

Hiding Plain Sight

A Visitor Study of
*Hide/Seek: Difference and
Desire in American Portraiture*
At the National Portrait Gallery

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Contents

Foreword.....	4
Executive Summary.....	6
Introduction	9
Methodology.....	12
Qualitative Interviews	12
Quantitative Surveys.....	12
Qualitative Findings	13
Significance	13
“It Takes Some Guts”—Subject Matter	13
“I Probably Would Not Recommend It to My Great Aunt”—Appropriateness	15
Personal Impact	18
“Incredibly Wrenching”—Emotional Responses.....	18
“I’m Too Old to Get Shocked”—Discomfort.....	20
“If You Go Outside, You are Not Okay”—Connecting to Personal Experiences	24
Themes and Messages	27
“...If You Look at It Closer...” —Gay Codes	28
“They Couldn’t Just Be Open”—Hidden Selves.....	30
“To Grow As Humanity and As a Society”—Historical Progress Toward Openness	33
“The Small Events That Happen Between People”—Acceptance	34
“Everyone Is a Work of Art”—The Unremarkable Side of the Gay Community	36
“Put Me in the Mind of Tim Burton”—It’s All About the Art.....	37
Criticisms	39
“Sort of Not Equal”—Gender, Racial, and Geographic Imbalance.....	40
“One of the Only Pieces That Made Me Feel Happy”—Emotional Imbalance	41
“Did They Choose Artists Who Were Gay?”—Thematic Scope	42
“Just Guys Standing There in Their Underwear”—Not Edgy Enough	43
Design and Layout.....	44
“So Much Space”—Layout and General Presentation.....	44
“I Was Just Looking for the Portrait of Teddy Roosevelt”—Placement Within NPG.....	46
“Extraordinarily Well Written”—Labels/Text	48
“I Guess They All Deserve to Be Shown”—Number of Artworks	50
Odds and Ends	51
“That’s the Way It Is in D.C.” —The Controversy.....	51
“Reading from a Script”—Cell Phone Guide	56
“Like Watching the Preview for a Movie”—Website	56

Quantitative Findings	58
What Visitors Expected.....	58
What Visitors Did in Hide/Seek.....	61
Responses.....	62
Experience Outcomes	65
Ratings of Exhibition Features	69
Visitor Characteristics	72
Discussion	75
Conclusions.....	75
Implications	76
Appendix A: Qualitative Interview Guide	78
Appendix B: Entrance and Exit Questionnaires	79
Appendix C: Response Frequencies Entrance and Exit Surveys.....	81

Foreword

At the request of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (NPG), the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a two-part visitor study of the NPG exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. This study included both a quantitative visitor survey and a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with almost 70 visitors to the exhibition.

The results suggest some of the limitations of surveys with regard to providing a full, rich picture of visitors' reactions to an exhibition. In terms of the simple five-point scale for overall satisfaction used by OP&A on its visitor questionnaires, *Hide/Seek* appeared to be about average for a Smithsonian exhibition. However, interviews conducted with visitors tell a very different and more nuanced story. OP&A has conducted visitor studies of Smithsonian exhibitions for many years, and comments on *Hide/Seek* were among the most reflective, emotional, authentic, and discerning that OP&A staff have heard. As visitors departed the exhibition, an attitude of acceptance—of “just let people be what they are”—was apparent.

A few interviewees commented on what they saw as the inappropriateness of the exhibition. But most were very pleased that the Smithsonian had hosted it. A number were surprised that the exhibition was held at such an “unlikely” place as the Smithsonian Institution; some believed that the Smithsonian should present more exhibitions that engage with provocative themes and depart from traditional expectations.

Hide/Seek made a strong impression on many visitors, such as those who focused on the larger-than-life image of an emaciated AIDS victim, *Felix*, a few hours after his death. Some commented on how works in *Hide/Seek* led them to a deeper understanding of the suffering caused by that disease—not only through its direct effects on the bodies of the afflicted, but also indirectly, through society's marginalization of AIDS victims. Some interviewees cried as they talked about these issues.

More generally, several visitors talked about how society has long battered homosexuals, and how they have struggled with their identity for centuries. But many also noted that the United States appears to be moving toward greater acceptance. Understanding the challenges that gay artists have faced was a revelation for some visitors.

Other visitors reflected on themes such as secret lives, self acceptance, and coming to terms with one's authentic self. Several noted the power of art, with its ability to nurture inner awareness and make us look at others with greater tolerance, kindness, and compassion, in a spirit of providing space for everyone to realize their potential. On the whole, this exhibition rose to the occasion of demonstrating the role of portraiture in addressing a controversial topic.

I wish to acknowledge all the OP&A staff, interns, and contractors who contributed to this study. Staff members Lance Costello, Claire Eckert, Kathy Ernst, Jarrid Green, Ioana Munteanu, Andrew Pekarik, James Smith, Ikuko Uetani, and Whitney Watriss interviewed visitors in the exhibition, as did intern Bethany Miller. Daniel Garcia, a talented intern, analyzed the interview data and produced an excellent first draft of the qualitative findings. James Smith reviewed and added to Daniel's work on the qualitative findings and wrote the executive summary and conclusions. Lance Costello supervised interns Adrienne Pizatella and Bethany Miller and contractors Lisa Mayorga, Eliza Kleintop, and Charlotte Brown in the administration of the quantitative surveys. He and Andrew Pekarik analyzed the survey data and wrote the quantitative section of the report. Intern Adrienne Pizatella proofread a draft of the report.

I would also like to thank David Ward, Co-Curator of *Hide/Seek*, and Nik Apostolides, Associate Director at the Portrait Gallery, for requesting this study. Their interest in creating knowledge of and learning about visitors' views of the exhibition adds critical information to arguments and debates among competing stakeholders and answers the question, "What difference did the exhibition make?"

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Executive Summary

The National Portrait Gallery (NPG) exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* ran from October 30, 2010 to February 13, 2011 at the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture. The Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) was asked by NPG to undertake a visitor study of *Hide/Seek*, consisting of two parts:

- Quantitative entrance and exit surveys to gather basic figures on visitor demographics, responses to thematic and design elements, and expected/actual experiences in (and overall rating of) the exhibition. A total of 470 entering and 429 exiting visitors completed self-administered survey questionnaires, with response rates of 92% and 77%, respectively. Respondents constitute a representative sample of visitors to the exhibition at the times when the surveys were conducted.
- A set of in-depth visitor interviews to probe a sampling of visitor reactions at a deeper level. Members of the study team conducted 55 interviews with a total of 69 visitors, ranging in age from 18 to over 70.

Entering visitors appeared somewhat wary of *Hide/Seek*, reporting low expectations for their overall exhibition rating. This was true even among visitors who specifically came to the Reynolds Center to see *Hide/Seek*. However, exiting visitors' actual ratings showed substantial increases over expectations, and those who came specifically to see the exhibition were especially pleased with it. Exiting general visitors were less negative about it than they had expected, although not as enthusiastic as exhibition-specific visitors.

Overall, visitors found the experiences they were looking for in *Hide/Seek*, as well as having some strong experiences they were not expecting.

- Visitors came to *Hide/Seek* anticipating an enriched understanding of art and history, and the exhibition delivered in this area. Nearly half of entering visitors selected "Enriching my understanding" as an experience they were looking forward to, and a similar percentage reported this as an actual satisfying experience upon exit.

- Visitors to *Hide/Seek* reported strong experiences of personal reflection and emotional connection that many of them had not anticipated. Among entering visitors, only 38% anticipated “Connecting with the emotional experiences of others,” but 58% of exiting visitors reported having this experience. Likewise, 34% expected to experience “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw,” but 50% actually did.¹

Qualitative interviews suggest some additional details about these experiences of personal reflection, emotional connection, and enriched understanding:

- Reflective experiences typically appeared to involve visitors’ reflections on their own pasts²; their own and others’ struggles to define personal identity; and society’s tendency to pass summary judgment on people who are perceived to be different.
- The emotional connections evoked by *Hide/Seek* were not only common, but also unusually strong for some visitors. This was most obvious with respect to visitors’ feelings of sadness and empathy when reflecting on the tragedy of AIDS and the historical stigmatization of homosexuals.
- One important way in which many visitors’ understanding appeared to be enriched was through grasping how norms with respect to homosexuality have changed over time, and how this change has been reflected in art and portraiture.

To say *Hide/Seek* was particularly successful in the emotional, reflective, and understanding dimensions is not to say it did not succeed for many visitors as an aesthetic or learning experience. But on the whole, visitors were more inclined to see the point of the exhibition in terms of personal reflection, general understanding, and human connections than in terms of aesthetic or learning experiences.

On balance, the evidence gathered by the OP&A study team suggests *Hide/Seek* was no less successful (judged by standard exhibition metrics) than a “typical” Smithsonian

¹ “Enriching understanding” and “reflecting on meaning” are related experiences, both of which suggest an enlargement of viewpoint. The difference is that “enriching understanding” is usually interpreted as basically objective (grasping ideas explicitly presented in an exhibition), and “reflecting on meaning” as subjective (identifying ideas that resonate personally, regardless of whether they are present in the curatorial intent).

² For exhibition-specific visitors, the experience of “recalling memories” increased substantially between entrance and exit.

show, and that it was unusually affecting for some visitors. If a substantial proportion of visitors were offended by it, this did not show up in any obvious way in the study.

Far from providing a cautionary tale, *Hide/Seek* shows how the Smithsonian can present a potentially sensitive issue in a way that remains within boundaries that most visitors are willing to accept. Of course, Congressional and public perceptions will always be legitimate concerns when addressing issues on which Americans disagree. When the Smithsonian addresses topics that include potentially controversial elements, these need to be confronted with awareness and sensitivity. This could mean, for example, sponsoring public and online forums in conjunction with exhibitions to provide opportunities for reasoned public debate of the relevant issues; providing discussion spaces within exhibitions themselves where visitors can converse with each other and with museum staff about their reactions; or conducting front-end and formative evaluation to identify potentially controversial elements of exhibitions, so as to plan in advance for any reasonably foreseeable issues.

Introduction

The National Portrait Gallery (NPG) exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* ran from October 30, 2010 to February 13, 2011 at the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture. Shortly after its opening, senior staff from NPG approached the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to request a visitor study of *Hide/Seek*.

Gallery leaders had some interest in collecting basic figures on visitor satisfaction, demographics, and exhibition experiences. However, they also were aware that *Hide/Seek* was an unusual exhibition for a somewhat conservative institution such as the Smithsonian, and anticipated some strong visitor responses that would not necessarily be captured in such figures. It was therefore agreed that the study would have two parts: quantitative surveys to gather the basic numbers, and a set of in-depth visitor interviews to probe a sampling of visitor reactions at a deeper level.

NPG publicity materials for the exhibition describe the exhibition in these words:

This is the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture. "Hide/Seek" considers such themes as the role of sexual difference in depicting modern America; how artists explored the fluidity of sexuality and gender; how major themes in modern art—especially abstraction—were influenced by social marginalization; and how art reflected society's evolving and changing attitudes toward sexuality, desire, and romantic attachment.

The exhibition begins with late nineteenth-century works by Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent and charts the twentieth century with major works by such American masters such as Romaine Brooks, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The exhibition arcs through the postwar period with major paintings by Agnes Martin, David Hockney, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. It continues through the end of the twentieth century with works by Keith Haring, A.A. Bronson, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres about life, love and death during the AIDS crisis, and charts the vigorous reassertion of lesbian and gay civil rights in the twenty-first century.

Hide/Seek occupied several galleries on the second floor of the Reynolds Center adjacent to the permanent *Struggling for Justice* gallery of civil rights and social justice figures, and slightly removed from the permanent *America's Presidents* gallery. For much of its run, *Hide/Seek* was also situated directly adjacent to the temporary photography

exhibition *Elvis at 21*. It included over 100 works in a variety of media, including photography, painting, and a few installation pieces.

The exhibition received favorable reviews, many of which acknowledged its groundbreaking character. For example, Holland Cotter opened a December 10, 2010 review in the *New York Times* by noting:

With the exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," one of our federally funded museums, the National Portrait Gallery, here in the city of "don't ask, don't tell," has gone where our big private museums apparently dare not tread, deep into the history of art by and about gay artists.

The *Washington Post's* Blake Gopnick wrote in a November 5, 2010 review:

This is the fascinating world, and powerful art, that fills a new show called "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," at the National Portrait Gallery. It surveys how same-sex love has been portrayed in art, from Walt Whitman's hints to open declarations in the era of AIDS and Robert Mapplethorpe's bullwhips. Amazingly, this is the first major museum show to tackle the topic. "Hide/Seek" handles it with all the subtlety required. Scholars Jonathan Katz and David Ward have mounted one of the best thematic exhibitions in years.

About a month after the exhibition opened, the Gallery received complaints from a Catholic advocacy group about an 11-second segment of a video work in *Hide/Seek* by the artist David Wojnarowicz, which portrayed ants crawling over a crucifix. Concerns about this allegedly anti-religious imagery were echoed by some in Congress, who raised the possibility of cutting the federal appropriations upon which the Institution relies for salaries, capital funding, and operating expenses. On November 30, 2010, Smithsonian Secretary G. Wayne Clough made a decision to remove Wojnarowicz's work from display, noting that the growing controversy threatened to become a distraction that overshadowed and detracted from the rest of the exhibition. This in turn prompted a number of artists, arts organizations, and free-speech groups to decry the Smithsonian's actions as censorship.³

³The following weeks saw demonstrations in front of the Reynolds Center; public statements from cultural organizations such as the Association of Art Museum Directors taking issue with the Smithsonian's actions; an announcement from the Warhol Foundation that it would no longer provide support for Smithsonian exhibitions; a public demand from artist A.A. Bronson that his work *Felix*—a linchpin of the exhibition—be removed from *Hide/Seek*; and negative commentaries in the mainstream arts media and the blogosphere.

Through it all, however, visitors continued to pour into the exhibition in large numbers. Some of them were drawn by the controversy, others by the favorable press coverage that preceded it, and still others by chance. This study looks at what visitors thought and felt about the exhibition; what experiences they had in it; and how various design and thematic aspects of the exhibition struck them.

Methodology

Qualitative Interviews

The study team conducted 55 semi-structured interviews with a total of 69 visitors in the *Hide/Seek* galleries. This methodology is effective in probing visitor responses in depth, as it allows visitors to raise issues that are particularly salient to them and to discuss them in whatever words, and at whatever length, they wish. However, this methodology does *not* yield a representative sample of exhibition visitors; respondents were not chosen in a systematic fashion, and no effort was made to encourage reticent visitors to participate. Thus, findings presented in the qualitative section should be read as suggestive rather than representative of how visitors approached, interpreted, and responded to the exhibition.

For this part of the study, interviewers used a general question guide, which is reproduced in Appendix A. Interviewers were, however, given wide latitude to depart from the guide, in order to follow up on points raised by interviewees in the course of the discussions. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to over 70. OP&A staff transcribed all interviews; coded passages that they judged to be particularly original, articulate, or insightful; and organized the qualitative findings around thematic sections.

Quantitative Surveys

For the survey portion of the study, adult visitors⁴ entering and exiting the exhibition between January 21 and January 23, 2010 were intercepted. A total of 470 entering and 429 exiting visitors completed self-administered survey questionnaires, with response rates of 92% and 77%, respectively. Respondents constituted a representative sample of all visitors to the exhibition at the times when the survey was conducted. Survey questionnaires are reproduced in Appendix B, and frequencies of responses to the questions on the surveys are provided in Appendix C.

⁴ Excluding visitors under 18 and members of organized groups.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative interviews with *Hide/Seek* visitors produced a wealth of thoughtful and articulate observations. Many of these are reproduced in this section, some at considerable length, to convey a rich sense of how some interviewees responded to the exhibition. However, it is important to reiterate that these interviewees did not constitute a representative sample of visitors, and it is not possible to draw general conclusions about *Hide/Seek* visitors based solely on the findings in this section.

The quotations reproduced below have been edited for clarity, readability, and grammar. Where substantial interpolations or deletions were made, these are indicated by bracketed text and ellipses, respectively. Interviewers did not query visitors about personal characteristics such as religion, political leanings, or sexual orientation, but many interviewees volunteered such information unprompted. Where such self-identified characteristics have a bearing on a quotation reproduced below, they are identified either in the quotation itself, or the introduction to it.

Significance

Many interviewees seemed to recognize that *Hide/Seek* was an unusual and perhaps even daring exhibition, and that its presence in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery represented a step toward greater cultural acceptance of gay identity and sexuality.

"It Takes Some Guts"—Subject Matter

Many interviewees saw the significance of *Hide/Seek* in terms of its recognition of the artistic contributions and cultural struggles of the gay community, and in terms of the curatorial boldness in tackling this subject. Some praised the exhibition as evidence that mainstream museums were becoming more open to artistic expressions of gay identity, long after other forms of cultural diversity had been embraced:

It's wonderful to see all of this together. Nobody else is doing this. The San Francisco [Museum of] Modern [Art] should do [a show like this], and they haven't. ... People don't do this. People aren't bold enough to do this. They aren't brave. Because it takes some guts ... to do a show that has gay or lesbian themes in it.

* * *

Traditionally, this form of exhibit was near nonexistent. I feel the very fact that it's here today is a good indicator of the progress we have made toward being an accepting society. ... Unfortunately, gay culture has not been as widely accepted as maybe it should have been at this point. But I feel like it's certainly getting there, more and more.

* * *

I was not prepared to see [such an exhibition] in the museum of American portraits. ... Americans are moralistic in certain things. ... [Europeans] are more accepting of this diversity of human expression and homosexual identity. It's a part of normal life; people just accept it and respect it. [But] I haven't seen such an open exhibition about the influence of homosexual feelings in art [anywhere]. It's the first of this kind of exhibition I ever saw. ... I don't know, maybe such exhibitions have been staged in Europe, and I haven't seen them.

Some interviewees saw special significance in the show's placement at NPG, and were gratified to see that a national institution of this stature could present an exhibition that focused on gay and sexual themes:

I think that this is really kind of a landmark exhibit. ... I do think it's remarkable that it happened at the National Portrait Gallery. I'm imagining that that was not easy to pull off, just because it's not easy to do shows that have sexually related themes in a bureaucratic institution. ... I'm aware that the exhibition was privately funded, but the very fact that it's here does a number of things. It says that this is a quote-unquote "respectable" subject matter, and that this is an important [perspective on] the history of portraiture.

Other visitors noted how *Hide/Seek* challenged their stereotype of the Smithsonian as a conservative, staid institution:

I was actually kind of surprised that a Smithsonian art museum would display rather graphic images. I wouldn't expect that from a Smithsonian museum; I think of it as more conservative.

* * *

The subject matter... is something that I think is a little brave for a government gallery. That was a very pleasant surprise. Although I don't think it was tremendously avant-garde, on the other hand it took a strong position.

“I Probably Would Not Recommend It to My Great Aunt”—Appropriateness

Because of its subject matter and the controversy surrounding it, the study team was interested in visitors' perceptions about the appropriateness of the exhibition, both in terms of the NPG venue and more generally. On the question of whether it was appropriate for a federally-subsidized museum to display *Hide/Seek*, several interviewees responded positively:⁵

OP&A: *Do you think it's appropriate for [a taxpayer-subsidized] museum to have this exhibition?*

Visitor: *Oh yes, it's more than appropriate.*

OP&A: *What do you mean by that?*

Visitor: *To me, it's the role of the government to ensure that ... people think from time to time. ... It's about getting the people to think, and that's really essential.*

* * *

Visitor: *It's the museum's job to challenge public opinions and accurately present a full picture of where society is. I also feel the nation's museum should take a stance on political issues.*

OP&A: *What if you disagreed with that stance?*

Visitor: *I would still support them in taking a stance. I would be outraged if NPG's stance were to support the religious conservative movement; but I would still expect them to take a stance and bring the issue up front for discussion. I think museums are in the best position to raise and talk about issues of importance to our society today.*

The study team did not talk to many visitors who took a strong stand against the appropriateness of the exhibition, either for display at a publicly-funded institution or more generally. To some extent, this probably reflects self-selection among those available to be interviewed in the exhibition.⁶ Nonetheless, study team interviewers did

⁵ As correctly noted in a quotation above, the exhibition itself was privately funded. The reference here is to the implicit subsidy through federal appropriations for Smithsonian facilities, salaries, and overhead expenses.

⁶ That is, individuals offended by the artwork or subject matter of *Hide/Seek* were unlikely to visit it in the first place, or to stay for any length of time if they happened to wander into it. For this reason, the sample of visitors

talk to a few people who wandered into the exhibition serendipitously and found it inappropriate. Their objections tended to fall into three categories. First, that the show was inappropriate for children, and access to it should have been restricted:

If I was a parent here, I'd be very annoyed. Without making any statement about someone else's freedom of expression, ... there is such a thing as bad taste and bad timing. There's a time and place for stuff, and this is probably not the place [for an exhibition like this].

... Second, that a taxpayer-supported institution was not an appropriate venue for such an exhibition:

Husband: *The venue has everything to do with your judgment about whether it's appropriate. ... You would expect something like this at MOMA, or the Met, or a private gallery, or a museum of modern American art. But not in this building.*

Wife: *I'm all for personal rights and liberties, but ... I would not want my tax dollars going to support it.*

Husband: *You can always play the taxpayer card and say "That's just not something I want to support." ... Given the general access—[including] free, unencumbered access by children—it wouldn't be something I would [choose to] support.*

... And third, that *Hide/Seek* was offensive to traditional moral or religious beliefs held by much of the public:

OP&A: *What made you uncomfortable?*

Wife: *The topic. I'm a believing Christian, and I don't believe that homosexuality is necessarily a Godly thing.*

Husband: *I would echo that. Those are not images that I find particularly edifying or pleasant to look at. While it may be somebody else's reality, it's not something that I think is worth spending time on. I know some people think all things pop culture are great. I don't happen to agree with that, which is probably why I gravitate toward the traditional side.*

Wife: *That art is not enjoyable to us.⁷*

approached for interviews by the OP&A study team within the exhibition was never likely to include a large number of people who found the show inappropriate.

⁷ In fairness, it should be noted that this couple's discomfort was expressed in terms of a desire to personally avoid the art on display at *Hide/Seek*, rather than a categorical objection to its presence at NPG.

On the first point, it should be noted that it was not uncommon even for interviewees who personally enjoyed the exhibition to question whether it might be inappropriate for children. (This is discussed in more detail below in the section on “Design and Layout,” as the issue arose several times in the context of the proximity of *Hide/Seek* to the Presidents gallery.)

Likewise, some interviewees who did not themselves find the exhibition inappropriate expressed some degree of understanding for others who might object to it on the basis of their upbringing or convictions:

I probably would not recommend it to my great aunt. It's sort of a generational thing. You know, ideas about sexuality and morals change over time. Some of that [concept of changing norms] was actually present in the exhibit. But I think for certain generations and certain beliefs, this could be uncomfortable.

* * *

It depends on the sense of morality that people have been socialized with. ... That's going to affect how you see this art. You know, the sort of society you grew up in, your morals, your religious beliefs, all those could make some of the art in there seem inappropriate.

* * *

As an individual, I'm definitely very liberal, but I come from a more conservative family. I guess [that kind of tension] is there for [society] too. ... You can think so differently than someone else, even though you're both Americans, [because] you start at such different beginning points. It's one thing to have differences with people who are near your beginning point; but when it's people with a completely different set of beliefs and criteria for how to live, it's really hard, it's frustrating. ... I understand that religious beliefs are the heart of some people's existence. ... Sometimes we're afraid of things because we think it's going to have this viral effect and it's going to break down society and take us down an immoral path, although I don't think that's what's going to happen. It's this idea of exposing ourselves to other people's thoughts and ideas, and knowing that they are out there—not living a life of pretend, or trying to block out things that you don't like.

* * *

*In general, I can see why there might have been objections to it. I don't agree with them, because I consider myself an open-minded individual, and I think this [show] is very important artistically and culturally. But I suppose I can understand—well, not “understand,” but **see**—why it might be slightly controversial in more conservative circles, among people with more traditional values. I think those values are outdated, but everyone has their own opinion.*

Another simply noted that one important function of museums is to challenge visitors, and that anyone who comes in the door should be prepared for surprises:

If art is in the museum, that means it's in a special place. If you go to it, you know that you [might see art by] someone who thinks about society in a way that may not necessarily be yours. So, this is no place to be shocked, as I understand it.

Personal Impact

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Hide/Seek* to emerge in the interviews was the personal impact on many visitors. OP&A study team members agreed they have rarely observed such powerful effects among visitors to a Smithsonian exhibition.

“Incredibly Wrenching”—Emotional Responses

Feelings of pain and sadness were evident in the words and body language of many interviewees, particularly in response to the AIDS section of the exhibition. A literature teacher who was taking her class to the exhibition indicated that, prior to the trip, she had prepared her students for the potentially strong emotional impact of the artwork:

[I told them] they might find some of the pieces difficult to look at just because they are so raw and sad. When I showed them the catalogue before we came here, there was no giggling or shock, but there was sadness—particularly at the AIDS section. One girl looked up with tears in her eyes.

Interviewees found some pieces particularly poignant. *Felix, June 5, 1994* by A.A. Bronson, a larger-than-life portrait of the artist's dead partner, was one such piece:

Visitor: *Having lived in New York City during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s until the mid-1990s, the piece along the back wall there [was particularly powerful]—the artist's partner, whose has already been dead a few hours, and whose eyes are so wasted that they can't even close. I buried a lot of friends. I saw a lot of friends sick; maybe not to that degree of*

wasting, but I saw their bodies deteriorate. Seeing that piece brought back a time in my life that was very hard.

OP&A: *So it really had an emotional impact?*

Visitor: *Yes, it did. [Chokes up] It still does now, even just talking about it.*

One man, who claimed to know A.A. Bronson personally, was similarly affected:

Whenever I see that piece ... it just impresses me about the gravity of his being. He's had such incredibly strong experiences in his life. That particular piece, the Felix piece, is just so incredibly wrenching. It's amazing.

Other interviewees had comparable reactions to the work:

I was reading [the wall text, and found out] he's already dead in that picture. And he's so wasted away that he can't even close his eyes, because he doesn't have skin to close them. And I thought, "Oh my God. Wow. That's just really scary." Like, I can't even imagine that.

* * *

It's really large, so it invades your space when you're looking at it. And it definitely inspires emotion because the man lying there is obviously really sick and you can kind of see his body decomposing even as you read the [text]. He had been alive only a few minutes ago. So it really makes you think about the way that we view gay and lesbian relationships in society and the way that we view AIDS and the AIDS epidemic. ... It's definitely one of the pieces that inspires emotion.

* * *

That really hit me—to see his face and the stuff that he liked around him. ... It hit me really deep.

Another piece that had a strong visceral effect on several interviewees was Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, an installation piece consisting of a nondescript pile of wrapped candy that initially had the same weight as the subject, and whose gradual diminishment as visitors take pieces away mirrors the gradual wasting of AIDS:

The pile of candy hit me harder than any other piece in the exhibit. It could be just because I am particularly emotional right now; my housemate of almost 30 years

died last week from AIDS complications. ... Some of the pieces that specifically dealt with AIDS I found especially poignant. I'm more open to that emotionally right now.

* * *

When you eat the candy, it's like you are going through a Mass. I'm not Catholic, but I do work at a church, believe it or not. It's [like] taking away from the body of Christ, because you're taking the body of that person. I would expect by now that more people would try to eat the candy; but it still looks like it's pretty full. It makes me sad. I wonder if we were in New York, whether people would be more willing to take a candy and touch the stuff in museums—whereas here, it seems much more conservative. That hit me a lot.

Another piece that moved several interviewees was the *Unfinished Painting* by Keith Haring:

The incomplete painting [stood out for me]—purple with gold. It was almost tragic in that it was not finished. I mean, that was the point: the artist died of AIDS, so it was a sort of a statement about that.

* * *

It's just that corner and then it's not finished because—you know... That's just kind of sad, especially since I so like [Haring's] stuff. ... You see what he created in some very unusual places, bringing a little light all over the world

Another visitor talked more generally about the sadness she felt when reflecting on how society has frequently stigmatized homosexuals, particularly in the past:

I think how long they went without even seeing or knowing... That they had to hide, that they had to lie to themselves about who they were—which is terrible.

“I'm Too Old to Get Shocked”—Discomfort

Some interviewees displayed a level of discomfort in *Hide/Seek*. There was, of course, the obvious discomfort of those who wandered into the exhibition by chance, found it inappropriate, and had no desire to engage with it further. But feelings of discomfort were by no means confined to visitors who disliked the exhibition or found it inappropriate. Several interviewees who were quite willing to engage with the

exhibition nonetheless found that it took them outside their usual comfort zone. The teacher quoted above, who brought her class to the exhibition, had this to say about how she prepared her students for this aspect of *Hide/Seek*:

I did tell them that the online video tour we did before coming here left out what, for some viewers, would be some of the most shocking images. I told them that when we go, you will see pieces that weren't [online], and some of them will make you do a stutter step. But [those pieces] are here as part of the thesis of the show. If they make you uncomfortable, you don't have to look at them for long; but I know you'll understand why they are in the show.

For example, while visitors' grief in the section on AIDS has been previously discussed, such grief was often mixed with a sense of unease at the sometimes stark portrayals of the loss, suffering, and abandonment wrought by AIDS. This comes across in some of the quotes in the previous section, but the following account of one distraught visitor's response to the Gonzalez-Torres piece makes it more explicit:

I took a candy and expected not to make much of it. But as I moved along and the candy was shrinking in my mouth, I was thinking about how Torres felt ... about the effects of AIDS. It was increasingly hard to swallow. [Then] I saw "Felix" ... [and] it was hard to taste the liquid in my mouth. ... I wanted to cough it out and stop the process—to save his life. [Begins to sob]

Other interviewees' discomfort had more to do with their reactions to depictions of sexuality that they found unexpected or surprising. One male visitor from Annapolis was candid about this:

The overtly sexual, in-your-face stuff, I kind of shied away from. ... It's not that I didn't like it—it's just that it made me uncomfortable. [But] there's nothing wrong with that.

Other interviewees were less forthcoming about their reactions, but conveyed unease in other ways. For example, one unsuspecting female visitor who happened upon the exhibition was obviously uncomfortable about discussing what she found, despite assurances that she did not personally find the artwork inappropriate or embarrassing:

OP&A: *You said you don't think [the nudity] is inappropriate. I'm wondering if you could tell me more about why you think that.*

Visitor: *Um ... nudity is not really a bad thing—even though it might be embarrassing for some people. Ah ... that's all. [Laughs]*

Specifically, the depictions of male nudity and sexuality seemed to surprise a number of visitors, several of who resorted to humor to make light of their unease:

They are very interesting pictures. Lots of male-on-male action. [Giggles]

* * *

I was confronted by a picture of this fellow, larger-than-life-size, with his schwantz in my face.⁸ [Laughs]

* * *

As a guy my age [in his sixties], seeing pictures of guys kissing sometimes bothers me. [Laughs]

* * *

I've never looked at a group of guys and wondered what they look like naked. ... Well, I don't remember doing that! [Laughs]

* * *

Visitor: *I cannot imagine, if I look back to my younger days, that we would have had all these male nudes.*

OP&A: *Was the nudity a shocking factor for you?*

Visitor: *No, no—come on! I'm too old to get shocked.*

Several interviewees who admitted to being somewhat taken aback by the depictions of male nudity and sexuality hinted that similar depictions of females may not have elicited the same response, because they are more common:

It has a lot of masculine bodies, whereas in some countries or some cultures, you'd see basically females. I haven't seen many females here.

* * *

Female: *I've never seen so many naked men in paintings. Usually it is women. [Laughs]*

Male: *You know, me too!*

⁸ Probably *O'Hara Nude with Boots* by Larry Rivers.

Some interviewees found in this reversal of the expected an opportunity for reflection:

There was a tall male nude, and I thought, “We are always looking at female nudes, and that equals ‘art.’ Isn’t it fair that a man’s body should also be the subject of art?”

Another visitor suggested that what was most unnerving about the nudity in *Hide/Seek* was not that it was predominantly male, but rather that it was very different from the de-sexualized nudity common in mainstream art museum displays:

*I’m not used to seeing nudes—**real** nudes—in museums. I’m used to the traditional, classical [portrayal of nudity], which is to represent people as if they had no sex, basically.*

Several interviewees found it entirely legitimate for art to provoke discomfort as a way of challenging viewers to feel and to think about what the artist wished to convey:

*There **should** be art that makes you feel [uneasy] ... You don’t always have to feel great. It might push you into an area that you didn’t think about.*

* * *

*There were parts that were **supposed** to make you uncomfortable; there were parts that were not supposed to be happy-go-lucky. So, yes, there were parts that were uncomfortable and “inappropriate,” but that’s sort of the nature of the beast.*

* * *

*Art is supposed be controversial; that’s what the whole purpose is. Well, I mean, it’s not the **only** purpose, but it’s one purpose. And of course many artists don’t think in the establishment way, so of course you’re going to get controversial stuff.*

* * *

It’s always good to have something you don’t like. It gives you a way to compare what you do and don’t like. It also forces you to try to understand [the art you do not like], to broaden your mind. So I see things that I don’t like in art as a challenge. ... I’ve seen stuff I didn’t like at first, and then I’ve learned about it. And actually, [after I learn about it], I do like it. It’s a challenge for me to look at something closer.

However, a number of interviewees strongly disagreed with the suggestion that *Hide/Seek* was notably provocative, shocking, or outrageous. They thought that such a suggestion said more about the conservative cultural scene of Washington, D.C. than about the exhibition itself. In their view, standards for what is considered outside-the-box are simply low in Washington D.C., at least in comparison with major cultural centers:

We came earlier because we saw [a segment on the controversy] on PBS. ... We wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I was disappointed, because there's nothing to it. It's not that controversial. It's not shocking. I have seen stuff that's more erotic in New York. But I guess it's a little more prudish in D.C.

* * *

I remember one painting [I saw in the Netherlands], where two males were painted together as if marrying, and one was Jesus. He was ... up on the cross, and they were naked. So it's not to that stage here, you see.

* * *

I'd like to have more [exhibitions on] modern identity, like you see in New York. You don't have much of that in D.C. Especially a lot of realism—painful, shocking exhibits.

* * *

I have seen in some foreign art galleries work that you would say was homoerotic, and it's not even commented on. It's not even labeled as that. America is very fond of labeling.

“If You Go Outside, You are Not Okay”—Connecting to Personal Experiences

Several interviewees, particularly but not exclusively visitors who identified themselves as gay or lesbian, drew strong connections between what they saw in *Hide/Seek* and experiences from their own lives. The AIDS section evoked painful recollections from several individuals who had lived through the height of the epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s and seen its effects up close:

I guess all of the AIDS stuff towards the end made me really sad. Those are all my contemporaries.

* * *

I had several friends who died of AIDS when I was in high school. They were gay before enough was known on how to prevent [contracting] it. I hadn't thought about that in a while. Maybe it's because there's not so much press, but it appears that fewer people are dying of AIDS now—or at least people that I'm aware of. ... It just reminded me of some of the feelings I had about it; the terror. ... I was young, but everyone seemed to be sexually active as teens.

* * *

The painting of Felix really struck me. It was such a horrible time for the people who contracted the disease. I work in a hospital, and I know that was a time when everybody was panicking. We didn't wear gloves before then; it was that fear that was put in us. I can imagine [how] these people [felt], being subjected to people fearing them. That's just awful.

A number of interviewees drew much more general connections between the exhibition and their own lives. The following quotations are from interviewees who identified themselves as gay:

Well, it's kind of hard to put it in words. It's like your whole life, all together [in one place]. Everything [in the exhibition is very personal]. The large piece at the very back of the room—the guy who is dead in his bed—is very much my childhood. Seeing [someone] die that way is very personal for me. [But also] seeing portraits of writers, of people who you admire. To just see people you feel like you know—gay people. You don't see that in a museum. So it is different.

* * *

When I was a young man, living in New York in the 1980s, I had a group of friends who were in their 50s and 60s, who would talk to me about pre-Stonewall New York and things that happened to them. I always felt it was like a history lesson that I didn't get in school. So seeing some of the early pieces here from the perspective of the gay and lesbian community—as opposed to just “here's a piece by Eakins,” for example—it's very heartening. I'm 48 years old, and I wish I had this history taught to me in school.

* * *

Walt Whitman's piece reminded me of the first gay movie I saw as a teenager. It was a love story between two teenage girls who were quoting Walt Whitman and reading and being oppressed together. [Interacting] with lots of people who were either drag queens or trans-women just made such an impression on me. Then I loved that the drag-king stuff was in there, because it was the first time I saw that in a public setting, and I was like, "There's more than one? That's amazing." ... When you are a queer kid, the space where you are allowed to be everything is very, very small and it's shared by drag queens and drag kings. All the fruits are all in one room. It's not like you have the whole city to run around in. It is just this one place where you are okay. If you go outside, you are not okay. [Begins to cry] It reminded me very much of my childhood, and growing up as a queer kid in the city.

* * *

I've been "out" since 1974. That was the year I became a [U.S.] citizen. When I left Britain, homosexuality was still illegal. I left in 1965, and it wasn't made legal until '67. I grew up with this restriction and this knowledge of being in a separate sort of society altogether. If you've ever been to Britain, I don't know if you're aware of how reserved, especially back then, most people are about anything personal. I was aware that I was not going to marry, I was not going to lead a straight life, and I had always wanted to come to the States—not because I thought it was more liberal, but because I thought there were fewer restrictions on things like careers. ... When I lived in Britain there was very little discussion of homosexuality. The only famous gay person when I was growing up was Lord Montague. ... So that was the most visible gay sort of personality that we were aware of. There was no hint of [overt] homoeroticism in art or movies, but I could see a movie and pick up some kind of erotic content that wasn't essentially heterosexual. ... In the fifties and sixties I would say [America] was probably more puritanical even than Britain. Yet today, this sort of exhibition causes really very little flutter. You couldn't have shown this in Britain or even the States in 1960. [This exhibition shows] how courageous a lot of these artists were, producing what they did in that time frame, even though they were enclosed within their own groups. They were setting themselves up for attack, which I think comes across.

However, personal identification with the struggles of the artists and subjects in *Hide/Seek* was by no means limited to visitors who considered themselves gay:

Something about this exhibit to me is more moving and more relatable than a lot of other art, just because it's very much a part of what it is to be alive now and

growing up in this generation. I'm always drawn to things where people have been repressed and not able to fully express themselves. I think it creates an art that's very human; no matter who you are, you can connect on that level with it. That idea of trying to find yourself in the world and trying to be able to be proud and open about who you are, in spite of what people might think. ... There is a lot of art where people can either not like it or like it—it's aesthetic or it's not. But these are more like human stories; they're on a human level that anyone can connect with. ... I have a lot of conversations with friends of mine about this idea ... that our parents created this world they wanted us to live in, but you can recreate it for yourself. You don't have to fit into that mold. I'm exposed to a lot more ideas and freedom than maybe my parents were, and that fundamentally makes me feel different about life and the world. It makes me want to embrace that as a gift. Not that my parents are to blame or anything; [the world] was just not as opened up then.

At a later point in the same interview, this visitor returned to this theme of openness:

I was thinking as I was going through that I sometimes have the same struggles. They may not be the same subject matter that these artists were dealing with, but I have that same feeling of wanting to share things about myself, but not knowing how they'll be received, and trying to understand my own self identity. They'll always be different hot topics or things that will be controversial and that we'll be working toward understanding and accepting as a society. But on a personal level there will always be things that you're trying to deal with and to understand about yourself.

Themes and Messages

The study team's interviews revealed that visitors read a variety of themes and messages into *Hide/Seek*. Since art is inherently subjective and there is no correct way for visitors to interpret it, the study team presents a wide selection of interviewees' ideas here, without speculation on how well these ideas may or may not fit with curators' intentions. Further, while there has been an effort to categorize themes into distinct sub-sections for the sake of readability, there is a good deal of unavoidable overlap among them.

Not surprisingly, a large number of interviewees suggested that the main theme was simply "gay sexuality," "gay culture," or some variant thereof. In the absence of further elaboration, such observations strike the study team as both obvious and vague. When confronted with this type of response, the study team generally attempted to draw out

the specific aspects of “gay culture”—and its relationship to wider American society—that struck visitors to the exhibition. It is these results that are reported here.

“...If You Look at It Closer...”—Gay Codes

One idea that many visitors took away from the exhibition was that artists often “coded” gay themes into their works rather than making them explicit, particularly in the days when homosexuality was widely stigmatized. Visitors detected this type of coding not only in works by artists who were themselves gay, but also in works portraying gay (or ambiguous) subjects by artists of any sexual orientation.

I actually think the point that this exhibit makes is that the expression of gayness was codified, and that it had to be because of society. A [younger person] who comes to this exhibit might not understand what he or she is seeing, which validates the camouflage that gay society had to go through in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

* * *

Mother: *I figured [the point here] is to show that there was a difficult time as painters were coming out, especially in the earlier 20th century. They still wanted to get their views across, but they had to hide it in code—some more than others.*

Daughter: *I think they are hiding the fact that they are gay in portraits, and you have to find [the code] to be able to distinguish that.*

A number of interviewees interpreted the title *Hide/Seek* as referring, at least in part, to this kind of coding—to the idea that the “difference” captured by a portrait may not be overt, but may have to be ferreted out through clues provided by the artist:

I just felt like [the title] was a statement about ... [how homosexuality] had to be so carefully masked. ... Over the years, that mask is pulled away. And as times change, finding it is a little simpler.

* * *

There’s that slash mark between “Hide” and “Seek.” It’s this line where some things are hidden, and some things are visible. I like that the curators chose to make it canonical art, not “outsider art” or “radical art.” This art is all part of the canon; but it’s seeing it through a different lens. We have seen this art before—particularly things like Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns—but we have not looked at

it from a homosexual viewpoint. So I love that you can look at it through a different and wider lens, and understand it in its full meaning. The “hide-and-seeking” is a revealing, and I love that idea.

Several interviewees noted their surprise when learning from wall text about the subtle gay undertones in specific works or types of works that they never would have suspected harbored such connotations:

Like [Men Reading, by J.C. Leyendecker], where the two guys are, you know, frat brothers or whatever. One guy is reading the newspaper. I would never think about that as having any homosexual connotations whatsoever.

* * *

You have to sneak it in. One painting I liked was [Men Reading]— the two gentleman all dressed up with the starched shirts and cuff links and shiny shoes.

* * *

[I particularly enjoyed the painting of] the working-class people enjoying the day on the river, with the “possibly, possibly-not” homoerotic aspect of it. I didn’t know that existed in cities at the time. ... The description next to it mentioned the gentleman who was basically a voyeur, which was sort of funny to me. It was like a story; even though it was just one picture, it was like watching a 20-minute documentary on that part of history.

* * *

I was surprised by the print of the public bathhouse. It was surprising to learn that this had been a popular print. It wasn’t just a one-off painting that some artist did that was bought by a collector and hung in a gallery. It was a very homoerotic print that was widely for sale, and sold well—at the beginning of the 20th century. It was surprising that this could hang in the average person’s home. Well, maybe not the average person, but you know—you could walk into someone’s home or apartment and see this hanging there. ... In terms of the whole exhibit, the whole idea of “Hide/Seek,” some people might just look at that print and say, “Oh, here’s a scene of a bathhouse, with a group of men.” But if you look at it closer, you see another element to it. You see this sexual element to it. So it’s kind of hiding in plain sight.

* * *

I thought it was cool how [certain elements were] supposed to mean that it was gay. Like, with a lot of the paintings. I couldn't tell just by looking at them. ... The tour guide told us how it was considered to be [gay-themed].

“They Couldn't Just Be Open”—Hidden Selves

A closely related theme brought up by many interviewees was the tension between feeling compelled by society to keep one's homosexual identity hidden from public view, and longing for the freedom to express one's real self more openly.⁹ Again, this is more in evidence in the earlier works,¹⁰ but it remains an undertone throughout the exhibition. One interviewee provided a description of this phenomenon of “hidden selves” in the context of a novel he had recently read, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin:

The novel explores what it's like to be a homosexual man in the mid-20th century, at a time when it wasn't as culturally accepted as it might be today. One of the main themes is the duality of its protagonist. Although he's aware that he's homosexual, he's scared to embrace it and indulge in it. ... So it's this mix of confusion combined with emotional and sexual repression; but also an underside of free expression. ... [I see parallels in Warhol's] Troy Diptych, with its multiple portraits of a teen idol in the 1960s who was alleged to have had a homosexual affair with another one of the “all-American boys” of the era. I feel that painting depicts a hidden side that is kept away from the public in black-and-white. And the side that is colored in is what everyone actually sees—but there are flaws in that side as well. ... I felt that pertained to the protagonist of the novel, David. He has a fiancée, and tries to maintain a straight relationship. Yet at the same time, he realizes that's not the person he is, and he has this side he tried to keep hidden from his society at home, and that he expresses when he moves to Paris.

Another visitor provided a powerful metaphor for this perceived exhibition theme by recalling her feelings when playing a common children's game:

When I first saw the title, I thought of the connection to the game you play as a child, hide-and-go-seek. I remember even now being younger and playing that

⁹ Note that several of the interviewees quoted in the section on “Connecting to Personal Experiences” touched on this theme, in the context of their own personal experiences.

¹⁰ To some extent, this also applies to the works from the AIDS era—when homosexuals, after making considerable progress in shaking off the stigma attached to their sexuality per se, were re-stigmatized because of the public's association of the gay community with a feared communicable disease.

game. It was fun, but at the same time it was scary. You're so young and impressionable—and your heart races a little at the idea of being found. You don't want to be the first one found, but you don't necessarily want to be the last one found either. I thought about that idea as I was going through the exhibition: of wanting to be found and at the same time not wanting to be found, and the tension that creates. That correlates very well with how a lot of the artists and their artwork was created and some of the natural tensions that surrounded their lives and their work.

In terms of specific works, several interviewees were struck by the “hidden in plain sight” aspect they perceived in the photograph of Hugh Laing and Antony Tudor by Carl Van Vechten:

[The photograph of the choreographer and his partner] holding hands, but very discreetly—I mean, it's really endearing. [It was taken during a transitional phase, when] gay men couldn't be overt. ... It was also interesting to see Grant Wood and some of the more iconic Americans of that older generation, who were hidden in plain sight.

* * *

There was a nice 1940s photograph of [two male partners] sitting together. When they sat together side by side, they were holding hands, but they put one arm in front so you couldn't see that. ... The reason for that is the period of time. They couldn't just be open.

Other interviewees made similar points more generally:

What caught my attention was how these people suffered and kept it to themselves. So afraid of shame, of people pointing at them and treating them like criminals. That's what I get—that they're so happy when they come out, so that they can be human beings like everyone else.

* * *

[The main point is] just the struggle [gay artists] have to go through to express their desires and to express how they feel. They cannot; they have to hide it.

A number of interviewees expressed surprise at discovering that one or more of the well-known artists and subjects represented in *Hide/Seek* were, or were suspected to be,

gay or bisexual—poignant evidence for their success in keeping their real selves unknown to the public:

My main impression is that I did not know that so many of our famous and great artists are homosexuals. Not that I care, but it's fascinating.

* * *

I would say [the exhibition] wants to convey an acceptance of homosexuality by demonstrating that so many of our artistic and literary heroes were in fact gay. That was eye-opening for me. I mean, there were so many that I didn't know about.

* * *

I didn't know the gentleman who painted American Gothic was gay. So I'm learning about things like that. Georgia O'Keeffe—eh, we all knew about that; but it's nice to see an original Georgia O'Keeffe.

* * *

There were some artists that I was surprised to see in here—Eakins being one of them. And then it mentioned that Walt Whitman was also gay, and I didn't know that either. So I learned a lot from it.

* * *

One [discovery] that really surprised me, and probably because I haven't read too much of his material, is [that] Walt Whitman [was gay]. I was a little surprised. It wouldn't affect me one way or the other, but I think some Americans would [be startled]—a great person in literature like that, who has so many schools and public places named after him.

Interestingly, one interviewee speculated that social repression may have been what drove some of these artists to artistic or literary greatness:

I think there are lots of gay people who have contributed a lot to American society [because they had to submerge their true selves, and therefore] were more expressive in their writings or artwork. Maybe a lot of people who were exposed to their work have seen whatever they wanted to see. I think this exhibition is telling you who those people were in their real lives.

“To Grow As Humanity and As a Society”—Historical Progress Toward Openness

Other visitors saw the show in terms of the historical evolution of societal attitudes toward homosexuals in the 20th century, and how this evolution was reflected in art and portraiture. From the earlier works, where much was hidden and the “coding” was difficult to break, we see fitful progress toward greater artistic freedom and more-or-less open depictions of homosexuality in the works shown in the later chronological sections:

I liked seeing the progression of the depiction of homosexuality from the 19th century into the 20th. Just seeing how much more subtle it was in the earlier pieces and then some of the later things, the photograph of the two [men] kissing is very overt.

* * *

I always like seeing the more historical pieces, like the portrait of Gertrude Stein and her lover, Alice Toklas. I think a lot of the time today, as gay men, we think about the gay community in terms of Stonewall, forward. But we forget that there was this whole life of gay men and lesbians in the early part of the 20th century that we don't necessarily learn about in schools growing up. To me, it's always fun to see that and to have that reaffirmed.

On a grander scale, one interviewee saw the show as documenting the general movement toward greater openness, tolerance, and artistic freedom:

One thing I was thinking was interesting as I went through is how ... it encompassed different generations and many years, and through that, America, society, and culture have changed. ... The whole point of the exhibit is to give people the dominion, the space to feel free to create art. And the fact that art doesn't fall in line with the beliefs of other people or groups begs the question of how those values have changed and shifted over time. There were things years ago that would have really offended people; but because we challenge our beliefs and ideas and are willing to examine them, we're able to grow as humanity and a society. It doesn't mean that we always in the end [reject] everything that we challenge, but the process of challenging is very pivotal to keeping ourselves safe from our own human brain. Sometimes we can be our own worst enemies because we form prejudices and ideas; [but] the world has so much information that we have to simplify things in order to live in it and not wig out all the time. At the same time, we have to keep

challenging the assumptions and perceptions that we have, because they are not always the right ones.

However, one interviewee, himself a museum professional, pointed out one unavoidable difficulty with such historical presentations—namely, that they are always out-of-date. In this connection, he suggested that the evolution of gay artistic expression has continued to evolve well beyond what is covered in *Hide/Seek*:

By the time a museum engages with a subject, many times the culture has already moved on to another permutation of that issue. It's very hard for a museum to be right at the edge of the moment, because it takes months or years to put together an exhibition. But even if we're into the next step, the previous issues we still have to work with. In the queer range, there's currently a kind of new decadence that's going on—everything from the resurgence of kink to going back to Warhol-esque gender bending. In some ways I think there's a reverberation of the sexual revolution of the '70s wanting to reassert itself, with sort of a pop sensibility; but [with] the knowledge [gained from] the AIDS epidemic. So, on the one hand there's a desire to go back to the disco, but with a sort of uneasy tension.

“The Small Events That Happen Between People”—Acceptance

Another theme suggested by a number of interviewees was the need to accept differences. Interviewees who detected this theme stressed the need to relate to the artists and subjects in *Hide/Seek* as fellow human beings, rather than primarily as representatives of gay America—a role that they themselves may not have wanted to embrace. Some interviewees, for example, discussed how the art in *Hide/Seek* compelled visitors to reflect on the larger framework of shared humanity underlying the surface-level “difference” between gay and straight. In the words of one thoughtful visitor:

Whether you write or paint or draw, you're telling a story. [Others] might not always like the story, but [it's still a] part of the human experience. I like [Untitled (Ross in L.A.) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres] because [it portrays] somebody who had a life and a story, and was a human being who loved and breathed and did all the things we all do. We have a tendency when we categorize people or traits or lifestyles [to sometimes say] they're not like us. Art reminds us that we are all interconnected in one way or another.

Others talked about how the exhibition portrayed feelings and experiences that transcend gender or sexual identity, to which anyone can relate by virtue of shared humanity:

This exhibition [conveys] those very deep human feelings about love and affection. [It is] not pushing an aggressive [lifestyle]. It just exposes [the subjects], so you can see what kind of feelings they had, what kind of love. ... The same feelings of love, and sometimes of jealousy and losing partners and looking for others, that every person has—the homosexual, the heterosexual, it doesn't matter. It's life stories, given in pictures, photos, and abstract images. [It] is the small events that happen between people: you meet people, you lose them, you love them, they die, and all this. It doesn't matter what the sex of your partner is.

This theme of acceptance and common humanity was voiced by a number of interviewees in a variety of ways:

Maybe [one important purpose is] to take away some prejudices from ordinary people—to tell them that everybody has a contribution to make and has a different perspective to bring to things.

* * *

Expressing who you are through art or otherwise is not an easy thing to do. People are not very compromising and understanding. This exhibition helps me understand [gays' and lesbians'] struggles. I want to understand where they are coming from. It is such a large part of American lifestyle and it deserves as much attention as any other social topic in our lives.

* * *

The feeling I get [from this exhibition] is that anyone can overcome adversity. Not that the artists are spitting in people's eyes or saying, "I am who I am and I don't care what you think." It's maybe a softer version: "I'm here, I'm a human like you, and I'm going to do what I want to do and tell my story. You can look at it if you want to, but you don't have to." I don't feel it is either militant or passive. It's in between. ... I'm sure some of the artists meant to be defiant, and some did not. Some just had this in them, and wanted to express it.

* * *

One of the images was a photo of the two gay men in the back of a taxi coming back from their night at work [Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, New York City by Nan Goldin]. ... You could see that somehow the image was taken with respect for their lives. [They were not depicted] as a cheap labor or something, but as human beings. It's a very uneasy life. They're just going home, they're tired, but they carry themselves with dignity.

“Everyone Is a Work of Art”—The Unremarkable Side of the Gay Community

Another theme suggested by some interviewees focused on how *Hide/Seek* undermined stereotypes of gay culture as monolithic, exotic, and very different from mainstream life. For example, some visitors noted that many of the works in *Hide/Seek* portrayed gays, gay culture, and gay sexuality as unremarkable and diverse in expression—in stark contrast to stereotypes of glittering, glamorous urban gay culture:

[This exhibition] does not show the glossy side of gay culture at all. That is interesting to me. If I am thinking about [the stereotype of] glossy, amazingly perfected, well-dressed gay men and women—it's not in there. ... What would that lead you to think? Is this exhibition representative of [gay culture]? Does this really portray any one gay community? No, it does not. It portrays a wide array of different communities. ... So there is no one gay culture to me. There are many, many gay cultures. Some of them are represented in there, but not all. There is no way that you can say there is just one gay culture.

* * *

The people in some of these portraits are just—I don't want to say they're just mundane shots, but it's not all necessarily [like] Andy Warhol's camouflage self-portrait. Some of the Nan Goldin shots, for example, are just people in their daily lives. [So there's] the idea that everyone is a work of art, in a way; you just have to look in a certain way in order to see it. ... Granted, there are pieces, like the Frank O'Hara here—this is definitely a posed shot. But not all of them are posed shots. Some of them are just slices of life.

The idea that “gay culture” has been to a large extent integrated into American culture writ large was another variant of this theme mentioned by a few interviewees:

There is such a wide range [of gay cultures], and they are so involved and so integrated into what American culture is. I don't know if anyone would necessarily say that there is [a line where] what we commonly accept as “American culture”

stops, and “gay culture” or “the gay community” starts. Now it is just part of everybody’s lives.

“Put Me in the Mind of Tim Burton”—It’s All About the Art

While not necessarily denying that the kinds of themes discussed above were there, some visitors nonetheless suggested that the lives and sexuality of the artists and subjects were in some sense beside the point. These interviewees held that the artistic and aesthetic merits of the works on display ought to be the first, if not the only consideration:

I look at these as pieces of art, not as saying anything about homosexuality.

* * *

Gay and lesbian art should just [be treated] the same as [any] art, in my opinion.

* * *

Many of those things are just pure art. For example, I’ve seen the Grant Wood painting American Gothic in Chicago many times, but I never knew Grant Wood was gay. ... Leonardo DaVinci was gay. I don’t know. It didn’t really influence me one way or the other.

* * *

I’m an amateur artist, so I focus a little bit on, you know, light and shade, and how the artist does different things, particularly in the nudes. ...The artwork is really fabulous. If I know that someone is really interested in LBGT issues [I might especially recommend the exhibition to them,] but I think that anyone would be able to enjoy it on its own artistic merits.

* * *

I’m straight, but I can still appreciate art when I see it. And I think the art here is truly beautiful.

* * *

I think it’s the picture [itself] that allows you to imagine what you want to imagine. Reading about the history is nice, but if I’m not interested in the art, I don’t care

what the text is behind it, because it has not pulled me in and made me curious.

One visitor focused so strongly on the art itself—specifically, on the changes over time in approaches to portraiture on display in the show—that he barely seemed to be aware of the themes of “difference and desire” at all:

The theme is different portraiture in the 20th century. It is a historical documentation of what happens in art in this time period.

Discussing the art itself, several visitors commented positively about the eclectic mix of styles and genres:

I didn't know what to expect next. The images are very different styles—pictures in black and white, drawings, very realistic [or very abstract], very monochromatic or very colorful, a collage. You don't know what you'll see next.

* * *

I was almost surprised to see the breadth of the exhibit. For some reason, even though I had read about it, in my mind I was thinking more in terms of [just works from] the latter 20th century, as opposed to some of the Thomas Eakins and things like that. ... You have [traditional] portraiture, but you have installations. It wasn't just “Oh, here's a portrait of this person, here's a portrait of that person.” There was much more to it.

Several visitors spent much if not most of their interview discussing the aesthetics of the exhibition, sometimes with little evident interest in the larger cultural or historical dimensions discussed above:

I automatically liked [Self -Portrait by Romaine Brooks] because I like Tim Burton and that put me in the mind of Tim Burton. ... It's not sad or depressing, but it's just very dark.

* * *

I especially liked the Cadmus art—Paul Cadmus. He is very insightful; his technique is very highly developed; he's an excellent craftsman; and his composition is wonderful. I also loved that huge Bellows painting. It's amazing when you come close to it, how rough the whole technique is; but when you stand back, everything comes together.

* * *

I do installation and video. I also like performance art. This exhibit will probably inspire me in how I prepare for my art. ... No other show I've seen in the past pushed the boundaries of expression so strongly. The whole community of artists appreciates it. This exhibit helps us "survive" as artists and evolve.

One interviewee, a student of art, captured the ambivalence of some visitors about seeing the works in *Hide/Seek* specifically as "gay" art rather than simply as art, while admitting that it was ultimately an interesting and unique juxtaposition:

I guess for me it was interesting because I never really thought about putting together a collection of portraiture of gay artists, just because there are so many artists who are [gay]... It never occurred to me that it had to necessarily be stated. I guess in studying various artists, I always knew they were gays, and that [the art in this exhibition] is their work. But I suppose not a lot of people are necessarily aware of that. I guess it is interesting to see that perspective and to think of it in that way.

Another visitor, a young woman who spoke about how the exhibition touched her on a personal and emotional level, noted that while the quality of the art itself may not have been the central point for her, nonetheless the show could not have succeeded if the art itself was not of high caliber:

I definitely think the aesthetics were important. If the art hadn't been good—that's obviously subjective, but let's say if it hadn't been of high quality—I would have walked out unimpressed and maybe even with indifferent feelings toward the whole genre. [That said, artistic quality per se] wasn't for me at the forefront for an exhibit like this. ... On some level [aesthetics and message] become mixed, and you're not sure which is the more powerful factor in driving you toward a piece. Color and composition play a big role—I'm a very visual person. When I see something in colors or composition that really appeals to me, that's the first thing I notice, and then I go.

Criticisms

Although interviewee responses to the content of the exhibition were generally quite positive, some interviewees offered criticisms about specific curatorial choices. Most of

these, however, appeared to pertain to the absence of something an interviewee would have wanted to see more of, rather than missteps in the content actually presented.

“Sort of Not Equal”—Gender, Racial, and Geographic Imbalance

Several interviewees pointed out that in some ways, the show seemed oddly deficient in terms of diversity and inclusiveness, particularly but not exclusively with respect to the balance between the male and female sides of gay America. For example, one female interviewee observed:

I am struck by how male-dominated things are, even in this world. There's not much stuff by women, not a lot that I would relate to. It's still sort of not equal, in that lesbianism isn't given attention. ... Boy, there's really not much about women here.

* * *

It's not equally about male and female desire. Of course, in this setting, gender gets blurred, as it should. But it feels like male desire taking masculine or feminine shape, more than female desire taking masculine or feminine shape.

* * *

This is a show that's much more heavily male—for reasons of art history, reasons of who [became] artists, and just because things turn out to be more male than female unless very proactive attempts are made. I imagine that the curators did make proactive attempts, but one wishes there were more lesbian material. It feels like a more gay male show.

However, one visitor's comments indicated that such judgments might to some extent reflect the specific works or sections on which critics focused:

I actually feel like it was more female-dominated, at least in these two rooms that I visited. Even [in] the works that had mixed sexes ... it looks like there is probably an even [balance between men and women]; but then you have a woman bare-chested from the waist up over there. So I feel like, at least in these two rooms, it was more female dominated.

Several interviewees also suggested that the exhibition's content was skewed toward a white, Euro-American perspective:

A couple pieces that were interesting touched upon the intersection of LGBT issues and people of color. There was one by an Asian artist and one by a black artist and that was it. That was a minor part of the exhibition that might be interesting to explore more.

* * *

I think it was definitely more white male dominated. I noticed that there was a section where there were African-American people, and there is stuff about Harlem; ... but I think it's also harder to find, it's more hidden, it's more obscure.

* * *

What struck me while walking through it is that it feels very "white male." That's interesting. I don't think that's something that necessarily should have been changed, because it is supposed to be the canon. It just makes you think hard about what's in the canon.

A few others perceived bias in favor of the "East Coast" experience:

I came of age in San Francisco [in the 1960s and 1970s] and I did not see any of that world in this exhibit. So it kind of had an East Coast orientation.

* * *

I thought there wasn't very much representation from the West Coast, and I wasn't sure why. I knew there must have been a great many gay artists in L.A. and San Francisco, especially in the 50s and 60s. But there seems to be an emphasis on New York or Boston here.

"One of the Only Pieces That Made Me Feel Happy"—Emotional Imbalance

Despite the emotional power of the show with regard to feelings of sadness, discomfort, wistfulness, and so on, a few interviewees were struck by the absence of works that evoked more buoyant feelings. One female visitor who identified herself as a lesbian worried that the focus on "desire" without adequate attention to love, happiness, joy, and family might inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about gay people:

I did not see a lot of representations of joy, of love. Just one piece caught my eye—by David Hockney, We Two Boys Clinging Together. That piece had little hearts in it. That was one of the only pieces that made me feel happy when I looked at this

exhibition. So that was missing, I guess. Were there any representations of families? Totally missing. No families, no babies. ... There was [a picture of] two guys kissing, but then [that was counterbalanced by] representations of death. It would bother me if a straight person walked in and did not see any joy, happiness, love. That would make me say, "Isn't that a part of 'desire'"...?

An 18-year-old college freshman echoed this criticism:

The thing that was unbalanced for me was that there was so much about death and AIDS and heartbreak and tragedy. There was not much about joy or the pleasure that leads to that. It was sort of more tilted towards one end of the spectrum, in my mind.

Another interviewee, however, disagreed with this somber assessment:

I don't think it was dark at all. I thought it was fascinating and beautifully curated. ... I was quite impressed with how beautiful I thought it was.

“Did They Choose Artists Who Were Gay?”—Thematic Scope

One visitor, who very much enjoyed the exhibition, nonetheless was confused about its thematic scope and the criteria by which works were selected for inclusion:

Did they choose artists who were gay? Or subjects that were gay? Or what? I don't think everyone included was necessarily gay. Which works were selected for inclusion in it? ... [Some] artists do things that have no particular subject matter; is that considered "gay art"...? I guess they were just going with the themes of representations of sexuality both hidden and overt, as related to homosexuality. So I guess it could be any sexual orientation of the artists themselves.

Another visitor, himself a museum professional, also saw the ambiguity of the inclusion criteria as problematic:

[While most of the artists here were] known to be gay and lesbian, there are also artists whose sexuality is not known, or who were heterosexual but their [artworks] are such that there are homo-erotic readings of them. This is something that was spelled out pretty clearly in the catalogue, [but not in the exhibition itself]. ... The intro panel in the exhibit referred to gay and lesbian artists, without mentioning that some [straight] artists' works are in here because they portray gay subjects or can be read homoerotically. I think that's unfortunate, because that was an

important part of the argument of the catalogue. It also comes across in the labels that some of these artists are working in periods where it was a less binary kind of gay/straight division, and sexuality was constructed differently. ... But in the intro text, that point is not made. So I think your average visitor just automatically assumes that all artists are gay or lesbian.

“Just Guys Standing There in Their Underwear”—Not Edgy Enough

Finally, some interviewees thought that the show was not edgy enough—that it was in fact surprisingly conservative, given its subject matter and what the controversy surrounding it might lead visitors to expect.¹¹ For example, one visitor whose curiosity had been piqued by media accounts of the controversy surrounding the show expressed surprise at how relatively tame it turned out to be:

Some of it is just guys standing there in their underwear. You can see that in a magazine.

One interviewee’s comments about the focus on the canon and the exclusion of “outsider art” have also been given elsewhere. Another visitor, an art curator himself, echoed this idea:

The only thing I think I would like to have seen is maybe a little bit more outsider art. There are two definitions on that. On the one hand, there’s the definition of it as “not well-known”—[things that aren’t Jasper Johns or Andy Warhol] or things like that. [Then there’s the definition of “outsider art”] as the visionaries. There are only one or two visionary-type works in there.

However, the same interviewee also conceded that a show on this theme with an emphasis on “outsider art” might not be possible for a museum such as NPG, at least at this time:

But when you talk about outsiders, could NPG have done this exhibition if it had not had mainstream art? No, I don’t think so, because what happens from the curatorial perspective is that you have to keep a certain [familiarity] about the work in an exhibition in order to engage your audience, and I would imagine that that is especially important at a venue like this. The masters create a legitimization function.

¹¹ A number of quotations to this effect are given above in the section on “Discomfort.”

Another interviewee shared this view that it might be a while before a Smithsonian museum could get away with staging an exhibition on a similar theme featuring more provocative or less well-known artwork:

If this is the first major exhibit like this, you have to take baby steps. So maybe this exhibit was not as provocative as some would have hoped. But since this one has, I gather, been a success, maybe the next one can be more provocative. ... If something is too provocative, it can be off-putting to people, which would make the museum more hesitant in the future to do something else like this.

Design and Layout

“So Much Space”—Layout and General Presentation

Many interviewees had no opinion about the exhibition layout one way or the other, with a number not even recognizing any underlying organization to it at all:

I didn't discern a serious pattern to how it was laid out. Was there one? It seemed to me like a nice collection of art by gay and lesbian artists.

Some visitors were not concerned about the layout because of the way they approach museum exhibitions in general:

I did here what I usually do. You come in, and after the first turn that you take, you look at everything and you read the labels, read the labels, read the labels. Then you start looking for things that interest you, so you go over there. You don't necessarily follow a line. Then you see something else over there; you see something over there; you see something over there. So for me it becomes a question of whatever interests me. It's not a line to hit everything.

Others had a favorable impression of the layout, but found it difficult to articulate specific reasons for this:

I thought the layout was good. I mean I didn't notice anything— maybe there was something I should have noticed. But no, no I thought the layout was good.

One visitor, who had experience designing exhibits in England, liked the openness and spaciousness of the exhibit space, as well as the eclectic mix of media:

I love the spaciousness here. I've been to so many shows, even in D.C. and even when it's only half attended, where you feel a little bit cramped. I love the space of this architecture—it's very, very good. I like the way the paintings are not consciously grouped in any particular categories—you go from male to female to photography to oil and found pieces and so on. There's a nice lack of categorization, I think.

Some other visitors had similar thoughts concerning the spaciousness and open feel of the show, including one who noted:

There was so much space to see individual works. It wasn't crowded at all. You have the whole area. It seems to be well laid out; I was impressed by that. I've been to museums before where there are like 10,000 things on one wall, so this was pretty nice.

Another specifically noted the irregular spacing of the artworks as a positive design element:

I think it's well spaced out. It's not one-one-one-one, like this. ... The way it's set, your focus went to [the art]—your gaze was drawn to a lot of them.

Some visitors also mentioned the wall colors:

It's modern. I like the colors. The grays make you look at the image itself. I like how some of them are like blocks of windows.

* * *

The neutral colors are always good for art. Bright colors detract from the art.

Some commented positively on the flow:

It guides you through. ... It's easy to follow. It's not tiring and not boring.

However, others had negative or mixed feelings on this point:

It flowed very well, but I wasn't very sure where to start or which way to go. So I just did each room [one] at a time instead of going around one way and coming back the other way.

* * *

I'm not a huge fan of the layout, but that's the result of the building, obviously. ... Maybe something about it made it flow a little less for me. I had to go a little more into nooks and crannies and then come back out, and cross back over areas. You kind of come to sections [that] split left or right, then you go around walls, and then there's another corner. Some people might like that, but for me ... maybe a more straightforward path.

A visiting museum professional agreed with some of these criticisms, and on the whole offered a mixed assessment of the exhibition layout:

It's the nature of the exhibit—it includes such disparate kinds of work in terms of media, in terms of framing, in terms of size—that it really looks to me like it's difficult to hang. And I think these are tough galleries: windows that are partially covered over, niches that are partially filled in, spaces that look like they were once open but walls were put in—you know. So there is a sense in which the galleries themselves have funny proportions, and then to try to hang art in them is kind of difficult. There are places where the juxtapositions work beautifully; there are ways in which if you look closely, you notice that the subject in one photograph is an artist whose work is elsewhere in the show. There are other nice literary relationships that are set up, and I think they've done well at that. But there are also places where things are double-hung in ways that are less successful.

Another visitor drew some interesting comparisons between the general presentation of *Hide/Seek* and that of the nearby Presidents collection:

[The Presidents is done in] a more classical way or more educational way. Also the architecture of this exhibition is very different from the Presidents, which is more formal. Here you get more impressions, feelings, thoughts, things that are more abstract. I think this has to be presented in a more abstract way, or [at least] in a different way. This all has to be like a bundle so you can get [visitors to feel] certain moods and certain feelings. If you were to display such pictures in a very cold, very neutral way, it would have a very different meaning or give a very different impression.

“I Was Just Looking for the Portrait of Teddy Roosevelt”—Placement Within NPG

Although the specific location of *Hide/Seek* within NPG was not deliberately chosen by the curators, several interviewees commented on the fact that *Hide/Seek* was located

close to *America's Presidents*, one of NPG's iconic attractions.¹² Some interviewees found the contrast between the two exhibitions intriguing; a few had come to see the Presidents, and then were drawn in by the very different show a few paces away:

I was more focused on trying to remember where the Presidential portraits were. But on my way out ... I'm glad I saw [Hide/Seek]. I was just looking for the portrait of Teddy Roosevelt!

* * *

It certainly grabs your attention because it's so different. You walk through the Presidents, and then all of a sudden you're wondering, "Did I take a wrong turn someplace?" But not in a bad way—in a good way.

However, others found the transition between the two exhibits to be somewhat jarring—especially considering the family audiences that the Presidents collection draws:

Husband: *When you walk from the Presidents straight into here, it was kind of different—it was a shock. It wasn't a good transition. I'm not saying it's disrespectful to the Presidents, but it's kind of like ... just a totally different part of the United States. Maybe something more transitional between [them would help,] so you wouldn't be as shocked when you walk in.*

Wife: *I mean, I'm a parent, so I would want a note to say some of this stuff might be a little graphic for kids. I don't know if I would want my six-year-old coming upon a President, and then a penis.¹³ [Laughs]*

* * *

OP&A: *Is there anything that you disliked about the exhibition?*

Visitor: *I think walking in unprepared. ... I guess I'm more concerned about children coming in.*

* * *

[My husband] was saying that he would one day like to bring our kids [to the Smithsonian museums]. But I don't know if I would like to go through that gallery

¹² Both exhibitions are adjacent to *Struggling for Justice*; few visitors commented on this.

¹³ Note that this woman's comments indicate she completely missed the "mature content" signs at the entrance of the exhibition. Some study team members were concerned that these signs were not sufficiently prominent, and easy to miss.

with my kids. ... I mean, we weren't sure what it was; we were really just walking through to get to [the Presidents gallery].

Another interviewee assumed that the placement close to the Presidents' gallery was intentional and was a clever move, in that it could potentially draw in audiences who might not otherwise gravitate toward an exhibition like *Hide/Seek*:

The funny thing is that it's right next to the American Presidents. I think whoever organized did a very smart thing, because you just bump into it, and you can decide if you want to go in or just stand back.

“Extraordinarily Well Written”—Labels/Text

Interviewees' response to the labels and wall text in *Hide/Seek* tended to be positive. Those who commented on the text generally thought it was effective in providing context for the art:

I honestly think the labels are extraordinarily well written here—very unusually good in terms of being smart, making some interesting connections, and helping visitors with things they might not know or see, but at the same time not talking down [to visitors]. I think they're a little long, but they're very good, and they also draw some nice connections between some of the works.

* * *

In general, I like to read the panels. Here, I definitely did, because they are focused on this historical context and cultural moment. It was really helpful to read the information that was there.

* * *

I have to give them kudos. The text was very well done; I think they labored over it. I don't like shows that are done for the sake of controversy—[but in this case] the controversy, of course, was created from the outside. The quality of the objects is very high, [and they are] complemented by the text, which [does a good job] dealing with a subject matter that everybody has a pretty personal take on: sex and sexual experiences.

* * *

I thought it was straightforward about the controversial issues, and honest and dignified in its presentation of sexuality.

The teacher who brought her literature class to the exhibition noted how the wall text succeeded in the difficult task of hitting all visitor levels:

I think [the curators] managed to do what I assume is the goal of [all exhibition] wall and online text, which is to hit all different levels of viewer knowledge simultaneously. ... There were moments when [the text] felt very erudite, with allusions to other artists that are not in the show, and it was assumed that the reader understood the connection. ... [But on the other hand,] a lot of my students don't come to museums regularly and don't have a high level of comfort with art, and they were still reading every word. I thought that was a pretty good test; ... means the text hit all different levels of readers. That was a real accomplishment.

Several visitors specifically said that they spent more time examining the labels at *Hide/Seek* than at other exhibitions. For example, two females visiting the exhibition together had the following thoughts:

Normally, I like to spend some time responding to the artwork before I read the labels. But in this case, I found myself reading the label and then responding again, because there's a lot of information that I obviously couldn't come up with on my own without reading the labels.

Other visitors had similar stories about how information on the context of the artworks transformed their understanding of, and appreciation for, these works:

I tend to get overloaded sometimes in museums with information, so I don't always read wall text much. But I actually felt that [the wall text was] really compelling in this exhibit. I read more than I usually read. Maybe that was because the art just connected to me in a more personal way, ... so reading the text was really interesting to me. It made the pieces more complete. With this exhibit compared with other ones, ... you definitely get the sense that there's a story behind it that needs to be told, that wants to be told. That comes across. With other exhibits I can appreciate the art, but I'm not as interested sometimes in what went on behind the art. The history doesn't seem to play as important a role in it. But here, they're both really tied together—the story of it and then what was produced.

* * *

Mostly, it was like passing by the images, having a first glance, and then something catches your interest and you want to read a little more about it. For example, there is a huge picture at the end of the show displaying a dead person, and I didn't [initially] know that it was a dead person. My first thought was that it might be someone who was suffering from AIDS and was in a bad condition. It was interesting to [read] that this was a picture of a dead person, and who this person was. [So] this gives some further thoughts of the image, some further impressions of the image, and more insight into this piece of art.

A few interviewees complained about the size and physical legibility of the wall text:

The type was a little bit small; I did notice that.

* * *

You have to get quite close to the text [to read it,] and it gets a little crowded in there because so many people are also trying to read the text.

* * *

Not only was the type too small, but the contrast between the type and background was bad. I read all the labels, but my eyes ached after I finished.

“I Guess They All Deserve to Be Shown”—Number of Artworks

As with the layout, many visitors appeared not to have any detailed opinions on the overall size of the exhibition. Several visitors expressed general satisfaction with the size, without going into much detail:

The size was good—about the right size, I guess. ... If you get too much, you end up shortchanging it at some point.

* * *

I definitely feel [the size] was nearing just right. More, and it could have been too much. It was really just right for me actually, because I got through and I felt good about it when I was finished. I didn't want more or less.

Some interviewees thought that the exhibition might have been too large. However, such comments were typically couched in terms of personal overload with the material on display, rather than the suggestion that parts of the exhibition were superfluous:

Visitor: *I really liked it, [but it was] a bit too much for me. I think it's a lot to take in. But I guess they all deserve to be shown.*

OP&A: *So would you have downsized the exhibition?*

Visitor: *I think a little bit, yes. ... On the other hand, I don't know which ones I would have excluded. ... Andy Warhol is so well-known, so maybe I would have done a bit less of him. ... If I were to keep it down, I would take out the more obvious ones, like Georgia O'Keeffe or Alfred Stieglitz. ... I mean, it is hard to tell which ones to cut because you don't know who is going to come and visit. Some people need to see [the more widely known artists] also.*

* * *

I'm a professional with a trained eye. I was the first person in the show at 11:30, and it took me an hour and a half. It might be too much content for a regular museum goer. But that is not particular to this exhibit; others are sometimes much too long.

Other visitors, by contrast, wanted more:

It's too stretched out. I want to see more. You waste a whole wall on four photographs and maybe one little small thing. There is so much art about [the gay experience] that could be displayed here. So I was disappointed.

* * *

I expected, perhaps, a little larger. When I ended it down there I went into the next room and I thought it was continued, but it wasn't. But I guess I still must have spent one-and-a-half hours.

Odds and Ends

“That’s the Way It Is in D.C.”—The Controversy

Perhaps ironically, when public controversy did strike *Hide/Seek*, it had nothing to do with the exhibition’s depictions of “difference and desire.” Instead, it was a charge of anti-religious imagery in one of the show’s video works that prompted the Smithsonian to remove that work from display. This evoked an equally vociferous counter-reaction from arts and free-speech groups, who equated this response with censorship.

Interviewees ranged from those who were completely unaware of the controversy, to those who were personally caught up in it. In between were others who were aware that some kind of furor had surrounded the show, but were unaware of the details.

Among interviewees who were aware of the specifics of the controversy, a few had actually been drawn to *Hide/Seek* specifically because the media coverage had piqued their interest. Several interviewees speculated that the old adage “there’s no such thing as bad publicity” was probably applicable:

I gather the controversy actually increased the number people coming to the show. They say any publicity is better than none.

* * *

It's unfortunate that there are ... you know ... narrow-minded people in the world. Or what I feel are narrow-minded people. But on the other hand, I can understand the Smithsonian's position of being in a tight corner. And perhaps in removing that one piece of art, more people came to see it. Controversy sells.

The study team did not talk to any visitors who explicitly approved of the Smithsonian’s decision to remove the Wojnarowicz video.¹⁴ Still, some of those familiar with the controversy readily conceded that the Smithsonian had been placed in a very difficult situation, and some expressed varying degrees of understanding for its decision:

You have to walk a line. It's one thing to be a private gallery, where you can say, "I'm the gallery owner and I can throw up whatever I want on these walls." It's another thing when it's the Smithsonian.

* * *

My thought was, well, because [the Smithsonian is] government-sponsored, it has to [be sensitive to political pressure] if it wants to stay open.

* * *

I kind of understand why they did it. They're so dependent on federal money. I'm almost sympathetic to why they did it.

* * *

¹⁴ Again, the self-selection factor among those present in the gallery should be borne in mind in this context.

I definitely think [the video] should still be playing. [But] I do understand sort of where it can get a little complicated with federal funding. I heard that was the primary reason it was taken down, or at least [that was what some people] speculated. So I understand it, but I think it is really a shame that [the video] can't be a part of this exhibition, because it is a really affecting piece. I don't think there was so much in it that was offensive. But that is my opinion; some people certainly were offended.

* * *

I've been in a position where I was the director of a school, and sometimes I had to make [tough decisions like the Smithsonian faced in this case]. It's so hard when you're immersed in it; you don't have the same perspective. As a person coming to visit the exhibit, I would say no, you shouldn't have pulled [that video]. And that seems like a very easy answer for me. But [when I was facing tough decisions in a] position of responsibility, suddenly I felt like the picture was much more complex and different than when I was viewing it from the outside.

On the other hand, a number of interviewees expressed disapproval of the Smithsonian's actions:

If it were another minority group, this may not have happened. The Smithsonian might have stood its ground. But when it comes to gays and lesbians, the first thing they do is fold.

* * *

It was a mistake to put something in, and then take it out. If it was my piece, it would really tick me off. I've always liked the concept of the Smithsonian as an open, free place for people—for everybody. ... [The Smithsonian needs to] show more guts when somebody says, "I don't like that; take it out."

* * *

What's the big deal? If you want to show the video, show it! Don't hide it. We are not in the Soviet Union.

* * *

I have no agenda; I'm relatively conservative. But once you start censoring factions of art, then [you are moving toward saying] we should just have [art] the way one faction or group says is good. That's a slippery slope you go down when you do that.

* * *

Visitor 1: *I think it's unfortunate that they removed a piece after having installed it. To me, they should have had the foresight to see it as a [potential] problem and not put it in. But once they put it in, they should have stuck with it and just said "This is what we're doing."*

Visitor 2: *I agree. They do fold, as I know from experience—easily, I would say. ... I think in the past the Portrait Gallery has been a bit more conservative, has it not? So if they are going to go out on this limb, have the courage to hang there!*

One visiting museum curator criticized the decision in largely pragmatic terms, expressing concern for how it might come back to haunt the Smithsonian in the future:

I think it undercuts funding opportunities in the future from foundations like the Warhol Foundation and others, which have indicated they [will no longer] give money to Smithsonian museums. I think that it's also potentially damaging in terms of other museums and artists and galleries possibly [refusing to loan works to Smithsonian museums] down the road. From a professional and personal point of view, I think it was ... very poorly handled.

One visitor saw in the controversy a chance to contrast Washington's cultural conservatism with what goes on in more artistically daring places:

I used to live in New York, and we had Damien Hirst and all that stuff—the shark in formaldehyde and Christ in urine. Here, it's like somebody has a video that's offensive to a small group of people, they complain, and the people at the top say, "We'll take care of it." So they get rid of it, and then all the artists came out of the woodwork to protest. That's the way it is in D.C.

However, one visitor, while disagreeing with the decision to remove the video, stressed the need to keep it in perspective:

I was going to go to the demonstration [against the Smithsonian's decision to pull the video], but I kind of don't want to. They are asking for [the Secretary's]

resignation, but that seems too much. You know, he made a mistake, but ... I don't know enough about him to just ask [him to leave] his job. [It's okay] to be at a demonstration to say that the Institution shouldn't cave to religious extremists or whatever you call them. But I don't feel comfortable asking for a man to be removed from his livelihood.

Another had a very strong reaction to the intimation that Smithsonian funding could or should be affected by incidents such as this:

If I had my way, I would have the Smithsonian's funding protected from the ability of Congress to cut it [in response to small controversies]. With regards to the long-term mission like the Smithsonian, if you're looking at one piece in one show in the context of something as sprawling as this institution over a long period of time, I think [some people in Congress] are being silly. The idea that an institution like the Smithsonian can be held hostage by one [advocacy] organization over one piece in one show is absolutely and utterly ludicrous. I would support legislation to prevent that sort of action from happening. The ability for one person or one small group to destroy [such] an institution is itself a form of autocracy.

Several interviewees also commented on the specific piece at the center of the controversy, noting that a deeply ironic aspect of the situation was that the anti-religious interpretation of Wojnarowicz's work was itself highly debatable:¹⁵

I am an Episcopal priest and I thought: So...? Crucifix with ants. That simply means someone didn't honor it. Someone maybe threw it on the ground where ants would crawl on it. What does this say? That we've ignored it.

* * *

These people who [objected to the video] have not seen it or read what [the artist's own] description was. ... He's a human being, and a Christian one at that.

* * *

Christ himself was a reviled figure in his time, which is why he was crucified. At some time, if and when there's a second coming, who's Christ going to hang out

¹⁵ A more benign interpretation was presented by a prominent piece on the controversy by Holland Cotter in the *New York Times* ("As Ants Crawl Over Crucifix, Dead Artist Is Assailed Again," December 10, 2010), which cited the deceased artist's own past statements to argue that his use of Christian imagery was by no means intended as anti-religious.

with? Not with the [tele-evangelists]. He's going to hang out with the gays and the oppressed. And people are going to look at this guy and say, "Who the hell's this hippie? Let's hang him." Here we go again.

“Reading from a Script”—Cell Phone Guide

Among interviewees, there were few cell phone tour users. Indeed, several of the interviewees, when specifically asked about the cell phone tour, expressed little interest in the concept. One visitor did not take the tour because he incorrectly assumed that it required a smart phone rather than an ordinary cell phone.

Among the few interviewees who took the tour, one claimed that it was at times unclear:

While I like the idea of using the cell phone as a guide, at times it wasn't clear to me which pieces of art were 'on the tour,' so to speak, in order to listen to the background on them.

Another interviewee, an independent museum curator, disliked the tone of the guide:

Essentially they were just reading from a script. [But] I kept doing it because they added layers of information that went beyond the labels in some instances. To hear someone reading is very flat, and it becomes hard to follow.

This interviewee argued for a more “conversational” type of audio guide, as such guides are “much, much easier” to listen to, are less expensive to produce, are more effective at educating the audience, and are “just more interesting for the visitor.”

“Like Watching the Preview for a Movie”—Website

There were relatively few comments about the exhibition’s website, as the interviewees generally did not ask about it and the interviewees rarely volunteered comments on their own. One notable exception was a group of young visitors who had spent some time on the website before coming to the exhibition. The group leader spoke positively about the website:

I loved the way it was set up on the website page, where it would give you a condensed version, and you could hit a tab for more information if you wanted to dig deeper on the pieces that interested you. And it was beautifully written.

However, one member explained why, even for digitally savvy young people, the website was no substitute for seeing the show in person:

Online, it's like watching the preview for a movie—it looks kind of cool, but you don't get the full impact of the art unless you see the artist's lines, you see the size he wanted to make it, you see it presented as the artist wanted it presented. Online, everything is set to a standard size and it kind of shines at you from a computer screen. So this is definitely far more impactful—and far more beautiful, just in terms of viewing the art. ... There's a portrait at the very far end of a dead man in bed. The photo of that online is, what, five by five inches...? You don't really see the detail. But when you get here, it's this massive thing that just shoots out at you and affects you far more—perceptually, emotionally.

Another visitor had similar thoughts about the difference between seeing representations online or in books versus seeing art in person:

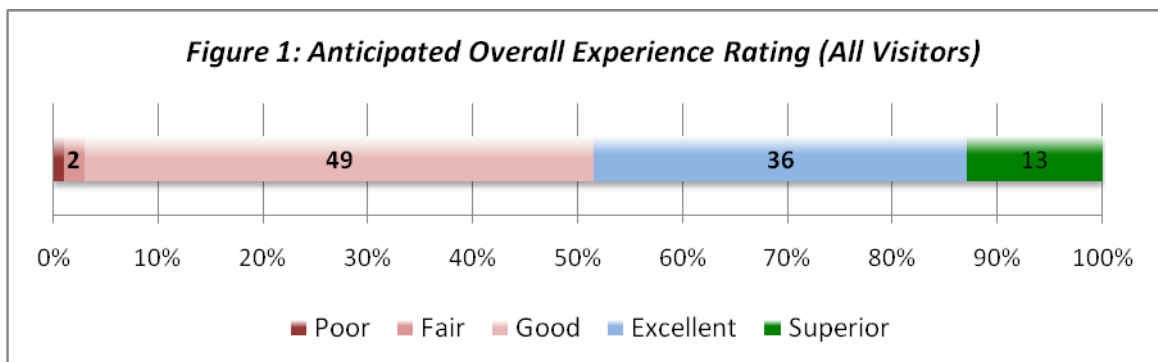
It's like the difference between seeing a picture of the Washington Monument and then standing at the base of it—totally different experience. Much more enriching. Art-wise, it is much more “Oh, I get it, because I see it.” You don't put a book on the wall and walk away from it, then walk closer. But here, you can get close and see the strokes if you want to see that or the details. You can look at it from far away, go up close—it's a three-dimensional experience.

Quantitative Findings

What Visitors Expected

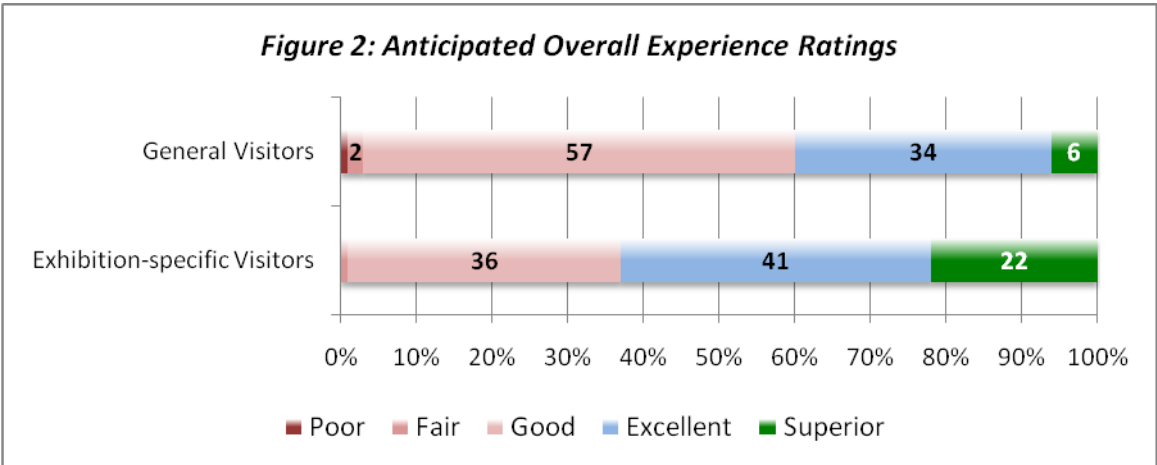
More than half of all visitors entered with relatively negative expectations.

Entering visitors were asked how they expected to rate their overall experience in the exhibition, using a five-point scale that has been applied by OP&A across Smithsonian exhibitions: *Poor*, *Fair*, *Good*, *Excellent*, and *Superior*. In general, visitors who expect to have criticisms tend to select one of the lower three categories of *Poor*, *Fair*, or *Good*. Visitors who expect to be basically satisfied tend to mark *Excellent*. (In most Smithsonian exhibitions, the average rating is *Excellent*.) Those who expect to have very positive responses tend to mark *Superior*.



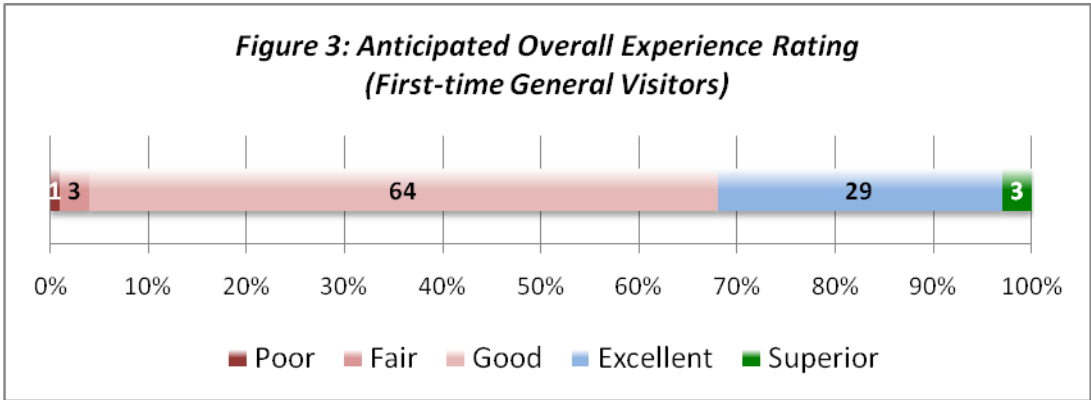
As shown in Figure 1, more than half of the visitors to *Hide/Seek* expected that they would rate their overall experience in the lower three categories of *Good* (49%), *Fair* (2%), and *Poor* (1%)—ratings that indicate visitors were expecting to be critical of the exhibition to some degree. Only 13% anticipated rating *Hide/Seek* as *Superior*, the highest rating; and another 36% selected *Excellent*.

Those who came to NPG specifically to see *Hide/Seek* expected a better experience than those who came for other reasons. Visitors who come to a museum to see a particular exhibition (“exhibition-specific visitors”) typically expect a better experience in that exhibition than those who come for other reasons (“general visitors”). In the case of *Hide/Seek*, the difference in expectations between these two groups was notably large, as shown in Figure 2.

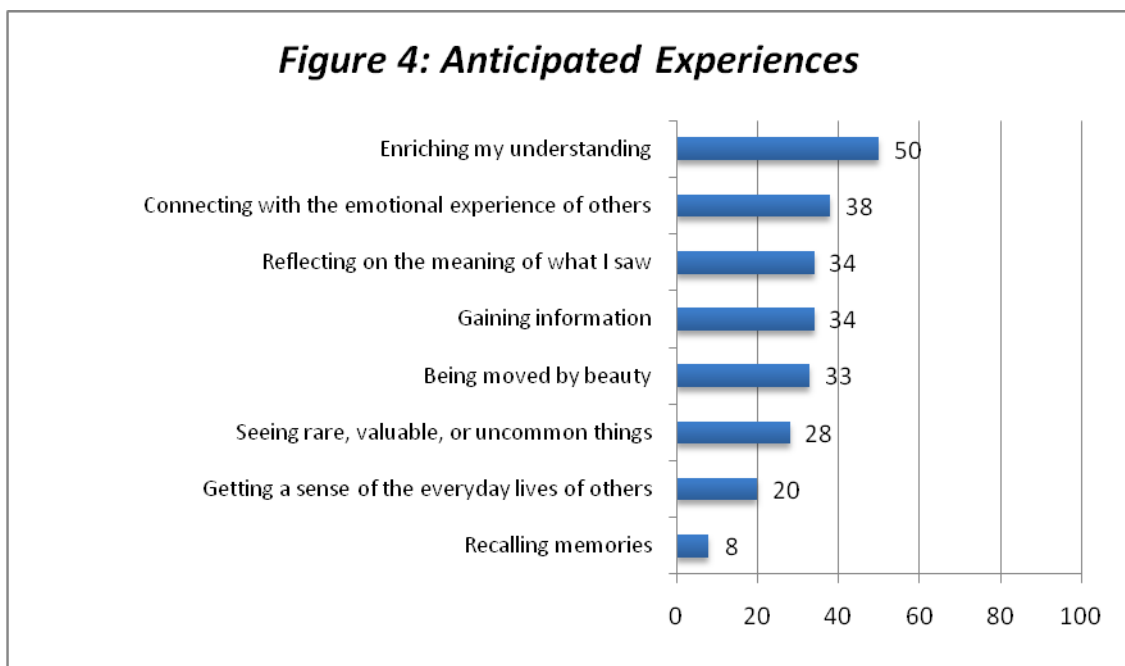


Those who came specifically to see *Hide/Seek* were less negative in their expectations (37% of exhibition-specific visitors expected to rate *Hide/Seek* in the lower categories of *Poor*, *Fair*, and *Good*, compared to 60% of general visitors). Exhibition-specific visitors were also more likely to expect to rate the exhibition *Superior* (22%, vs. 6% for general visitors).

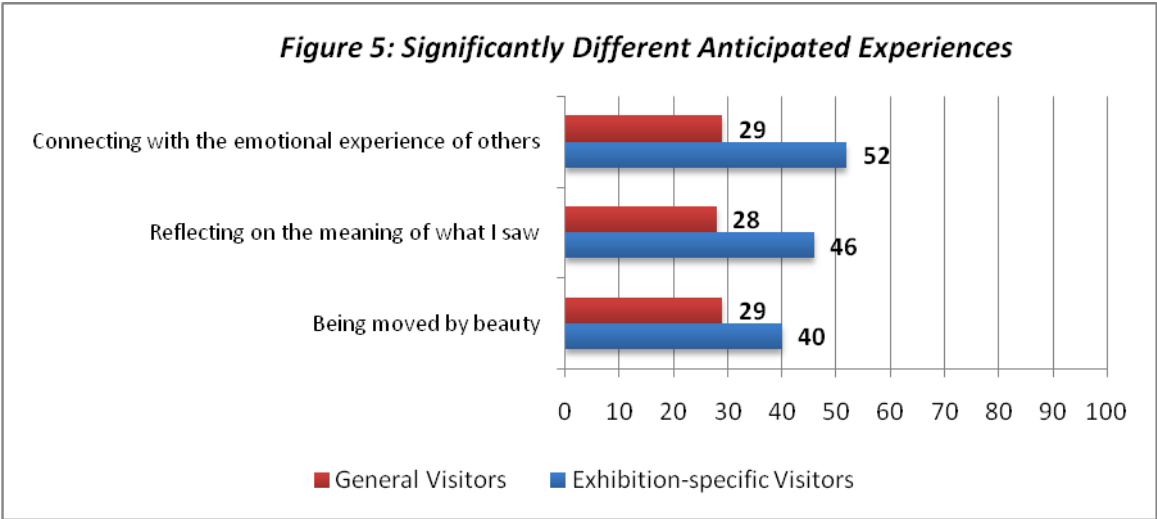
First-time visitors who did not come specifically to see *Hide/Seek* had the most negative expectations of all. General visitors who had not previously come to the Reynolds Center (32% of all visitors) entered with particularly low expectations—68% expected to rate *Hide/Seek* as *Poor*, *Fair*, or *Good*, compared to 49% of repeat general visitors. (See Figure 3.)



About half of all entering visitors were especially looking forward to enriching their understanding, which was the most common anticipated experience. Visitors entering *Hide/Seek* were invited to choose, from a set of eight experiences, those experiences they were especially looking forward to during their visit. (See Figure 4.) Nearly half identified “Enriching my understanding.” Four other experiences were marked by more than one third of respondents: “Connecting with the emotional experiences of others,” “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw,” “Gaining information,” and “Being moved by beauty.”

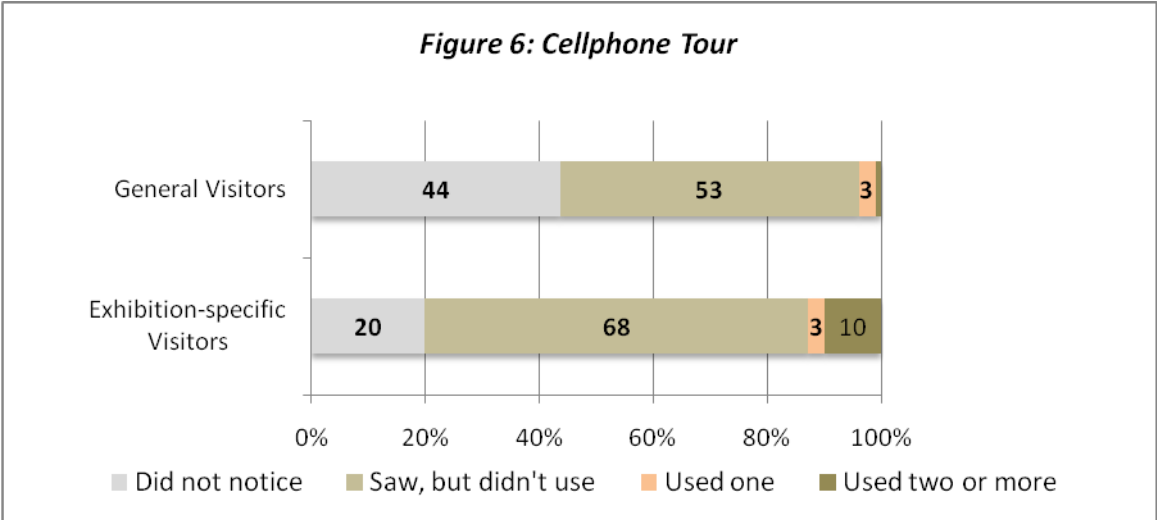


Exhibition-specific visitors were more likely to be looking forward to emotional connections, reflecting on meaning, and being moved by beauty than general visitors. These two key audience segments differed not only in how they expected to rate the exhibition overall, but also in what they were looking for in the exhibition. Approximately half the exhibition-specific visitors were looking forward to emotional connections and reflecting on meaning, compared to less than a third of the general visitors, as shown in Figure 5.



What Visitors Did in Hide/Seek

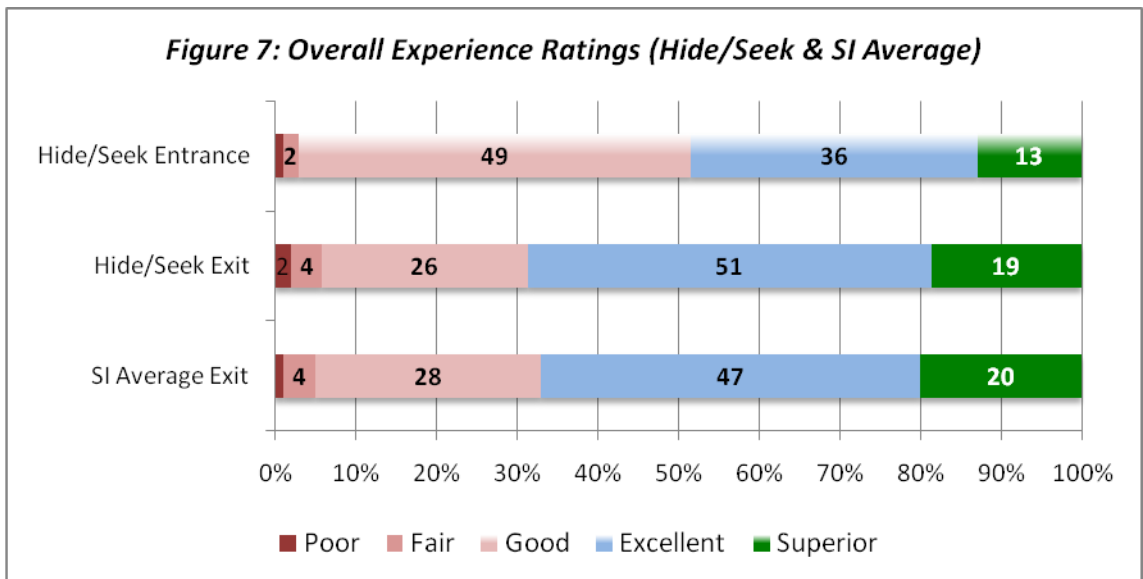
Exhibition-specific visitors went through the exhibition more carefully than general visitors. Although the survey did not include specific questions about visitor activities in the exhibition, it did ask a question about the cell phone audio tour that was available at some locations in *Hide/Seek*. The striking difference in awareness of this tour between exhibition-specific and general visitors indicates that these two key audience segments were not equally attentive to the exhibition’s texts (see Figure 6).



A relatively large percentage of general visitors (44%) never noticed that there was a cell phone tour, and only one general visitor in 200 used it more than once. Exhibition-specific visitors, however, were much more likely to note that it existed, and one in ten of them used it more than once. This difference in awareness and use of the cell phone tour strongly suggests that general visitors were doing less reading in *Hide/Seek* than exhibition-specific visitors, and were probably less engaged overall.

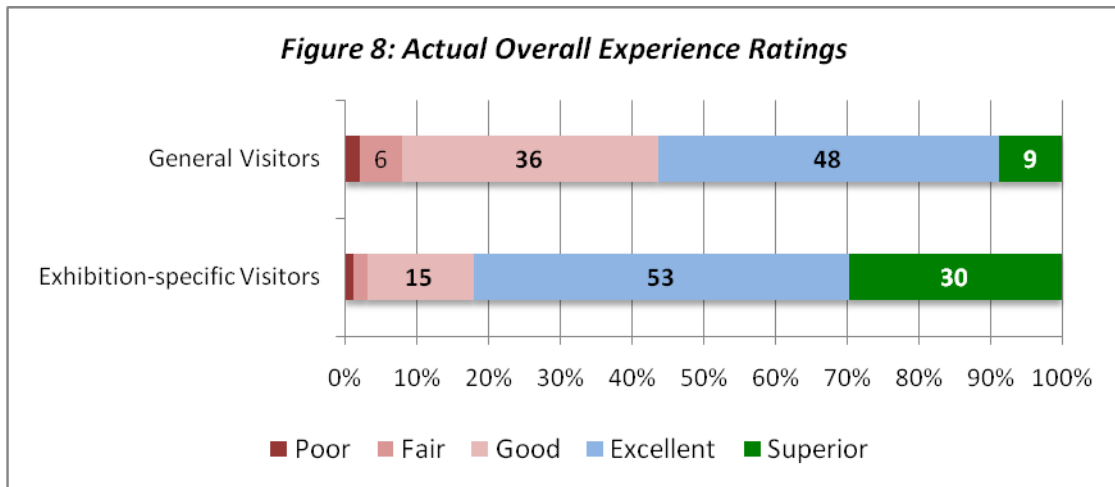
Responses

Visitors overall rated the exhibition close to the Smithsonian average, which was better than they expected before entering it. Exiting visitors were asked to provide an overall rating for the exhibition on the same five-point scale that entering visitors used. The difference between prospective and actual ratings was significant. Exiting visitors gave far fewer ratings at the low end of the scale (*Poor/Fair/Good*) and somewhat more at the highest end (*Superior*). Exiting visitors' overall experience ratings for *Hide/Seek* were very close to the Smithsonian average.¹⁶

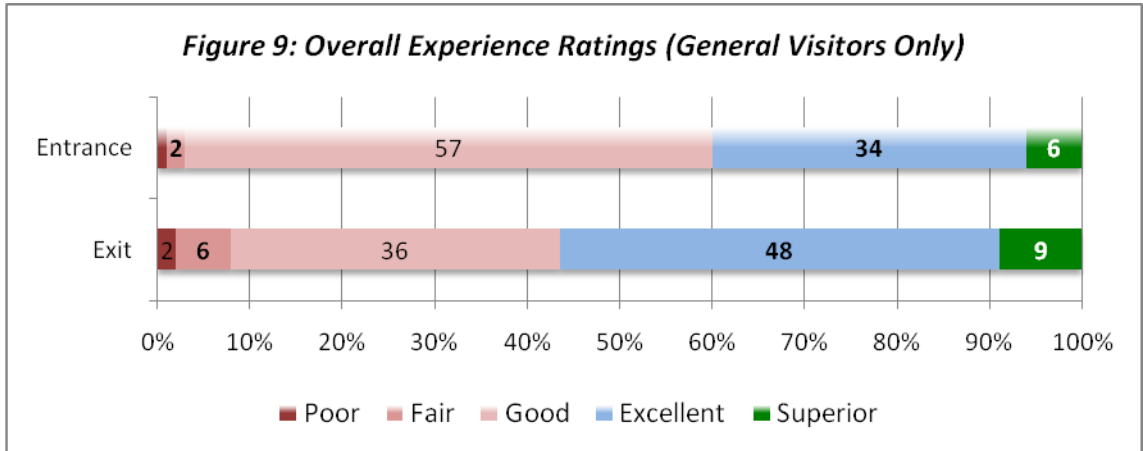


¹⁶ The Smithsonian average is the average overall rating of exiting visitors at 70 Smithsonian exhibitions studied by OP&A between 2004 and 2010.

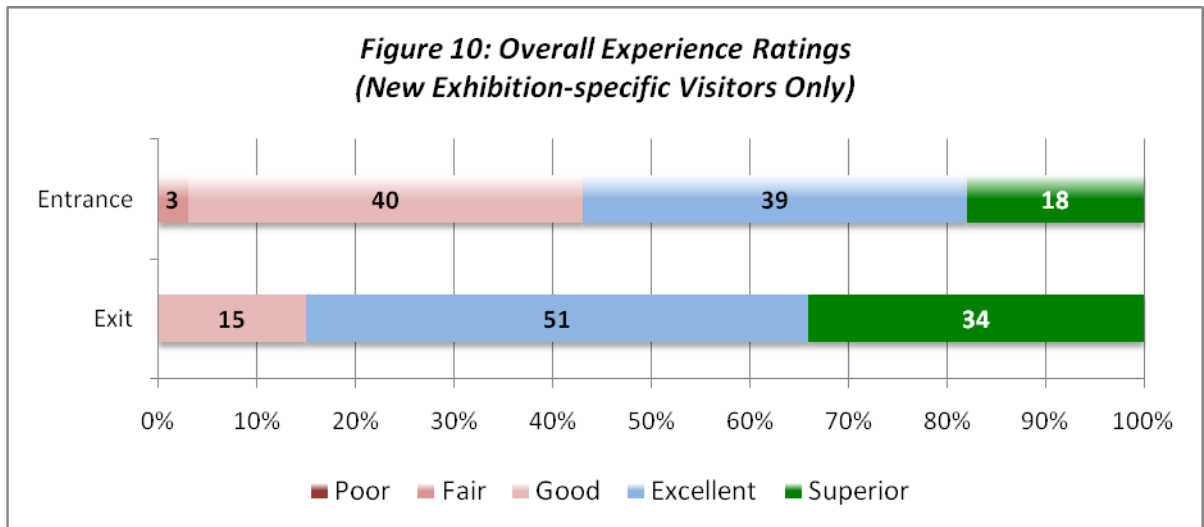
Exhibition-specific visitors were far more enthusiastic than general visitors. The average rating across all visitors obscures a major difference between the ratings given by exhibition-specific visitors and those given by general visitors. While general visitors' ratings were below the Smithsonian average, exhibition-specific visitors rated their overall experience well above the Smithsonian average. Nearly one third of exhibition-specific visitors rated their overall experience as *Superior*, as shown in Figure 8.



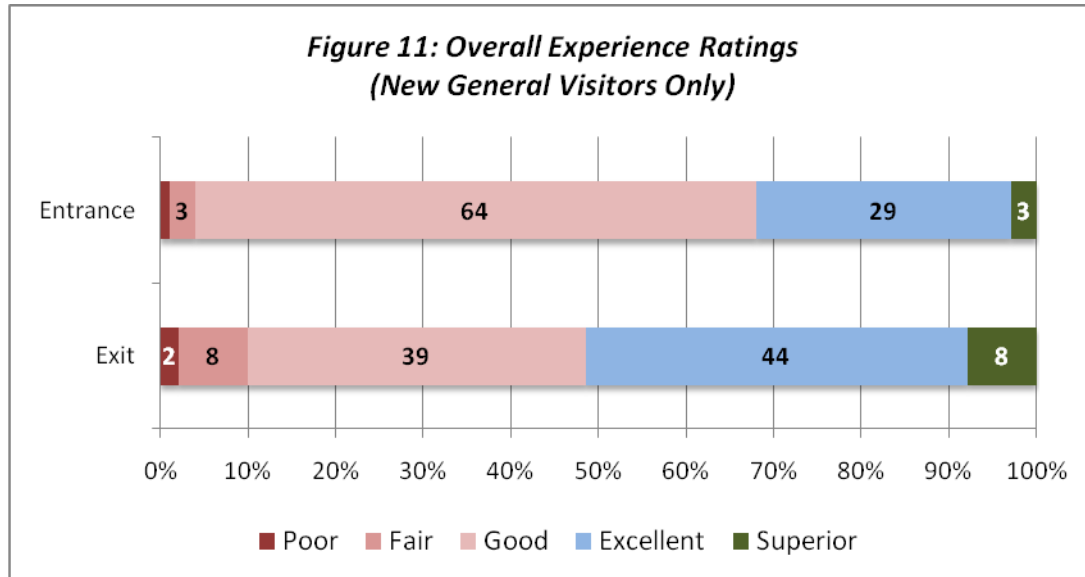
Exiting general visitors were less critical of *Hide/Seek* than entering general visitors expected to be. Exiting general visitors gave considerably fewer ratings at the lower end of the scale (*Poor/Fair/Good*) than their entering counterparts anticipated, and *Superior* ratings for exiting general visitors increased slightly as well, as shown in Figure 9. It seems that the wariness of entering general visitors was somewhat assuaged by the time such visitors left the exhibition, even if they were not necessarily enthusiastic about it.



New audiences brought to the Reynolds Center by *Hide/Seek* were very excited by the exhibition, and showed the largest difference between entrance and exit ratings. First-time visitors to the Reynolds Center who came specifically to see *Hide/Seek* constituted a substantial group (16% of all visitors to the exhibition). Like exhibition-specific visitors overall, they entered with relatively negative expectations, but they left very pleased. Over one-third of them rated the exhibition as *Superior* (nearly twice the anticipated figure), and only one-sixth rated it in the lower three categories of *Good*, *Fair*, and *Poor* (about one-third of what was anticipated). (See Figure 10.)

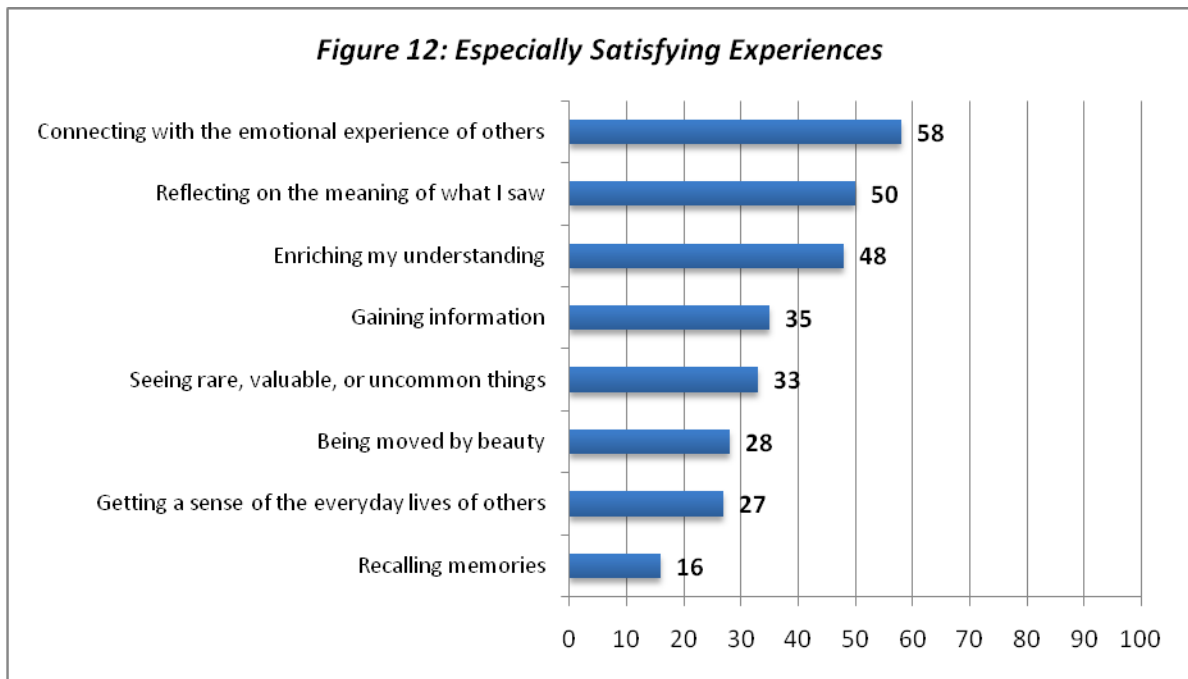


Even the least favorably inclined group of visitors (first-time general visitors) rated the exhibition better than expected. As noted above, over two-thirds of the general visitors who were new to the Reynolds Center expected to rate *Hide/Seek* in the lowest three categories on the scale; but when these visitors left the exhibition, less than half gave these lower ratings. *Superior* ratings also increased somewhat, as shown in Figure 11.



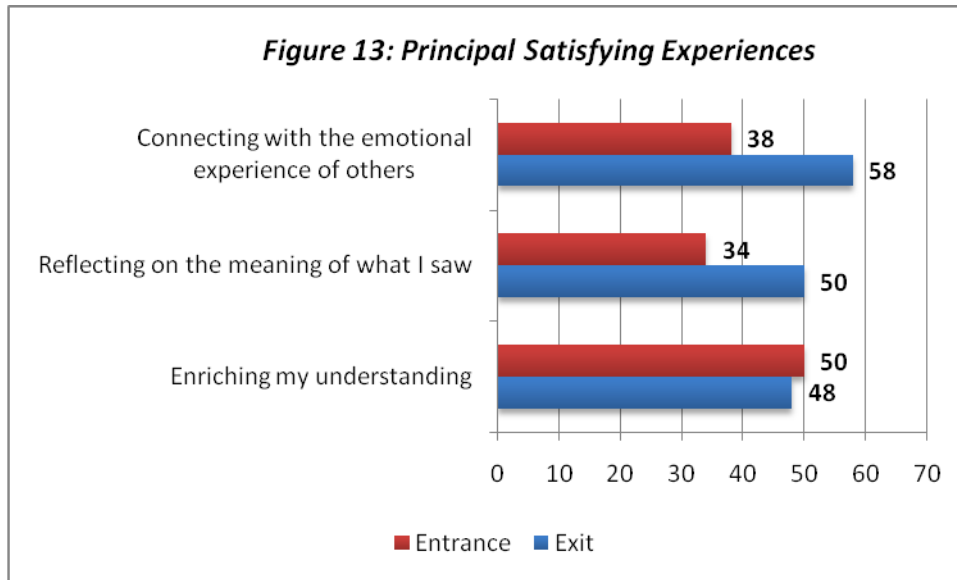
Experience Outcomes

Half or more of exiting visitors reported “Connecting with the emotional experiences of others” and “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw” as satisfying experiences in the exhibition. From the list of eight experiences noted above, emotional, reflective, and understanding experiences were the ones most often selected by exiting visitors as especially satisfying. (See Figure 12.)



Connecting emotionally and reflecting on meaning were two unanticipated satisfying experiences for many visitors. Approximately one third of entering visitors were looking forward to either “Connecting with the emotional experiences of others” or “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw.” But much larger percentages of exiting visitors—half or more—actually selected these as especially satisfying experiences in *Hide/Seek*. (“Enriching my understanding” was reported by exiting visitors to the same degree that it was anticipated.¹⁷) (See Figure 13.)

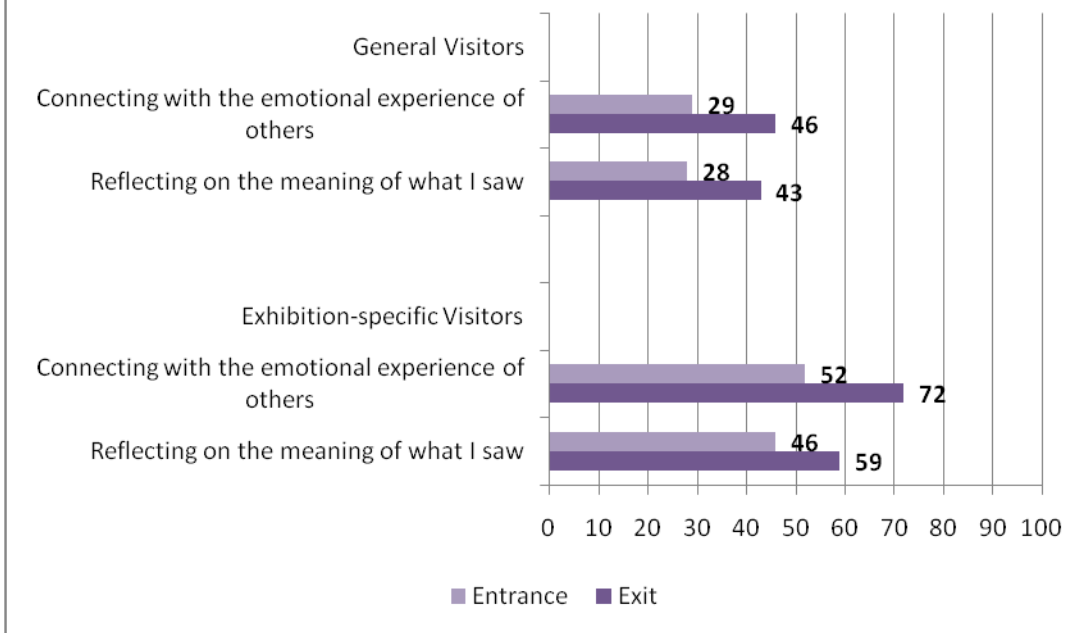
¹⁷ The other experiences also showed no significant differences between entry and exit figures. See Appendix C.



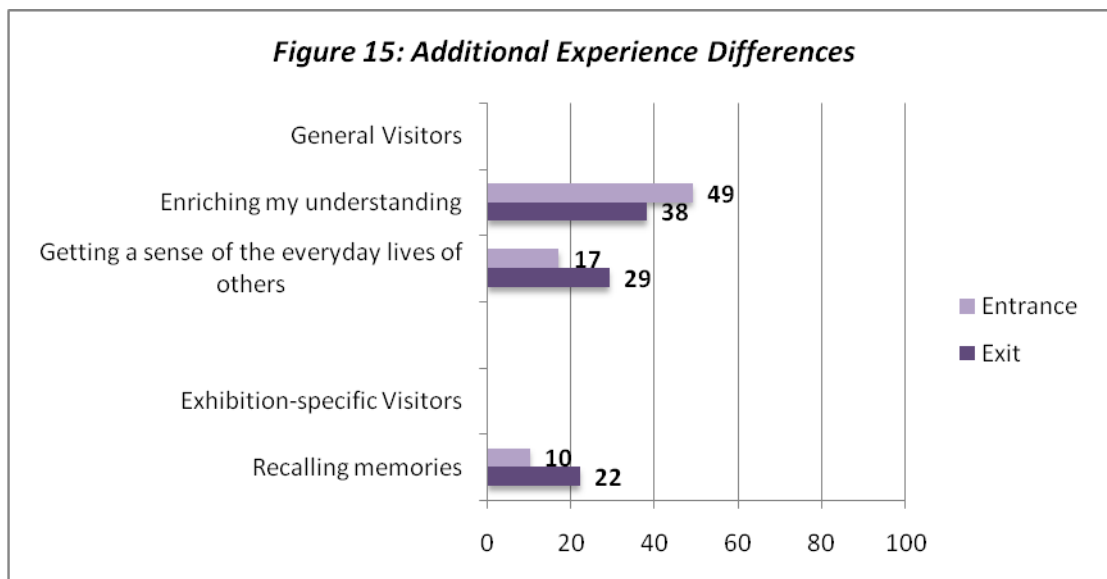
Both exhibition-specific and general visitors reported more emotional connection and reflection on meaning than entering visitors were looking forward to. As noted above, entering exhibition-specific visitors were considerably more likely than general visitors to be looking forward to emotional connection and reflection on meaning (as well as being moved by beauty). However, both exhibition-specific and general visitors reported experiences of emotional connection and reflection on meaning considerably more frequently on the exit survey than their entering counterparts had anticipated.¹⁸ Nearly three out of four exhibition-specific visitors reported feeling an emotional connection.

¹⁸ The experience of “Being moved by beauty,” was reported on the exit survey by both groups to the same degree that it was anticipated.

Figure 14: Principal Experience Differences



Exiting exhibition-specific visitors were more likely to cite “Recalling memories,” as a satisfying experience than their entering counterparts anticipated. Exiting general visitors were more likely to select “Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others” than their entering counterparts expected, but less likely to select “Enriching my understanding.” (See Figure 15.)

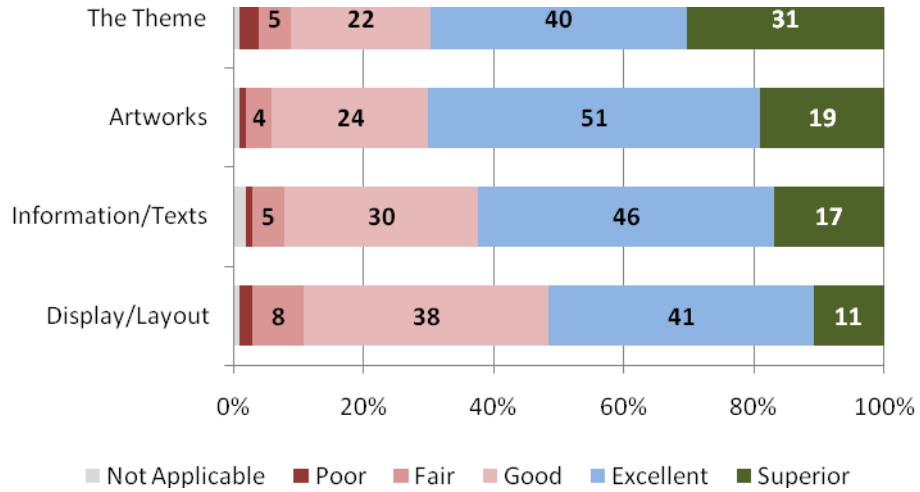


Visitors who gave higher overall exhibition ratings reported more experiences on average. Those who rated their overall experience *Superior* on average marked four of the eight experiences as especially satisfying, while those who marked *Excellent* on average marked three, and those who marked *Poor*, *Fair*, or *Good* on average marked two.

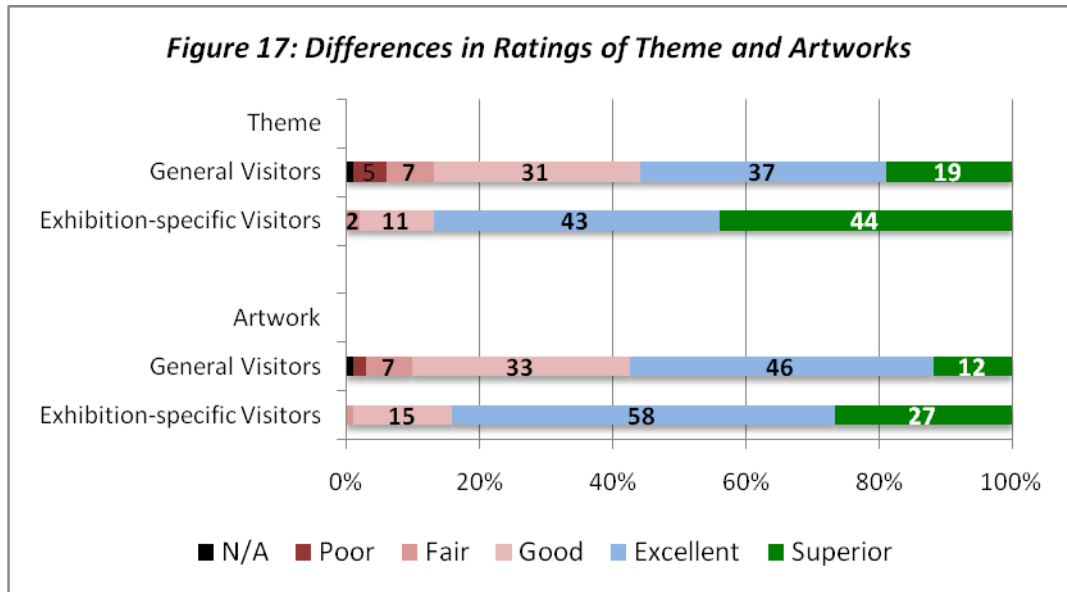
Ratings of Exhibition Features

Visitors overall were most pleased with the exhibition theme and least pleased with its display/layout. Exiting visitors were asked to rate four features of the exhibition on the same five-point scale used for rating their overall experience (*Poor*, *Fair*, *Good*, *Excellent*, and *Superior*). Among these features, “The Theme” received the highest ratings, with roughly three in ten identifying it as *Superior*. Just fewer than two in ten rated the “Artworks” and “Information/Texts” as *Superior*, and one in ten held that opinion of the “Display/Layout.” (See Figure 16.)

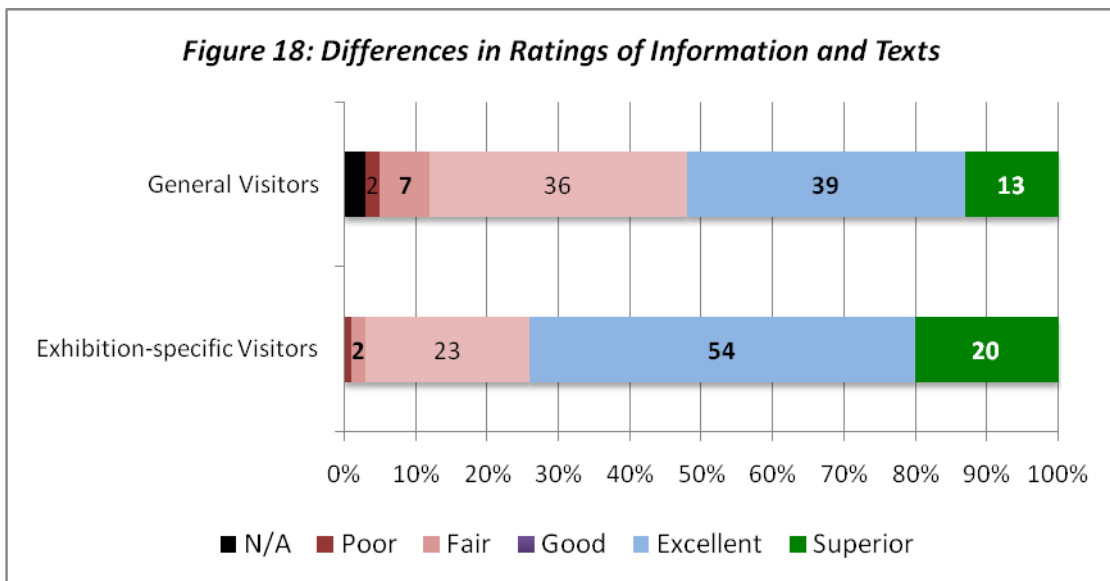
Figure 16: Ratings of Exhibition Features



Exhibition-specific visitors rated the artworks and theme much more highly than general visitors did. Exhibition-specific visitors were extremely pleased with the theme—44% rated it *Superior*. By contrast, a similar percentage of general visitors (43%) rated the theme at the lower end of the scale (*Poor/Fair/Good*). A similar difference of opinion between exhibition-specific and general visitors emerged with respect to the artworks, which 27% of the former but only 12% of the latter rated as *Superior*. Both exhibition-specific and general visitors rated the artwork lower than the theme. (See Figure 17.)



General visitors rated information/texts lower than exhibition-specific visitors did. As noted above, responses to the question on cell phone tours suggest that general visitors were reading less in the exhibition than exhibition-specific visitors. When explicitly asked their opinions of the information and texts, general visitors rated them considerably lower (45% *Good/Fair/Poor*) than exhibition-specific visitors (26% *Good/Fair/Poor*). (See Figure 18).

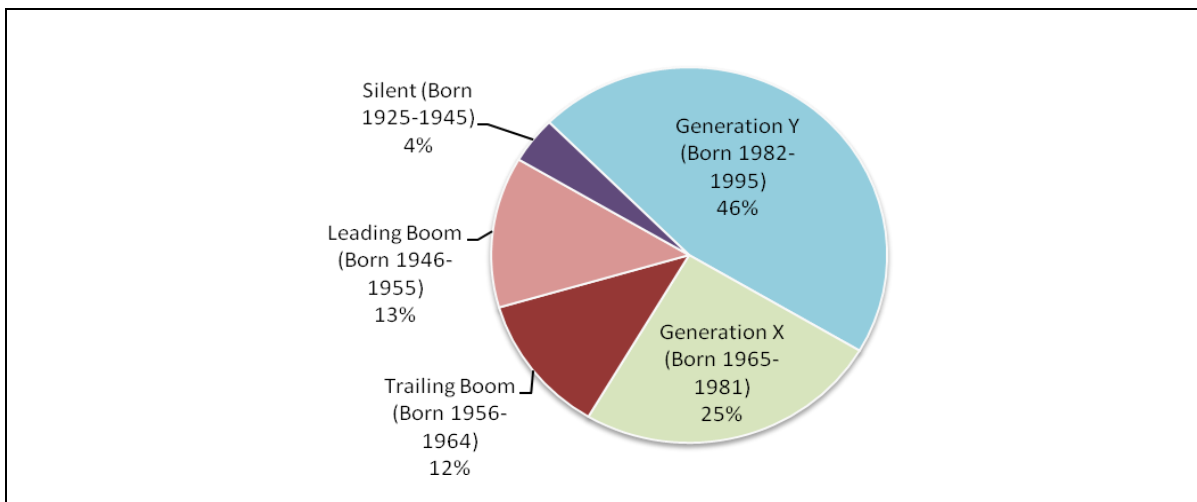


Exhibition-specific and general visitors did not differ in their rating of the display/layout of the exhibition.

Visitor Characteristics

The audience for *Hide/Seek* on average was younger than normal for the Reynolds Center during late fall. The average age of respondents was 37 and the median age was 31. This was significantly younger than visitors to the building in fall 2008, when the average age was 44 and the median age was 42. By generation, nearly half of respondents were from Generation Y (born 1982-1995); a quarter were from Generation X (born 1965-1981); a quarter were Baby Boomers (Trailing Boom, born 1956-1964, or Leading Boom, born 1946-1955); and four percent were from the Silent generation (born 1925-1945). (See Figure 19.)

Figure 19: Visitation by Generation



Other than age, the demographic characteristics of visitors to *Hide/Seek* were close to those identified in previous surveys of Reynolds Center visitors.

- Slightly more than half of exiting respondents (56%) were making a repeat visit to the Reynolds Center. This is comparable to the results of the fall 2008 Reynolds Center survey, in which half of respondents identified themselves as repeat visitors (50%).

- Nearly half of the visitors exiting¹⁹ *Hide/Seek* (47%) were exhibition-specific visitors. Repeat visitors to the Reynolds Center were more likely than first-time visitors to be exhibition-specific visitors (57% vs. 34%).
- Only a very small percentage (3%) were visiting from a country other than the United States. Nearly half (48%) of respondents were from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area—a higher percentage than for the building as a whole in fall 2008 (39%). Repeat visitors were considerably more likely to be local (61%, compared to 29% of first-time visitors), and exhibition-specific visitors were slightly more likely to be local (53%, vs. 42% of general visitors).
- Similar to the fall 2008 survey, visitation to *Hide/Seek* skewed slightly female (54%). A large majority of visitors came to the exhibition with other adults (84%); about one in seven was visiting alone (14%); and the rest (3%) were visiting with youth under 18. This composition was similar to the fall 2008 survey (77% adult-only groups, 14% unaccompanied visitors, and 9% with youth/children).

Visitors who came to the Reynolds Center specifically to see *Hide/Seek* were older than general visitors. The average age of exhibition-specific visitors was 39 (median age 36), while the average age of general visitors was 34 (median age 29). Exhibition-specific visitors were also more likely to live locally (with 55% of them in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, vs. 45% of general visitors). For other visitor characteristics, there were no significant differences between exhibition-specific and general visitors.

Exhibition-specific visitors coming to the Reynolds Center for the first time were about the same age as visitors who came to the Center for other reasons. The age of the new audience drawn to the Reynolds Center by *Hide/Seek* was close to that of general visitors, with an average age 35 and median age 31. Moreover, new visitors who came to see *Hide/Seek* did not differ in age from new visitors who came for other reasons.

¹⁹ On entrance, only 38% reported coming to the Reynolds Center specifically to see *Hide/Seek*. The study team can only speculate on the reason for this discrepancy. One possibility is that since visitors were intercepted for the entry survey as they approached but before they actually entered the exhibition, some general visitors were intercepted before they had actually decided to view the exhibition, and did not proceed to do so after filling out the questionnaire. Such visitors, whose behavior as seen by those administering the exit survey would be to walk up to the entrance of the exhibition, pause briefly, then leave, would not have been intercepted for the exit survey. A second possibility is that some general visitors were so enamored by the exhibition that upon exit, they felt that it was what they had come to see.

Discussion

Conclusions

Entering audiences were wary of the exhibition, reporting low expectations for their overall exhibition rating. But visitors on the whole found their opinions changed for the better by the time they left. Exiting visitors who came to the Reynolds Center specifically to see *Hide/Seek* not only gave it higher overall ratings than they anticipated, but were especially pleased with it. Those who came for other reasons were less negative about it than they had anticipated, although not as enthusiastic as exhibition-specific visitors. This pattern of responses suggests that many visitors may have been “expecting the worst” of *Hide/Seek*, but did not find their fears confirmed by the exhibition.²⁰

Hide/Seek was particularly successful in evoking emotional and reflective responses from visitors. The experiences of “Connecting with the emotional experiences of others” and “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw” not only received the highest absolute ratings, but also saw large increases between expectations reported on the entrance survey and actual experiences reported on the exit survey. “Enriching my understanding,” an experience closely related to “reflecting on meaning,” scored about as high as the latter in absolute terms, although not in terms of increases between entry and exit.²¹ Interviews suggest some additional details about how visitors responded to the exhibition in these three areas:

- “Connecting with the emotional experience of others.” Interviews suggest that the emotional connections evoked by *Hide/Seek* were not only common, but also unusually strong for some visitors. This was most obvious with respect to some visitors’ feelings of sadness when reflecting on the tragedy of AIDS and the historical stigmatization of homosexuals. Some visitors also saw *Hide/Seek* as

²⁰ Neither the interviews nor the survey provide much insight into the reasons for this wariness, so the study team will not speculate about them.

²¹ “Enriching understanding” and “reflecting on meaning” both suggest an enlargement of viewpoint. The difference is that “enriching understanding” is usually interpreted as objective (grasping ideas explicitly presented in an exhibition) and “reflecting on meaning” as subjective (identifying ideas that resonate with a visitor personally, regardless of whether those ideas are actually present in the curatorial intent).

promoting an empathetic connection to the lives of people who are different, thus promoting a measure of tolerance and acceptance.²²

- “Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw.” Discussions with visitors suggest that reflective experiences typically involved visitors’ reflections on their own pasts;²³ their own and others’ struggles to define personal identity; and society’s tendency to pass summary judgment on people who are perceived to be different.
- “Enriching my understanding.” Interviews indicated that visitors’ understanding was often enriched by grasping how social and cultural norms with respect to homosexuality have changed over time, and how this has been reflected in art and portraiture. For some visitors, an especially enlightening aspect of this experience was seeing well-known, canonical works from a new and unexpected perspective—that is, not simply as compelling works of art, but also as markers of society’s historical progress in coming to terms with gay artists and subjects.

To say *Hide/Seek* was particularly successful in the emotional, reflective, and understanding dimensions is by no means to say it did not succeed for many visitors as an aesthetic or learning experience. Interviewees, some of whom are quoted above, often commented on the beauty and appeal of the art itself, and exit ratings for the experiences associated with aesthetics and learning met the expectations of entering visitors. Nevertheless, it appears that on the whole, visitors were more inclined to see the basic point of the exhibition in terms of reflection, understanding, and human connections than in terms of aesthetic or learning experiences.

Implications

The evidence gathered by the study team suggests that *Hide/Seek* was no less successful (judged by standard exhibition metrics) than a “typical” Smithsonian show, and that it was unusually affecting for some visitors. If a substantial proportion of visitors were offended by it, this did not show up in any obvious way in the study.

It can of course be argued that those most likely to be offended by *Hide/Seek* were unlikely to visit it, and would probably leave quickly if they entered it by chance. Thus, such individuals were not likely to be present to register their displeasure. But while

²² For general visitors, the experience of “Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others” increased substantially between entrance and exit.

²³ For exhibition-specific visitors, the experience of “recalling memories” increased substantially between entrance and exit.

true, this argument is irrelevant in this context; by definition, a visitor study explores the views of those who actually choose to visit. Inquiring into the motivations of people who choose *not* to visit is a very different research question, and not one that OP&A typically pursues when asked to study an exhibition.

Far from being a cautionary tale, *Hide/Seek* suggests how the Smithsonian can succeed in presenting a potentially sensitive issue while staying within boundaries that most visitors are willing to accept, even if in the end not all are enthusiastic about it. If the Smithsonian wishes to remain relevant in a rapidly-changing world, it may have to be willing at times to grapple with social and contemporary issues of the sort treated in this exhibition. The mission and strategic priorities of the National Portrait Gallery make it particularly well-situated to presenting exhibitions and other offerings that tie together the cultural, historical, and human dimensions of relevant contemporary issues in a compelling way.

Of course, Congressional and public perceptions will always be legitimate concerns when addressing issues on which Americans disagree. When the Smithsonian addresses topics that include potentially controversial elements, these elements need to be confronted with awareness and sensitivity. This could mean, for example, sponsoring public and online forums in conjunction with exhibitions to provide opportunities for reasoned public debate of the relevant issues; providing discussion spaces within exhibitions themselves where visitors can converse with each other and with museum staff about their reactions; or conducting front-end and formative evaluation to identify potentially controversial elements of exhibitions, so as to plan in advance for any reasonably foreseeable issues that may arise.

Appendix A: Qualitative Interview Guide

Background

- Why did you come to the Reynolds Center today? [NPG, SAAM, a particular exhibition?]
 - Have you visited the Reynolds Center before?
- Before visiting today, had you heard of this exhibition?
 - If YES: Where did you hear about it?
 - Were you aware of this exhibition's controversy? If so, what had you heard?
 - Did the controversy influence your decision to visit?

Experience in Exhibition

- *People have different way of visiting exhibitions—some read none of the text, others most of the text; some watch video; some just wander through and stop at what catches their attention*
 - What did you emphasize when you visited this exhibition?
 - Is that what you normally emphasize?
 - What caught your attention?
 - What did you especially like?
 - Did you dislike anything? If so, what?

Interview Core

- Please describe the main ideas of this exhibition? What do you think the museum was trying to convey? [Probe]
- What did you think about the size of the exhibition? [Were there too many objects? Too few?]
- What did you think about the design of the exhibition? [Layout, Labels, Seating, Lighting, etc.]

End

Thank visitor

Record sex, approximate age, group composition, and residence]

Appendix B: Entrance and Exit Questionnaires

7222256174	National Portrait Gallery <i>Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture</i> ENTRANCE
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Is this your first visit to this specific building?
 No Yes

How do you think you will rate your overall experience in *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* when you leave?
 Poor Fair Good Excellent Superior

Which of these experiences are you especially looking forward to during your visit? [Mark one or more]

- Being moved by beauty
- Connecting with the emotional experiences of others
- Enriching my understanding
- Gaining information
- Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others
- Recalling memories
- Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw
- Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things

Did you visit today specifically to see *Hide/Seek*?
 No Yes

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]
 I am alone Other adult(s) Youth under 18

Are you male or female? Female Male

What is your age?

Do you live in the United States or another country?
 United States, specify zip code:
 Another country, specify: _____

THANK YOU!

D	O	O	Ses	<input type="text" value=""/> <input type="text" value=""/>	Seg	O	O	O	O	St	O	O	O	O	ID	<input type="text" value=""/> <input type="text" value=""/> <input type="text" value=""/>
E	H					1	2	3	4		C	R	L	I		

Is this your first visit to this specific building?

- No Yes

Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, today:

- Poor Fair Good Excellent Superior

Which experiences did you find especially satisfying in *Hide/Seek*? [Mark one or more]

- Being moved by beauty
 Connecting with the emotional experiences of others
 Enriching my understanding
 Gaining information
 Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others
 Recalling memories
 Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw
 Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things

Please rate the following features of this exhibition, *Hide/Seek*:

	Not Applicable	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Superior
<i>Artworks (Photos)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Information/Texts</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Display/Layout</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>The Theme</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How many of the *Hide/Seek* cellphone audio tour segments did you listen to?

- Did not notice the cellphone audio tour
 None One Two or more

Did you visit today specifically to see *Hide/Seek*?

- No Yes

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]

- I am alone Other adult(s) Youth under 18

Are you male or female?

- Female Male

What is your age?

Do you live in the United States or another country?

- United States, specify zip code:
- Another country, specify: _____

THANK YOU!

Door
E S

Session

Segment

1 2 3 4

Status

C R L I

ID

Appendix C: Response Frequencies Entrance and Exit Surveys

(In percent, except average and median age)

*DW Reynolds
Center, Fall 08*

	<i>ENTRANCE</i>	<i>EXIT</i> ²⁴	
Is this your first visit to this specific building?			
Yes	51	44	50
No	49	56	
Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition, <i>Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture</i>, today:			
Poor	1	2	
Fair	2	4	
Good	49	26	
Excellent	36	51	
Superior	13	19	
Which experiences did you find especially satisfying in <i>Hide/Seek</i>? [Mark one or more]			
Connecting with the emotional experiences of others	38	58	
Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw	35	51	
Enriching my understanding	49	48	
Gaining information	34	35	
Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things	28	33	
Being moved by beauty	34	28	
Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others	20	27	
Recalling memories	8	16	

²⁴ Exit results which are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level compared to Entrance are highlighted. (Green highlights are increases over Entrance; red highlights are decreases.)

Please rate the following features of this exhibition,
Hide/Seek:

Artworks

Not Applicable	1
Poor	1
Fair	4
Good	24
Excellent	51
Superior	19

Information/Texts

Not Applicable	2
Poor	1
Fair	5
Good	30
Excellent	46
Superior	17

Display/Layout

Not Applicable	1
Poor	2
Fair	8
Good	38
Excellent	41
Superior	11

The theme

Not Applicable	1
Poor	3
Fair	5
Good	22
Excellent	40
Superior	31

ENTRANCE

EXIT

*DW Reynolds
Center, Fall 08*

How many of the *Hide/Seek* cell phone audio tour segments did you listen to?

Did not notice the cellphone audio tour			33	
None			60	
One			3	
Two or more			5	

Did you visit today specifically to see *Hide/Seek*?

No	62	53		
Yes	38	47		

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]

I am alone	11	14	14	
Other Adult(s)	88	84	77	
Youth under 18	4	3	9	

Are you male or female?

Male	44	46	42	
Female	56	54	58	

What is your age?

<i>Average Age</i>	35.9	36.9	43.8	
<i>Median Age</i>	31	31	42.3	
Generation Y (Born 1982-1995)	47	46		
Generation X (Born 1965-1981)	30	25		
Trailing Boom (Born 1956-1964)	9	12		
Leading Boom (Born 1946-1955)	11	13		
Silent (Born 1925-1945)	3	4		

ENTRANCE

EXIT

*DW Reynolds
Center, Fall 08*

Do you live in the United States or another country?

United States, specify zip code:	97	97	94
Another country, specify: _____	3	3	6
New England	9	10	7
Mid Atlantic	18	19	20
Metro Washington	51	48	39
South East	3	2	7
South Central	2	4	3
North Central	4	5	5
Midwest	0	1	2
Mountain	2	1	2
Pacific	2	3	7
Unspecified US	6	4	3
Country other than US	3	3	6



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