

## **User-Generated Content (UGC):**

### **The (Re)birth of the Visitor as Author of the Museum Experience**

40 years ago, Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author.<sup>1</sup> In museums that moment seems to have coincided with the birth or, some would say, rebirth of the visitor as author of his/her own cultural experiences. Today many if not most museums have an explicit policy of involving 'multiple voices' in the construction and interpretation of their collections, through audience research, collecting oral histories and setting the museum staff in open dialogue with visitor feedback.

New technologies are playing an increasing role in stimulating this sort of user-generated content (UGC): museums' websites invite emails and blogging from online visitors, visitors now create their own museum podcasts and downloadable audio tours, and some sites feature audio and video recording stations in the galleries. User-generated content seems to be the buzzword of the day and is commanding unprecedented levels of investment and speculation from leading media companies as well as start-ups. But what are the potential benefits and risks of the UGC game for content providers like museums?

#### **A definition of User-generated Content (UGC)**

To evaluate the value of UGC in the museum, it is useful to begin by defining it as distinct from other interactive experiences such as feedback, souvenirs and aide-mémoires.

In museum multimedia experiences such as websites, in-gallery kiosks, and multimedia tours, examples of 'feedback' include interactives where visitors vote or answer yes/no and multiple-choice questions. Through these experiences, visitors participate in a larger community, but are creating meaning within a framework that is completely constructed and controlled by the museum.

Souvenirs and aide-mémoires can be digital records of a visit or exhibit, such as 'bookmarks' in multimedia tours, maps showing where the visitor has been in the museum, or photos or other traces of their in-gallery activities that visitors create at designated points in the exhibition space. Again, the form of the interaction and input from visitors is highly structured and pre-determined by the museum.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "**Death of the Author**", *Aspen*, 1967; republished 1977 in *Image-Music-Text*.



Figures 1a&b: Above, an example of 'bookmarking' and 'aide mémoire' in an exhibition: A Visite+ online map of a visitor's route through an exhibition at La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris. Below: Souvenir or UGC? A visitor's personal record in Visite+, including photographs of the visitor taken at a designated point in the exhibition. Both images with the kind permission of Roland Topalian of La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, Paris.

Visite+ registration - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Eichier Edition Affichage Favoris Outils ?

**My Visite+ services**

Hello, you are registered with the Cité's Visite+ services.  
You can change your settings here.

**Your name or nickname**

**Your email address**

**Language**  Français  English  Español

**Mail options**  HTML  Text

Submit your settings: [OK]

my visits

my images

visitor newsletter

dossiers

conferences

 That's Canada! - Your postcard  
December 16, 2003

 The population of the world -  
April 7, 2005

To stop receiving our emails and be removed from the registered member database at the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, click here: [Unsubscribe](#)

In accordance with Article 34 of the French Data Protection Act (loi Informatique et Libertés) of January 6, 1978, the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie hereby informs you that the personal data you have supplied to us, which is essential for answering your request, shall be used solely by the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie for this purpose. This information is confidential and shall be kept by the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie. You are entitled to access and modify it whenever you wish. To do so, please send us an email: [contact us](#).

UGC, by contrast, is freer in form, giving visitors more scope for their creativity and personal expression. Visitor comments in comments books and the like are the earliest forms of UGC, but today digital media offer visitors new means of capturing UGC through blogs, podcasts, uploading images, video, sketches, and more.

### The elephant in the corner

Yet only a minority of visitors use new technologies for consuming museum interpretation, as was illustrated during a 2006 study at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). During the Matthew Barney exhibition at SFMOMA, visitors were offered a wide range of mobile and fixed media interpretation: audio tours on MP3 players, downloadable as podcasts, and on cell phones; a 'learning lounge' featuring multimedia kiosks and video as well as wall texts, a brochure, and other printed catalogue resources; and of course the exhibition website. Surveys of visitor use of the interpretation tools showed that most chose 'analog' media such as wall texts, catalogues and brochures over multimedia and audio tours as their primary sources of in-gallery interpretation, even though visitors report lower satisfaction with these.

## Use Pattern / Value Rating of Barney Interpretive Resources

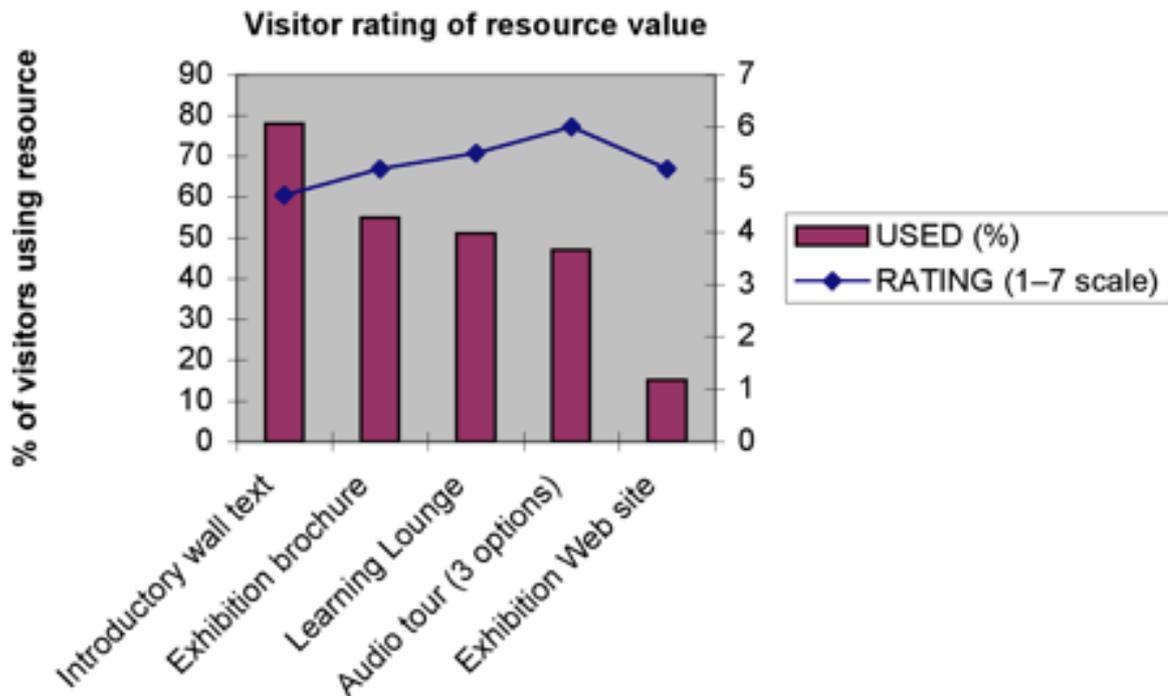


Figure 2: Use Pattern/Value Rating of Barney Interpretive Resources, from the study, “San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint Interactive Educational Technologies & Interpretation Initiative Evaluation”, Randy Korn & Associates, 2006.

As Peter Samis, Associate Curator for Interpretation at SFMOMA, observed:

It appears that traditional media – read: wall texts, brochures, and films or videos – consistently trump all our new media mishigas, at least in terms of use habits. That does not mean the old media work better...; only that museum-visitors are by-and-large an educated, highly literate crowd who feel comfortable with text and have learned to use it over long years of gallery-going practice. Our kiosks, touchscreens, PDAs, and podcasts still appeal to a distinct minority of our total visitors.<sup>2</sup>

So how do we justify the cost of new technologies? For museums on tight budgets, this is the big question we cannot ignore: the elephant in the corner! Museums have an ethical as well as financial responsibility to ensure their investments will truly lead to an improved or expanded visitor experience, and are not just ‘technology for technology’s sake’.

<sup>2</sup> Samis, P., Gaining Traction in the Vaseline: Visitor Response to a Multi-Track Interpretation Design for Matthew Barney: DRAWING RESTRAINT. In J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*. Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, published March 31, 2007 at <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/samis/samis.html>

The most successful applications of new technologies have been those that broaden the museum's audience, enable greater access to the collections, extend the visit and encourage community involvement in the museum. Here are a few notable examples:

### **1. Reaching visitors through their own personal devices**

Podcasts, downloadable audio tours, and mobile phone tours all make it possible to reach out to new audiences with minimal costs beyond content generation and marketing. This is not to say that content and promotion for the tour are insignificant costs if the museum is aiming at quality and mass reach, but in addition to saving on technology and on-site staffing costs, these platforms can appeal to audiences who do not typically take traditional audio tours. As an example, the 2007 study of Tate Modern's cellphone tour of the David Smith exhibition found that of the visitors who had never taken an audio tour before, 63.3% said they would take an audio tour of the permanent collection at Tate Modern if it were offered on cell phones. The novelty – or perhaps the familiarity – of the cellphone tour platform can get people listening who would never normally take an audio tour.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, the professional quality podcasts of a number of leading museums regularly appear in 'Top Podcasts' lists on iTunes and in the press, vying successfully for listeners' time with the podcasts of major media publishers.<sup>4</sup> As an example, SFMOMA's ArtCasts have been awarded 'Podcast of the Week' by *The Times* of London and ranked as the best museum podcast in America in its rankings of the Top Five American Museum Websites. SFMOMA also won the 2007 Best of the Web Award for its ArtCasts enhanced podcasts at Museums & the Web. Produced by Antenna Audio, the ArtCasts regularly include 'user-generated content' in the form of spoken word and sound art as well as visitor comments in the gallery. As Peter Samis has explained, the museum gets a good response to personal solicitations for UGC, either through 'vox pop' microphones in the galleries, or inviting writers, composers and youth to contribute to the podcasts' "Guest Take" segment. But response has been distinctly muted to generic, anonymous calls for UGC contributions.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Proctor, N., When In Roam: Visitor Response To Phone Tour Pilots In The US And Europe. In J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*. Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, published March 31, 2007 at <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/proctor/proctor.html>

<sup>4</sup> See for example SFMOMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery in London, and Tate.

<sup>5</sup> Samis, Peter, personal email correspondence with the author, 5 July, 2007.

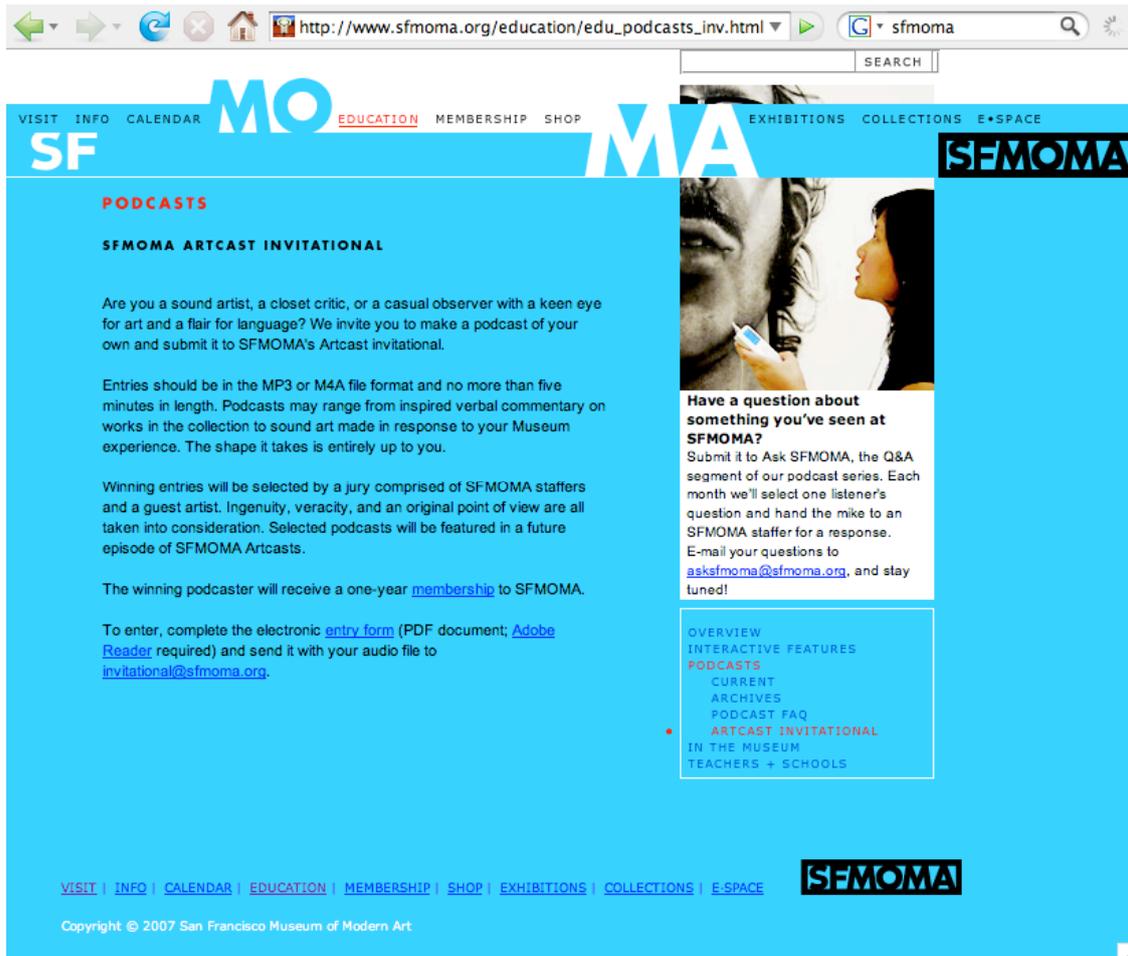


Figure 3: Screen shot of SFMOMA's website inviting contributions to the ArtCast series.

## 2. Speaking to visitors in their own language

The need of international visitors for interpretation in their own languages has always been a major driver for audio tours, and special descriptive audio tours for visually-impaired visitors were an early application of the technology to serve a wider range of visitors in the museum. As one visitor to the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Galleries commented on the audio-descriptive tour: "I've never spent so long viewing a single exhibition, and when I say 'viewing' as a totally blind person then it means something extraordinary. I actually felt I'd experienced the Holocaust Exhibition directly, which is rare if not a first!"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Visitor comment from unpublished comments book in the Holocaust Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, quoted with the kind permission of Paul Salmon, Holocaust Galleries, Imperial War Museum.



Figures 4a&b: Left: Visually-impaired visitors taking an audio descriptive tour on a museum-specific MP3 audio player, Antenna Audio's X-plorer™, designed in conjunction with leading accessibility groups for ease of use by those with low vision. Right: Deaf visitors discuss the British Sign Language Multimedia Tour at Tate Modern.

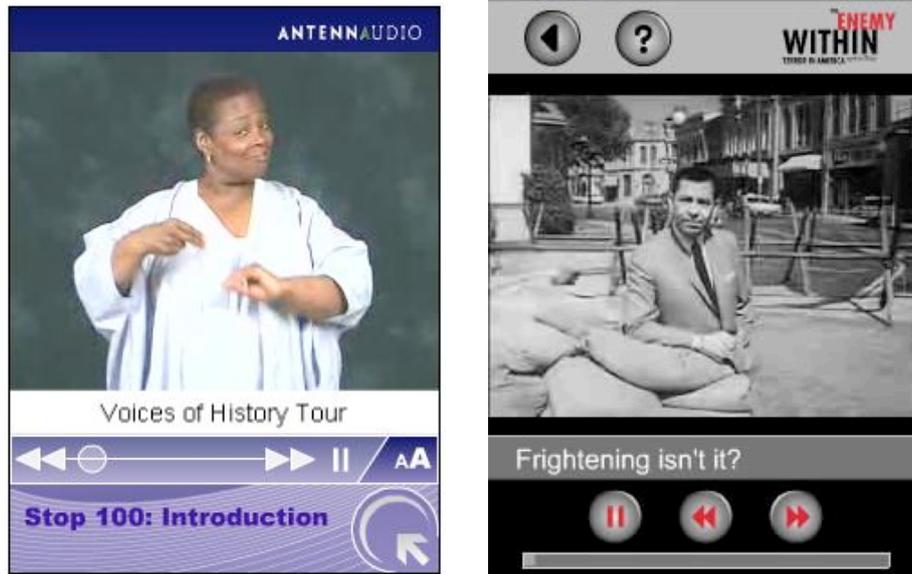
Now sign language and subtitled guides reach deaf and hearing-impaired visitors as well. A report from the Royal National Institute for the Blind on Tate Modern's 2003 British Sign Language Guide pilot noted:

All of the respondents liked this new system [of video sign language interpretation on a PDA]. They thought that it would make a visit to an art gallery much more interesting and fulfilling for them. They would definitely use a system like this and it would encourage them to visit an art gallery. They are conscious that art galleries usually have audio guides and feel excluded from this service.<sup>7</sup>

Like most aids to accessibility, subtitled tours and descriptor tours have proven to have a value to visitors without disabilities as well: reading subtitled audio while listening can reinforce learning and help with comprehension for visitors using the tour in a foreign language, while many fully-sighted visitors appreciate how optional detailed audio descriptions of artworks help them see and appreciate the exhibits more fully.

---

<sup>7</sup> Chris Bowden, Royal National Institute for the Deaf product evaluation report, 31 January, 2003.



Figures 5a&b: Left: An American Sign Language Guide of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Right: A subtitled guide from the International Spy Museum, Washington, DC.

### 3. **Bookmarking to extend the museum visit**

'Bookmarking' in multimedia tours has been shown to be extremely effective in stimulating post-visit interaction between the visitor and online or emailed information about the collection. With little promotion of the service to the visitor, Boston's Museum of Science found that 10% of visitors to its 2005 Star Wars exhibition visited their personal 'bookmark' webpages on the museum's website as a result of this service in the multimedia tour.<sup>8</sup>

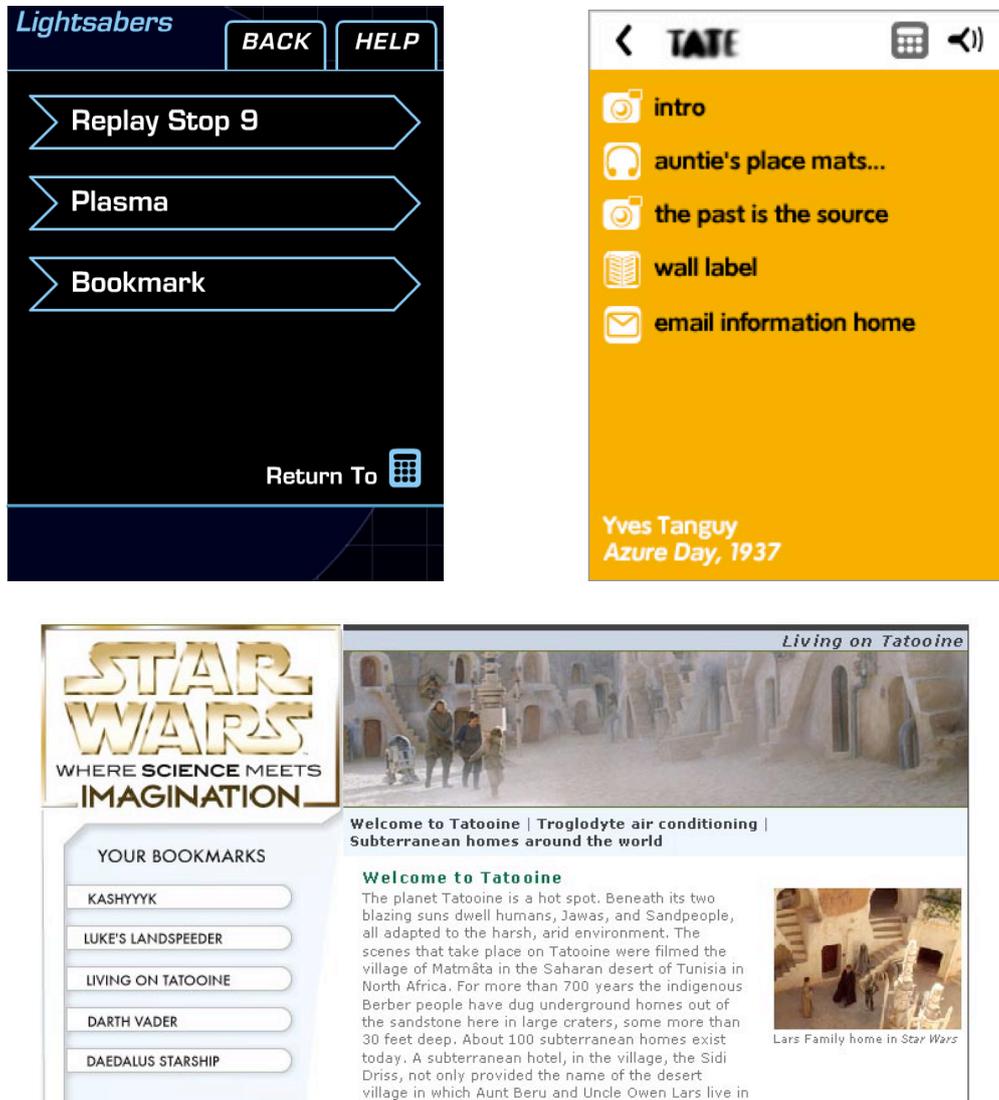
At Tate Modern where bookmarking was actively promoted to every tour user, a 2005 survey showed that nearly 1/5 of visitors who took the multimedia tour visited Tate's website afterwards as a result of receiving their tour 'bookmarks' by email. 43% of visitors used the bookmarking service, and nearly half of them (44%) clicked through from the bookmarks they received by email to Tate's website.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most impressive post-visit results have been obtained through the Visite+ system of La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris. In 2005, Roland Topalian reported a better than 50% return rate, with 104,000 personal post-visit websites created for three exhibitions,

<sup>8</sup> Sonja Hyde-Moyer, mini-workshop "The PDA Tour: We did it; So can you" at Museums & the Web, Vancouver, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Filippini-Fantoni, S. and J. Bowen, Bookmarking In Museums: Extending The Museum Experience Beyond the Visit?. In J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings. Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, published March 31, 2007 at <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/filippini-fantoni/filippini-fantoni.html>

and 70,000 visits.<sup>10</sup> Topalian attributes much of the traffic to ‘vanity surfing’: visitors returning to the museum website see the photograph they took of themselves in the exhibition – an excellent use of the ‘souvenir’ to sustain a connection with the museum and the exhibition once the visitor has returned home.



Figures 6a-c: Above left: Screen shot from the multimedia tour of *Star Wars: Where Science Meets Imagination* Exhibition at the Boston Museum of Science, 2005, and below, screen shot of a personalized webpage including bookmarks collected through the multimedia tour of the exhibition. Above right: Screen shot from Tate Modern’s multimedia tour, Collections Guide pilot with bookmarking, 2005.

#### 4. Leveraging blogs and community sites

<sup>10</sup> Topalian, R., Cultural Visit Memory: The Visite+ System Personalization and Cultural Visit Tracking Site, in J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds.). *Museums and the Web 2005: Proceedings*, Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, published March 31, 2005 at <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2005/papers/topalian/topalian.html>

While reaching beyond its walls, the museum can extend beyond its own website as well to reach audiences in blogs and community sites such as Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, Wikipedia and Del.icio.us. The Guggenheim in New York is only the most recent example of a museum using Wikipedia to promote an exhibition by adding an extensive summary of Richard Prince's retrospective to his entry in the online, free encyclopedia.<sup>11</sup>

In his keynote address to the 2007 Madrid conference, 'Agenda; Communicating the Museum', Will Gomperz, Director of Tate Media, described how Tate Britain had used Flickr to solicit photographs from the public for the 2007 exhibition, *How We Are: Photographing Britain*. Photographs from winners of the online competition were included in the exhibition, and can still be seen online on both Tate's website and Flickr:

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/howweare/slideshow.shtml>
- <http://www.flickr.com/groups/howwearenow>

The screenshot shows the Flickr interface for the 'How We Are Now' group. The top navigation bar includes 'Home', 'The Tour', 'Sign Up', and 'Explore'. A search bar is present on the right. The main content area is titled 'How We Are Now / Discuss'. On the left, there is a 'Current Discussion' list with titles like 'Anyone fancy a free visit?', 'The Final 40: Announcement of Winners', 'Incorrect spelling', 'Is anyone interested in selecting their 10 favourites in each category?', 'Broken screen @ Tate Britain', 'I KNEW I'd do this', 'Mystery Shopper', 'Will the winning photographs be shown on this website?', 'Dates of exhibition', 'The Exhibition', 'I cant see my pics on the slideshow!', and 'My photos are cannot be'. The main discussion on the right is titled 'The Final 40: Announcement of Winners' and features a post from 'Tate Gallery pro' with a 'TATE' logo. The post text reads: 'The judges (Val Williams and Susan Bright, co-curators of [How We Are: Photographing Britain](#); Derek Ridgers, photographer whose work is included in the exhibition; Heather Champ, photographer and member of the Flickr team; and Greg Whitmore, Observer Picture Editor) have now each selected two photographs from each of the four themes, and we are very pleased to announce the 'Final 40' winners. We would like to thank everyone who took part in How We Are Now for making the project such a success. The winners are: Portrait: Nana David Charding, Argyle Street Anthony Day, Untitled 2 Toomuchroom'. Small thumbnail images of the winning photographs are displayed next to their titles.

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Prince](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Prince) Consulted October 14, 2007.

Figure 7: Screen shot of Tate Britain's 'How We Are Now' competition winners in Flickr. From over 6,000 photographs submitted by more than 3,000 Flickr members, 40 photographs were selected for inclusion in the Tate Britain exhibition.

## **5. Exhibiting fragile artifacts through new technologies**

New digital presentation technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to make objects and artifacts available to the public despite their fragile or friable condition. A number of 3-D scanning technologies now allow objects and architecture to be studied in high quality detail and manipulated by visitors online or in kiosk environments. Similarly, the British Library's 'Turning the Pages' technology presents rare books and manuscripts on large touch screens, inviting visitors to literally 'turn the pages' of the books onscreen with a startlingly 'real' effect. Microsoft is popularizing Turning the Pages through its new Vista operating system, which has been developed to operate with the British Library's technology.<sup>12</sup> As Clive Izard from the British Library has remarked, the introduction of Turning the Pages in its Web 2.0 version "marks a change in how libraries will think about access and interpretation".<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.armadillosystems.com/ttp\\_commercial/news.html](http://www.armadillosystems.com/ttp_commercial/news.html) Consulted October 14, 2007.



Figure 8: Turning the Pages, book and manuscript presentation technology, from the British Library and Armadillo Systems. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>

### **There is no silver bullet...**

Time is on the museum's side in the application of new technologies for interpretation as the generations become ever more expert in their use and costs come down with wider adoption. Nonetheless, there is also a risk of reinforcing the 'digital divide' through a myopic or monolithic rollout of technologies in the galleries. Not everyone wants or can afford a cellphone, a personal MP3 player, or Internet access, so no single interpretation tool is a perfect solution to communicating the museum's message.

Indeed, the SFMOMA study reveals that the more interpretation tools visitors use, the greater satisfaction they are likely to report with their visit. In the chart below, we see visitors' reported satisfaction with the exhibition climbing as the number of interpretive offerings consulted during the exhibition increases.

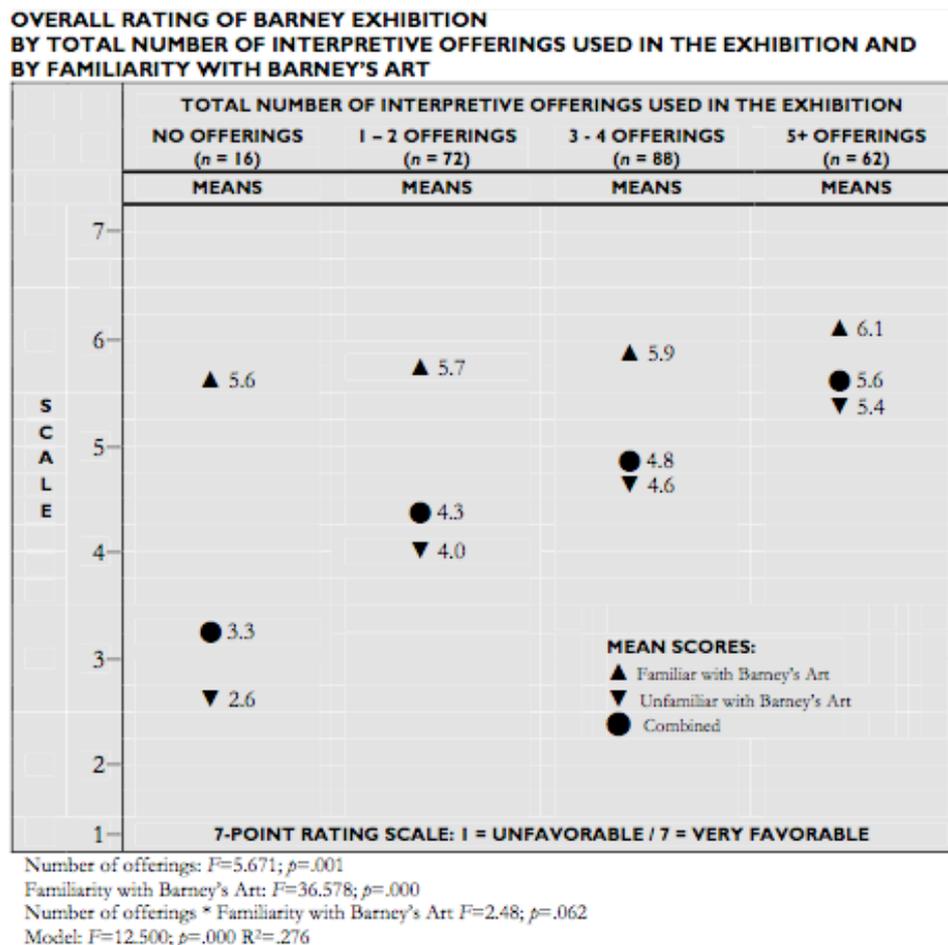


Figure 9: Overall rating of Barney exhibition by total number of interpretive offerings used in the exhibition and by familiarity with Barney's art, from the study, "San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint Interactive Educational Technologies & Interpretation Initiative Evaluation", Randy Korn & Associates, 2006.

With each interpretation platform they use, visitors are actively voting to learn, making an investment whose dividends are greater pleasure in the experience for the visitor, and a more engaged public for the museum which is more likely to translate into active support for the museum and its mission.

### UGC: Learning through teaching

As Peter Samis has argued, "The most effective interpretation strategy is born from a mix of the analog and the digital, providing visitors with a menu of diverse yet complementary offerings."<sup>14</sup> New technologies can offer far richer means of telling the museum's story with images, video, graphics and animations in addition to audio. Yet we have only just begun to comprehend, let alone tap, the revolutionary potential of the new interactive platforms. Instead of simply providing a more expensive replacement for traditional ways of telling the museum's story, these technologies can become tools for

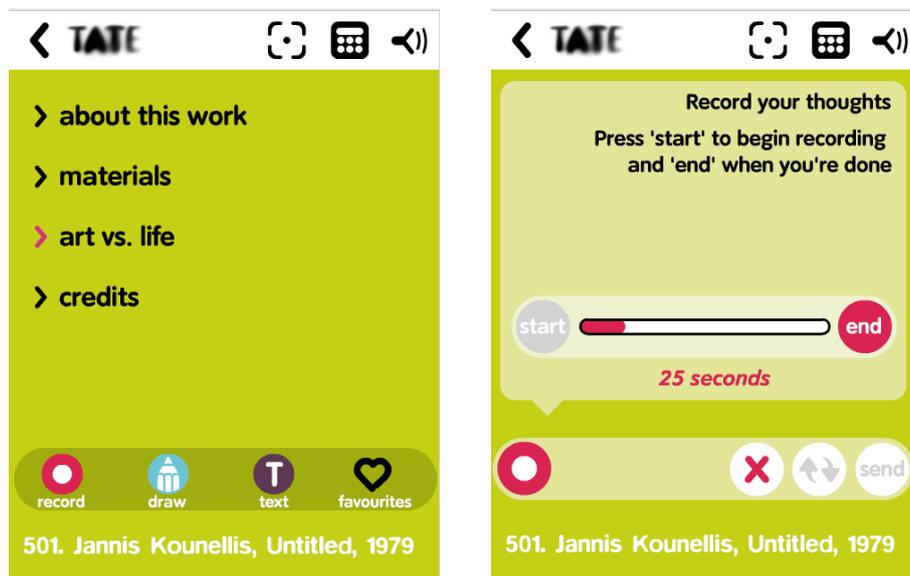
<sup>14</sup> Samis, op. cit.

inspiring and empowering the visitor to tell his or her own story of the collection through user-generated content.

New in-gallery solutions for capturing visitors' spoken, written, and sketched responses to what they see turn visitors into teachers, active interpreters and explorers of their world rather than passive recipients of the narrowcast voice of the Museum Author-ity. Antenna Audio is currently working Tate Modern in London and the Pompidou Centre in Paris to develop and trial UGC tools on the multimedia tour and mobile phone tour platforms.

### ***Tate Modern's Educational Pilot Project<sup>15</sup>***

Tate Modern's pilot project is initially aimed at secondary school students visiting as part of a teacher-led group. Pupils have the option to take the specially-designed, free multimedia guide for the permanent collection, provided on a handheld PDA. The content on the guide is specifically written to engage students with the artworks and encourage pupils to explore, evaluate and contextualize the works of modern and contemporary artists, through specific interactive tasks, opinion polls and questions. Pupils also have the opportunity to record their responses and create content directly on to the PDA, using drawing, audio recording and note taking tools. The content the students produce is then loaded from the PDA to a website accessible outside the museum.



<sup>15</sup> Jane Burton, Curator of Interpretation at Tate Modern and Creative Director of Tate Media, will publish the results of the pilot in Spring, 2008.

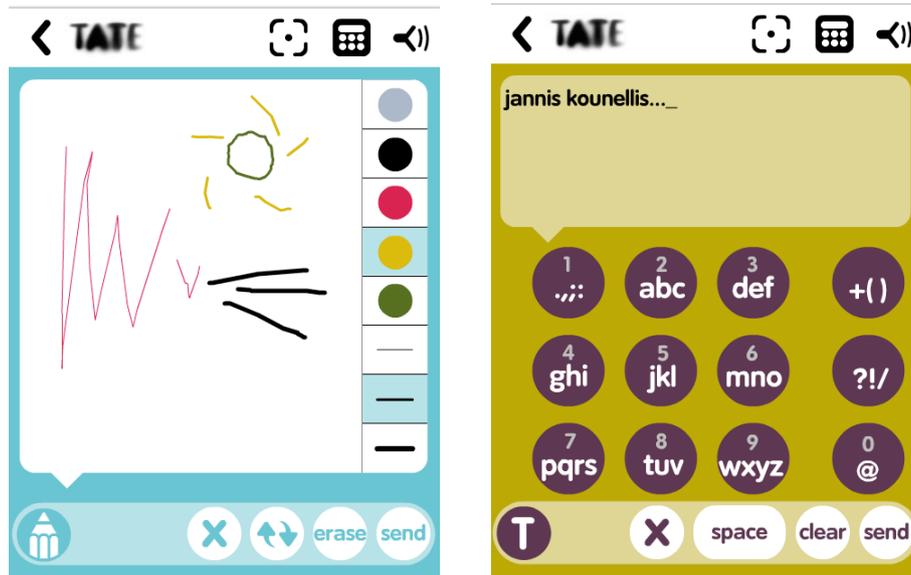


Figure 10: Screen shots of the UGC tools in Tate Modern's Educational Pilot Project.

Teachers and pupils are able to access a website prior to their visit where they receive practical information about using the guides, suggested lesson plans and learning objectives. Following the visit, each student has access to the website, through their own password protected account. Once logged on to their account, the pupils are able to filter the content collected and generated during their visit and upload new content. They can then use this to design multimedia presentations, visual diaries, and log books to make connections with their own art practice and share ideas. It is envisaged that at GCSE and GCE level students' multimedia presentations may form part of research projects or personal studies.

### ***CineLab at Centre Pompidou***<sup>16</sup>

The Centre Pompidou Research and Innovation Institute is developing a new film annotation software called *Lignes de temps* (Timelines). This web 2.0 software allows online users to annotate the time lines of films by attaching their audio, images, and text to specific moments in the films' timelines, and then share their annotated time lines with others through the *Lignes de temps* website. As part of the CineLab project, the Centre Pompidou is also working with a team of French research institutions and Antenna Audio to develop mobile annotation tools that will allow visitors to film exhibitions and mobile phone users to capture their comments on films for upload to the *Lignes de temps* website.

From December 7, 2007 to January 7, 2008, these mobile annotation tools will be trialed in conjunction with the exhibition, *Erice – Kiarostami: correspondences*. As the exhibition website explains, the aim of the exhibition is to elucidate the dialogue between these innovative filmmakers:

<sup>16</sup> Vincent Puig, Deputy Director of the Centre Pompidou's Cultural Development Department in charge of the newly founded Institute for Research and Innovation (IRI), will present the progress of the CineLab project throughout its lifetime until 2009.

The cinema directors and artists Víctor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami both work on the hazy frontier that separates cinema from video installations, photography and painting. The 'Correspondences' exhibition, presented by the Centre Pompidou, creates a dialogue between the works by Erice and Kiarostami, revolving around the themes and issues they so often share: childhood, landscapes, roads, trees, silence, etc. It is also an opportunity to screen all of the works the two directors have produced over their careers, and to provide Víctor Erice with carte blanche to present around twenty films that are linked to childhood and which have inspired his own work.<sup>17</sup>

Although the exhibition has been presented previously in Barcelona and Madrid, the Paris edition widens the conversation between Erice and Kiarostami to include the community of visitors as well by means of a multimedia tour that includes UGC tools. Visitors will be able to audio record their comments on the exhibits and even selected scenes within the films, sketch and write their thoughts through the handheld computer. These annotations are then uploaded to the Lignes de temps site on eight in-gallery kiosks where visitors can synchronize their comments with specific moments in the films' timelines and share their in-gallery experiences with a larger public.

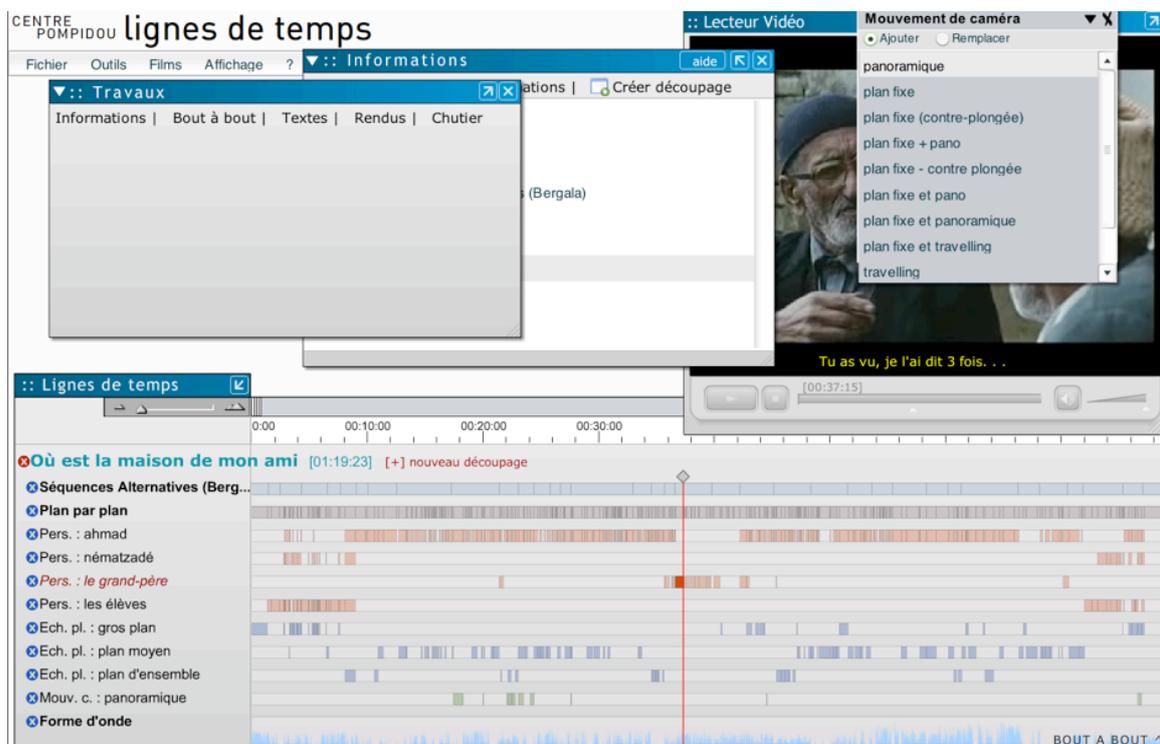


Figure 11: Screen shot of the Centre Pompidou's *Lignes de Temps* website, allowing users to share their annotated timelines of films online. Reproduced with the kind

<sup>17</sup>

<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Manifs.nsf/AllExpositions/4794DC37B5ACD744C12571B60050103E?OpenDocument&sessionM=2.2.1&L=2> Consulted 12 October 2007.

permission of Bernard Stiegler, Director of the Centre Pompidou's Cultural Department.

### ***Museums and Visitors in Conversation***

In both the Tate and Pompidou projects, UGC tools are deployed in the context of high quality, professional interpretive content about the exhibits. The views of curators, artists, and other authorities guide visitors through their gallery experience, but at each exhibit the visitors have the opportunity to react and interact with the handheld technology.

The next step in cultivating the creative dialogue with the visitor may be to use the UGC tools in conjunction with voting and polling applications in the handheld tour to ask visitors what they want to know about the museum and its collection. In conjunction with focused audience research, we can use UGC to find out what visitors already know about artworks and artifacts, and what further information they are most interested to have. Developed in response to these expressed needs of the visitors, the museum's official interpretation then becomes an active dialogue with the visitor, rather than exclusively a one-way lecture from experts.

We are only at the beginning of investigating different approaches to professional content to stimulate and enrich the dialogue between the museum and the visitor, and much is left to learn regarding the right balance between 'official' museum content and UGC. But what is already clear is that no matter how sensitively the museum voice speaks, or in how much rich media, it can shut down dialog with the visitors unless specifically pitched to stimulate a response from visitors. That is to say, high quality, official content created by the museum plays a pivotal role in UGC: visitors go to museums precisely because they want to hear what the experts have to say about their collections. If that professional content is appropriately pitched and deployed, it will also inspire visitors to enter into a dialog with the museum and one another, taking the museum experience to a new level and definition of interactivity in the galleries.

### **Process, not product**

Wary of turning the museum into a 'reality TV'-quality experience, many museum professionals have questioned the value of UGC, which is likely to be less well informed in its interpretations than museum-authored content, and less polished in its presentation. While it is true that visitors will not necessarily produce 'better quality' interpretation than the museum's own, the process of authoring that content has an educational value and impact that outstrips what visitors will retain from passively consuming the museum's message. User-generated content is about the process, not the product.

As a case in point, the number one use of the Internet is email: people wanting to communicate, share information and recount their stories with others. Far from leading to the death of writing as was initially feared by some, email has turned us into a generation of authors, building relationships with

more 'pen pals' worldwide than even the great correspondents of the Classical and Grand Tour periods.

Similarly, new technologies that support UGC have the potential to transform the visitor's dialog with the museum into a regular, active participation in cultural life that fundamentally changes the visitor experience and helps extend it beyond the museum's walls. The more the visitor invests in the museum experience – the more time s/he spends, the more interpretation tools s/he uses, and the more effort s/he puts into voting, commenting, and creating in response to the visit – the more memorable and pleasurable the visit will be, the stronger the relationship between the visitor and the museum, and the more likely it is to extend beyond the individual visitor to embrace and inspire a larger community of 'museum advocates'.

### **A new approach to content management**

The other understandable concern with UGC is the potentially Herculean task of managing large quantities of user-generated content: if UGC tools and activities become too popular, there is risk of museums becoming victims of their own success. Who will listen to, read, not to mention edit and censor all of the visitors' contributions?

Internet-based businesses and organizations have honed a number of strategies and technologies for managing UGC from which museums can learn. Star ranking systems such as those used on travel and retail sites provide a way for visitors to promote the best UGC to higher levels of visibility. Wikipedia's community editing principles have proven effective in quickly eliminating offensive and inaccurate information. And online auction sites would never have survived let alone thrived if it weren't for the desire of users to protect the quality of their own content and their on-line reputations. In Tate Modern's experiment, for example, visiting students will create online presentations of their visits which will be reviewed by teachers and classmates: this audience alone serves to focus efforts and discourage frivolous uses of the UGC tools in the tour.

Nonetheless, the UGC adventure requires a new approach to content management on the part of the museum, and not just on the technology front. As Will Gomperz from Tate Media has argued, while new media such as the online networking and UGC-driven sites represent significant new opportunities to engage a wider audience in new ways, in order for museums to take advantage of these opportunities, they must think of themselves differently: not as repositories or collections of precious artifacts, but as 'content businesses'.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps ironically, part of being a content business in the Web 2.0 era is relaxing control over content: it's about creating spaces in which a range of authors can collaborate and share their conversations with the museum. It's about making the museum's high quality, professional

---

<sup>18</sup> Will Gomperz, "What's happening in new media at the Tate and other museums?", paper presented at the conference Agenda: Communicating the Museum, Madrid, 2007; proceedings online at <http://www.communicatingthemuseum.com/synthesis.html>

content available to the widest possible audience and building communities of interest both inside and beyond the museum. Partnerships with other content producers, distributors, and online destinations will play a key role in helping the museum achieve its objectives both in terms of audience reach and funding.<sup>19</sup>

Since the dawn of the Internet, there have been several projects in the museum world that have lobbied for museums to share content and collaborate in building common repositories of assets, most notably images. So far none of these has succeeded, each for a variety of reasons, both individual and endemic to the industry and time; but as has been said before, 'pioneers always get scalped'. With the advent of UGC and the community ethos of the new Web 2.0 world, perhaps it is time for the settlers to come in and finally reap the rewards of those early pathfinders' efforts. Our visitors are ready to share their content and creativity with the museum; are we in the museum business ready to open our practices and stories to include their voices? Perhaps even more radically, can we envision contributing cross-institutionally to common databases of images, audio, video and text that will fuel creative communities both inside the museum and beyond?

### **The challenge ahead**

For those wishing to take up the call to UGC action, our challenge now is threefold:

1. Continue to hone our skills and strategies in producing high quality interpretation that inspires and educates the public, while
2. Inspiring and empowering visitors to add to that body of professional content with their own interpretations and stories of the museum, thereby
3. Turning visitors into teachers and making them active and effective champions for the museum.

As Barthes might have it: let the Author(ities) set the stage for the visitors to sing.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.