

TEXT in the MUSEUM

WHY, WHAT, HOW MUCH,  
AND FOR WHOM

# WHY: COMMUNICATION

- What is the exhibition attempting to accomplish?
- Can that be done without text?
- Not all types of text or interpretative material are appropriate for each type of exhibition
- A combination of stylistics modes can reach more viewers



Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas



Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas



Menil Collection, Rothko gallery, Houston, Texas



Menil Collection, Houston, Texas



Menil Collection, Houston, Texas



Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, "Santa Cruz Collections," 2012





Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, "All You Need is Love," 2011

# FOR WHOM



Frequent visitors  
Visit a few sections  
at a time  
Difficulty with navigation  
Distracted by children



Moderate frequency  
visitors  
Difficulty with navigation  
Distracted by children



Visits accompanied  
by adults  
No outlet for energy  
Difficulty with under-  
standing  
Limited by parents

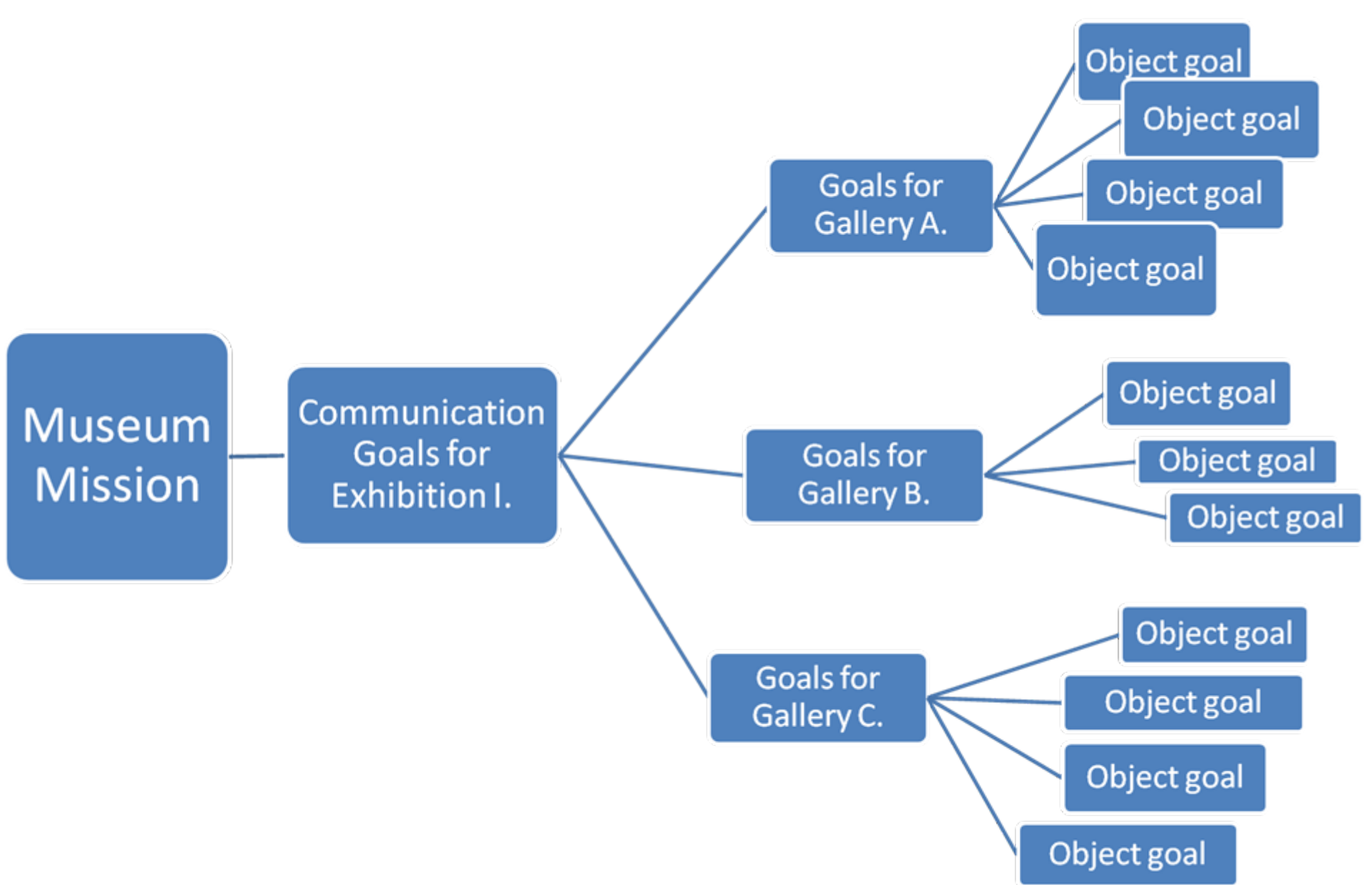


# Voice

- Language should be appropriate for audience (so you must know your audience!)
- Variety of view points
- Balance of perspectives—curatorial, educational, marketing, design, public
- Authorial voice vs community voice

# WHAT

- Identify objectives of the exhibition
- Objectives derive from or tie to the museum's mission
- Textual information should relate to those objectives
- Information can be shared via words, visuals (film, photographs), sound, interactives



# HOW

- Writing style
  - Traditionally linear, factual,
  - New rules
    - Introduce “hook”
    - Use simpler (not dumber) language
    - Ask questions
    - Express doubt
    - Explain debate
    - Reveal relevancy

The Assumption of the Virgin  
tempera on panel, probably c. 1385  
**PAOLO DI GIOVANNI FEI**  
Sienese, mentioned 1369–1411  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.71

# Plate

Iran, Sasanian period.

6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE

Silver and gilt

Gift of Arthur M. Sackler

ARTHUR M. SACKLER GALLERY S1987.124

A pair of ibex flanks the base of a stylized tree or vine heavy with fruit, flowers, and leaves; peahens, peacocks, and pheasants stand along the edge. Cultivated landscapes probably inspired the imagery, which is also found on stucco decoration from the sixth to the eighth century. Another characteristic of later Sasanian metalwork is the spot gilding that highlights specific details.

## Plate

Iran, Sasanian period,

6th–7th century CE

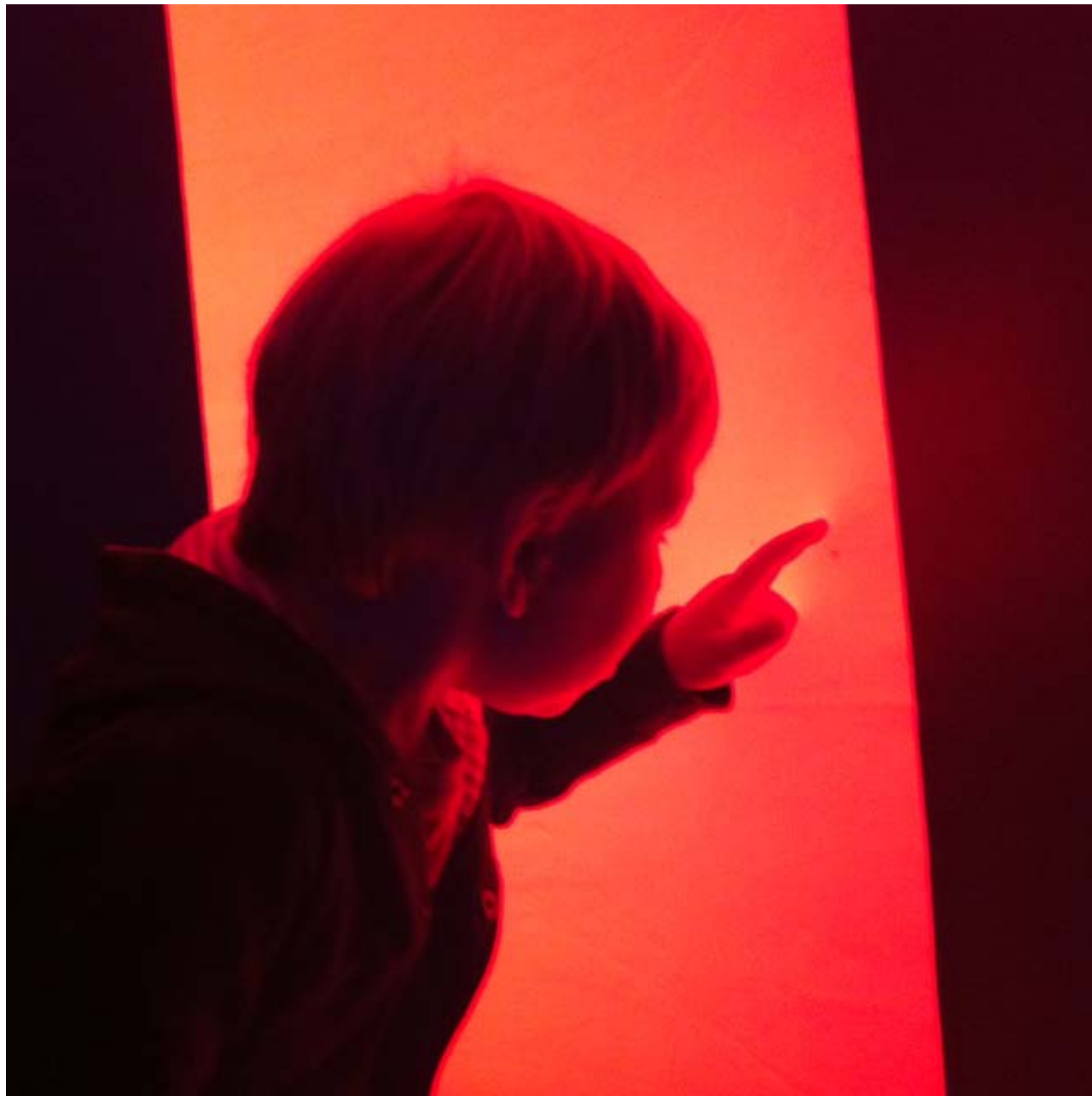
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Mirazozo Architects of  
Light, Edinburgh Fringe,  
2011

**Kasimir Malevich** 1879-1935

Born and worked Russia

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***Dynamic Suprematism*** 1915 or 1916

Supremus

Oil on canvas

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Malevich's abstract paintings belong to the intense period of artistic experimentation that coincided with the 1917 Revolution in Russia. He abandoned representative images in favour of what he called Suprematism in 1915. In these works he used severely reduced geometrical forms – most famously a black square on a white canvas – whose meditative quality served as secular equivalents to Russian icons. He soon moved towards greater energy in paintings such as *Dynamic Suprematism* in which forms pull and push without relying on any reference to the physical world.

**Postcard available**

Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1978  
T02319



Tate Modern, London



ZUID-NEDERLANDSE  
SCHOOL  
ca. 1400

TAFERELEN UIT HET LEVEN  
VAN MARIA

van links naar rechts

DE ONTMOETING VAN ANNA  
EN JOACHIM  
DE GEBOORTE VAN MARIA  
MARIA DOOR CHRISTUS GEZEGEND  
EN DOOR ENGELN GEKROOND  
DE OPDRACHT IN DE TEMPEL

ÉCOLE DES PAYS-BAS  
MÉRIDIONAUX  
vers 1400

SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE  
LA VIERGE

de gauche à droite

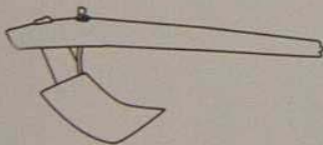
LA RENCONTRE D' ANNE ET DE  
JOACHIM  
LA NAISSANCE DE LA VIERGE  
LA VIERGE BÉNIE PAR LE CHRIST  
ET COURONNÉE PAR LES ANGES  
LA PRÉSENTATION AU TEMPLE

Inv. 4883



## Plow (reproduction handle) 1838

This is the oldest surviving John Deere plow. Its steel blade easily cut through the roots of tough prairie grass and was crucial in opening America's central prairies to farming.



Gift of Deere & Company

# HOW MUCH

Studies in the US show visitors can tolerate:

- about 50 words on object labels,
- no more than 150 words on room labels ,
- 300 words max. on longer introductory texts

Most visitors spend **10 seconds** in front of an object—7 to read the label, 3 to examine the thing itself.

For most people museum fatigue sets in after about 45 minutes.



**Painted terracotta figurine,  
perhaps a bull**  
Made in Cyprus  
About 6th century BC  
From tomb 83 at Amathus

Turner Bequest Excavations  
GR 1894.11-1.193 (Terracotta A 180)

**Painted terracotta figurine of  
a horseman**  
Made in Cyprus  
About 7th century BC  
From tomb 36 at Amathus

Turner Bequest Excavations  
GR 1894.11-1.89 (Terracotta A 166)

**Painted terracotta figurine of a  
stag**  
Made in Cyprus  
About 6th century BC  
From tomb 217 at Amathus

Turner Bequest Excavations  
GR 1894.11-1.488 (Terracotta A 182)

# Exhibition Text Guidelines

Lord and Lord, *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, 2001

<b>Exhibit Element</b>	<b>Word Length</b>	<b>Type Size</b>
<i>Main Titles:</i> Identifiers	3–8 words	To be sized as appropriate for the size of the exhibit unit and the context of viewing. 2–3 inches (5–7.5 cm.) is often used as a standard
<i>Subtitles:</i> Level 1 – Key points	10–25 words	100–120 point. This is usually the most important written information in the display
<i>Group Texts:</i> Level 2 – Explanatory text	50–60 words	30–40 point. This text usually explains why the key point is important or describes a group of objects in an exhibit
<i>Detail Text:</i> Level 3 – Discussion	60–80 words	24–32 point. This text explores the argument and implications of what is presented in an exhibit
<i>Artefact Text:</i> Level 4 – Individual items	10–20 words	18–22 point. These words present information on specific objects on display. They may be on individual or group labels



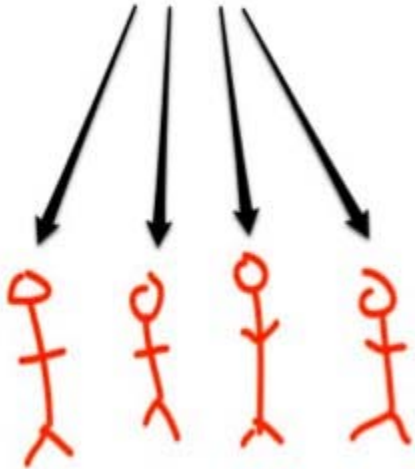
Collage making, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History



# COMMUNICATING IN 2 DIRECTIONS

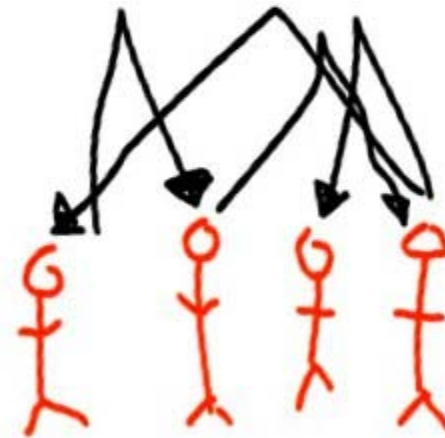
## THE PAST

Authority is **content** provider



## THE FUTURE

Authority is **platform** provider



What makes this comment wall special?  
It allows people to respond to each other.



National Vending Machine Project, Amsterdam



Break up wall, "All You Need is Love," Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, 2010



“All You Need is Love,” Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, 2010



## Write your own label

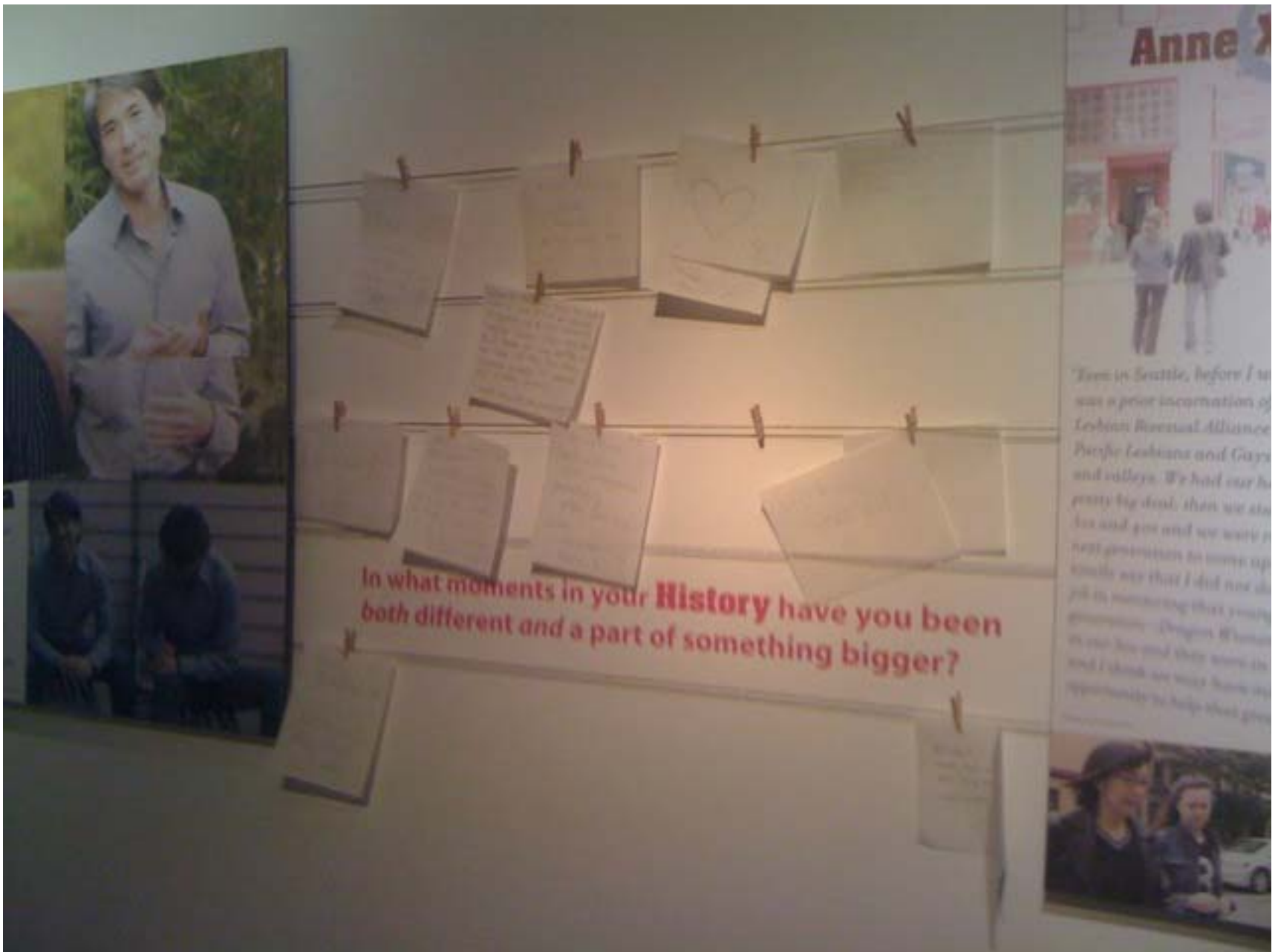
This device is called the apple pulper. You get a cricket bat and beat the apples to a pulp. This is a good anger management cure.



How do fictitious interpretations affect the way we engage with objects?

Name: Mel M. ☺

Age: 17



Wing Luke Museum, Seattle, Washington state



San Francisco Mobile Museum, California



EVALUATION

Front-end

Formative

Summative

Visitor Studies Association

*ILVS Review*



Australian Museum, Sydney, student workshop, "Birds of Paradise"



# Kids liked:

Australian Museum 2010

- short, bold text
- overview information rather than detailed labels
- well designed and spaced labels that were placed in close proximity to the object
- simple language that did not exclude young children or those whose first language is not English
- catchy second-person text that engaged them personally to 'imagine', 'consider' or contemplate a scenario
- humour
- clever or interesting topic sentence or heading
- text in an interactive or on a digital screen
- bullet points in labels
- labels that directed you to look at a particular aspect of an object that wouldn't initially be apparent
- a mystery trail throughout the exhibition
- different points of view in text or in interpretive strategy (i.e. POV of an animal or predator)

## Kids disliked:

- text in general
- too much text
- plain colours
- cluttered design
- descriptive language when it didn't have obvious information
- excessive use of bolded text that distracted the eye from reading the sentence
- exhibition-themed booklets that required too much immediate attention and distracted them from the displays.





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**Jean Dubuffet** 1901–1985

Born and worked France

***The Busy Life*** 1953

La Vie affairée

Oil on canvas

This work belongs to a series that Dubuffet called 'beaten pastes' because the main paint layer resembled butter, into which he scratched the graffiti-like figures. He wrote 'I am at a loss to explain just what it was in these paintings that gave me - that still gives me - such a keen satisfaction. It probably has something to do with the physical pleasure derived from spreading freely, with a large spatula as broad as one's hand, this beautiful white paste... then letting the long knife wander over the smooth paste, tracing with such perfect ease graffiti of sonorous colours.'

Postcard available

Presented by the artist 1966  
T00667



## The Bigger Picture

**Jean Dubuffet, *The Busy Life***

*Brian Eno, musician*

Certain paintings make me imagine what they would sound like as music. Often they suggest music that doesn't yet exist - and invite you to make it. This painting does that for me. I see how everything is layered and scraped away, how figures emerge from the field of hyperactive mess, how accidents get muddled up with intentions. I think of a dark, jagged African hip-hop, stray voices shouting in and out of the mix and a mosque with a bad PA system wailing in the background. This painting is a frozen smear through time. It's like looking at a whole series of paintings which, almost accidentally, ended up in the same place, jostling for attention and getting tangled together. Dubuffet's work looks like a complete adventure, a journey he started without proper maps, following where it led. That seems to me like a good modern feeling, an embrace of being alive in lively times.





Brooklyn Art Museum, "American Identities: A New Look"





St. Louis Science Center, Amazing Brain Carnival, 2011



Touchscreen, National  
Museum of Scotland



Tate Britain, Constable exhibition, display showing layers of painting



California Academy of Sciences, rooftop garden





