating/art appreciation benefits from participatory activities indicated that the activities had thought-provoking effects or that the activities caused them to more deeply appreciate the
corresponding art. For example, one visitor wrote about the activities, “They made me think about the details of the paintings, ideas, moods.” Another visitor wrote that the activities, “Made me look a little closer at the painting.”

Other visitors indicated appreciation for the engaging experience the activities created. One respondent wrote, “I like that the museum felt immersive. Not just staring at art.” Another respondent wrote, “Anything interactive is more engaging.” Several visitors indicated a combination of these factors when describing how the activities enhanced their experiences. For example, about the activities, one respondent wrote, “They were fucking awesome and really forced me to think more about the exhibits, plus, they made the experience more fun.” These responses indicate that activities had positive impacts on the overall experience of the visitors. The benefits to visitor experience demonstrate the potential of participatory activities to supplement the viewing experience of the museum audience by drawing attention to the artwork. The CMA gallery paradigm aligns with Villeneuve’s (2012) concept of supported interpretation. Supported interpretation uses activities and learning to engage visitors, structuring the entire exhibition as an interface between the visitor and the artwork (Villeneuve & Viera, 2014). For Villeneuve and Viera (2014) this is achieved through activities that facilitate learning for visitors. The multiple connectors Mostov includes in the galleries engage the visitor with the artwork, leading visitors toward the gallery’s learning objective. The positive impacts reported by participants are consistent with the findings and learning objectives designed by Director Mostov. Mostov has found that the activities successfully facilitate close observation and social experiences among CMA visitors.
Conversely, among visitors who indicated low ratings for the participatory activities three major themes emerged. The general themes among visitor responses were, general disinterest (in the activities), distracting (from the art), and did not participate. One visitor indicated in the activities, “Didn’t really catch my eye.” Only one visitor indicated a specifically negative opinion of the activities writing, “Distraction from the art.” Most other respondents indicated that they had not yet had a chance to participate or that they simply did not participate. Not every visitor who provided a low rating indicated that the activities inhibited their experience. For example, one respondent wrote, “No they did not inhibit – I found them charming, but I usually take a personally quiet approach to museum visits.” Another wrote, “Even though I didn’t participate, I am pleased to see so many engaged (kids + parents).”

Many of the visitors who indicated that they did not engage with the activities chose not to expand on whether the activities enhanced or inhibited their experience. Of the 26 respondents who indicated that they did not engage with the participatory activities, only 14 provided ratings of their reflections on the activities. Given that few respondents indicated that the activities actively inhibited their experience, it is possible that many respondents felt ambivalent about the activities, and did not see a way to express that response on the survey. Alternatively, all 33 of the respondents who indicated that they engaged with the activities provided a numerical indicator of their reflection on the activities. As a result, the average rating of the experiences for visitors who engaged with activities is more valid than the average rating for those who did not engage because of its higher sample size.
The difference between those who did engage and those who did not indicates that participatory activities do influence museum visitors. For those who participate, this is a positive influence, enhancing their overall experience. Alternatively, most individuals who do not participate cite a slight benefit, or no response to the activities. Visitors who choose not to engage with the activities perceive the benefits of the activities as too low to overcome the perceived costs of participating. This perceived cost means the social value of the activities is not high enough for non-participants to choose to engage with activities (Bitgood, 2006). However, this does not mean that the activities have negative effects on the experiences of nonparticipants. Presumably, many non-participants would also express ambivalence to the activities if given the option. Museums other than the CMA may enhance their visitor experiences by incorporating participatory activities into the gallery spaces.

Data from the visitor survey and interview with Director Mostov suggests that most visitors feel that participatory activities have a positive effect on their museum experience. However, museums may face resistance or backlash from their constituency if participatory activities are included in their galleries. Only one visitor directly expressed negative feelings for the participatory activities in the survey. Most visitors who did not engage with activities indicated neither that the presence of activities enhanced nor inhibited their experience. However, there was a portion of the visitor population that felt the inclusion of participatory activities did inhibit their experience.

This trend among a small group of visitors has been recognized at the CMA by staff. Director Mostov has refers to this population as *art insiders*, visitors who are motivated for the sake of art itself. Simon (2016) uses the label *insiders* to describe a
similar population. To Simon (2016), insiders represent a population with strong preferences for what is included in the museum, and are resistant to change when their preferences are altered. Mostov has expressed that backlash to the Connectors and interactive programming the CMA encounters nearly always comes from this demographic. She estimates that art insiders are less than 5% of all visitors. Further, she described how art insiders expressed dislike for changes the CMA made in renovations and Connectors programming, “Art insiders gave us some real kick back… I used to walk through the galleries and talk to visitors, I didn't get as much. But Nannette (Nannette Maciejunes, Executive Director of the CMA) would hear it from serious art insiders in town. And a couple of letters and a couple of comments… And what I translate from that, what I'm hearing from people is, ‘This isn't what art museums have always looked like when I grew up.’ And they weren't. I grew up going to the Butler; they didn't look like this. But that doesn't mean they can't look like this.”

For museums to create sustainable models they must understand the wants of their audience, responding to feedback from visitors (Villeneuve, 2012). At the CMA, the majority of visitors are responding positively to the changes of the exhibition paradigm through the inclusion of participatory activities. Responding to the interests of the audience allow museums to stay relevant within their communities (Villeneuve, 2012). “In any situation where you are trying to make something relevant, you are trying to make it relevant to new or more people” (Simon, 2016, loc. 589). The CMA is using participatory activities to attract new audiences and create a more inclusive experience for visitors. However, insiders do not always find change inclusive, rather, they find it threatening (Simon, 2016). Simon (2016) argues that the best way for organizations to
engage with new audiences is to cultivate insiders who embrace growing change at the organization. Within the museum itself, staff act as insiders, they are present within the museum paradigm and perpetuate the institutions goals. Museums can easily train their staff to act inclusively to make the institution more relevant to potential audiences. Insider visitors however, present a greater challenge. While museums must continually work to improve visitor experience, it is impossible for the museum to be a perfect experience for every visitor (Kotler & Kotler, 2004). Means of ingratiating resistant insiders into new museum practices will require further research.

Are visitors more likely to engage with participatory activities if they are familiar with the museum?

The data from my research did not suggest a correlation between familiarity with the CMA and a visitor’s engagement with participatory activities. When designing my project, I predicted that familiarity with the museum may affect if and how visitors choose to engage with participatory activities. To investigate this, I asked visitors to indicate if they were museum members and if it was their first time to the CMA. Only 3 survey respondents were museum members of my total 60 responses. As a researcher, I had an internal assumption that members of the CMA would be more familiar with the museum and be prevalent within the museum space. However, given that only 5% of my respondents were members this low sample of visitors does not allow for me to draw themes among member participation with activities. I expected a much higher number of museum members to be in the space when I surveyed. It is possible that museum members are less likely to visit the museum on weekends when I conducted the survey.
Additionally, I asked respondents to indicate if it was their first visit to the CMA. The respondents were closely split between first-time visitors and returning visitors. Of 60 respondents 28 (46%) were first-time visitors and 32 (54%) were returning. A single respondent indicated that it was their first visit to the museum, however, the respondent did not indicate whether he or she chose to engage with the activities. Among first-time visitors to the CMA, 59% indicated that they engaged with the activities. Conversely, among the returning visitors, only 53% indicated that they chose to engage with the activities. The similarity in these percentages suggests that familiarity with the CMA did not play a role when visitors elected to participate with activities. Based on the results of my data, having already seen the participatory activities did not make visitors more likely to engage with activities than first-time visitors. The presence of a participatory activity in a gallery space is an invitation to engage with high quality artwork and professional expertise (Lenz Kothe, 2016). Familiarity is among the tools that may be used to communicate an invitation to participate with a visitor (Lenz Kothe, 2016). Although familiarity with the CMA itself may not have influenced participating visitors, familiarity with the activities themselves may have had an effect. Creating experiences that are familiar and inviting to visitors make the museum more inclusive and potentially attract a broader audience (Roberts, 2004; Simon, 2016). Visitors value comfort, choices, and control in their museum experience, as well as a welcoming environment (Rand, 2004). Participatory activities may appeal to visitors to make them feel welcome and comfortable in the galleries. However, further research is required to make this investigate this possibility.
Engagement with activities did not strongly correlate with respondents plans to return to the CMA in the distant future (see Figure 8). Regardless of whether visitors participated with the activities, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they would return to the CMA in the future, if not in the next year (see Figure 7 & Figure 8). However, the percentage of respondents planning to return to the CMA who engaged with activities was slightly higher than those who did not engage with activities but indicated that they would return to the museum. This indicates that the general audience of the CMA is interested in returning to the museum.

My data suggests that although visitors express interest in social and interactive experiences, they are still coming to the museum for the art. Reasons visitors wished to return to the museum were divided into four primary categories based on responses. These categories of motivation are art/exhibitions, social/family friendly, interactive, and unique experience. Visitors provided 45 distinct responses that were sorted into these categories. Outlier responses that did not align with the four categories were removed from consideration. Art was the primary motivation expressed by visitors who indicated they were likely to return to the museum. For example, one visitor explained why they would like to return writing, “I love the new exhibits. I am always amazed with the art here, new and old.” Another wrote, “New exhibits coming. Love to pop in ...” Of 45 expressed motivations to return to the CMA, an interest in returning to the art or exhibitions was cited 26 times. The following motivations to visit the museum were to have family friendly/social experiences (10 of 45 responses), then interactive experiences (4 of 45 responses), and unique experiences (4 of 45 responses). These findings are largely consistent with motivations identified in existing literature. The Urban Institutes
2005 study on art museum visitor motivations found education, aesthetic, affective and social motivations to be the top four reasons visitors attended art museums (Ostrower). These findings suggest that visitors are looking for more from their museum experience than simply further knowledge of the subject matter (Smithsonian Institute, 2007). Audiences desire multiple dimensions from their visits, seeking experiences that have aesthetic, educational, emotional and social factors (Smithsonian Institute, 2007).

Data suggested that the primary reason visitors would not return to the CMA in the next year or distance future was distance. For example, one respondent indicated that he or she hoped to return to the CMA, but lived in Minnesota. Only a handful of respondents who indicated that they would not return provided a distinct reason. Only one response indicated dissatisfaction with the CMA, the author wrote, “Doesn’t seem like there is many exhibits.”

These findings indicate that visitors engage with participatory activities in social ways and are influenced by the interests of their peer group in the museum. Specifically, the age demographic of a social group impacts their engagement with activities in the museum. For example, groups with children demonstrate visible enthusiasm for activities and often exhibit the caretaker effect. Groups of adults do not demonstrate visible enthusiasm, but still seek out and choose to engage with participatory activities. Most visitors are choosing to engage with the activities at the CMA and feel that the activities have a positive impact on their experience. Visitors benefit from the activities through enhanced intellectual stimulation, art appreciation, engagement and interaction. Alternatively, few visitors who do not engage with the activities report positive or negative effects from the presence of activities in the galleries. Overall, the data
suggested that visitors desire the interactive and engaging opportunities that participatory activities provide. To meet the interests of their audiences, museums should create experiences that promote social and interactive engagement.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Summary of Questions and Procedures

This research study took the form of a qualitative case study at the Columbus Museum of Art. The study intended to identify the major trends that occur during interactions that museum visitors have with participatory activities. I investigated what, if any, impact participatory activities had on the experience of the museum visitor. The study gathered data on how frequently visitors engaged with participatory activities, and how visitors responded to the presence of the activities in the galleries. Further, I explored how familiarity with the CMA related to a visitor’s decision to engage with participatory activities. Data was collected through an interview with Merilee Mostov, Director of Inclusive Interpretation at the CMA, observations of visitors engaging with participatory activities, and a survey of museum visitors. Observations of participants took place over three days, in three different galleries at the CMA. In total, 30 observations were recorded. The survey was administered over two days in the CMA galleries, and 60 responses were collected.

For this research, I defined engagement with participatory activities as tactile interaction between a visitor and an activity. The CMA intentionally crafts installations to engage visitors and achieve the museum’s learning objectives. Installations that are intended to spark this engagement and learning among visitors are referred to as connectors at the CMA. Connectors include activities like puzzles, crafts or question
boards. However, Director Mostov defines anything in the gallery other than art as a connector. This includes aspects of the gallery such as paint color, seating, and labels. As I consider certain connectors such as labels and seating ubiquitous in art museum galleries, I instead focused my research on installations that are tactile and interactive. Throughout my research, I defined these installations as participatory activities.

**Summary of Findings**

The five trends of visitor engagement with participatory activities and one emerging trend I identified were:

- Visitors engage with activities in social groups
  - The Peer Interest Effect influenced group behavior
- Engagements with participatory activities are most often momentary or short period interactions
- Visitor response to participatory activities varies based on the age demographics of the group
- Visitors use art as social objects in gallery spaces
- Participatory activities diversify the learning opportunities for visitors in art museums

**Emerging Trend**

- The Caretaker Effect influenced groups with children

Most visitors attend the museum in social groups (Hein, 1998). Social groups also dominated the use of participatory activities. Of the 30 observations of participants I conducted, only three observations were of individuals. The total time spent in the galleries varied greatly. Of 30 observations, half of the visitor groups spent less than five
minutes in the gallery space. Ten groups spent five to ten minutes in the gallery space, and only five groups spent more than ten minutes in the gallery space. 40% of visitor interactions were momentary, beginning and ending in less than 60 seconds. 40% of visitor interactions were short period, taking place in one to five minutes. Only 20% of interactions lasted more than five minutes. Engagement with participatory activities demonstrated the “peer interest effect,” meaning that interactions were dependent on the engagement of the larger social group. My data showed that visitors who expressed interest in participatory activities were unlikely to stay with the activity for more than a momentary interaction if the remainder of their social group did not choose to engage. The “peer interest effect” demonstrates the importance of socializing during visitors’ interactions with the participatory activities at the CMA.

Response to participatory activities varied based on the age demographics of the engaging social group. Groups with children demonstrated more visible enthusiasm for the activities than groups with children. Groups that included children often demonstrated the caretaker effect. The caretaker effect described interactions where the adult members of a group encourage interactions among the children of the group, but do not demonstrate any interest in engaging themselves. Instead, the activity is used as a learning opportunity for the children, while the adult does not engage.

Groups also use artwork as social objects in museum galleries. Social objects serve as the focal point of conversation for visitors, providing a springboard for social interactions (Simon, 2016). Visitors who engage with participatory activities also used the corresponding artworks as social objects connecting their experience to the art
through discussion. This demonstrates visitor interest in having experiences that revolve around the artwork itself.

Museums are in competition for the attendance and time of public audiences (Hood, 2004). Participatory activities offer provide social and interactive experiences for visitors. These qualities especially appeal to visitors who are occasional and nonparticipants at art museums (Hood, 2004). By incorporating participatory activities into art museum galleries, museums diversify the educational approaches in their galleries. The CMA uses participatory activities to allow visitors to construct their own knowledge and questions surrounding artwork. This active learning process works in conjunction with the passive learning process already established in the gallery. The curators and educators structure a narrative that visitors absorb, and creating text panels and labels that support their narrative. Text panels and labels provide information in a didactic manner that is passively absorbed by the visitor (Hein, 1998). Activities also function as a strategy to increase the time spent by visitors in gallery spaces. In turn, museums can use visitors’ increased time in galleries to achieve more learning objectives (Hein, 1998).

The CMA is following social constructivist theory and methodology as illustrative in the data obtained in this project. Social Constructivism allows for individual construction and creation of knowledge (Hein, 1998). Visitors are constructing their own knowledge about the art through participatory activities. They are making sense of their own experiences in an art museum, connecting the hands-on activities to the surrounding artwork. The participatory activities allow visitors to enhance their experiences through increased interaction or engagement, as well as increase appreciation for the art. The
design of the CMA’s galleries allows for visitors to engage with didactic features such as labels or wall text, while simultaneously engaging in a tactile manner through a participatory activity. While the didactic features result in passive learning, social construction plays out through the inclusion of the participatory activities. The activities themselves function as the springboard and stimulus for learning through social construction.

The majority of survey respondents (33 of 60 total respondents) indicated that they did engage with participatory activities in the CMA galleries. Overall respondents reported that the activities had a positive impact on their experience in the CMA. Visitors who chose to engage with the activities reported a higher beneficial effect than those who do not engage with activities. Two major trends emerged in the ways participatory activities benefited the visitors’ experience. First, visitors reported that the activities enhanced their experience with the art, causing them to observe the art more closely, or view the art in a different way. Second, visitors reported that the interactive aspect of participatory activities enhanced their experience providing an engaging, hands-on opportunity.

Among visitors who chose not to engage with activities the activities were found to be less beneficial. Only a few visitors directly indicated that the activities inhibited their experience. These respondents who were negatively affected by the activities may be art insiders, visitors who feel comfortable in the museum establishment and have strong opinions about what belongs in the gallery space (Simon, 2016). Art insiders have expressed dissatisfaction with the CMA due to the inclusion of participatory activities in the past. Director Mostov recognizes the backlash the CMA received from this
demographic when the museum underwent renovation, and when participatory activities were made part of the regular CMA programming. Most respondents who did not engage with the activities indicated this lack of participation when asked to specify how the activities affected their experience. The decision to not respond indicates a possible ambivalence, which can be explored through future research.

The study indicated that familiarity with the CMA was not a factor in whether visitors chose to engage with participatory activities. Familiarity was explored through two questions on the survey: a participant’s membership status with the CMA, and if the visitor was making their first trip to the CMA. Only three respondents indicated that they were members. These three responses did not supply a large enough sample to draw conclusions about member usage of participatory activities. However, 59% of first-time visitors to the CMA indicated that they engaged with participatory activities and 53% of returning visitors engaged with activities. This indicated that familiarity with the CMA did not correlate to whether visitors chose to engage with participatory activities.

Overwhelmingly, visitors indicated that they would return to the CMA if not in the next year, in the distant future. Only a few visitors indicated that they were never likely to return. The main reason for never returning was distance, meaning the visitors lived out of town. The most common reason cited by visitors that they would return to the CMA was the art. Other trends in responses included interests in the family friendly or social experience of the CMA, interest in the interactive experience, or interest in the unique experience of the CMA.
Implications: Summary

This research study contributes to understanding how visitors engage with participatory activities in art museums. The exploration of social groups in engagement with participatory activities has provided insight into the importance of creating opportunity for social experiences within activities. The Peer Interest Effect was identified as a key aspect of the way visitors engage in with activities in social groups. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of social and engaging experiences in art museums there is a lack of public literature surrounding the specific ways visitors engage with activities (Hood, 2004; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Falk, Scott & Direking, 2004; Ostrower, 2005). My research has also identified the emerging trend of the Caretaker Effect that has not been discussed in existing literature. Understanding how visitors use and engage participatory activities will allow museums to construct experiences that best meet the interests and needs of their constituents.

The data from my study suggests that participatory activities have a positive impact on the majority of visitors to the CMA galleries by enhancing the visitor’s experience with the surrounding art or by creating an engaging and interactive experience for the visitor. The data also indicates that the majority of CMA visitors choose to engage with participatory activities. Although my research recognized a portion of the museum visitor population that is opposed to the inclusion of participatory activities, overall visitors reported that the activities had a positive impact on their experience. These findings indicate that art museums have an opportunity to improve the experience of their visitors by incorporating participatory activities into the galleries. This improvement is especially relevant among occasional and nonparticipants to museums, as both audiences
desire interactive and social experiences (Hood, 2004). Visitors choose to engage with activities when social interaction is present. Museums should structure interactive activities within their galleries that also allow for socializing among participating visitors.

The need to develop interactive and engaging programming for visitors is especially prevalent for museums in small or regional areas. Large museums in major cities are often tourist attractions themselves. However, regional or non-destination cities do not have the small tourism interest. As a regional and mid-sized city, Columbus does not have the tourism traffic of a major city or destination. The CMA must create experiences that attract the local constituency to maintain attendance. The findings of this study suggest that visitors desire hands-on, interactive experiences and choose to engage with participatory activities when they are placed in the galleries. Therefore, the CMA enhances the experiences of their visitors by including participatory activities in the gallery spaces. The inclusion of participatory activities is meeting the interests of the CMA’s audience and supporting the future of CMA attendance. Other small or mid-sized art museums have the potential to enhance the experiences of their visitors through the introduction of participatory activities in their galleries.

Museums may increase educational opportunities for visitors by including participatory activities in their galleries. The activities function to extend the amount of time visitors spend in the galleries. By extending the time spent in the gallery, the visitor has the opportunity achieve more of the museum’s learning objectives (Hein, 1998). Objectives designed by the museum should be achievable within the brief period that the average visitor spends in a single gallery. Museums have the potential to use participatory activities as tools to achieve institution specific objectives for visitors.
Diversifying educational and engagement opportunities for visitors will assist museums as they compete with online or technology based opportunities. Museums compete for the attendance of visitors with all other leisure time opportunities (Smithsonian Institute, 2007). Only 12.6% of adults report that they have attended a museum within the last year (Smithsonian Institute, 2007). As technology allows audiences to have increasingly interactive experiences from home, museums must create environments within their own galleries that compete with online opportunities. For example, high-resolution online galleries and electronic essays allow visitors to extensively examine and learn about a museum’s artwork from their own homes (Proctor, 2011). To entice visitors to make the physical trip to the museums itself, the institutions must structure their galleries spaces to meet the needs and interests of their audience. Participatory activities present an opportunity for visitors to engage in tactile engagement and social interaction in the galleries. The physical and tactile nature of participatory activities cannot currently be duplicated through online opportunities.

**Future Research Discussion**

In future research, I would revisit the structure of the rating system that I used to investigate how visitors reflect on participatory activities. The scale itself did not allow for visitors who actively disapproved of the activities to express their feelings with a numerical response. Further, the questions asking visitors to expand on their numerical response did not have an option to express ambivalence toward the activities. Many of my respondents wrote that they did not participate with the activities on their surveys. To me, this indicates that many visitors felt activities had no effect on their experiences. While visitors could indicate their feelings of ambivalence by circling a 1 on the rating
scale, they did not have a space to express their ambivalence in further questions. This design could be improved by the expansion of the scale to include very negative to very positive responses to the activities. Despite the limitations of the design, the survey I conducted indicates that there is a difference between the reflections of individuals who engaged and individuals who did not engage.

The survey collection took place over two days, a Saturday and Sunday at the museum. These audiences visibly differed over the two days. On Saturday, nearly every visitor was an adult walking the galleries with a companion. Sunday, children were very present in the galleries. This variance in audiences suggested that the museum sees dramatically different demographics on different days. In future research, I would be interested in continuing to survey visitors on more days of the week, to capture a broader audience and sample. When administering the survey, I attempted to randomize the individuals I approached. However, I noticed that during the collection, the individuals who decline to complete the survey were consistently middle aged. As a result, the survey may be slightly skewed toward younger people. No individuals appearing to be in their 20’s or 30’s declined to participate in my project. However, several individuals, who I presume to be in their 40’s or 50’s declined to participate.

Through future research I would like to further investigate how visitors reflect on participatory activities in museum galleries. However, I would like to understand how a visitor’s individual interest in the museum relates to their response to participatory activities. For example, Falk and Dierking (2013) identify specific categories of visitors with broad needs from the museum. I would be interested in exploring how each of these visitor categories engages or responds to participatory activities. Future exploration into
this topic can provide insight into how museums should structure participatory activities to meet the needs of their audiences. In addition, I would like to investigate how significant art insiders are within the museum population.

Questions for future research could include:

- How do museum visitors who do not engage with participatory activities reflect on the presence of participatory activities in galleries?
- How prevalent are art insiders in the museum galleries?
- What motivates visitors to come to the art museum?
- How do Falk and Dierking’s (2013) seven categories of visitors attend the museum in social groups?
- How do Falk and Dierking’s (2013) seven categories of museum visitors each engage with participatory activities?

Investigation of these topics can add to the knowledge base of how visitors use participatory activities, and how museums can use the activities to achieve their objectives and appeal to visitors.

In conclusion, this research study will serve as a foundational seed to forthcoming investigation of the impacts of participatory activities in art museum galleries. By altering the designs of my inquiry techniques and broadening my sample population, I will improve the validity and strength of future research. The characteristics of interactions I have identified and the reflections of visitors on participatory activities will hopefully provide information that assists administrators in understanding the role participatory activities may have in gallery spaces. The findings from my research will ideally
contribute to the ability of museums to craft participatory activities that meet the needs of their visitors.

**Personal Learning Outcomes**

This research process has changed my perception of participatory activities in art museum galleries. Studying how participatory activities effect the experience of a museum visitor has convinced me that interactive installations have the potential to enhance visitor experiences. The findings of my research suggest that participatory activities support art appreciation and engaging experience in the galleries. Through participatory activities, museums may structure experiences that are active and engaging for visitors rather than passive and didactic. The presence of participatory activities breaks up the lecture or text based learning that dominates a traditional gallery model (Hein, 2001). Without interpretative strategies like participatory activities, museums will continue to produce disengaging experiences for visitors.

Researching participatory activities and active museum experiences has personally made me more aware of the interpretation and engagement strategies employed by museums. When visiting museums, I seek out the ways that the administration is engaging visitors through tactile interaction. As a museum visitor, I see participatory activities as an indication that the museum intends to create experiences for visitors that are engaging and interactive.

Further as a researcher, I have developed my knowledge of museum literature and qualitative methods. The process of developing and designing a study has provided me with a foundational understanding of key topics in the museum field. My research has allowed me to connect interpretative practices to learning theories in museums. Finally,
developing and administering my research procedures has given me insight into the process of conducting visitor research in the future.
References


Mostov, M. (2014). Making Space for Experimentation, Collaboration, and Play: Re-


Appendix A: Interview Questions: Merilee Mostov, Director of Inclusive Interpretation

What programming are you responsible for producing in the museum?

What is the general framework of objectives that you use for developing programming?

What are the current examples of visitor-centered programming in the museum?

How does the museum define Connectors?

How has visitor engagement evolved in the museum over time?

How does the museum register the success of its visitor-centered programming?

What response has the museum received to its visitor-centered efforts?

What motivated the museum to change to a creativity and visitor based model of experience?
Appendix B:
Survey

Please circle an age range:

18-19 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79 80-89
90+

Did you engage with any participatory activities in the museum? (participatory activities include puzzles, conversation stations, crafts, etc.)

Yes / No

Please circle a number from the range below to indicate how the activities enhanced your experience.

Not at all – 1 2 3 4 5 – Very much

If you answered 3 to 5 please indicate how the activities enhanced your experience.

If you answered 1 to 2 please indicate if the activities inhibited your experience and why.

Are you currently a member at the museum?

Yes / No

Is this your first visit to the museum?

Yes / No

Are you likely to come back to the museum this year?

If so, why?

If not, why?
Are you likely to come back to the museum at all?

Is so, why?

If not, why?