

# Meeting Warhol in the Exhibition: Visitors' experience with art in the Hong Kong Museum of Art

Ting Wingyan Vivian and Ho Chui-fun Selina

## Craving art?

From the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District project to the booming art market, art has been capturing the attention of local communities and visitors to the stylish, entertaining, and intellectually stimulating art exhibitions. According to recent reports, the Hong Kong Museum of Art (HKMA) attracted a record breaking 763,200 visitors in 2012-13, that was twice the number (358,000) for 2010-11 (Leisure and Cultural Services Department 2014). In 2013, art seemed to be passionately winning over more and more people. The “Mobile M+ Inflation!” exhibition drew 150,000 visitors in six weeks after the opening in late-April (West Kowloon Cultural District 2013) and more than 60,000 people attended the “Art Basel Hong Kong” event in just 5 days (Art Basel 2013). Started by the end of 2012 and running into March, 2013, the art-hungry crowds became fascinated by “Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal”, the largest touring exhibition of Warhol’s works in Asia, which was launched at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. A total of 257,055 visitors flocked to see the *Campbell’s Soup Cans* collection and the glamorous screen prints of Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy, among other famous works by the pop artist (personal communication).

The growing number of visitors to art exhibitions and events indicates the extent to which art has become a more important part of peoples’ lives. The trend is encouraging as art participation is positioned at the core of the long-term development of arts and culture. Greater art engagement would be expected to foster a better understanding of the arts, and sustain the communities’ support of artists, and art professionals and organizations; and consequently, facilitate the burgeoning growth of local arts and culture (Zakaras and Lowell 2008: 95). More research into the personal agenda behind art participation and the audiences’ level of engagement would provide the facts and figures necessary to cement Hong Kong’s status as the cultural hub of the region.

Why would people be interested in visiting an art exhibition? How do they consider arts in the context of their daily lives? What interpretive strategies do they use when looking at a piece of art? To answer these questions, the research team conducted observations and semi-structured interviews with more than 100 museum visitors in February 2013 when the blockbuster exhibition, “Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal” (Warhol exhibition), was held at the Hong Kong Museum of Art (the Museum). The Museum is considered as an ideal research site for two reasons. It is popular in local communities, where a wide range of visitors can enjoy different genres of art and a great variety of exhibitions, events, and activities

(Hong Kong Museum of Art 2012; Leisure and Cultural Services Department 2013). Second, besides the museum's collection of artworks of local and regional significance, the institution has worked with overseas partners to organize exhibitions that cultivate a global appreciation of the arts. Hence, an ethnographic study at the Museum during the Warhol exhibition would have wider implications about the visitors' art experiences.

This article is a museological enquiry to examine how visitors assign meanings to their visits and their interpretive strategies for connecting with art. We begin by explaining the theoretical rationale and design of our research methods and analytical framework. In analyzing the meaning-making processes of museum visitors, we identify different modes of visiting experiences, based on their personal motivation, interpretation of experiences, and general perception of art and cultural activities. The qualitative data is used to show how the arts are received, and what is expected from the museum, as an agent that mediates meanings of art to the wider public. We hope that this research will produce useful knowledge about Hong Kong art visitors to benefit art administrators and museum professionals in considering how to effectively interact with visitors in a meaningful way.

### Researching the visitors' experiences

The total experience of museum-going can be viewed in part as a leisure activity, social interaction, and cultural learning. Visitors may be interested in looking at some pieces of art or learning about the cultural knowledge assigned to the objects. At the same time, they may be engaged with various museum facilities and services, such as interactive games, bookshops, and learning workshops, because they are fun activities and help pass the time as they wait for their friends or family members. Visitors are not passive receivers who will accept everything that the museum offers; they are active participants who are ready to make their own sense of what they encounter (Chan & Goldthrope, 2007; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004). Besides being influenced by the museum services and facilities, the experiences of visitors are shaped by their personal motivation, interests in art and culture, social dynamics, prior cultural experiences, and situational needs (Falk 2009; Bash, 2003).

In considering how meaningful museum experiences are shaped by the institution and the visitors' agenda, the complexities of the experience need to be explored in detail. According to John Dewey (1958), the pioneer of pragmatism and educational theories, meaning is gained when people are in a dialogue with an object (such as a painting, an exhibition, or a guided tour): we recognize the immediate qualities of objects, compare them to our own knowledge and personal experiences, mediate them through social context and enact meaning – a new set of immediate qualities – to reshape our perception of the surrounding environment (137-139, 287-288). Meaning making can be a single or short interactional episode of what one encounters. It can also intersect with multiple, simultaneously ongoing interactions, both personally and socially, to constitute a more deep-seated involvement with the world, which Dewey (1958) referred to as “experience” (232-233). He held that experience facilitates our contact with the world; for instance, in feeling, thinking, and doing (Dewey 1938: 15-16). Applying Dewey's notion to the

museum context, *meaning making* refers to a process of internalization, in which visitors locate an object within their personal context. By investigating the contents of the meaning making episodes (regardless of how trivial they may seem), new light can be shed on the perceptions of visitors. The museum experience is a dynamic process of meaning-making that constructs, negotiates, and appropriates the meaning of the art offered by cultural institutions (Parker 2008; Doering 1999). In addition, the meanings of art is constructed through the collection, exhibitions, and education programs, and the various other aspects of visiting, like advertising posters that appeal to visitors in the first place, admission fees, the spatial design of the museum, ease of way finding, physical comfort of visitors, and even their interactions with personnel like security guards.

To investigate the dynamic nature of museum experiences, this research uses semi-structured interviews with visitors and explores how they interpret their museum experience and relate to exhibits and museum services and facilities. In total, 103 interviews were conducted. The interview questions covered the visitors' motivations and expectations, their interpretation of visiting experiences, interaction with exhibits, and general perceptions about art and culture. After the interviews, participants were asked to complete questionnaires to provide personal data, and demographic details about their educational background and interest in the arts and culture. The information was used to triangulate the visitors' museum experiences with their personal interests and prior knowledge, and visiting agendas. We anticipate that our research would have an impact on the visitors' interpretations since they would be using their interpretive repertoires more extensively than they used to. Nevertheless, we believe that this would not change the visitors' interpretations, other than to encourage them to reflect more about the exhibition, which was necessary for generating useful data about how visitors make meanings from their visits.

Detached and structured observation can provide another perspective for understanding people's participation in the exhibition. The research team spent 14 days at the Museum, observing how visitors interact with different museum facilities (i.e., the collection, hands-on activities, and the shop), and indicate their interests in the exhibition. Data was recorded for each visitor, including the date and time of visit; the total time spent in the Museum; the route followed and stops made; and the visitor's visible reactions to the physical facilities. The data was used as a supplement to the visitors' interpretation of their experiences. It also enabled the researchers to go beyond basic questions, and probe such details as: why the interviewee decided to leave the exhibition space at some specific point, or why the interviewee looked attentively at the Polaroid images instead of looking at the iconic works (like the prints of Marilyn Monroe).

### **Visitor segments as the analytical framework**

Conducting fieldwork at the HKMA, the researchers have made contact with more than 100 visitors. Although the visitors often have similar demographic profiles and education backgrounds, they have different approaches to participating in the exhibition. Their various approaches are shaped by their

different attitudes, opinions, and motivations about the arts and the situational demands of their visit. We decided to conduct a segmentation analysis that uses an analytical framework to show how different groups of visitors interpret their visit and what the art museum means to them in their daily life context. Segmentation studies have long been adopted by museum professionals and art researchers to investigate the patterns of art attendance and participation. For instance, enquiring into how the varied motivations of visitors shape their visits, Doering (1999: 15) categorized museum experiences into modes of social activity, object appreciation, learning process, and introspective association. McIntyre (2006: 24) identified the visitor as a researcher/ searcher, follower and browser, in demonstrating different preferences for museum interpretive approaches. Such studies offer detailed analysis of visitors' behavior patterns in exhibitions; however, we argue that another framework for examining modes of visitors' experiences is needed to consider the totality of the museum visiting experience and its relationship with people's engagement in art and culture.

In analyzing the qualitative data, visitors' segments are identified according to three aspects of their experiences: 1) entry narrative for visiting the museum; 2) interpretations of the visits; and 3) reflective summary of such visits, especially in relation to their general perception of the arts and culture. Informed by previous studies of museum visiting experiences, a visitor's "entry narrative" refers to personal interests, motivation, and agenda for the visiting experience. Research findings have suggested that visitors come to museums for diverse reasons, which direct their visiting behavior to satisfy their personal needs and agendas (Falk 2009: 80-89; Packer and Ballantyne 2002; Doering and Pekarik 1996). A visitor who expects to learn something from an exhibition would likely be more motivated to interact with the exhibits and the interpretation aids (e.g., exhibition panels, audio guides, and/or education workshops), and consequently, the experience would contribute to his or her degree of satisfaction with the visit. Considering the visitors' entry narratives in the context of local museum experiences, the visits of those attentive visitors would likely be influenced by their motivation, prior knowledge, and interest in the arts; however, the impact of entry narratives is less explicit in the other segments. The analysis helps to uncover the users' perspective of the museum, while outlining their socio-cultural needs when interacting with museum content.

Probing into the fluid, multi-layered experiences of museum visits, the analysis also examines how visitors make sense of what they encounter. While the museum offers diverse meanings of art through its facilities and services, visitors often assign meanings to their experiences according to their prior interests and knowledge, social dynamics, and conditional demands of the moment. The process of meaning-making is reciprocal as visitors must construct, negotiate, and re-confirm the meanings of their experience. By interviewing the participants, the research team aims to inquire about what visitors have done in the museum, how they assign meanings to their visit, and the extent to which they feel engaged in the process of meaning-making. The obtained data is crucial for exploring how the meaning-making process operates and what people look for in the museum.

The third focus of the analysis – reflective summary of visiting experiences considers how visitors relate

their visit to a wider context of the general perception of arts and culture. During the pilot study at the HKMA, the researchers found that visitors tend to relate their visiting experiences to confirm or contrast their notion of art. Some visitors found Andy Warhol's works "beautiful and innovative", confirming their perception that the artist sees the world differently. Interestingly, some interviewees were frustrated by Warhol's silk-screen prints because they challenged their view of art and craftsmanship. The associations between the exhibition and the visitors' perception of arts revealed how they internalized their meaning-making process and articulated their own notions of art. Although the notions often seemed cliché, many of them (such as "everything can be considered as art" and "art is about beauty") had their roots in the mass media or popular art education. Thus, the visitors' remarks on art illuminated some of our collective "imaginations" of what art is.

### Different modes of art experience at the museum

By investigating museum visits as a process of meaning-making, the research team categorized the visitors' modes of art experience into five segments: 1) connoisseurs; 2) enthusiastic learners; 3) curious viewers; 4) leisurely wanderers; and 5) passive visitors. The segmentation is used to unpack the complexity of how people make sense of their visit and of the arts, as offered by the museum. The meaning-making process is multilayered and dynamic as it responds to the conditional demand of the moment. For example, a connoisseur might become a leisurely wanderer when his or her schedule no longer allows further in-depth study of an exhibit or when an exhibition area becomes too crowded, or simply when the visitor loses interest in browsing the exhibit. By the same token, a curious viewer might progress to become an enthusiastic learner if his or her interest is triggered and the museum appears to be providing the tools necessary for making sense of the exhibition. The participants in our study could be categorized according to their mode of behavior and how they responded to the museum facilities and services (Table 1).

Mode of Behavior	No.	
Connoisseur	4	} Highly engaged
Enthusiastic learner	16	
Curious explorer	31	} Some engagement
Leisurely wanderer	43	
Passive visitor	9	Not currently engaged

Table 1: Number of visitors categorised into five segments of museum visit

Table 1 shows the numbers of visitors categorised in the five segments of museum experience. The five segments of visitors show distinctively different approaches to interacting with the museum content. On average, visitors spent 66 minutes in the Warhol exhibition (which occupied two gallery areas). Connoisseurs stayed more than two hours in the exhibition and stopped more than 100 times to look at the exhibits and text panels attentively, while the passive visitors tended to walk around the exhibition in



less than 10 minutes. Most of the visitors were able to name a couple of Warhol's works that impressed them, such as the screen prints of Marilyn Monroe, the *Campbell's Soup Cans* collection, *Brillo Boxes*, and Polaroid portraits. Interestingly, the connoisseurs and enthusiastic learners likely contextualized the works that were less familiar to them, from prior knowledge or readings in art history. The passive visitors did not remember any works from the exhibition; and the curious explorers and leisurely wanderers described some of the iconic works of Warhol, but their degree of appreciation varied. Not surprisingly, the interactive photo-game (Plate 1) located on the first floor appeared to be the most captivating device in the museum. Some connoisseurs and enthusiastic learners disapproved of the photo-game because it "distracted people's attention to the device" instead of looking at Warhol's works. Nevertheless, the same device was well-received by other visitor segments; many of them considered the device "fun", "lively", and "educational" for understanding Warhol's distinctive approach to colors. Most of the visitors were amazed by *Silver Cloud* (a balloon installation) (Plate 2) and were interested in interacting with the balloons personally. The connoisseurs considered such interactions as ruining the atmosphere of art viewing, but the enthusiastic learners tended to enjoy watching the interactions since it created another dimension to the work. Despite their varied outlooks of art and museum experiences, 82 visitors found the visits "enjoyable", 9 interviewees considered the experiences "very enjoyable", and only 12 people described their trip "fair". To examine these comments more deeply, and the meaning for visitors in relation to their art experiences, the following discussion outlines the characteristics of each visitor segment.

### Connoisseurs – Looking for art *per se*

The connoisseurs are committed art lovers who relate the museum content, especially the arts, to their professional or amateur passions. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to be engaged with the arts. As experienced museum users, they have a clear agenda of what to look for, and how to navigate the exhibition galleries. They are likely to spend time scrutinizing the details – technical consummation of the prints, documentary films shown in the Silver factory, and the historical significance of objects collected by Warhol – and place the museum content into their own intellectual context. Their intellectual outlook is also reflected by their preference for interpretation. They are likely to study the museum text (Plate

Plate 1  
Interactive photo-game located on 1/F of the exhibition venue. (Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art)

Plate 2  
*Silver Cloud* installation. (Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art)

3), join the guided tour, and use the audio devices to gain a better understanding of the works and the curatorial notion of the exhibition. The connoisseur mode of art experience is not merely an intellectual process of learning, but a form of visual pleasure and a type of emotional fulfilment. For instance, a connoisseur visitor, who was interested in Warhol's work, *Suicide (Fallen Body)*, said:

Looking at how the image of a fallen body repeats itself in this work. I feel like joining the artist's thinking process and keep asking 'why suicide', 'what is death', and 'why life continues' when the images appear again and again. Each of the images looks the same, but everyone is different – some blur, smear, and seem out of focus as if refusing to reveal what really happens. The work is intriguing, and yet surreal that highlights the bizarre union of the violent end of life and peace of death.

Connoisseurs are active participants who are open to new art experiences, regardless of their personal interests. One connoisseur commented:

I don't like Andy Warhol. His works are kitschy. But I am glad that I came to this exhibition because it enables me to see Andy Warhol as a person, not the glamorous persona he wants to convince himself and the rest of the world. I am particularly drawn to the *Self Portrait* he made in 1986. The fiery-red image looks ablaze in the void darkness encapsulated by the canvas. The scale (of the work) is monumental, and the minimal lighting effect makes the image looks solemn, and yet lonesome. Setting near the gallery exit, the work almost suggests the glamor Warhol produced is nothing indeed. It is the blatant struggle against emptiness that means something in his arts.

Connoisseurs are confident to use professional language to talk about art and share their knowledge and interests with others. In fact, of the group of connoisseurs, two were professional art teachers, and two had belonged to the "Friends of the Museum" for years and have worked for the museum and other art organizations as volunteer guides. They all have museum passes and have come to the Warhol exhibition more than once: to aid their design of a teaching plan and class assignments, or to introduce friends and family to the exhibition. The connoisseurs explain that their museum visits are for enjoyment and to learn more about the arts. They suggested that the exhibition areas should be quiet and have sufficient lighting and information to enable them to absorb more of the arts.

This group of visitors considers museum visits as an important part of their daily life, since it offers them a wide range of art to enjoy. As frequent art participants, they also attended Song Dong's solo exhibition, "Song Dong: 36 Calendars" and "2013 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (Hong Kong)", at the time when the interviews were being conducted. In addition to the visual arts, they are happy to engage in other forms of art, such as classical music, contemporary dance, and poetry. The only thing that keeps them from art participation is their lack of free time. Since art is a priority in their daily life, these visitors are keen to study different forms of art, and art history, and tend to be well-informed about recent art works and critical reviews. They are assertive to evaluate good pieces of art based on their own

experiences, but are less likely to define “art” or “the meaning of art” for them, because such questions may lead to overly “simplistic” or excessively “pedantic” answers. Although the connoisseurs regard the museum as a prestigious cultural institution, they are more critical about museum services. Some suggest that more self-directed educational activities should be organized, and different layers of interpretation should be provided to position Warhol in the context of art history.

### Enthusiastic learners – Looking for knowledge

The visitors who demonstrate a genuine interest in the museum content are defined as “enthusiastic learners”. They are well aware that art exhibition enables them to relate to the arts or artists, and want the museum content to fuel their learning. Most of the visitors in this segment appear to be art lovers or have some prior experiences in art and culture that allow them to engage vigorously with the museum content. Their interests are extensions to their hobbies and many of them enjoy painting, playing a musical instrument, or photography in their leisure time. One of the enthusiastic learners says, “I want to learn from the artist and see how his creative practice would be applied to my own works”. For this group of visitors, the museum visits enable them to triangulate what they had learnt and further internalize the knowledge within their intellectual contexts.

All of the enthusiastic learners stay long hours at the museum. They walk through the exhibition galleries and tend to make sure that they have not missed anything, by frequently backtracking. With a clear agenda for learning, the enthusiastic learners are likely to examine exhibits in depth, according to their own interests. For example, one couple spends half an hour watching the documentary video on Warhol’s art-making of Mao (Zedong)’s portrait. They seem to be content to study the museum panels (Plate 4) and were engaged in exchanging their views about the artwork. Joining the guided tour, one group of four visitors stay in the exhibition galleries to look further at some of the exhibits, going back and forth. Clearly, the visual art students also belong to this category of visitors. Under the guidance of their teacher, they are usually deeply engaged in the selected exhibits: “It’s far more interesting to see the real works than looking at art history book or the teacher’s PowerPoint.” The experiences also enable them to formulate



Plate 3 (left)  
Museum text as in  
exhibition catalog.  
(Photo courtesy of the  
Hong Kong Museum of  
Art)

Plate 4 (right)  
Museum panel. (Photo  
courtesy of the Hong  
Kong Museum of Art)



their own opinions about the artist. For this group of visitors, the museum is an excellent platform for self-initiated learning. In the exhibition galleries, some students are instructed to do drawings in Warhol's style, an activity that is designed by the teacher to follow their visit. Some students make notes about the works and the artist's practices and ideas, based on the exhibit text panels.

Some of the enthusiastic learners use the interactive photo-game, but seldom stay very long at it. They rarely interact with the *Silver Cloud*, the balloon installation. One visitor says, "I like to see how people play with the silver balloons and create different movements and tempo rhythms of the work. They make the work alive. When I enter into the work, I find it so difficult to figure out how everything works." As attentive museum users, these visitors tend to be familiar with art terminology, but less confident to talk about the artworks with the researchers. When asked to talk about one work that they found impressive, these interviewees can quickly name a work of interest, and explain their choice in relation to the techniques they want to learn, the historical significance of the work, or what it reveals about the artist. For instance, one visitor who considers that the *Brillo Boxes* would have been "provocative" in 1960s gives a detailed account of why and how they were made based on the museum text. The enthusiastic learners' thirst for knowledge drew them to the historical, conceptual, or environmental context of the artworks, and they relied heavily on museum interpretation to make sense of the exhibition. This set them apart from the connoisseur group, who showed the most reservation in simply accepting a straightforward explanation about the art. The enthusiastic learners complain that the museum text is insufficient and they want to know more about Warhol and his works, within the context of modern art history and the American pop culture of the 1960-80s. To compensate for this, they are likely to join guided tours, learning workshops, and become involved in pre-exhibition study.

Like connoisseurs, enthusiastic learners also integrate museum visits into their daily life and are keen to attend other forms of art that are related to their personal scheme of learning. They consider art to be intriguing as it relates to the artist through a specific form, and the art cannot be reduced into messages from the artist. For these visitors, the best approach to art is through reading information from different media, such as books, websites, and museum exhibitions. They consider the museum as an intellectual portal that helps enhance their personal taste and aesthetic sense, through the exhibitions, public seminars, and education workshops. One visitor states: "You can see many artworks in shopping malls and other places. But a museum is different, since it puts different works together and arranges them in themes or in a certain historical context." In this sense, the museum is an important platform for the enthusiastic learners for learning about art. To help promote their learning, many of the enthusiastic learners have museum passes and regularly participate in museum education programs and activities.

### **Curious explorers – Looking for interests**

The curious explorer visitors are eager to interact with the museum content, whenever their interests are triggered. They come to the museum to "see some nice things" and the Warhol exhibition sounds appealing, because it is endorsed by high-profile media campaign and the works seem colorful and

vibrant. Many of the visitors have prior knowledge about Warhol and want to learn more about the artist's work. Many of the curious explorers show an interest in arts and culture, but tend to be casual in selecting artworks for viewing, and tend to make sense of their visual experience by reading the museum's interpretation. They would walk around all parts of the galleries, but often pay little attention to looking at the artworks. Even though they require contextual information, these visitors are less likely to join a guided tour or rent an audio device, because of time constraints. One visitor accidentally follows the guided tour (Plate 5) when she inadvertently meets the tour group. Even though she finds the tour to be instrumental in getting a better understanding of the work, she decides to continue on her own. Generally, this group of visitors is moderately engaged with the exhibits and spends less than half an hour in the museum. They tend to have short attention span for the first gallery (Plate 6), which diminishes rapidly in the second gallery (Plate 7).

When answering the question about which pieces of art impresses them most, these visitors are inclined to refer to Warhol's iconic works, like the portraits of Marilyn Monroe, the *Campbell's Soup Cans* collection, the *Endangered Species* prints, and the *Silver Cloud* installation. Their criteria for evaluating the art are: whether or not the works are "beautiful", and whether or not the works are related to their personal interests or daily life experiences. For instance, one curious explorer says, "I like the Animal paintings because I am a dog lover and I appreciate that Andy Warhol donated money to animal protection organizations." Another visitor considers the *Dollar Sign* to be memorable, because it is a sarcastic comment about the present society, and it reminds her of the pragmatic outlook of Hong Kong people. These visitors are less familiar with art terminology and their remarks about art tend to be more intuitive and emotional. To some extent, their approaches to art are based on a vague notion of visual pleasure and the biographical information of the artist that they can relate to.

The curious explorers express limited expectations about the arts and culture. In terms of the Warhol exhibition, their levels of satisfaction vary. Those who enjoy the exhibition find that the artist's works relate to celebrity, popular culture, and Polaroid shooting in resonance with their daily life experiences. For those who are less at ease with the exhibition, they are surprised that many of the works are reproduction images, screen prints, or photographs that appear to be lesser forms of art, in comparison to oil paintings or sculptures. Their discontent and frustration is derived from how they related Warhol's works to their notion of art. During the interviews, many of them ask, "Why are these works considered 'art'?" "These works do not show any technical skills; how should I appreciate them?" and "Why would daily life subjects be desirable to look at?" To define "art", this group of visitors would likely associate "art" with free flowing imagination. One visitor says, "Art can be many different things. Art viewing enables one to see things differently. Isn't it that artists always have something unusual to show? And we can find our own ways to relate to the works." This group of visitors would tend to be influenced by some popular notions, where "everything can be art" and "artists have a different perspective in seeing the world". These visitors would apply these ideas to their art experiences and create their personal interpretation of the works. Nonetheless, these visitors also consider the museum's interpretation to be essential for their art viewing and would like to know how to best appreciate the works and understand their significance.

Plate 5  
Visitors on a guided  
tour. (Photo courtesy of  
the Hong Kong Museum  
of Art)



These visitors are interested in art participation if it is framed as “fun”, “trendy,” and “popular”. Their art participation consists of sporadic visits to drama productions, pop concerts, and museum exhibitions. They tend to associate museum visits with entertainment, leisure activities, and social gatherings with friends and family, around a sense of culture. As they consider their visits as having a good time in the museum, these visitors tend to enjoy the interactive photo-game and participating in the *Silver Cloud* installation. One curious explorer states,

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Daily life is about works, deadlines and commitments. It is busy and overwhelming. The museum is isolated from daily life and one would take a slower pace and be curious in seeing some nice things. I enjoy going to the museum – it makes me relax.

To many of these visitors, the museum is a place for showcasing “some nice things” with interpretations. Thus, the curious explorers demonstrate a positive attitude towards their museum visits and are interested in engaging with the arts. Nevertheless, they look for art experiences that fit with their lifestyle and interests and need some appropriate interpretation to encourage them to interact with the artwork more attentively.

### **Leisurely wanderers: Browsing for personal connection**

Those browsing around the museum with little interaction with the content are considered the “leisurely

Plates 6/7  
(left) Gallery 1, (right)  
Gallery 2. (Photo  
courtesy of the Hong  
Kong Museum of Art)



wanderers”. Their motivation to see the Warhol exhibition is based on their perception that the “show” is a must-see, because the artist is internationally renowned and the exhibition is the only chance to see the work unless one travels abroad. Leisurely wanderers may show a limited interest in art and have little prior knowledge about Warhol and his works. In the exhibition galleries, these visitors tend to navigate the main paths only and rarely read from the exhibit labels (Plate 8). Their attention span would diminish quickly after viewing a number of pieces, and they tend to browse an object of particular interest and then walk around the rest of the exhibition. Some leisurely wanderers (especially those in a group of friends) eagerly engage in the interactive photo-game and the *Silver Cloud* installation, because these activities have an entertainment value for their visits. Those who came with children typically stop at the interactive photo-game and the *Silver Cloud* installation, and allow their children to participate. After briefly browsing in the galleries, many of the leisurely wanderers can be seen taking a long break on the museum benches. Their main satisfaction is derived from having visited the exhibition with friends and family and taking some photos in the museum.

During the visits, the artworks that are familiar or visually interesting attract the attention of the leisurely wanderers. Like the curious explorers, this group of visitors is most impressed by the portraits of Marilyn Monroe, the *Campbell's Soup Cans* collection, the *Endangered Species* prints, and the *Silver Cloud* installation. These visitors use phrases like “beautiful”, “unique”, and “modernistic”, as the key criteria for evaluating the works. This group of visitors is less likely to elaborate on these terms. In the interviews, “beautiful” is clearly related to the visitors’ notion of visual pleasure, “unique” defines something that the visitors have not previously encountered, and “modernistic” is used as a comparison to the vague idea of classical painting. The works are also evaluated in terms of how they relate to daily life experiences. For instance, many visitors are impressed by the *Endangered Species* series, because they immediately recognize the animals and consider Warhol to be “unique” in using the “unrealistic” palette to depict the animals. Typically, when the visitors speak about the artworks, they describe them briefly but give a longer account



Plate 8  
Exhibit labels. (Photo  
courtesy of the Hong  
Kong Museum of Art)

of the subject matter. In considering the portraits of Marilyn Monroe as “beautiful”, one visitor said, “She is an adorable actress, and unfortunately she died so young. Andy Warhol makes her look differently: she is sexy and glamorous, and miserable and sad at the same time.” The representative elements enable visitors to make sense of the works and enjoy the art.

The leisurely wanderers regard museum interpretation (for instance, text panels, audio guide, and exhibition leaflet) as a necessity for understanding the art. They tend to read the text when they want to find out more about a specific work. For instance, visitors who are interested in the *Campbell's Soup Cans* collection find little interpretation about the work. Based on what they have read in an earlier section about Warhol's work as a commercial illustrator, many of visitors in this group mistakenly think that the Campbell's soup labels were designed by the artist, which gave him much commercial success. Clearly, many visitors have difficulties in understanding the interpretation, let alone the artworks. The challenge in encouraging this group of visitors to visit the museum is in offering different interpretations and learning activities to assist in their meaning-making process. One of the leisurely wanderers comments, “I don't want to study the artist. What I want is just brief information telling me what the work means, and it should be entertaining!” Thus, the different approaches to interpretation need to fit the visitors' daily experiences and lifestyles.

Although this visitor segment does not comprehend the exhibition as much as they want to, most of them still enjoy the museum visit. One visitor says, “I enjoy seeing something that is different and incomprehensible. That is what art is about!” The visitors likely find their visits enjoyable because the experience somehow fit their “imagination” about art. According to some of these visitors, “art is too abstract to grasp”; it is about “how the artist expresses him/herself” and “one has to feel it”. Following this line of thinking, the museum is a place that shows something artistic, and “it is full of art ambience” that makes the visitors “artistic”, too. What would happen if the visitors do not feel the “art ambience” or become more “artistic”? The leisurely wanderers suggest that visitors should “figure it out by themselves”, which depends on whether or not they would be willing “to feel the artworks”. These visitors position the arts as entertaining, relaxing, and sociable, so that fully understanding the arts becomes unnecessary. To some visitors who find the experience less than agreeable, they comment, “visiting the exhibition is like going into a 3D book. It (the content) is serious, and nothing entertaining!” As infrequent attendees at a small number of art exhibitions and events, these visitors consider the museum as a showroom to see something nice and unique. For this group, the challenge is to provide opportunities that fit their lifestyle and art activities that they can enjoy with their friends and family. In addition, this group of visitors would pay more attention to art experiences associated with their personal interests, such as fashion, photography, and movies.

#### **Passive visitors: Absent-minded browsing**

The passive visitors show little motivation to look around the exhibition. Three of these visitors come to the museum for their assignments and six simply walk by the museum. Generally, they seem to be

disinterested in making sense of their visits. The students are only interested in finding the specific works for their assignment and want to finish the task as soon as possible. Those who are just passing by look at a few works, but stay in the galleries for no more than five minutes. Besides the students, these visitors do not have a clear agenda for their visit, nor are they aware of which exhibitions are being held at the museum. All of them seem to enjoy having their photos taken in front of the exhibition backdrop or in front of the harbour view. One interviewee says, “It is a way of spending some leisure time”; the experience of going to the museum is in itself a satisfying activity.

The passive visitors find the exhibitions and the interpretive text to be difficult to comprehend. Many of them emphasize, “We come here to see things – just seeing, not trying to study them” and consequently, the art does not seem to leave them with a strong impression. Most of the passive visitors remember very little about what they have seen. Two visitors respond to interview questions by giving generic comments about the works. One visitor considers the ink paintings to be impressive because “in Hong Kong you cannot see a landscape like this”. Others say, “I don’t remember the name of the artist. But his colourful paintings are nice. I have not learnt to paint like this.” Obviously, “art” is an unfamiliar concept to this group and their response to art is more intuitive than cerebral.

This group of visitors has no expectations or motivation for participating in art, and they would not likely engage in other art activities or events. One passive visitor claims, “I don’t know about arts and surely I won’t paint, or buy arts.” Of the different visitor segments, this group is more likely to cite practical reasons (i.e., lack of time, poor information about art activities, and limited prior knowledge) as barriers to engaging with art. Nevertheless, most of them find their museum experience to be enjoyable. One visitor says, “It is nice that the government gives us this place where one can see so many beautiful things”. The visitors do not seem to see the role of the museum within the cultural landscape of Hong Kong. To them, the museum would be an important destination for leisure activity.

During the fieldwork, some museum visitors refuse to be interviewed, because of time constraints or because they are not interested in talking about their experiences. Of the various visitor segments, the passive visitors are most reluctant to be interviewed. From our observation, the passive visitor groups are often comprised of family members. When focusing on their family responsibilities, parents can easily be without any time to make sense of the visits. Their children might be curious and constantly asking about the exhibits (like why the artist painted a woman in pink), but the adults may not be able to address such questions while taking care of their children. Sometimes, the parents would relate personal experiences that were related to the artworks; for example, they would mention that they had seen soup cans like the *Campbell’s Soup Cans* collection; or they might ask their children which colors they liked in Warhol’s *Flower* series. Although the families are less interested in looking at the artworks, they are happy to participate in the *Silver Cloud* installation and the interactive photo-game. The passive visitors can easily progress to become curious viewers, especially if the museum uses more interactive approaches for their engagement with exhibits.

## The accessible museum

By categorizing museum visitors and exploring their characteristics, this research aims to explore people's motivations, attitudes, and approaches to interacting with an art exhibition. The purpose of exploring the museum experiences of the five groups is not to summarize them into stereotypical categories, but to increase our understanding of why people come to the museum and what they expect from their visits. We argue that the more we understand the reasons behind museum visitations and various visiting patterns, the more likely the museum will develop new strategies for fostering art participation and attracting new audiences.

Overall, our research shows that people crave more art in their daily lives, because art experiences offer enjoyment, emotional reflection, and learning opportunities that are closely connected with their personal interests, motivations, and agendas. Due to their differences in prior knowledge and experiences in art, museum visitors adopt different approaches to interact with artworks, which contribute to different levels of art engagement and reshape their notions about the meaning of art. Connoisseurs and enthusiastic learners, who are well-equipped with prior knowledge and extensive art experience, are assertive in using the museum content to develop their own interpretations for evaluating the artworks. Their museum visits are pleasant and intellectually fulfilling, and consequently, the visits add to their awareness of the value of art participation. Curious explorers and leisurely wanderers prefer making use of the museum content to articulate their opinions about the artworks. The existing museum interpretations may not accommodate their intellectual needs and lifestyles; however, they consider art participation to be desirable, and even challenging. Passive visitors are the least engaged in their museum visits, and do not express an interest or motivation for art participation. Obviously, the visitors who have a lower level of engagement tend to make more casual comments that are aligned with popular notions of art.

For meeting their situational and entertainment needs, most visitors have a positive attitude towards their museum experiences, which extends to their perception of art participation. Despite the different outlooks to their museum visits, most of the interviewees say that museum interpretation would be crucial for them to make sense of the arts. Nevertheless, the visitors who have a lower level of engagement tend to find the interpretations difficult and boring. Consequently, the museum should consider different approaches for interpretation (like hands-on activities, theatre performances, and audio-visual supports, etc.) that provide more varied and interesting information about the artwork.

Qualitative research of museum visitors is uncommon in Hong Kong. Even in Australia and many developed countries in Western Europe and North America, academic studies of museum experiences are rare. Researchers have suggested that the methodological difficulties in analyzing experiences, the threat of populism, and other practical concerns (i.e., being time-consuming and labor-intensive) contribute to the lack of studies (Kirchberg and Trondle 2012). Our research findings on museum experiences and patterns of art participation will likely lead to more questions in the burgeoning development of local arts and culture. To what extent do visitors consider themselves as part of the museum interpretive community?

How should the museum encourage non-visitors to enter the museum? How do museum visitors relate their visiting experiences to other opportunities for art participation? How can the museum experiences be transformative for people's daily lives and contribute to the well-being of society? We hope that this article will stimulate further studies to understand the patterns of museum visitation and art experiences.

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Ting Wing-yan Vivian is the Assistant Professor, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University  
Ho Chui-fun Selina is a PhD candidature, Asia Institute of Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne

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