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**‘BRIDGING THE GAP’ IN SFMOMA’S LEARNING
LOUNGE: WHERE HIGH-TECH MEETS HIGH-
TOUCH**

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Abstract

The inauguration of the new Koret Visitor Education Center (KVEC) has changed the way we conceive of interactive technology opportunities at SFMOMA. Situated on the Museum's second floor a few steps from the galleries, this high design space acts as a sort of "red carpet lounge" where casual museum-goers can drop in to find live staff, regular video screenings, exhibition catalogs, and a full set of our interactive educational technologies programs produced to date—all in a setting as pleasing to the senses as the galleries themselves. This paper describes the opportunity KVEC presents to change the nature of the museum as an educational activity system and to reach out to visitors in new ways. It details changes that are both technology- and human resource-based: development of a new interface to eight years of interactive multimedia productions; distillation of sixty-five videos into the new Artists Working, Artists Talking program; docent tours which begin with media viewing in the KVEC Learning Lounge and then continue out the door to engage artworks in the galleries. It also describes the technological features of this state-of-the-art center: moveable walls, front- and rear-projection surfaces, and a centralized media control console. The paper reflects work in progress on a 3-year grant funded by the United States Institute for Museum and Library Services, including user-experience assessments and custom programs and interfaces for our audiences in this new location.

Keywords: visitor experience, learning environments, museum architecture, educational multimedia programs, learning styles, human-computer interface, IMLS

Learning is influenced by motivation and attitudes, by prior experience, by culture and background, and—especially in museums—by design and presentation and the physical setting. When we talk about learning, and particularly learning in museums, we are not talking about learning facts only. Learning includes facts, but also experiences and the emotions. It requires individual effort, but is also a social experience. In museums it is the social experience that frequently is best remembered.

—Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1999), p. 21

When the news came down at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that the Education Department was going to have to give up its classrooms on the Museum's ground floor to make room for an expansion of the MuseumStore, no one was happy. Yet along with this ultimatum came a promise to replace the existing facility with a better one. It was 1999, the economy was strong, and the director was full of dreams of expansion. He was confident we could build a better, larger education center in the Museum's lower level garage, which would no longer be needed.

The three-year journey from that moment to the present Koret Visitor Education Center was a long and surprising one, full of unpredictable turns. Suffice it to say that when the new facility opened in October 2002, it was not in the garage in the tail of the building but on the second floor, just around the corner from Matisse's *Femme au chapeau* and other masterworks from the Museum's permanent collection. The offices of the four departments that had formerly occupied the area had been moved out, most of them to rented quarters across the street, and the Museum had a new director. The promise made in a time of prosperity had been fulfilled in spite of an economic downturn, and one of the salient challenges now before us was to tell people just what was available to them: a new breed of facility, unprecedented in American art museums.



Fig. 1: The Learning Lounge in the Koret Visitor Education Center (partial view) Photo: Richard Barnes

The Space

The first thing that makes the new Koret Visitor Education Center (KVEC) unique is its overall design aesthetic. Designed by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects of San Francisco,

the use of materials, detailing and finishes borrows from and updates Swiss architect Mario Botta's design vocabulary for the surrounding building. The messages that this a space for adults as well as kids--contrary to normal expectations for a museum "Education Center"--are numerous and omnipresent: hardwood floors that continue from the gallery landing into the Center (not linoleum); wood ribbed ceiling detailing inspired by Botta (not ceiling tile); high design graphics against luminous entry walls by Michael Mabry (Fig. 2) with embedded LED displays



Fig. 2: Entry from Gallery landing to Koret Visitor Education Center- Photo: Richard Barnes

announcing the day's video screenings; and finally, when one arrives in the Center proper, comfortable and elegant leather furniture: couches, easy chairs, and carpeting (Fig. 1). This central space is the Learning Lounge--a drop-in space with art books, computer stations, children's activity bins, teacher resources, and museum staff--designed for Museum visitors of all ages. Enclosed on two sides by moveable glass partitions and on a third side by a vertically folding acoustical wall that disappears into the ceiling at the turn of a key, the Learning Lounge is a truly flexible multi-function space, a living room in the Museum. On touchscreen command, data projectors drop down from either side and project video or multimedia programs onto the frosted glass walls, with zoned speakers overhead supplying sound. If one chooses to raise the rear wall (or "sky-fold door") the Lounge's capacity expands from thirty to ninety-five, as it merges with the equally versatile Lecture Room behind. (There too, digital and analog projection capacities

abound, along with a live video-link to the Wattis Theater below.) On each of the seven computer stations, all of the multimedia programs produced to date by the Museum's Interactive Educational Technologies (IET) team are available via a newly created master interface. And if a surprised first-time visitor has any questions, he or she can simply ask one of two friendly resource specialists, both trained in art history, to help orient them.

All of the technology:

4 video/data projectors drawing media from the following data sources

2 rack-mounted DVD players

2 rack-mounted VHS VCRs

2 additional rack-mounted computers

plus the zoned sound and paging system

mechanized shades to divide rooms or block out daylight

Crestron modular integrated AV control system is controlled from a central touchscreen console by the staff at the KVEC front desk (Fig. 3).i



Fig. 3: Front desk control console interface: Source Selection screen for the four data projectors

Behind the Learning Lounge and Lecture Room is a large studio classroom used by children on school tours in the mornings, teenagers in the afternoons, and families on weekends. (That space is also divisible by a moveable wall.) Finally, the U-shaped corridor that surrounds all these rooms has been designed as a versatile Community Gallery, in which artworks produced in the Museum's hands-on workshops can be displayed. Figure 4 shows the whole Center in plan.

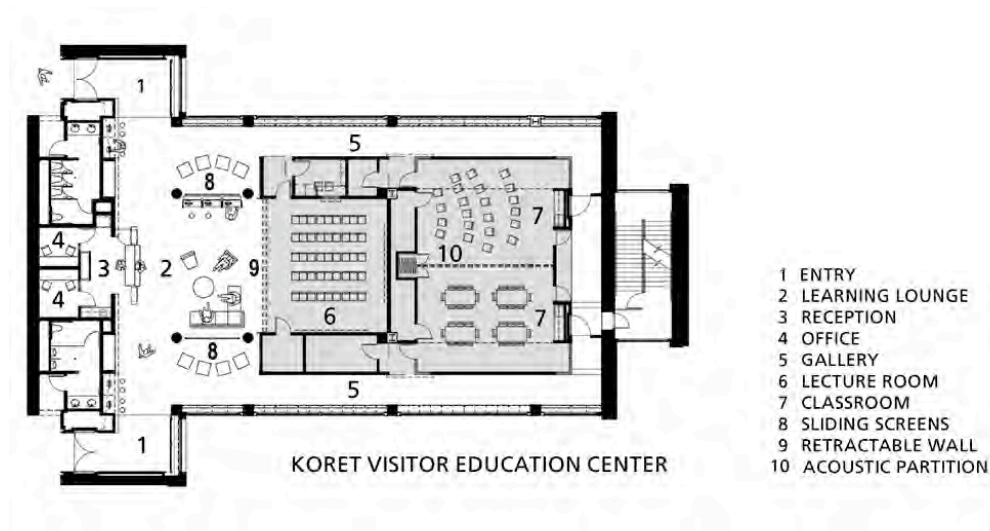


Fig. 4: Koret Visitor Education Center, plan view

Taken together, the three major educational spaces of the new Koret Center represent three learning modes:

Learning Lounge	Informal, self-activated & exploratory learning
Lecture Room	Formal learning situations, guided dialogue, listening and watching
Studios	Hands-on creation of things, ideas and experiences

New New Technology Programs

With the opening of KVEC and its informal, drop-in Learning Lounge came the question: “What is the most appropriate educational multimedia program to feature for our visitors?” Our first answer was: All of them! Over the past eight years the SFMOMA IET

Team has produced programs large and small, including:

Broadband websites or CD-ROMs

Making Sense of Modern Art

Art as Experiment, Art as Experience

Voices & Images of California Art

Large-scale monographic exhibition features

Ansel Adams

Eva Hesse

Bill Viola

Smaller exhibition features

Gerhard Richter

Philip Guston

Lindy Roy

Now, thanks to a new unified interface that leads to all these programs (as well as other online resources), the Learning Lounge functions as a multimedia library in which visitors taking a break from the galleries can pull up a chair, individually or severally, and browse through the educational content we have produced to date.

In addition, under Susie Wise's leadership the IET team produced Artists Working, Artists Talking, a compilation of sixty-five videos drawn from our existing programs, showing artists making art, discussing their work, and reflecting on the creative process.

These features include:

Robert Rauschenberg telling the story of his Erased de Kooning Drawing

Louise Bourgeois on her spider sculptures, such as Nest

Ansel Adams in the darkroom, describing his creative process, and telling the story of photographing Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico

Diego Rivera at work

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera at home together

Judy Chicago on developing a feminist artistic vocabulary

Jackson Pollock at work

Marcel Duchamp on his readymades

Louise Nevelson at work

Imogen Cunningham interviewed on 'The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson'

Richard Serra at work on, and discussing, the splashed lead sculpture he made at SFMOMA

Andy Warhol making a silkscreen painting

and many more

Past research has shown that users of our new technologies programs particularly appreciate the opportunity to hear and see artists at work or discussing their work. Nothing replaces the holistic apprehension that video affords of an individual portrayed in a revealing moment. In fact, one of the boons of working in a modern and contemporary art museum is that so many of the artists are still alive, or have been documented on film during their lifetimes. That said, when we craft multimedia programs, video is but one of the elements used to create a rich sense of context for the artworks in our collection. Typically, clips are embedded in a presentation that starts with questions our visitors ask, and also includes zooms, critical or curatorial commentary, primary source documents such as letters or manifestos, and comparison works by the same artist, his or her predecessors, peers, and aesthetic progeny. So to create this “video jukebox” anthology was to remove the Museum’s authorial voice and put the artist full-screen, front and center (Fig. 5)

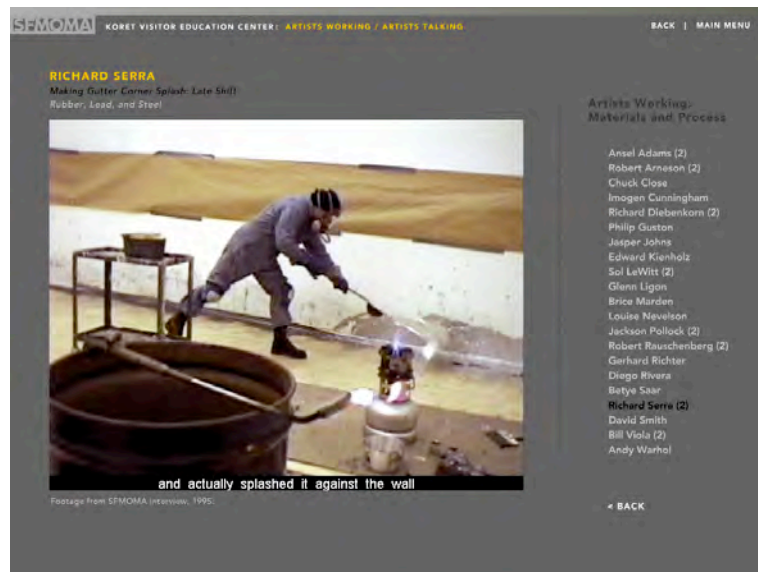


Fig. 5: Artists Working, Artists Talking: Richard Serra

Needless to say, our public loves it.

That said, we are aware that the unified interface to our programs-to-date (Fig. 6) and Artists Working, Artists Talking are only a partial answer to meeting our audiences’ needs. There is still no way for visitors to know where they will find information about the many other artists and movements not treated in a monographic exhibition feature. Furthermore, most of these programs have been created in Flash using our publishing tool

Pachyderm, without the metadata that would facilitate searching, either on the Web or in KVEC's standalone kiosks. The work that lies before us is to evaluate the present KVEC kiosk interface and augment it with a detailed Content Index by artist and theme, capable of linking directly to specific screens in all our legacy programs, regardless of their original authoring platform.

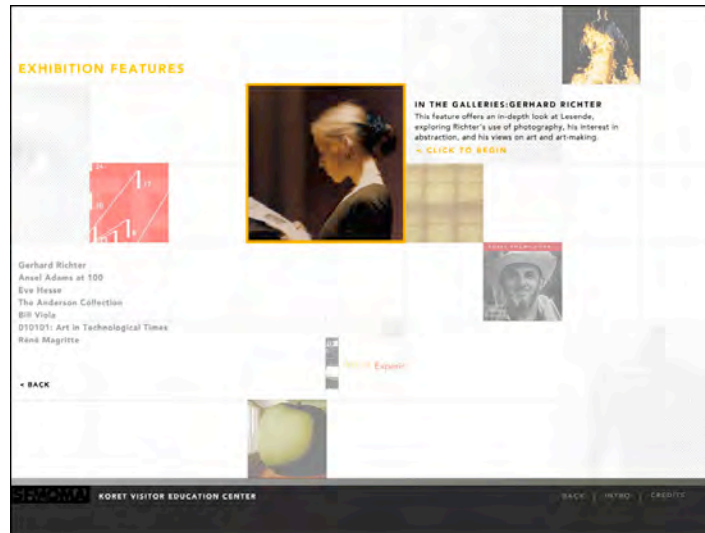


Fig. 6: 'Exhibition Features' layer of the present KVEC kiosk interface

'Bridging the Gap' between KVEC and the Galleries, between traditional and multimedia educational models

Perhaps more than anything, we look forward to having an education center located only a few steps from the permanent collection galleries on the second floor. I believe it will change the way people feel about SFMOMA, providing a friendly, informative, comfortable complement to the direct experience of viewing art in the galleries.

—John Weber (2002)

If KVEC's design and technological features are impressive, perhaps the most innovative aspect of the Center is its proximity to the Museum's prime permanent collection showcase, the second floor galleries. We cannot overestimate the importance of the fact that this facility is not in the basement or some other equally remote location—the places where education programs are typically consigned. (In fact, it was at a design workshop

with representatives from other prominent museums that had recently built “state-of-the-art” education centers at a distance from their galleries that we were advised not to expect any traffic beyond those visitors arriving for publicly advertised, previously scheduled programs.)

As it turns out, one in five visitors to the Museum drops by KVEC on days when it is open. They might not know what to do with the space yet, but they are at least peeking their heads in, or coming in and walking around. Regularly scheduled screenings of films or videos related to popular current exhibitions consistently attract a crowd, and the Center is often comfortably full of people consulting our multimedia programs, reading exhibition catalogs, or just resting their legs and talking, perhaps while their kids try out one of our “box studios.”

So now that we have this space, the next frontier is to develop a set of hybrid programs that meld the Museum’s array of new media resources with the more traditional menu of personally delivered education programs. The first such synthesis is the “Spotlight Tour,” currently being prototyped by the Museum docents. These tours start in KVEC, where the visitors are introduced to an artist through a video projected on one of the walls of the Learning Lounge. A brief discussion follows, framing salient points about the artist’s process or approach, and preparing the group for its visit to the galleries. Discussion continues in the galleries, where impressions from the video enrich the encounter with the artwork.

Education department staff is working collaboratively to test this tour model and develop other collaborations in which museum representatives avail themselves of new media resources in public presentations using the new KVEC space.

‘The Articulate Museum’

Two years ago, we presented at this conference about our successful integration of new technology prototypes in the galleries during the exhibition *Points of Departure: Connecting with Contemporary Art* (Samis 2001). The question might now be asked: Having shown how effective devices like handhelds and smart tables can be in providing

visitors with just-in-time information while they are standing in front of an artwork, is the Museum now regressing by developing a high-tech media ghetto at a remove from the galleries?

I hope that it is apparent by now that this is the furthest thing from our intention. In fact, personalization is the rule of the day when it comes to KVEC. The Center is designed to provide a comfortable and stimulating complement to the gallery experience, and the presence of professional museum staff and volunteers to engage visitors, answer questions, and guide them to appropriate resources is an essential part of the equation. The warmth of intelligent human contact is key to helping people feel at ease in this beautiful space, be they teachers wishing to consult our Teacher Resource Center or casual visitors with a question about minimal art. In fact, through their sensitivity, observations, and participation, the KVEC Educational Resource Specialists actively help the Museum and its visitors define what the KVEC experience can be.

As we open the Koret Visitor Education Center, I'm driven by the notion that what we are trying to create is something we might call an "articulate museum." Rather than displaying art and leaving visitors on their own to interpret it, an articulate museum chooses to speak to its patrons, and in languages that make sense. Like a thoughtful friend, an articulate museum says neither too much nor too little, and takes care to speak in tones that are clearly audible but not overloud. It knows when to stay silent and leave visitors to their own contemplation, and, like a skilled conversationalist, it solicits visitors' thoughts, listens to them, and responds.

-John Weber (2002)

Thanks to a leadership grant from the federal Institute for Museum and Library Services, SFMOMA is now in a position to actively engage this dialogue on multiple fronts in a variety of ways. We have not abandoned our explorations of gallery-based educational media, nor our outreach to schools and other audiences via the Web. But we are aware that as the amount of digital information that museums publish for their visitors increases, we need to find sites of user experience better suited to in-depth consultation. Handhelds in the gallery are designed for maximal impact in a short timeframe; there is a window of 1-3 minutes that the average visitor can be expected to stand in front of a work of art. But

that same visitor might spend 10 minutes or more exploring the different dimensions of that same artwork, given the chance to sit down with stimulating content in the Learning Lounge after their gallery visit. What's more, after a break like that, they might feel invigorated and curious enough to return to the galleries and find themselves enjoying the very artworks they had found most problematic before.

Early research indicates that visitors who have spent time in KVEC feel the Museum is personally addressing their needs, both emotional and intellectual. When asked if using the computers in the Learning Lounge affected their comfort level with the art, one visitor replied:

“I felt good about myself... like you are interacting with me and talking about our experiences... I had questions in my mind and they were answered, and that [leads to] more questions and more curiosity.”

Another visitor specified that she had consulted the Making Sense of Modern Art features about Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing and Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, two iconic works of modernism that consistently pull our visitors up short.

“It made me want to look and think about what I read, like the Fountain. It's great, I really enjoyed learning and putting a story behind the art.”

Interestingly enough, that visitor said she “liked the video, but got more out of the reading.” If others respond like this, it would tend to indicate that for all the gratification and sense of personal connection to the artists that our video clips offer, they still benefit from being contextualized in a pedagogically crafted framework that takes visitors questions seriously and addresses them in a direct and engaging way.

In the final analysis, through our drop-in visitor education center, our interactives, and our personalized approach to programming, we are aiming to change the very nature of the Museum. As one visitor told us:

“I love the idea of this Learning Center because five years ago you were stuck following a pamphlet or using an audio guide, and now it is more tactile, comfortable, and inviting.”

We have only begun to develop the Museum of the future, and places like the SFMOMA Learning Lounge will play a vital part. Stay tuned.

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