

Through their interventions, [students] sought to open a dialogue about how visitors access works of art and to consider the multiple entry points into experiencing art in exhibitions.

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Disrupting Art Museum Experiences: Interventions in a University Art Museum

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Abstract: This article focuses on interventions created by graduate students in response to the University of Arizona Museum of Art's exhibition *The Art of Food: From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation*. Students in an art and visual culture education course designed and implemented three interventions focused on food justice, class, and economics that attended to unexplored themes in the exhibition. Focusing on materials as ingredients, soundscapes, and interrogating food culture, students developed alternate ways for visitors to interact with works of art that went beyond building on interpretations constructed by the curator. In doing so, they employed the concept of the ignorant museum in their design and implementation (Jung, 2010; Sitzia, 2018), based on theories presented in Jacques Rancière's *The ignorant schoolmaster* (1991) that promote intellectual freedom through equality. Students also utilized their university art museum as a site to explore visual culture, interrogate institutional systems, and experiment through collaboration.

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In Fall 2021, eight graduate students in an art and visual culture education course engaged with the University of Arizona Museum of Art's (UAMA) exhibition, *The Art of Food: From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation* focused on visual art related to themes of food. Students worked in groups to design interventions that would create sensory avenues to experience this exhibition, as opposed to more traditional museum visitor experiences. They sought to disrupt museum visits centered on the perspective of the curator by including more ways for visitors to engage with the exhibition through reflection, dialogue, and embodied response. Specifically, student interventions created participatory projects through soundscapes, an interactive online guide examining untraditional materials as "ingredients," and a printed zine. An intervention "signifies the act of interceding to create change," and in museums, it is "an artistic strategy that encourages self-reflective museum practice" (Marstine, 2017, p. 4). Interventions can signify art outside of the traditional spaces of galleries and museums and in the community as a "social collaborative event" that allows for both reflection and participation (Richardson, 2010, p. 19). Although, for this project, students worked directly with the university art museum, they were interested in how communities access works of art in museum exhibitions inside and outside of the walls of the institutions. Through their interventions, they sought to open a dialogue about how visitors interact with works of art and to consider the multiple entry points into experiencing art in exhibitions beyond traditional docent-led tours and viewing art and reading wall text for information. The class also focused on how communities could be a part of a dialogue with the museum about food and their experiences and histories with food. This interest beyond the museum setting may have been due partially to the fact that UAMA had not yet reopened after closing for COVID-19, and all the preparations were taking place outside of the museum itself. However, students also considered the role of the university art museum as a part of campus and the city of Tucson, and its relationship to

communities in and outside the University of Arizona.

UAMA often approaches its programming with a socially engaged lens, and this exhibition included subthemes of community, dissociation, and control (Miller, 2021). However, students found areas of the exhibition that were unexplored and included unattended openings for visitor experiences. Students activated the galleries through their interventions by addressing these gaps and expanding on relevant themes in the exhibition. In doing so, they incorporated an understanding of visual culture as "a social theory of visibility" that focuses on "questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing, and power are all interrelated" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 14). They did this by bringing new facets of the works to light and asking visitors to consider how these objects relate to discussions of inequities, social classes, and cultures.

Creating Interventions

UAMA collaborated with students to incorporate their perspectives into the programming for the exhibition through these interventions. The staff was willing to work with students, respond to ideas, and share space, time, and resources for this project. Willa Ahlschwede, Assistant Curator, Education and Public Programs, met with students to talk about the upcoming exhibition, including themes, specific works of art, programming, and exhibition design plans. One of the components of the exhibition was to include engagement through technology for people wanting to engage with the exhibition offsite through online resources. Students shared initial thoughts on this project with the class and began to work together in groups to continue brainstorming. They naturally divided themselves into groups based on similar themes and interests (Figure 1). Devan described the process of their group,

At the beginning of this intervention project, we all had seemingly different interests. I was considering ways for visitors to represent their own stories in the exhibition, Johnathan wanted to question the overuse of

certain artists in museums, and Rachel was interested in community participation and fostering symbiotic relationships. However, the more that we talked as a class, the more we realized our ideas were not that dissimilar at all. They all revolved around aspects of community engagement. We wanted to provide an outlet for visitors' voices to be heard. We decided to partner up and start brainstorming ways to combine all our objectives into a single intervention. We concluded that a zine would be the easiest and most immersive way to do so. Zines are self-published and small-circulating booklets that generally contain original media by one or more individuals. They are often used as a means of artistic collaboration and expression. This then makes them the perfect choice for such a diverse set of specific goals under the larger umbrella of community engagement.

Each group eventually came up with a proposal that was shared with Willa, who shared the proposals with other staff members in the museum. This dialogue was an important part of the process as students wanted the projects to complement existing plans at UAMA, and the museum staff's feedback helped them to shape how their interventions would work on a practical level.

The interventions this class created are described by the students below and were built from experimentation, sensory experiences, participatory practices, and humor. They will be implemented as part of UAMA's Community Day and throughout the run of the exhibition.



Figure 1. Students designing the zine for their intervention.

Materials as Ingredients

The "Shopping for Art" intervention focuses on a print series by Ed Ruscha (b.1937) called *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, and Dues* (Figure 2). In this art museum intervention taken in the form of a digital interpretive guide, we chose to demystify or break down the components of the print series into more understandable means. By using an everyday, ephemeral item—a grocery ad—as a tool for delivery, barriers are broken between these "highbrow" museum art objects and a common, mass-produced newspaper print. Some art forms, which often include paintings, sculpture, and in many cases, high quality prints, are considered inaccessible to some audiences. The intention of this intervention is to equalize both forms as well as present additional information and imagery about the works of art. Shifts from fine art to more inclusive visual culture engagements are more common in art education classrooms. Art museums still struggle with incorporating visual culture into conversations about art, even though, as Vallance (2008) suggests, visual culture helps us to understand the context of museum objects beyond the walls of the museum gallery.

In this series, Ed Ruscha's inks were created out of food and everyday items that celebrate various parts of "Englishness." Each component symbolizes an aspect of English culture, including the words on the prints themselves. By looking at their previous

forms, there is deeper insight into the original foodstuffs and how they are normally used. Yet, many of these items are not widely available or affordable to all—a Branston pickle, red salmon roe, and caviar—the third item being lavish fare costing \$50 to \$75 per ounce.

Further, food is a temporary, tangible object meant to be consumed, and the longevity and care in maintaining the prints appear contradictory to this intent. In this sense, it has a renewed or extended “shelf life.” This brings to mind the shelves of a grocery store with its canned goods and boxed and bagged items as a place for mass consumption. As a general concept, a grocery store is a place for everyone who can purchase items, regardless of background, because food serves as a great equalizer: it is necessary for the daily needs of all human beings. Contrasting ideas of accessibility and mass consumption with items that are unaffordable pushes us to consider how we think of food and our relationships to food. It makes us question which food is for whom. It also mirrors issues in museums related to who can access these institutions and who feels welcome in these spaces that may be perceived as highbrow. By bringing in these conversations, we can see the impact of disruptive museum education practices that move beyond guided interpretation with the works of art.

Through the creation of a fictional tongue-in-cheek grocery store, *Ruscha’s*, we re-envision the works of art through their materials as if for sale, featuring representative images for each print ink ingredient (Figure 3). This grocery store can be accessed through a QR code. When participants select on one of the grocery groupings on the homepage, they are directed to an image of Ruscha’s print to find more information about these ingredients. Per each type of “ink” there are jars, cans, and appetizing displays of the items in their common forms. While not all foods are typically known to appetites in the United States, the presentation of these foods and everyday items in a grocery advertisement also creates relatability, materiality, and may inspire some to try them. It is through this knowing, remembering, or being engaged in the pursuit of understanding of a certain

look, taste, or feel of an object that there is potential for more meaning or impact. By using an individual’s sense of familiarity or acquaintance, the meanings behind works of art can be revealed.

Yet, it is important to recall the physical setting of the prints on display. When considering axle grease, pie fillings, or crushed flowers, these unorthodox materials could be dirty or exert smells, which seems unwelcome in a museum environment conscious of contents that may decompose or attract insects. Although museums display objects about class and economics, bringing in materials that intervene in the physical environment of the museum is a step that many traditional institutions are not willing to take. Acting as interventional tools themselves, by inserting these works into an art museum environment, they instantly break from norms and expectations of what is considered fine art and assumptions about what is considered “museum quality.”

The grocery advertisement format further asserts the peculiarity of these items in this space, offering pause for thought about their make-up and purpose. This accomplishes what Richardson (2010), claims is the purpose of an intervention, that it “can potentially throw a public site into confusion, the resolution of which requires an implicit renegotiation among those who share the space. Within this exchange resides the potential for new social formulations and new thoughts previously by social, discursive, or physical restrictions” (Richardson, p. 21).

Art is frequently relegated to being created out of typical mediums that are seen as the norm; Ruscha takes this to the next level by not only making a commentary on the medium but of the foods and objects that are seen as just that—what they are, versus what else they could be. By taking the concept of an art installation and transforming it into a grocery ad, we too are making a commentary on what something is, versus what else it can be by pushing what is deemed acceptable in a museum setting.



Figure 2. Willa Ahlschwede, Assistant Curator, Education and Public Programs, sharing Ruscha's series in the exhibition.



Figure 4. Students sharing their soundscapes.

Inserting Sound

For the interventions we created, we focused on the idea that the awareness of sound is especially apparent amid silence. In this case, we thought specifically of the silence of museums and how we could activate these quiet spaces through soundscapes (Figure 4). A soundscape is the human perception of a specific acoustic environment. Community events, celebrations, and specific occasions all have their own unique sounds. In this intervention, we provide an acoustically immersive environment designed to engage senses and enhance the viewer's experience. Sounds were collected and recorded then combined to create a rich, layered "soundscape" specific to individual works of art in the exhibition.

We were inspired by the scientific phenomenon of synesthesia, meaning "joined sensation," in which a person experiences something usually perceived via one bodily sense in connection with a feeling from another, including literally seeing sound (Cytowic, 1989). While we cannot replicate such an experience, we created an intervention that emphasizes the strong connections between our senses. As Kai-Kee, Latina, and Sadoyan (2020) write, "all the senses provide portals to engagement with art" (p. 100). These soundscapes activate the senses, inspire memories, and elevate a sense of time and place in the works of art. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes, our senses are not separate, but work together as we encounter them. In other



Figure 3. Home page of online grocery store.

words, something can be a visual and auditory experience at the same time without distinguishing between the two individual senses (Kai-Kee, Latina, & Sadoyan, 2020). When creating these soundscapes, we sourced material online and in the [city] community. We approached these works individually, creating literal versions of some scenes and more lyrical interpretations of others. Most art museums focus almost exclusively on seeing, but what happens when other sensory experiences are added?

Hubard (2007) describes how museum activities focused on embodied response, including through sound, “help visitors engage their bodies and emotions in response to an object” and “grant viewers access to those aspects of a work that may elude discourse” (p. 48). This exhibition reminds us of the unique ways food plays into not only art, but life and culture as well. We hope that our intervention amplifies these cultural expressions. We took to heart the idea that “poets help us discover within ourselves such joy in [perceiving] that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space.” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 199) The familiarity of certain foods and food settings can become so commonplace or routine that we no longer approach them with a sense of wonder or excitement. We want to reawaken those feelings and emphasize the tone of these works.



Figure 5. Draft of zine for the intervention.

Interrogating Food Culture

As we flipped through the slide deck of images depicting art included in the upcoming exhibition, we were struck by the high number of works by big-name artists who rose to prominence in the late twentieth century: Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Damien Hirst, Ed Ruscha, and more. We wondered, what would this exhibition of food-themed art look like without the superabundant perspectives of Warhol and his cohort? How would other artists represent and interrogate contemporary food culture? Simultaneously, we wryly noted the foods characterized in these artworks hardly reflected the rich multicultural food heritage and unique food history of the Tucson area, or of any food traditions important to us; rather, we felt they reflected depersonalized consumption of food products. As we discussed our own relationships to food and food cultures, we also considered the disparity between foodie culture and food insecurity within a city recently designated as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. We were curious how museum visitors’ own experiences might add to this conversation around food culture and value. We wondered, what foods are important to them? How could their lives and voices be included here?

To intervene in this exhibition, we wanted to acknowledge “the visitor’s intelligence” (Sitzia, 2018, p. 80) and create an opportunity to communicate their knowledge and experience. We agreed on the format of a participatory zine—pocket-sized, hand-folded booklets filled with

open-ended prompts for writing and drawing to accompany the visitor’s museum visit. Zines, as the chosen medium of counter-consumerism and ephemeral underground publication (Piepmeier, 2008), are an ideal vehicle for slipping between the institutionally produced art exhibition and the visitor experience. For design inspiration, we riffed on the Pop artists’ graphic aesthetic and Analía Saban’s relief print series of generic, disposable plastic bags, included in the exhibition (Figure 6).

Led by a simple question: *What’s on your plate?*, we ask what foods are personally valued by museum

attendees, and how they connect to other important social relationships and nurture a sense of belonging (Figure 7). In our own initial encounters with the exhibition, we noted a disconnect between the foods of our own lives and the foods being presented as art. We used these thoughts as motivation for developing questions for our zine.

In addition to asking *What's on your plate?*, we ask museum attendees *What is missing? Do you see foods from your life in the exhibition?* We hoped visitors will be compelled to explore their own relationships to art and food culture and share their stories in pictures and words. Though our own questions regarding artistic and cultural representation remain at the heart of our intervention project, our goal is not to transmit facts or criticism but to open a two-way conduit for knowledge. We offer our knowledge as arts education graduate students through playful prompts and questions, and we hope visitors reciprocate with their own thoughts and experiences.



Figure 6. Willa Ahlschwede, Assistant Curator, Education and Public Programs engaging with Saban's prints in the exhibition.

University Art Museums as Sites for Experimentation

Through experimentation and collaboration with each other and the museum, students found new pathways to experience works of art in their university art museum. University art museums can serve as ideal settings for this type of project because students can participate in real-life museum activities and think critically about these practices (King & Marstine, 2006). Corwin discussed the concept of university art museums and galleries as laboratories as a site for experimentation and risk-taking (in Hammond et al., 2006). Focusing on exhibitions by undergraduate students that push traditional narratives of museums, Marstine (2007) writes of the third space of university museums that allows for visitors to engage with multiple perspectives and the messiness that comes with students' work, not through uneven processes or results, but in actively creating new space through experimentation, questioning, and "the power to mix things up" (p. 305). DiCindio (2020) discusses university art museum galleries as in-between spaces that allow for new possibilities to emerge through student-led engagement with works of art.

Museum educators regularly create activities and programming that ask visitors to engage with art from new and different perspectives. However, in this project, students intervened from outside of the museum, rather than acting as educators creating programming as insiders, and designing their interventions as bridges between the institution and the community. UAMA has a history of giving students space to add alternative ways to engage with art through course collaborations, interdisciplinary projects, and student interventions. [Citation withheld] (2016) describes the collaborative, non-hierarchical nature of university art museums as sites for interdisciplinary connections and active learning. Writing about university students' interventions, Reid (2016) argues that university art museums are ideal settings for students "to experiment with institutional critique focused on inclusive practices" (p. 13). This project,

created in the same university art museum, continues this work through engagement with new exhibitions.

These interventions used the lens of the ignorant museum in their design and implementation (Jung, 2010; Sitzia, 2018). The ignorant museum is based on theories presented in Jacques Rancière's *The ignorant schoolmaster* (1991) that promotes intellectual freedom through equality as opposed to "intellectual hierarchy" (Jung, 2010, p. 149). Sitzia (2018) connects these practices to the constructivist paradigm in museum education (Hein, 1998) as museums shift from the transmission of expert knowledge to a public forum built on "a trust in the public and a loss of control by the institution over what knowledge is created and what results can be expected" (p. 80). The visitor-centered, and often visitor-produced, programming that many art museums now employ "offer agency to the visitors in terms of what and how they learn, shifting the balance of power from the institution to the individual learner and to some measure introducing critical pedagogical practices in the museum" (p. 77). In these interventions, the students embraced alternative forms of engagement with works of art. Rather than reinforce the curator's perspective in the exhibition through interpretations of the works, students found issues in the exhibition that had not been addressed. They extended the experience of the visitor by disrupting the curatorial voice and attending to these gaps. Through their questions and strategies, they raised localized questions about cultural class, economics, and food justice. They invited visitors to participate in meaning making and experiences with the works of art by considering the role of food and access to food in their lives, cultures, and communities. Through their interventions, students added openings for participation and for visitors to include their own voices in the experience of the exhibitions.

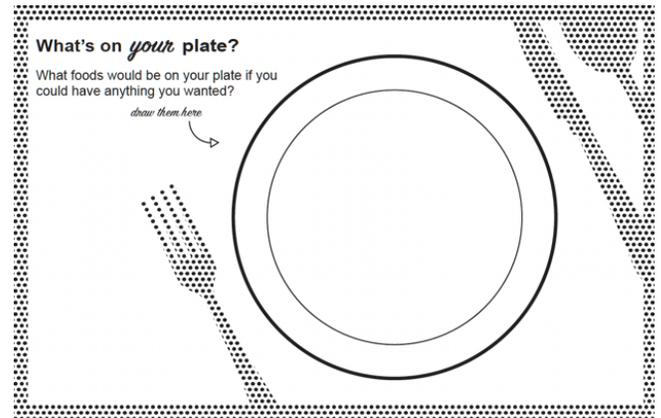


Figure 7. *What's on your plate?* zine activity.

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