REPORT OF INTERVIEWS WITH VISITORS TO THE GYROSCOPE EXHIBITION AT THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, IN JANUARY 2004

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INTRODUCTION
The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG) at the Smithsonian Institution (SI) in Washington, DC, asked the SI Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to talk with visitors about the exhibition of the permanent collection, called Gyroscope. With Gyroscope, the HMSG presented works from the permanent collection in a series of carefully composed installations. Art objects in Gyroscope are gathered in relation to specific, subtle themes that are not explicitly stated. Very little explanation or interpretation is offered in the galleries. Gyroscope is a continuing project; parts of which will be in constant rotation, as different art objects are brought together to draw out different meanings. The museum was especially interested in gauging the effectiveness and adequacy of signs and information and visitors responses to the exhibition.

METHOD
Visitors were selected in a non-systematic, non-discriminating manner while they were inside the Gyroscope exhibit on either the lower level or the third floor. 1 Twenty five interviews were conducted over two weeks, from January 12-January 24, 2004. Visitors were approached by interviewer and asked if they would like to talk about their experience in the museum. Response rates were high, with only one visitor declining to

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1 During the period of interviewing the second floor was partially de-installed as a new temporary exhibition was being put in place.
Participants were engaged in qualitative interviews centered on five topics: familiarity with HMSG, effectiveness of signs and information, familiarity with modern and contemporary art, response to *Gyroscope*, and the long-term outcome of art museum visits. Some interviewees were also asked to review a statement about the museum that the museum was considering for presentation near the museum entrance. The average interview length was around 20 minutes.

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES**
Specific demographics were not requested formally. Most ages were estimated by interviewers and other demographic information was brought up in the interview. Of the 25 interviews conducted, 7 interviewees were with pairs of visitors; thus, a total of 32 people were interviewed in all. Female visitors totaled 56 percent of all interviewees, and male, 44 percent. 40 percent of interviewed visitors were under 30 years of age, 30 percent were in their 30’s and 40’s, and the remaining 30 percent were over 50 years of age.\(^2\) The interviewees consisted of 34 percent local visitors, 56 percent from other US locations, and 10 percent foreign. Frequent visitors totaled 28 percent of the interviewed viewers, and another 34 percent were occasional, but repeat visitors. The remaining 38 percent were on their first visit to the Hirshhorn.\(^3\)

**THE VISITOR**
These Hirshhorn visitors, though diverse in many ways, were strikingly similar in their interest in art. Visitors were truly excited about what they were seeing. Many of the first-time visitors were sightseeing, or they had personal recommendations that prompted their visits. Among these first-timers, information about the Hirshhorn was found in guidebooks, on kiosks, and on signs on the mall. Interviewees indicated interest in art, architecture, and new exhibits.

While some visitors came to the museum to see art in general, most were interested in the type of experience that modern and contemporary art offered; an encounter with something new, different, or stimulating. These people were not just walking through the museum; they wanted to be engaged with the art works they were seeing. This was particularly true for those visitors who were artists themselves. One visitor thought of the museum as “a meal for your eyes, it gets your mind working.” She drew inspiration from the art she saw for the art she made.

Another group of visitors that was particularly interesting was the architects, and those who visited the Hirshhorn for its architecture. These visitors either specifically came to see the building, or were drawn inside by its unusual shape or atmosphere. The building reminded one woman of the structures in Hong Kong because people could circulate under the building, as well as within it. She was impressed because it was functional and beautiful. A male visitor was moved by the structure because he felt the roundness of the

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\(^2\) Age percentages are rounded to the nearest five percent.

\(^3\) The composition of Smithsonian audiences is significantly affected by the time of year.
building had a soothing quality. He also commented that “the light coming down through the center...reminds me of the Pantheon in Rome.” He appreciated the efforts by the architect to move away from the square and rectangular buildings that are found throughout Washington, DC.

Another group of note-worthy visitors was made up of those who came to see whatever the new exhibit was. The problem was that none of them had ever heard of Gyroscope as an exhibit, nor did they connect anything in the museum with Gyroscope. Interestingly, none of these visitors minded that they had not identified the Gyroscope exhibit. The installations were engaging enough on their own that Gyroscope was not missed until it was pointed out.

**THE VIEWING CULTURE**

*ART APPRECIATION:* While interviewees admitted that they did not like every work of art on display, they described all of the objects within the museum as art. They offered a range of opinions when questioned about what makes something art. One visitor, for example, gave sole credit to the artist, “It is art because the artist creates it...The emotion an artist puts into a piece is more important than if I like it or not.” Another man felt that his presence was important, “I influence art indirectly by visiting museums and by showing interest...it helps preserve the existence of museums.” For him, a personal appreciation of art was important to the creation and preservation of art. Additional visitors acknowledged the important role that the museum plays in the installation of the works. One pointed out that a creative arrangement can itself function artistically, and saw “the curator as the creator.” All of these views pointed to a deeper understanding that the visitors had of the important human aspects of art, seeing art not just as an object, but as a human experience.

The idea of art as an experience becomes clearer in the case of the art objects that many interviewees found especially interesting. Two of the most mentioned art works were Ron Mueck’s *Big Man*, and Ann Hamilton’s *At Hand*. These visitors found *Big Man* interesting because of its oversized physical presence and realistic quality. A visitor saw *At Hand* as “an experience and not just a cultural event...as Aristotle said, it was ‘learning through pleasure.’” People enjoyed the chance to interact with the art. One father was impressed by *At Hand* because “the preciousness was not there.” He was able to bring his six year old daughter into the exhibit and let her experience something new. In both cases, interviewees were not just looking at a work of art; they were sharing the same space and feeling a sense of interaction.

When interviewees were questioned on their favorite art object on display, or an item that made an impression on them, they tended to identify works that had meaning to them on many different levels; most importantly those that reminded them of their everyday lives, and those that engaged their intellect. An architect, for example, was taken by Siah Armajani’s *Fibonacci House Bridge* because it utilized materials that she used in her work (balsa wood), and also because it raised questions about scale and the absence of human figures. By connecting on a professional and intellectual level, *Fibonacci House*...
Bridge became her favorite. Another visitor felt a personal connection to Andy Warhol’s Self Portrait. When she was asked why she liked that painting specifically, she said it was “because he seems interesting, and I would have liked to have known him and talked to him.” She did not mention anything about the art specifically, just the artist. She had felt a connection to the artist; and therefore, she felt a connection to his work. Another woman had a similar personal connection, but instead of wanting to get to know the artist, she identified with her favorite objects, sculptures by David Smith, because she already felt as though she knew the artist. She knew his history, because her daughter had done a film biography about him, and she also identified with his work because it was from her generation. While there were many works that interviewees mentioned, it seemed that the most lasting impressions were made by the ones that they could connect with outside of the museum.

THE EXPERIENCE: Visitors were also very aware that simply by being in a museum, they were engaged in an experience with art and with other people. Over half of the people who were interviewed visited the Hirshhorn in a group of at least two persons. Visiting with others created an opportunity for discussion, and the visit became a social event in itself. One frequent visitor saw the museum visit as a social occasion where he could experience the reactions of the people he was with, as well as the reactions of those around him. He (as well as another visitor) saw the “people as works of art.” For him, the most important aspect of a visit was the opportunity to experience other people. As for the visitors who made the trip on their own, there was no clear consensus of motivation, but a couple of individuals mentioned that they enjoyed being able to spend as much time as they wanted to spend and see what they wanted to see. They enjoyed the freedom of the experience that came from visiting alone. Whether they visited alone, or in a group, these interviewees did so consciously and with self-awareness of how they were viewing the museum.

The interviewees were also very conscious of how the art was being shown to them. Many people commented on the importance of variety, juxtaposition, and installation, and though they did not attribute it to Gyroscope, visitors did feel as though the Hirshhorn had done an excellent job in this regard. The two rooms where organizing themes were most often mentioned were the Black and White Room on the third floor, and the human forms on the lower level. In the Black and White Room, people relied on the interaction among the art works to explain individual paintings. One visitor commented, for example, that he would have been confused by Ad Reinhardt’s Abstract Painting (1956), had it been in any other context, but because it was in the Black and White Room, the context was intriguing and the completely black painting gained meaning. The ambience of the Black and White room also caught the notice of one pair of visitors: “you felt good when you stepped inside.” These feelings were attributed to the selection of art works and their interaction in the display. Another visitor noted the importance of placement, and how it can increase or decrease the intrigue of a work of art. Here she cited an example of misplacement of a sculpture by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in comparison to what she thought was wonderful placement of Big Man in the Hirshhorn. She realized that had Big Man been placed in the center of the room, she would have had a different viewing experience.
Although they were unaware of the aim of Gyroscope, interviewees recognized that new installations of familiar objects can encourage return visits and a deeper understanding of more art works in the museum. One couple pointed out the importance of varying installations in other museums: “every time [The Art Institute of Chicago] moves something or changes it, you see it differently.” Visitors said that they would return to see a new installation of Gyroscope in order to see something they had missed during the current visit.

**OUTCOMES:** According to these interviewees the importance of visiting art museums like the Hirshhorn extends far beyond casual amusement. While some visitors said that they come to museums to seek out “peace of mind and relaxation in the environment,” others desire a deeper result. For many of these interviewees, the Hirshhorn was considered “a life-changing experience because you are made to think, and not be just a passive member.” People came to discover and develop new ideas. Most gave the impression that they were looking to be changed in a positive way. A college-aged visitor, for example, felt a self-imposed pressure to visit museums and not just to “sit on the couch, watch TV and feel like an idiot.” She wanted to utilize her time in DC to maximum benefit by interacting with the many events and possibilities that the city offered. For her, the experience was more than a day at a museum; it was an opportunity for self-development.

A visitor from Korea pointed out that United States’ museums are different from the ones in Korea, and when she returns home, she would take with her the experience of a new culture. To one interviewee, a visit to a museum is part of a ‘project of self-improvement.’ She would read about an artist or movement and then visit museums to add to her knowledge of the subject.

Visitors were enticed by the opinions of the artists and were eager to engage themselves with these new ideas. One visitor was very interested in Edward Ruscha’s Los Angeles Museum on Fire, for example. He did not know if the museum had ever caught on fire, but commented that if it had not, Ruscha was making a very intriguing comment, and that Ruscha might have been upset about the way the museum was representing art. This example is indicative of the type of experience many visitors had; they were engaged by the art and left feeling as though they had gained something important, whether it be a new point of view, a new idea, or a new question.

**THE MUSEUM**

**OUTSIDE:** While visitors were generally pleased with their visit to the Hirshhorn, they missed much of what the museum wanted to convey to them. When asked to comment on the outside of the museum, most visitors identified the presence of sculptures and gardens. A few visitors saw signs on Jefferson Drive or elsewhere on the mall. Since most visitors came from the mall side, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s Untitled (For Jeff), the large banner on the museum exterior, was above visitors’ sightlines and was not mentioned, and the Gyroscope sign in the window went mostly unnoticed. Neither was
influential to these visitors as a reason to enter the museum. Additionally, the entrance itself was not easy to find from the mall side; one visitor had to ask a guard for directions to the entrance.

WAY-FINDING: Once inside the museum, way-finding was a bit more successful. No problems were encountered by the interviewees and several commented on the accessibility of the circular layout—they did not get ‘lost’ as they did in other museums. Many visitors also followed an established pattern for viewing, either top to bottom, or vice versa. Nearly everyone saw (or were intending to see) the entire museum. Some visitors, however, only stumbled upon the lower level because they were looking for the restrooms or noticed the blinking lights on the Nam June Paik sculpture. Very few visitors stopped by the Visitor’s Information Desk.

TIME: Visits ranged in time from one half hour to two hours. Most visitors either came with the intention of staying for a certain amount of time, or were restricted by other engagements. Some limited their time at the museum, because they felt that after a certain amount of time, the impact of the art faded. There was a general consensus that one visit was not enough to experience everything. Over half of the interviewees were return visitors. One recently arrived DC intern pointed out that it would “take a couple days to take everything in, or even longer, so I have just been walking through, picking and choosing what I really take the time to look at, but I will have to come back to see it all.” Another woman quoted the statistic that a person only looks at an art object in a museum for seven seconds on average. She admitted to being a “seven-second looker,” but felt as though that small amount of time was adequate to experience a sense of what an art work was about. She did spend more time on the ones that especially intrigued her. Time did not seem to be a preoccupation, just another factor in the experience.

STAFFING: Security was mentioned on occasion in both positive and negative observations. Visitors did not object to the presence of security and realized the necessity. One visitor found the security thorough and respectful. Another commented on how security and institutional relationships can influence the visitor’s experience. He had been disappointed on a previous visit when his young daughter, and all of the other visitors inside of the room, was asked to leave Ann Hamilton’s At Hand. Additionally, he commented that he used to enjoy going to the Hirshhorn to sketch and relax. While he still sketches at the Hirshhorn, he does not feel that the same level of relaxation is available because of the “security culture.”

Some interviewees miss the opportunity to interact with the museum on a more personal level. One interviewee who has visited the Hirshhorn for multiple years, at a frequency of two to three times per month, commented that the interviewer was the only employee he had ever encountered. There were also miscommunications with the Visitor’s Desk; even when visitors asked about Gyroscope, it was not explained: “I asked (the visitor’s desk) what the new exhibit was and they said ‘Gyroscope’…They just said ‘Gyroscope,’” so I was expecting to see gyroscopes.” Another visitor inquired about the permanent collection and Gyroscope was not mentioned. Neither visitor was directed to or offered the postcards on the Visitor’s Desk that discuss Gyroscope.
**GYROSCOPE**

**MISCONCEPTIONS:** Gyroscope was unsuccessful as a unifying theme for the presentation of the permanent collection throughout the museum. While some visitors recognized the term Gyroscope, the majority had no idea where they had seen it, or what it was intended to represent. A few people who recognized the term had seen it on a card they had picked up in the museum, but only realized this connection when it was mentioned by the interviewer. Other people were under the assumption that they were going to see gyroscopes. Additional visitors came with the intention of seeing the ‘new exhibit,’ or their interest was piqued by the sign in front or in the lobby. Yet even when visitors were looking for a new exhibit, (that they did not know the name of) or for Gyroscope, they had no clue as to what it was.

One male visitor represented many common problems visitors encountered. Upon entering the museum, he did see the red lettering outside, but he thought that he was going to see gyroscopes. Once inside the museum, he forgot about the gyroscopes until he picked up the Beginnings card, where he noticed the term Gyroscope, but still did not understand the connection. “Maybe there is some type of theme going on here I haven’t quite captured yet.” This guest, like so many others, was actively engaged in the museum and looking to identify Gyroscope, but he could not.

**THEMES:** Some basic themes could be identified by the majority of the audience. These included: the Black and White Room, the Colors Room (which held Beginnings), the Human Form Room, rooms with single artists (like Alexander Calder), and At Hand, the room with falling paper (recalled from earlier visits). A select few identified other themes throughout the museum. One visitor recognized a ‘distorted people’ room when the interviewer walked the man into the room and asked if he saw any commonalities. A few guests noted the separation of prints, paintings, and sculptures. Two college-aged viewers realized that one room on the lower level had something to do with “architectural objects: buildings and doors, beds and furniture”. These two did admit that if they had not visited the Human Form room, they probably would not have picked up on the subtle theme in the back room. They did enjoy the transition from a room with an obvious theme to a room with a theme that was more challenging to discover. All of the visitors were eager to engage in the themes of the installations when they recognized them or were told by the interviewers that themes existed.

Visitors did not notice any themes specifically related to Gyroscope. No other rooms were identified with a theme. Visitors did not realize that there was a series of installations or that they were in an exhibition called Gyroscope. Few visitors realized that the themes were interconnected or that their purpose extended beyond the room they were in.

**EXPLANATIONS:** Many visitors were interested in the idea of more information but were not unhappy with what was available. Quite a few guests mentioned a desire for more information about the individual artists, the artists’ intentions, and the context. But they
also thought that “the actual experience of seeing art is more important [than the background].” It was their experience and the efforts of the artists that impressed the viewers. “An artist’s purpose is to bring you into his or her art.” While some artists were able to offer this type of experience to viewer directly through the art work, others needed a little help. A mixed method of cards, writing on walls, and writing on floors were suggested to convey messages and themes.

**Postcards:** Everyone who saw the postcards liked them; however, many people missed them entirely or saw only a few. Those who took them tended to read them and liked what they read (except for two people who responded negatively to the quotes on the black and white card). If the visitors were interested in the works that were shown on the cards, they were happy to take the postcards with them as souvenirs. Some visitors noted that the postcards were helpful because they gave insight and justification to the artists’ visions. “We don’t think like artists…they are doing this for a reason, they want us to get something out of it.” Through the contexts, histories, and quotes on the cards, visitors could connect with and engage in the artist’s purpose. A few visitors wanted to make it clear that cards should be used “judiciously and sparingly,” so that they would not interfere with the installations or with their own impressions of what they were seeing.

**Labels:** Visitors enjoyed the installations and even though they would have been interested in more information, additional labels, and more informative labels, they did not consider any of these necessary. Many did not notice the lack of labels, they enjoyed generating their own assumptions and opinions concerning the art they were seeing. One visitor who had experience installing art enjoyed that “the purity of the exhibits was preserved.” He thought that the installation was done well, and that the labels were adequately far from the art. Other visitors could have used more information, preferably an artist’s biography, or help with symbolism. “If you take [Van Nicholson’s *White Relief*], there is a lot of symbolism in this painting…I know it is there, but I can’t figure it out.” Some viewers, like this woman, felt that they were supposed to see or understand a deeper meaning, but did not know how to reach it. Those who thought that more information would be helpful pointed out that visitors who did not wish to read labels, were not required to. “I can walk by as quick as I want or as slow as I want.” The same individual pointed out that “the artist may have their own perception of what he was thinking, but me, being an independent person; I can think whatever I want.” Most of the viewers enjoyed forming their own opinions.

**Statement:** The statement about the museum that was given to the interview team was shown to some of the interviewees and brought mixed results. A few were very positive about the statement and would have liked to see it before they entered. But while most people thought that it would be okay to present near the entrance to the museum, they did not see it as a statement intended for them—-it would be useful for ‘other’ people. The statement met with approval insofar as it invited people to actively engage in the museum and prepared them to see modern and contemporary art. The problem was that the majority of the interviewees came to the Hirshhorn with the intention of engaging with the art, and with a knowledge, or at least an idea, of the kind of art that they were seeing.

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4 See Appendix page 11
about to see. Replies by the interviewees which used terms such as “general public,” “eighth grade reading level,” and “for the masses,” suggested their underlying and personal responses to the statement. The statement was approved of, but only because these visitors did not think the Hirshhorn intended it for them.

Other responses to the statement included a woman who took offense to it because she felt it was too personalized. Another young man did not think that it matched the atmosphere of the museum; he suggested that an artist, a poet in particular, should redo the statement.

**Reading Room and Staff:** Many viewers showed interest in other types of explanation. When interviewers asked, most interviewees said that, if it were available, they would utilize a reading room to discover more about an artist, a period, or a style. They also expressed interest in computer terminals and substantial, well-researched books as methods to enhance their visit to the Hirshhorn. One guest suggested a “teaser” or a question on a card nearby the art to prompt people to use the extra resources. Most visitors commented that the questions and ideas raised in the Hirshhorn by their responses to the art works themselves would be motivation enough to visit a reading room.

Some people spontaneously expressed a desire to have someone to talk to about interpretation in the gallery. One frequent visitor, who had enjoyed Ann Hamilton’s *At Hand* on an earlier trip, thought that most people left thinking “Well that was interesting but what did I come away with?” He felt that an extra connection was needed to give meaning to the installation, and he suggested having someone there to interact with the public.

The interviewers inadvertently demonstrated how human interaction can help visitors. When interviewers pointed out that themes were present, the visitors were more likely to look for and grasp those themes, and seemed to take pleasure in the activity. Additionally, visitors were eager to seek out the themes in new rooms. And when interviewers discussed the background of certain art works, they brought about deeper levels of engagement between visitors and art. For example, one interviewee who had liked Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing #1113: On a wall, a triangle within a rectangle, each with broken bands of color*, was subsequently approached by the interviewer and told that it was not actually painted by the artist, but that the design had been purchased and then painted to specification directly onto the wall. The interviewee had an interesting reaction. His first response was to immediately dislike the painting, because it had ceased being a “personal work by an artist,” but his next comment was that the drawing was “amazing in its own right.” In the end, after thinking about it further, he appreciated the drawing and wanted more information. Had he not spoken with the interviewer, his experience with *Wall Drawing #1113* would have been completely different.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The single most outstanding feature of these interviews was the high level of agreement among visitors as to the reason for their visit and the ways that they engaged with the art. They were all interested in the subject matter, had deliberately sought out the museum, knew what they were likely to encounter, and shared a viewing culture based on individual, personal responses rather than an interest in art history.

This unusual unanimity is probably due in considerable measure to the fact that these interviews were conducted in January, at the peak of the winter season. Smithsonian attendance is significantly affected by the time of year. Audiences during periods of better weather with higher levels of casual tourism are likely to be more diverse. It is also likely that the presence of a major traveling exhibition might have affected the composition of the audience.

In any event, because these visitors were in the museum due to their interest in modern and contemporary art in general rather than some other purpose or some specific artist or exhibition, they can be regarded as voices from the Hirshhorn’s core audience.

Overall these interviewees expressed satisfaction with their experience in the museum, but there is notable room for improvement in three main areas:

First, the title given to this exhibition, Gyroscope, was so obscure and poorly explained that its only noticeable impact was confusion. Although it caused little harm—most interviewees ignored it—it did not enhance the experience of these visitors. Because they did not appreciate the principles behind the presentation, the interviewees missed many opportunities for engaging the art in ways that would probably have increased their levels of satisfaction with the visit. The most serious challenge facing the museum in improving Gyroscope is how to inform visitors that the installations have themes without specifying in a narrow, reductive way what those themes are.

Second, even though these visitors did not object to the absence of didactic texts (and a few of them were appreciative of that absence), they were in many cases very willing, and even eager, to make use of interpretive aids. When interpretive assistance was made available, either directly through the texts on the postcards or indirectly through dialogue with the interviewer, the results were very positive. Although the postcards were very effective, their near invisibility in the galleries seriously compromised that effectiveness. Interviewees responded positively to the idea of a resource center with more detailed information, but it is hard to know whether they would have used it had it been available. The museum should continue to experiment with ways to assist visitors in their active engagement with the art.

Third, the interviewees raised some situations where the staff had not served the visitors well. It may be particularly difficult to keep information desk staff focused on visitor needs at a time of year when so few visitors seem to have any interest in approaching the desk. Security staff, who are always required to balance the needs of visitor against the protection of the art, may also need more help in recognizing when an installation or a situation requires that visitors be treated with greater sensitivity. With exhibits like
Gyroscope, where deeper levels of engagement between art and audience are the goal, it may be necessary for all staff to be more involved, and to work together better to build and maintain a positive relationship with visitors.

The results of this study are a snapshot of visitor opinions and experiences at a particular moment, and will need to be placed in a context of future studies, especially those conducted in other seasons. Over time, as imaginative staff experimentation is supported by reliable visitor feedback, both museum and visitors will benefit.

**APPENDIX**

*STATEMENT DRAFTED BY THE HIRSHHORN STAFF:*

*Welcome to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, a space for reflection and dialog about the art of our time.*

*While you are here you will see art by artists from around the world created in a variety of media and presented in dynamic displays that rotate on an ongoing basis. You will also see Gyroscope, on-going experiments with how the Museum’s collections are presented.*

*On your visit you will see expressions that may at times be new and unfamiliar; some you may not initially perceive as “art” in the conventional sense. Throughout, we will pose many questions. There are no right or wrong answers. We invite you to look, examine, and engage with Museum staff and each other. Take advantage of our Reading Room on the third floor. Participate in our offering of public programs. This is your museum. Take stock in artists’ multi-faceted expressions about our world. Enlist your imagination and expand your mind.*