NOW YOU SEE IT
NOW YOU DON’T

Strategies and Techniques for Interpretive Tours of Time-Based Media

San José Museum of Art Docent Council
National Docent Symposium 2019
A defining feature of this type of art is that the visual and sometimes the audio aspects unfold for the viewer over time. **Examples of time-based media include video, film, slides, audio, animations, and computer-based technologies.** Many engage multiple senses at the same time.

Art that changes over time can be challenging for viewers and can make interpretive, or inquiry-based, touring more challenging for docents as well.

**TIME-BASED MEDIA ELEMENTS**

**DIMENSIONS**
Height, length, width/depth, duration.

**EXPERIENCE**
The art must be experienced as it unfolds over time.

**REPRODUCIBILITY**
TBM’s technological constituents are always susceptible of becoming obsolete. Conservation of TBM relies on the conceptual migration of the work to a new technology.

**IDENTITY**
A TBM work exists only when installed. Its identity changes when it is reinstalled in another location owing to the unique features of the new environment and set-up.

**SYNONYMS**
New Media, Media Art, Expanded Media, Digital Art.
The San José Museum of Art has a dynamic exhibition calendar, with an average of 7 to 9 new exhibits annually. In recent years SJMA has been acquiring and presenting more time-based media. It was clear that we docents needed to address how to incorporate this new type of artwork into our inquiry-based tours.

Our goal for touring time-based media was to maintain the viewer interaction that allows art to be experienced through each person’s unique perspective. Through research, rehearsal, and trial and error, we learned we could adapt our existing techniques to address the specific challenges of time-based media.

The result is a four-key framework, using basic skills from our existing touring methods, that is the foundation for a successful interpretive time-based media tour.

1. **ASSESS THE ART**
2. **CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT**
3. **CHOOSE A TECHNIQUE**
4. **SET EXPECTATIONS**
Can we spend time with the work and find something valuable through our discussion? Because of its fluid nature, time-based media requires more familiarity with the format and content of the entirety of the work than most static art. You must spend time getting to know the art before you tour it.

Assess the following aspects of your artwork:

**DURATION:** How long is the work and do we need to see all of it? Can we watch a small portion of a longer piece and still gain meaning? Can we begin our viewing at any time?

**AUDIO OR SOUND:** Is audio a critical component, is it vital to the appreciation of the work? If there is sound, can we talk over it while facilitating a conversation with our visitors? Does the sound set a mood that a group discussion might impair?

**CONTENT:** Is there a storyline or discovery path with a clear beginning and end critical to finding meaning? Is there a dominant narrative or are the visuals “abstract”?

Despite the limitations these assessments might suggest, challenging pieces can still be toured. If a work of art has made it into your museum, it has artistic elements that can be discussed. You could focus your visitors’ attention on something as simple as the color palette, the use of transitions, repetitive actions or objects.
You’ll know some of the environmental aspects before beginning your tour, but others are affected by the makeup of your tour group and other visitors you may encounter during your tour.

Consider the following elements of the environment in which the work will be viewed:

**INSTALLATION:** Is the work in a space where it will be easy to see and hear with a tour group? If it requires an extended viewing time, is there seating? Are headphones required, and if so, how will you organize that for your group? In this a single computer monitor; do you have to guide your viewers through viewing one at time?

**GALLERY AMBIENCE:** Is there space for your group with other visitors present? Will a discussion interfere with the experience of visitors already in the gallery? Are there other tour groups or installations to navigate around?

**TOUR GROUP:** Can all of the members of your tour group participate comfortably? Is the content appropriate for all ages? Are there tour members who are hearing impaired, or who have mobility challenges?
At SJMA, we focus on three inquiry-based techniques* to facilitate conversations with our visitors about the art: VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES (VTS), DISCOVERY, and OBJECT-ORIENTED LEARNING. But there is no “one size fits all” technique to use with time-based media. You can adapt the principles we describe to accommodate your own touring style or institutional practice.

What all interpretive or inquiry-based touring techniques share are the use of open-ended questions and these CORE SKILLS:

**ACTIVE LISTENING:** Paying attention, hearing the meaning beyond the words, and reading body language — each of these actions shows your interest and encourages participation.

**PARAPHRASING:** Restating your visitors’ comments confirms that you have listened and validates their observations. It also helps you share a single visitor’s perspective with the rest of the group and keep everyone engaged.

**SCAFFOLDING/LINKING:** Comparing or contrasting multiple comments from different visitors over the course of your discussion helps advance the discussion and keeps your group on the same path.

**SUMMARIZING:** Reminding visitors of the main points from your discussion brings closure and a sense of accomplishment and provides an easy way to segue to another piece.

*Go to www.sjmusart.org/NDS2019 for more information on inquiry-based touring techniques.
For many visitors, time-based media is a new experience. Even experienced museum-goers may be unsure of how to engage with it. Letting your visitors know how they will be looking at this different type of art makes them more comfortable and willing participants in the ensuing discussion.

Set the stage for your interpretive tour by setting the following expectations before you view each work:

**HOW TO VIEW:** How long will they be looking? Should they take seats, or remaining standing? Is hearing the sound important to meaning, or can they disregard if audibility is an issue? Should they offer their observations while watching, or will you be discussing it after the allotted time is up? If it’s necessary to take turns to participate, such as with a single set of headphones, how will that work?

**WHERE TO DISCUSS:** Will they be remaining in front of the piece for your interactive discussion? If moving to another area, what will be their signal, and where exactly do they go?

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** You can help visitors focus on a work that is changing over time by suggesting a way into the art, some element or theme to look for. This also provides a common ground for the group discussion, especially if you’ve opted to move away from the piece before you talk about it. If there is background information that’s critical to making meaning, include it here. For example:

“We’re going to watch this 4-minute video from beginning to end, even if we start in the middle of it. There is a soundtrack, but the volume is low and hearing it isn’t critical to your appreciation of the art. I’ll signal when it’s time to move out to the lobby through that exit to start our discussion. While you’re watching, notice what all the girls who appear in the video have in common.”

Once you’re comfortable with this simple approach to time-based media, you’ll be able to tour even the most challenging and provocative works.
The San José Museum of Art reflects the diverse cultures and innovative spirit of Silicon Valley. Through its exhibitions, programs, scholarship, and collections, SJMA connects the present and the past, the art of the West Coast and the world. The Museum fosters awareness of artists’ broad contributions to society and engages audiences with the art of our time and the vitality of the creative process. It is a leading showcase in the Bay Area for modern and contemporary art.

This year, its 50th anniversary, the Museum has been energized around our new strategic direction, prioritizing technology as a critical topic in our community and exploring the intersection between art and innovation.

SJMA’S DOCENTS

The primary link between the San José Museum of Art and the public, SJMA docents help the Museum fulfill its mission of fostering awareness, appreciation, and understanding of contemporary art. Docents engage approximately 7,500 visitors each year. They walk visitors through the galleries and lead lively, participatory discussions about selected works on view. With their open, inquiring minds and desire to learn from others, docents engage the public imagination by encouraging new ways of seeing and thinking about art. They stimulate visitors to learn for themselves—to find at the Museum something they might not discover on their own.

For more help in implementing these practices at your own institution: www.sjmusart.org/NDS2019 • nds2019@sjmadocentcouncil.org