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Do not touch: An investigation in new and existing methods for managing physical interactions with artworks on display

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ABSTRACT

The Museum of Contemporary Art is an independent organisation with over a million visitors annually. One of the key challenges with our visitation is the audience attracted to the MCA are often overly interactive with the artworks on display. In April alone, front of house reported 649 individual incidents of touches to the artworks, ranging from minor incidents of pointing on the glazing of framed works, to walking on artworks and picking up sculptures and repositioning them.

To track and monitor these incidents Conservation relies heavily the diligence of the front of house staff both reporting and discouraging these interactions. The data from this reporting is logged so trends can be determined and particularly vulnerable artworks can have additional protective measures installed, such as bollards, or do not touch signs. Despite these risk controls, the incidents of touching continue.

In an effort to better inform protective measures available, this research will investigate methods of audience control, looking at the data emerging from cultural institutions, and also, information from outside the field. Studies in behavioural psychology will be analysed, in particular, those in marketing and retail. Marketing possesses a wide reach and extensive resources, with large corporations funding research to learn how to encourage customers to circulate around a space and engage with products. Supermarkets are an excellent example of behavioural psychology at work, with people moving as directed within the space, without realising there's been an element of passive control in their choice of pathway (Higuchi & Ohta 2013). This research will investigate if the psychology of marketing can be applied in a museum context to encourage visitors to remain a safe distance from artworks. It will look at how people engage with products physically (i.e. pick them up) to establish any similarities in museum displays that could be avoided, or if these methods can be reverse engineered to discourage touching of artworks. Employing behavioural psychology may provide subtler, and less visually distracting techniques of protecting artworks than the physical barriers often used.

References:

Higuchi, Y. & Ohta, M. 2013, 'Study on the Design of Supermarket Store Layouts: The Principle of "Sales Magnet"', *International Journal of Social, Behavioural, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*, Vol 7, No. 1, p209.

BIOGRAPHY

Lucy Willet is the Conservator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Previously, she was employed at Museum Victoria in a number of roles, including Collection Relocation Manager where she contributed to the second large collection move in the Museums history.