



## Challenging Assumptions in “Question”

Wednesday, October 20, 2004

Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts,  
Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA

### Program Flyer Information

Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center has turned their exhibition development process inside out for an exciting new project, entitled "Question." Says Patience Young, the Cantor Center's Curator for Education, "We are throwing out our assumptions in order to challenge ourselves and engage visitors in new ways. As we distilled a list of queries from the general public and visiting students, we discovered that some of the most basic questions are the most provocative. 'What is artistic quality?'; 'Where is the meaning in the work?'; and 'Who decides what is art or who is an artist?' have stimulated animated discussions among the staff."

Cantor Arts Center curators and other staff, working in teams, have selected objects from the Center's comprehensive collection of 26,000 works to provoke and illustrate specific questions. Working with exhibition designers Darcie Fohrman and Michael Brown, the Center devised an installation that raises even more questions than it answers and that provides numerous ways for visitors to interact with the artworks as they explore their own ideas about art and museums.

### Introductory Speaker

- Lauren Silver, *Associate Curator for Education*, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts

### Panel

- Patience Young (Moderator), *Curator of Education*, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts
- Darcie Fohrman, *Exhibit Designer*, Darcie Fohrman Associates
- Manuel Jordan Perez, *Phyllis Wattis Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas*, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts

### Presentation by Lauren

#### Brief Introduction to the Cantor Art Center

- The Museum is the oldest building on campus
- Houses a global collection including object from the Stanford family

#### Brief Introduction to “Question”

- An experiment for the museum – trying to avoid calling it an “exhibition”
- Arose from a set of questions – aligned with the strategic plan to create an “innovative learning environment” in an effort to “fail fast” so that the staff can move forward with improving the exhibition

- “Question” originally began with a smaller exhibit “*The Ideal Figure*,” on the second floor that involved people who are not traditional curators. The exhibit addressed cross-cultural ideas of body image in context with Pop culture.
- We had 18 months to put this exhibit together, much less than a traditional exhibition
- Four exhibit teams were developed including:
  - Presentation
  - Other Galleries (relating to the original “20 questions”)
  - Buzz committee (public relations)
  - Learning/Education
- Goals of the exhibit were\*:
  - Only use objects from the collection
  - Make the exhibit as broadly relevant as possible (This necessitated that all departments and people on the staff were involved. For example, public relations staff worked with registrars, installers assisted with education programming, etc.)
  - Experiment with the installation to include lots of interactivity and try to involve visitors with one another
  - Be an education-driven project so that the exhibit begins with the ideas and not the objects. (A real challenge for collection curators.)
  - Encourage discussion. (Take out anything that is “leading” or that leads the visitor to a conclusion.)
  - Evaluate the exhibit. (Conducting extensive evaluation effort, even doing follow up evaluation by calling people three months after their visit to the exhibition.)

\*See Learning Goals for “Question” handout given at program.

### **Lessons Learned from “Question”**

- Innovation is hard. What has been tried in this exhibit is not loved by all (visitors or staff) but has generated lots of dialogue
- It was difficult to convince a lot of people why we produced this exhibit
- We are learning the unending value associated with experimentation
- The process involved a lot of staff who do not necessarily want to be involved
- The community was very involved with good results
- Even two months into the exhibit, we are still receiving input from visitors and the community
- The tours offered for this exhibit are no longer “tours” but “conversations”
- Conversations with Stanford faculty have increased
- The take home message is that it is OK to do something risky

### **30 minute Self-Guided Tour of Question**

#### **Comments for the Panel** (moderated by Patience Young)

- I felt exhilarated. I could speak up in the galleries and not have to be hushed. I liked the environmental factors such as places to sit, books to write in, etc.
- I think the exhibit is courageous.

- The orientation (exit, entrance, etc.) was confusing. I felt there was a dead zone in the middle where I felt a little lost. The questions posed in the early stages of the exhibit were impenetrable and a bit over my head. I wanted more structure.
- The design and installation is so polished that the exhibit doesn't say "experiment" but "exhibition." It looks finished.
- There is lots of prototyping on display and interesting installation techniques for an art museum such as the colors of the walls, etc.
- I liked how you get to see the "behind the scenes" view and learn a bit about how decisions are made regarding what to put in the exhibit.
- The "graffiti" on the wall marginalized the exhibit for me since it is an orienting space.
- It was nice not to be drawn to the object label first, I felt freer to look at the object and its display first.
- The value/fake area stood out because some of the answers were provided

#### **Questions for the Panel** (moderated by Patience Young)

- What is the purpose of the introductory wall?
  - People have responded in interesting ways to the public/private space of the "graffiti wall." Some people have taken ownership of the space.
- Who is the audience for this exhibit?
  - Staff is still questioning who the audience is. The answers have ranged from our average 66-year old visitor, students to "I don't care"
- Was this exhibit an easier "sell" because you are located on a university campus where education and experimentation is a priority?
  - The Director really pushed us to see if we were able to pull away from tradition in this exhibit. He pushed the staff to be organized in other ways (i.e., new team structures, etc.)
- Will this experiment be included in future exhibits at the museum?
  - Yes! WE have already rewritten an exhibit planning document for how exhibits are put together to include things such as having the Education Department involved with the curators in the early stages so that Education is a priority
- How have curators been affected by this experiment?
  - Curators have been impacted by this exhibit so that they are thinking more about juxtapositions, open storage galleries, labels that may change to include various points of view, etc.
- How has this exhibit affected the bottom line?
  - Attendance for this show has not gone up; however, our visitorship has not gone down either. We've found that there have been many more intergenerational visitors (families, etc.). Many people spend one or more hours in the exhibit and we've received lots of thoughtful answers on our evaluation forms, irregardless of the time visitors spent in the galleries.
- Has anything changed in the exhibit since it first opened?
  - We gave ourselves permission to change things once based on comments we received on the early evaluations.

**Related Reading Material:**

- [San Mateo County Times review](#)
- [SFGate review](#)
- [Visitor letter](#)
- [Stanford Report article](#)