Hi, and welcome. Thanks for coming to the very last presentation of the very last day of a jam-packed conference! We’re going to jump right in and look at this video. This work is about 4 minutes long, so we are going to view it while it plays... it will be easy to see when it starts from the beginning. We’ll watch for a couple of minutes, then we’ll have an interactive discussion about what we’ve seen, just as you might if you were sharing it with visitors in your institution. While you’re viewing, notice what materials the artists have used in the video.
Thanks for that great discussion. I’m Peter, this is Leah, Monica, Francine. We’re all volunteer gallery docents at the San Jose Museum of Art, a museum of modern and contemporary art in the heart of Silicon Valley. What we just did is what you might experience on a public tour at our museum. After setting expectations for you, we were doing a pretty straightforward facilitation using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). How many of you are using or are familiar with this way of viewing?

By the way, that video is “Tapitapultas” by Donna Conlon and Jonathan Hacker from 2012. It has not been shown at our museum, but the rest of the slide backgrounds will show actual exhibitions that have been in our galleries.

As we go through a few slides and talk about touring time-based media, you might have some questions. Feel free to bring them up on the spot and we’ll try to provide an answer.

At SJMA our goal is to help visitors arrive at their own interpretations of the art. To do that, we primarily use three inquiry-based touring techniques, all of which focus on interactive discussion using open-ended questions. We have found that our museum has many first-time visitors and those who are not familiar with contemporary art.
These strategies encourage people to engage with the art even when they may not initially be comfortable with it. In addition to VTS, we use the Discovery method and Object-Oriented Learning. We’ll touch on the key skills involved later. And at the end of the presentation we’ll supply a handout with more information on these strategies and other material you can use to implement a similar plan at your own institution.
SJMA has a dynamic exhibition calendar, with an average of 7 to 9 new exhibits every year. In the last few years we found that our museum was acquiring and presenting more time-based media – videos like we just saw, animations, computer-based art, and so on.

Let’s take a moment to talk about what we mean by time-based media. There are several useful definitions of this kind of art, but we think the Tate’s succinct version captures the essence – the important element is that the visual and sometimes audio aspects change over time. We looked at a video because it was easily portable for this breakout session, but there are other kinds, like the moving sculptures of Alan Rath. You can probably think of other examples, like an abstract image that is computer-driven or an LED display that dances and changes – for example, maybe some of you have seen the delightful Leo Villareal hallway between the wings of the National Gallery.
When imagery changes over time it can be challenging for viewers and certainly can make touring more difficult. Some works have narration or other sound that makes conversation in front of the work hard. Some may be very long, with a specific narrative or plot – in a case like that it might be unrealistic to have your visitors see the whole thing. Some works are projected on multiple screens, like the work shown here. Can you think of other examples?

With all the challenges of time-based media we wondered how we would include them in our public tours, since our base strategies were designed for “static” art – paintings, sculpture, and the like. We thought we might have to invent a new method altogether, but through trial and error we found there is no secret formula for sharing time-based media with visitors. Instead, we could adapt our proven techniques to address the specific challenges of time-based media and maintain the viewer interaction that allows art to be experienced through each viewer’s unique perspective.

I’m going to hand this over to Leah, who’ll get specific on how all this can work.
As Peter said, we are seeing more time-based media at SJMA. We have spent many hours trying to determine the best approach to touring these pieces. We spoke with other institutions, surveyed docents, performed dedicated time-based media tours exploring the various forms of this media, and used different touring methods. We even reviewed our shift reports and tried to develop a tool for assessing the artwork and determining which touring method would work best. As hard as we tried to develop a step by step guide what we discovered is there are too many variables for any one tool, or touring method, to work with EVERY artwork.

What emerged from our trial and error were some basic skills that we were using time and again when we toured time-based media pieces. We have distilled these skills into 4 Keys that we will be sharing with you today so you can use at your own institutions, with your own touring strategies, to help you plan a successful time-based media tour.

So, let’s get started with our first key, familiarizing yourself with the artwork.
How long is it and do we need to see all of it? Other attributes we will discuss shortly play into this, but the first question is: can we spend time with the work and find something valuable in our discussion? Many time-based media artworks on display will be looped, that is, repeated over and over. This can be useful in touring the work, especially if it is short. We are likely to be able to go to the piece and join it at any point and still see the whole thing.

Some pieces have a substantial audio component – music, ambient sounds, spoken narrative, and so on. It is important to assess how vital that aspect is to understand the artwork and tell your visitors what to expect. How you let your visitors engage with the work may be defined by how critical the sound is. For example, do we need to stay quiet and listen to the whole video and then talk about it afterward? Can we talk over the ambient sounds without difficulty? Like the video we just saw with the bottle caps. Is the sound setting a mood that our group’s discussion will impair?

Content could describe the narrative or story, which may be spoken or simply visual. A narrative that has a clear beginning and end may require viewing the entire work. Starting the viewing in the middle (if you choose to try it) may suggest more setup beforehand. These considerations play off the other attributes we talked about (Is it a
long story? Do we need to hear narration?) On the other hand, if the content has no story to follow, we probably can join the video anywhere, with the appropriate introduction.

With these attributes in mind and the limitations they might suggest, we should still say that challenging pieces can be toured. Even if the viewers can’t watch the entire work, you can help them notice and appreciate the parts they are seeing and talk about those. Every piece is tourable, the key is knowing the artwork well and being comfortable with it. Once you are comfortable you will be able to tour even the most challenging and provocative works. As we all know, if a work of art has made it into your museum, it has artistic elements that could be discussed. Examples might be the use of transitions, interplay of video and audio, simply color palette, or animation style.

The key take-away for assessing the art is that you must know the piece well. This is even more important with time-based media as you may not view the entire piece or start at the beginning. You will be able to judge as you approach the piece if the timing is right to start a tour, maybe there are too many distractions in the gallery at that moment and you know this section needs a lot of focus. Being familiar with the artwork from beginning to end will make you more comfortable and confident which in turn will make your visitors more attentive.

With our first key we have assessed the artwork and know how long our piece is, we know what impact the audio has and what type of narrative we will be dealing with. Our next key will focus on the environment in which the artwork will be viewed and the type of group you might be hosting.
Some of these environmental elements will be known ahead of time, but others apply on the very day and time of your planned tour.

Consider how the piece is installed. In this example you could easily tour this with a large group. But if you have very small display (like a 1960’s TV screen) you might have difficulty getting everyone to see it. If the work has important narration, can everyone hear it? What if there is a single set of headphones for listening?

Some logistical considerations could arise when you enter the environment in real-time. Is there space for your group with other visitors present? Are other groups also talking? If you want to view the piece for a relatively long time, will it be comfortable for your group? Should you plan for seating (such as stools or cushions)? Remember, the more comfortable your visitors are the more focused and engaged they will be.

How about your specific group on tour? Again, the consideration of whether all can participate comfortably is important. Also, specific attributes of your visitors can alter the approach. For example, if narration is a vital component, the hearing-impaired will be impacted. What are some other examples of how the members of a given tour group might affect your approach?
You probably already think about many of these things in your tours, independent of whether you are looking at time-based media, but we think it becomes more important because of the durational element.

A quick recap of our first two keys: Key 1 we assessed the artwork and know the length, the importance of the audio and content; Key 2 we have examined the environment and know how the piece is installed, we have considered the logistics of the gallery and thought about the make-up of our tour group. Now it’s time to take a look at our third key and what touring method we will use.
As mentioned before at SJMA we use three inquiry-based touring techniques, all of which focus on interactive discussion using open-ended questions, VTS, Discovery Method and Object-Oriented Learning.

VTS uses three basic questions for discovering the artwork: “What is going on in this piece?”, “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find?” to guide the viewer’s observations. This is our main touring technique and the one Peter used with the video in the beginning of the presentation.

The Discovery Method explores the artwork by investigating what caught the viewer’s attention and examining what techniques the artist used to guide the viewer through the artwork.

And, finally, Object-Oriented Learning which involves looking at an artwork, reacting emotionally and intellectually, placing the artwork in a cultural context and then making a judgement about objects.

The key elements in all our strategies is open-ended questions that lead the looking and reacting to the work. What the visitor sees and remarks upon builds the experience of the work.

How you choose which technique to use would be the same process you use for
touring static art, figure out which technique works best with the characteristics of your piece. Whatever strategies and techniques you are accustomed to using, it is always good to fall back on the basics – what you know how to do. For us it is these three inquiry-based methods which all share the following Core Skills.

We all know what “active listening” means – pay attention, hear the meaning beyond the words, read body language as well.

Paraphrasing back to the visitors confirms that you have listened and validates their comments. It also serves to share with others in the group and keep everyone engaged. Simply repeating a comment verbatim can be OK but rephrasing with the same content is far more powerful and advances the discussion.

Building on multiple comments by tying them together is what we mean by scaffolding or linking. It is often useful to recall earlier comments and compare or contrast with the later ones. For example, “you noticed the structure that they are playing on, rough concrete with the metal drain seemed out of place in the jungle, and previously someone commented about the bright colored bottle tops were a sharp contrast to the natural jungle surroundings, so again we have a contrast between the man made materials and the natural environment of the jungle…”

Finally, summarizing can pull it all together. When it seems like the observations are lagging or it is simply time to move on, hitting the main points in summary form brings closure for the visitors and an easy way to segue to another piece.

I want to stress that with the third key “Choose a Technique” there is no “one size fits all” technique to use with time-based media. You will need to assess which of your techniques will work with the particular time-based media artwork you wish to tour. I just gave you an overview of our methods and core skills that we use when doing inquiry-based tours.

The first three keys to touring time-based media; Key 1 assessing the art, Key 2 considering the environment, and Key 3 choosing a technique and using the core skills for inquiry based tours, are keys that apply to touring all forms of art. However, they become especially important when touring time-based media because of the ever-changing nature of the artwork. Once you have evaluated your artwork with these first 3 keys you will be ready for our fourth and final key setting expectations to help guide your visitors’ experience with time-based media.
Our inquiry-based touring at SJMA is truly driven by the tour participants, there is little to no setup of the artwork, we do not read the labels or wall texts, we simply ask the viewer “What is going on in this artwork” and then facilitate a conversation around that work. What time-based media has taught us is that sometimes we need to modify our approach. Setting expectations as to how we will be looking at this different type of media has made the visitor more comfortable and a willing participant in the ensuing discussion.

For example, since we know the piece well and we know whether it is long or short, has sound or not, and whether the narrative is important, we want to have our visitors in the right mindset to investigate successfully. They will want to know how long we are going to spend. For example, “Let’s view this video for 2 or 3 minutes without talking, and then spend some time discussing it while we continue to watch.”

Whenever possible it is best to discuss the art in front of the piece, even if that means moving to the back corner for your discussion. In some instances, this will not be possible, the sound might be too loud to talk over, or there might be other visitors that you would be disturbing. If this is the case, moving your discussion to another location might be best, and could be handled like this: “We’re going to go watch this
5 minute piece from beginning to end (even if we start in the middle) and then come back out here to the lobby to discuss what we saw.”

Notice how in both of these examples I told them how long we would watch and where we would have our discussion.

Another important way to help viewers engage with time-based media is often to give them a way into the work – some element or theme to look for. This also provides a common ground for discussion, especially if you are discussing away from the piece. For example, this is a piece by Tabaimo and I could say, “watch for how the objects transform” or “notice if the objects represent a particular time for you”.

Key number 4 sets the expectations for the artwork viewing making your visitors more comfortable because they know how long they will be viewing the artwork, where and when they will be having the discussion, and you have given them something to focus on while watching the piece.

I will now hand you back to Peter who will summarize the 4 keys and wrap things up.
Let’s quickly summarize the keys again. We’ve said that each work has to be evaluated on its own. And there is no single answer that fits everything. So, our first step, key number 1, is to assess the artwork for its attributes. Then we want to give careful consideration to the environment and its impact on your viewers. Key number 2 looks at the installation, gallery ambience, and group dynamics.

Picking an inquiry strategy that works for you and the piece is key number 3 and setting expectations for your visitors wraps up our last key.

Of course, when the tour is happening you may need to be flexible and adjust your plans. You never know when a hoard of kids might come into your gallery and drown out the narrative your group was supposed to listen to.
Now that we have all of our keys let’s walk through how this might go.

We have picked our artwork (the piece pictured on the lower right-hand side of the screen above), and the environment will work well with our small group. We have decided what our basic inquiry-based strategy is going to be, and now we let our visitors take us on the journey.

We start by setting expectations: “We are going to spend 2-3 minutes watching, then start our discussion while we continue to watch. If we gather around, we should all be able to see well, feel free to have a seat if that is comfortable for you. We have some small stools or cushions over here if you want to use them. While you are watching I would like you to think about the locations shown in this piece.

During the discussion you may find that you can supply “hip-pocket” information when it is appropriate. A visitor may comment on something for which you have validating knowledge (“Yes, the artist lives in New York and must be familiar with this spot...”) But make sure it fits and seems needed, not gratuitous.

Eventually we see it is time to summarize and move on. You may have planned a
transition to another piece and can use it to physically guide your group along (“The next work was also done by a New York artist...”)

We set expectations, introduce the work, and provide a “prompt” to help engage the viewers and give a possible subject for discussion. Then we use open-ended questions to draw out observations and reactions. When the conversation winds down, we summarize what was discovered.
Let’s wrap this up by looking at another video. Try to note how the factors we discussed come into play for this one. This video is about seven minutes long. Although there is sound, I think we can discuss it while watching. Let’s look for a minute or two and then we’ll talk. While watching, notice what kinds of activities are shown and what cultures might be represented.
Thank you for that wonderful discussion and thank you for joining us today as we looked at the keys to touring time-based media. As you’ve seen, in the end we didn’t really reinvent any wheels. We adapted existing, proven touring strategies. We observed what other docents were doing to help their visitors get meaning out of an artwork that won’t sit still.

We feel the result is simple and intuitive, and we know it works because we’re using it regularly now at SJMA. We feel confident it will work for you, too.

As you walk out, be sure to pick up a handout. It includes a link to resources you can use for reference and build your own approach.