



# Trend Report

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Martina Deidda

## High Culture vs. Participatory Museum Controversy



Picture by Matthew Benjamin Coleman

Judith H. Dobrzynski is a [freelance journalist](#) who wrote an [article](#), published last August in The New York Times, titled *High Culture Goes Hands-On*. In the article she affirmed that museums are trying to adapt to nowadays quest for experience, dynamic opportunities and activities but in this process the “cultural treasures are multitasking too much, becoming more alike, and shedding the very characteristics that made them so special — especially art museums”. In other words, she thinks that museums across the country are sacrificing traditional experiences and activities related to history and art and neglecting the so called “high culture” in favour of vulgarised approaches to works of art and low quality content programmes.

The article inflamed the museum sector worldwide and many people read it and responded. Nina Simon, the executive director of the [Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History](#) (MAH) and author of [The Participatory Museum](#), did as well. Afterwards, a Santa Cruz journalist named [Bruce Bratton](#) wrote that Dobrzynski’s article fitted perfectly to the situation at the MAH. He believes that the institution lost the professional standard concepts of “museum”, “art” and “history” and shifted its mission statement completely and giving birth to a “second community centre”. Further on, he affirmed that MAH Board members, professional historians, curators and staff members had quit their job since Simon’s takeover as the museum’s executive director. His opinion was strongly contested by Nina Simone herself and many others that share her beliefs and approve her work.

I think that interactivity and audience engagement should not be seen as dangers to the culture and museum reputation, but instead they have to be promoted and encouraged. The goal for museums is not to become amusement parks, but to open their doors to everyone, according to their needs. None of the institutions mentioned in the articles risk losing their missions - of being a place where you can encounter the works of art quietly. It will remain to be one of their core-businesses. Occasional activities that involve new and dissimilar approaches to culture do not have to be seen as corruptive. Instead, it can be seen as complementary. Sometimes, though, it's fair to question the cultural value of what is proposed and if it may stimulate visitors' interest in the museum or not.

For the future, I expect museums to increase the amount of dynamic and more broadly accessible displays. Critics and experts can have a role where they help institutions to find the right balance between these two concepts and identifying projects that neither drown out nor degrade the traditional way of viewing art, but still can act to expand the concept of a museum experience.



Picture by Santacruzmah via Flickr

**Further reading:**

[artmuseumteaching.com/2013/09/25/a-museum-experience-is-not-one-size-fits-all](http://artmuseumteaching.com/2013/09/25/a-museum-experience-is-not-one-size-fits-all)

[www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/arts/design/carsten-holler-experience-at-the-new-museum-review.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/arts/design/carsten-holler-experience-at-the-new-museum-review.html?pagewanted=all)

[www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts/2013/09/trouble-in-paradise-santa-cruzs-museum-loses-its-way.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts/2013/09/trouble-in-paradise-santa-cruzs-museum-loses-its-way.html)

## Art promo videos

The last couple of years, many modern art museums and galleries have joined the online art community by creating a YouTube or Vimeo channel where they upload videos or show web-tv.

Museum of Contemporary Arts of Los Angeles, for instance, has presented some interesting videos on its [MOCATv YouTube channel](#) and gained the community's appreciation (especially since MOCATv's presentation of *Björk Mutual Core* was named the Best Music Online Film & Video at the 17th Annual Webby Awards).



Screenshoot, Musée d'Orsay, Youtube

The Guggenheim Museum also owns a YouTube account that got worldwide attention with the launch of [YouTube Play in 2010](#). It was a Biennial of Creative Video projects that aimed to discover the most exceptional talents of online video. A jury of experts selected twenty videos, submitted from around the world, to be presented simultaneously at the Guggenheim museums in Berlin, Bilbao, Venice and New York.

Despite these examples of innovation, the public is still concerned about the fact that these channels mainly offer two kinds of outputs: music videos (where the art is used as a visual decoration for the music only) or old school style documentaries.

The Musée d'Orsay seems to have started a change with the promotional video for its latest exhibition [Masculine / Masculine: The Nude Man in Art from 1800 to the Present Day](#). Instead of showing the paintings, the video involves a man recreating scenes from the artworks. This technique seems to be far more appealing for the global audience and the absence of a narration makes it suitable for an international distribution. [As several bloggers reported](#), the public seemed not to appreciate that the actor was painted with dark ink – it was spilled into a bathtub to emulate the black body in a painting by Kehinde Wiley. This was really a faux pas for such a well directed video.

This new way of promoting museums and exhibitions can, in a world characterised by too much written information, work really well. However, not many museums can afford such a well made promotion video and the high costs of video editing make this way of promotion more suitable for big museums. Still, museums have to be aware of the medium's enormous outreach power; for this reason it's essential to make sure that the message they send is coherent with their intent and that the big public will be able to understand it, avoiding any possible controversy or misinterpretation.

### Further reading:

[blogs.artinfo.com/lacmonfire/2012/10/04/how-much-is-moca-making-from-mocatv](http://blogs.artinfo.com/lacmonfire/2012/10/04/how-much-is-moca-making-from-mocatv)

## Pushing Experimental Museums to the Extreme



Some rights reserved by BEATBrooklyn

For the *BEAT Festival* (held from September 12 to September 21) the Brooklyn Museum became the “Brooklyn Museum of the Performing Arts”. Performances took place throughout Brooklyn’s largest cultural institution in an exhibition called *Experiment #23b*. Graduates of Brooklyn College’s *PIMA* (Performance & Interactive Media Arts) MFA Programme, created unique site specific adventures relating to local history and urban landscape, involving psycho-geographic inclinations of the audience. *Experiment #23b* is a perfect example of how the concept of interactive museum has evolved in the last couple of years, going from the concept of participatory exhibitions to a cross-disciplinary, 360 degree entertainment. Museum staff was wearing lab coats as if in a real scientific experiment and guided the public throughout the performances. The exhibition really reconceptualised the museum-going experience, exploring notions of observation, display, adventure and play. Through a series of personalized performance encounters throughout the museum, visitors were led on a unique journey into the psychic and physical unknown, exploring historic exhibition spaces and areas usually off-limits to guests, creating a dynamic playground for the imagination.

It’s impossible, in this case, to perceive the divide between visual art and the theatre and dance. The acting, the dance and the music performances also helps us to view the museum differently and to learn to expect different things from it. What makes this kind of experiences so interesting is the possibility for the visitors to explore a museum – they thought they knew – in a different way, with a completely altered approach. Entertainment can also be a way to reach people who normally don’t enjoy a museum visit and the traditional guided tours.

Museum Hack's not-so-typical tour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art goes in this direction. Since some people sometimes suffer from a “museum fatigue”, or does not enjoy a regular visit, **Museum Hack** aims to be an alternative to traditional guided tours. This project was born from Nick Gray's desire to share his love of the Met with friends to celebrate his 30th birthday, and since they were amazed by his way of telling the museum story and keeping them entertained at the same time, he came up with the idea to continue giving tours on a weekly basis. Mr. Gray set up a website where his friends and their friends could sign up for a guided tour but in a matter of days it went viral and he has now built up a team that guides people every weekend.



Photo by Museum Hack

Their different approach to the museum tour features lesser-known works and alternative sides to the main highlights. They arrange groups of maximum nine people and customize the programme on the participants' needs, experiences and interests. The program contains both physical activities and participatory experiences.

**Further reading:**

[online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324591204579037560364060476.html](https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324591204579037560364060476.html)

[blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2013/09/02/museum-hack-guides-fight-art-fatigue-with-unconventional-tours-of-the-met](https://blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2013/09/02/museum-hack-guides-fight-art-fatigue-with-unconventional-tours-of-the-met)

## Mobile Apps and Culture



Photo by Arend Jan Wonink

Museums of every size and range (from [Tate](#) to Fitzwilliam Museum, from the [British Museum](#) to the Dulwich Picture Gallery) have been adopting mobile technologies for more than a decade, but since technology never stops evolving, this trend is still a hot topic in the art field. For example, the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) and Four New York cultural institutions will receive a total of \$15 million from Bloomberg Philanthropies to develop new mobile apps over the next three years. Another example, [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), will launch an animated map of the museum. The app will contain storytelling, videos and pictures and MoMA's will also make it possible for visitors to share photos and comments through social media. The increasing number of people who have mobile devices have given museums an opportunity to reach visitors in new exciting ways and for this reason they are experimenting with interactive multimedia applications to attract more people, shape their experiences at the museum and let them explore further at home.

Nowadays, in fact, more and more visitors own a smart phone or a tablet and the big majority of them carry these devices around during a visit at a museum. This means that introducing smart apps in museums will not only benefit a lucky minority, but instead a big public. In addition to this, it is a great help for those who don't have the opportunity to travel to the museums in person and it can also help cutting museums huge investments in printed catalogues. Of course they have to take into account that exploiting costumers' hardware will implicate the development of different apps suitable for the all mobile operative systems – and update the apps when the operating systems changes - and that can also be very expensive.

Creating an app is not always an automatic win. Scarce museum resources need to be deployed strategically for maximum impact and fulfilment of the museum's mission.

Just putting the same old kinds of contents on new devices – even if those are the visitors’ own – will not increase the usage rates of mobile in museums nor raise customer satisfaction rate.

I think that museums and mobile vendors should focus less on technology and more on content and experience design that respond to the way people use their devices and the full potential of their media, rather than just re-proposing the traditional audio tour or just a gallery of the same old picture that you would find if you googled the museum. Despite many attempts,

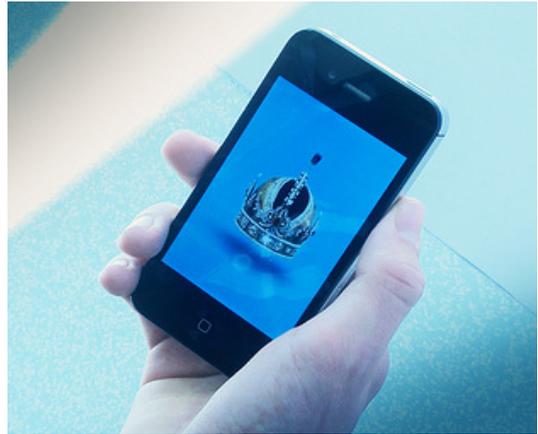


Photo by GMF-Productions

we have still a long way to go from reaching the goal of effective and efficient integration of mobiles into the network of experiences that museums offer. Just launching more apps or arranging QR codes in museums will not transform the quality of visitors engagement; indeed, technology-led mobile projects without meaningful content, experience design, and marketing can turn into big failures. If users don't feel comfortable with the design nor interested in the content, the device itself will not be enough to make them want to use the app. For this reason it's essential to explore the consumer's preferences and try to understand the way they relate to technologies, in order to create something that can succeed in improving and enriching their cultural experience.

Many museums seem to be realizing this and the brand new apps that will be launched early next year aim to be consistent with museums identity and morphology and also to be extremely user-friendly. In fact they are looking to develop location-awareness technologies that can locate a visitor's position with enough accuracy to allow fresh information to appear on visitors' smart phones the moment they step in front of each artwork. Sounds like an exciting future to head in to!

**Further reading:**

[online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324577904578555852506511038.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324577904578555852506511038.html)

[www.idea.org/blog/2012/04/16/museums-still-ignoring-mobile-especially-small-museums](http://www.idea.org/blog/2012/04/16/museums-still-ignoring-mobile-especially-small-museums)

## Crowdfunding for Art

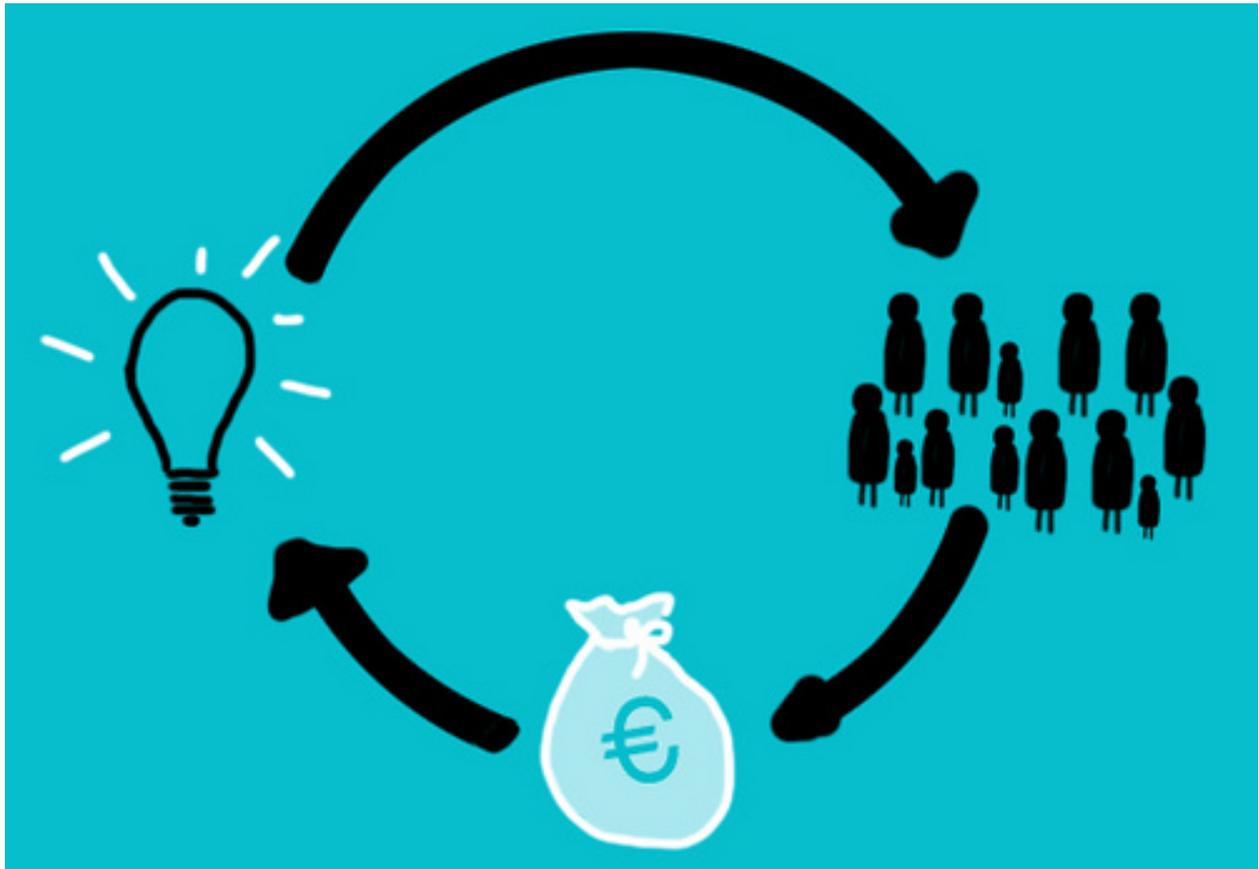


Photo by Rocío Lara via Flickr

In the last month we witnessed the exponential growth of numerous crowdfunding platforms where consumers can ask for or donate money, such as [Kickstarter](#), [Indiegogo](#), [RocketHub](#), and [RockThePost](#), only to name a few. While each site has its own unique approach, the general concept is the same for all: project creators can create a profile and use pictures and an optional introduction video which explains the project and can then add a list of rewards that the supporters receive when they invest in the idea or the project. After that, the creators have to define which goal they want to reach, in terms of money and time. Once the project is launched the countdown starts and the received money is shown on the campaigns site - so that everyone can track whether the idea is succeeding or not. In comparison to traditional investments, crowdfunding campaigns are funded by the general public. By exploiting social media, arranging email distribution lists and contacting local media, it is possible to create a successful campaign in order to involve as many donators as possible.

While crowdfunding creates a support opportunity that many smaller businesses may not have received in the traditional way, it is also a great outlet for well-known companies. Kickstarter category “[Art](#)” has over 300 active campaigns today and to manage the growing number of museums that uses the Kickstarter platform, they created a sub-category dedicated to Museums. This genre spans over several categories such as “Photography” and “Design” but it helps contributors interested in supporting the arts to find a project they like.

The projects vary from very small artistic individual activities to more important engaging projects. [The Marina Abramovic Institute raised \\$661,452 on Kickstarter](#) this past August with the support of almost 5000 contributors. Platform users can expect the

list to grow as the number of pages and subcategories expand to manage the growing number of reward-based crowdfunding campaigns. But sites like Indiegogo are competing with Kickstarter, even in the art field. In August, Inman, a popular comedian, launched the Indiegogo campaign “[Operation Let’s Build a Goddamn Tesla Museum](#)” helping a non-profit buying the land for a museum dedicated to the life and works of Nikola Tesla.



**ONE DOLLAR = ONE HUG**  
FROM MARINA ABRAMOVIC

support the **MAI** Kickstarter

Drawing: Cassandra Long

Photo by Maria Abramovic Foundation



Photo by Carlo Piana

For art lovers this competition is, of course, a positive aspect. It helps interesting art projects, in need of money, to be put into reality. But, as some cases exemplify, succeeding is not always that easy. For instance, to face its financial crisis, in early September, [New York City Opera](#) opened a Kickstarter to raise \$1 million of \$7 needed for financing its September activities. The [campaign](#) failed to receive the necessary funding and is now closing.

What we can learn from this sad story is that successful Kickstarter campaigns that receive more than \$1 million are often high-tech devices, videogames and media projects where the contributors essentially fund the production in hope for a future copy or a gadget in return. These kinds of projects are also able to reward anyone anywhere, thanks to Kickstarter’s wide geographical distribution and digital sharing. It’s hard to attract foreign donators when you’re an art organization serving only one region or one municipality.

Kickstarter really makes things easier for start-ups and dynamic project-oriented companies and it has powered up many projects that wouldn’t have existed otherwise. But for local arts institutions, with big reputation and complex financial statements, crowdfunding seems to not be a solution that can replace traditional fundraising and local philanthropy, in particular as a resource for their core-businesses.

**Further reading:**

[www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/kickstarter/30450](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/kickstarter/30450)

[www.theoatmeal.com/comics/tesla](http://www.theoatmeal.com/comics/tesla)