

A Note on the Picasso Museum Project

Professor Chan Screven, Director of ILVS and co-editor of the *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, recently returned from two months in France last Fall where he was working at the Musee Picasso in Antibes in France's Cote d'Azur. Picasso lived and worked in the Chateau Grimaldi in 1946, which later became the Picasso Museum in Antibes after donating the paintings he did at Chateau Grimaldi, and ceramics and sculpture of the same period.

Screven trained museum staff in formative, remedial and other evaluation methods using the museum's Picasso collection, galleries, and interpretation needs as the framework for training. The primary aim was to provide practical experience in formative and remedial evaluation methods to enable staff to incorporate these methods into ongoing efforts to improve their public's understanding of modern art. Working as a team, the staff learned to use feedback from the testing of advance organizers, corrective strategies for misconceptions about modern art, and in-gallery interpretation materials to improve visitor orientation and the quality of attention and interaction with art objects. Curatorial, exhibits, and education staff, including the museum's director, took an active part. Video tapes and observation data provided ongoing records of progress which will be used inhouse and with other art museums in France.

The first two or three weeks were accompanied by staff concern over "ugly" first-stage mockup materials in and around galleries and possible negative public reactions. But the staff soon found even sophisticated art museum visitors hardly noticed the poor aesthetics and usually were complimentary about the efforts to tell them useful things about the art works. After this acclimation period, Screven reports that the project was well received—both at the Picasso Museum and by DMF inspectors (Directions des Museums de France) who administer French museums. There now is enthusiasm and strong support for continuing the methods. A DMF proposal is pending that would extend this work through 1991. It is hoped that the Picasso Museum in Antibes eventually can serve as a place where French curators and others can see results of evaluation and audience oriented approaches in an art museum environment. Screven has recommended that a national research consortium be established to conduct research and to generate a pool of specialist-consultants to help member museums in similar efforts.

The Picasso project was funded by the Ministry of Culture and Communication as part of their interest in enriching art museum experiences for the general public. Seminars and workshops conducted by Screven in France over seven years (most recently at the Louvre) helped lay some of the groundwork for current French interest in evaluation methods. The Picasso project is one of the products of this effort.

Strawman or Scarecrow? Some Thoughts on the St. John/Hilke/Shettel Discussion of Metaphors

Lisa Roberts

Manager of Public Programming
Chicago Botanic Garden

Coming from a botanic garden, I feel compelled to point out that it takes not only wolves and worms but also crows, weeds, and raccoons to understand the complexity of the whole cornfield "organism." In other words, if I may mix my metaphors, both the lens and the object on which we train it provide but one limited glimpse into what is a rich, multifaceted phenomenon; and it is the whole collective of such views that make up the complete cornfield picture.

The last issue of *Visitor Behavior* featured three articles about the appropriateness and use of various research strategies in visitor studies. Most befitting was the authors' use of metaphor to discuss the use of metaphor. Although the articles were presented in something of a debate fashion, my sense is that the authors are in fact less at odds than might appear. Few, I think, would quibble with the opening comments above—indeed Hilke and St. John said as much. My purpose in opening thus was to shift the discussion a tad.

Because the articles focused so closely on differences over the usefulness (and also novelty) of various metaphors,

a terribly basic question was overlooked that stands at the heart of the issue: "What do you want to know?" Any assessment of metaphor or method must take into account the nature of the problem at hand.

What do you want to know?

Mark St. John's characterization of metaphor as "lens" is quite apt. For the linguistic and cognitive structures through which we view the world act as a lens that shapes what we see and make of it. Each of his examples—experimental research, journalism, narrative, and so on—provide one kind of lens with its own peculiar language and criteria for looking and judging. Each reveals a distinct aspect of the museum setting. The question facing the evaluator/researcher, then, is "Of what use are these various metaphors to me? On what basis should I choose to apply one over another?"

Hence, the question: "What do you want to know?" The choice of a particular metaphor or method must be governed in part by the nature of the problem or question one wishes to

address. Do you want to evaluate exhibit aesthetics? The architecture metaphor may be of use. What about the fairness of the message? Investigative journalism may be for you. (Although as Hilke pointed out, it's not clear that we aren't applying some of these approaches already under different guides. Only the names, as they say, have been changed.)

The danger of turning to alternative metaphors such as these, and I suspect the reason that they've provoked an outcry, is that many do not consider what has come to be viewed as a key measure of exhibit effectiveness: the visitor. Having finally succeeded in beginning to make the museum community aware of the importance of the visitor in the exhibit equation, it is hardly easy to take them back out. Furthermore, it can be argued that it would be methodologically unsound *not* to consider them. After all, exhibits are by definition created for public use; they exist in relation to a viewer who makes sense of them. For that reason alone it would be faulty to study them apart from their public component.

Some of St. John's metaphors do deal with visitors: anthropology, for example, can provide us an ethnography of visitor "culture"; narrative may help us inquire into the ways visitors encode their experiences. Others, however, deal with modes of criticism that are based on different standards and criteria of success: the architecture metaphor is more suited to address design standards of "fit"; the criticism metaphor offers something for the exhibit "connoisseur." (It would be a useful exercise to see specific examples of how some of these metaphors might be realistically applied.)

Exhibit evaluation: Still a goal-reference approach

One final question, then, faces the museum evaluator/researcher. It's been asked many times and answered many ways, but it bears repeated consideration: What constitutes an effective exhibit? By what criteria do we deem it a "success"? Visitor satisfaction provides one measure of success. Information transfer and interactive behavior provide others. But take out the visitor and what have you left? (Does a tree falling in the forest make a sound if nobody is there to hear it? Does an exhibit "work" if no one is there to experience it?)

To the extent that exhibits are created for the public, it seems unconscionable to leave the public out of our definitions of success. At the same time, other professional interests enter into the making of a good exhibit: aesthetic standards, political aims, scholarship. A few exhibits, after

all, notably art exhibits, are created in part for a professional community and are subject to peer review. What constitutes "success," then, finally depends on what an exhibit was intended to achieve in the first place. In other words, exhibit evaluation must refer first and foremost to exhibit goals.

It is the nature of these goals that finally drives the selection of appropriate tools of assessment. That's all that these metaphors and methods are, after all: tools. To argue their merits without reference to the job at hand is as futile as claiming that a hoe is better than a sprinkler. "Better at *what?*" is the question. Better at assessing visitor reaction? Better at gauging how well two exhibits complement one another?

It is a sign of museums' evolution of thought that their exhibit goals have come to encompass the visitor — a change that is undoubtedly tied to shifts in the exhibit development process. Team approach to exhibit design has become something of a watchword today. Educators, curators, and designers are now understood each to contribute distinct perspectives and goals to the development of an exhibit. If we are to take these multiple inputs seriously, a multifaceted approach to evaluation may be in order. Indeed, it is already being practiced in facilities like the Saint Louis Zoo. Perhaps this is where the value of some of these alternative metaphors is to be found. Their application, however, must ultimately refer to specific questions that relate to specific goals of achievement. *That* is the true measure of their appropriateness and use.

Strawman or scarecrow?

St. John's promotion of alternative metaphors was offered in light of perceived shortcomings of traditional experimental research. And, indeed, he admits, he may simply have created a "strawman" to oppose. I suggest that what he's given us is in fact a scarecrow. To criticize experimental research methods for their limitations is to fall into the same narrow-minded thinking he condemns. After all, let's not forget, it is that very experimental research that has helped open our eyes to the complexities that these other metaphors are proposed to address.

In the end, what the wolf can't see, perhaps the crow will find. But if we shoo either of them away, we lose one more piece of the whole. Hence, let's not get too caught up pitting one metaphor against the other, and instead work to understand what each has to offer, pitfalls and all. □

DON'T FORGET TO RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TO VISITOR BEHAVIOR

OR

JOIN THE VISITOR STUDIES ASSOCIATION