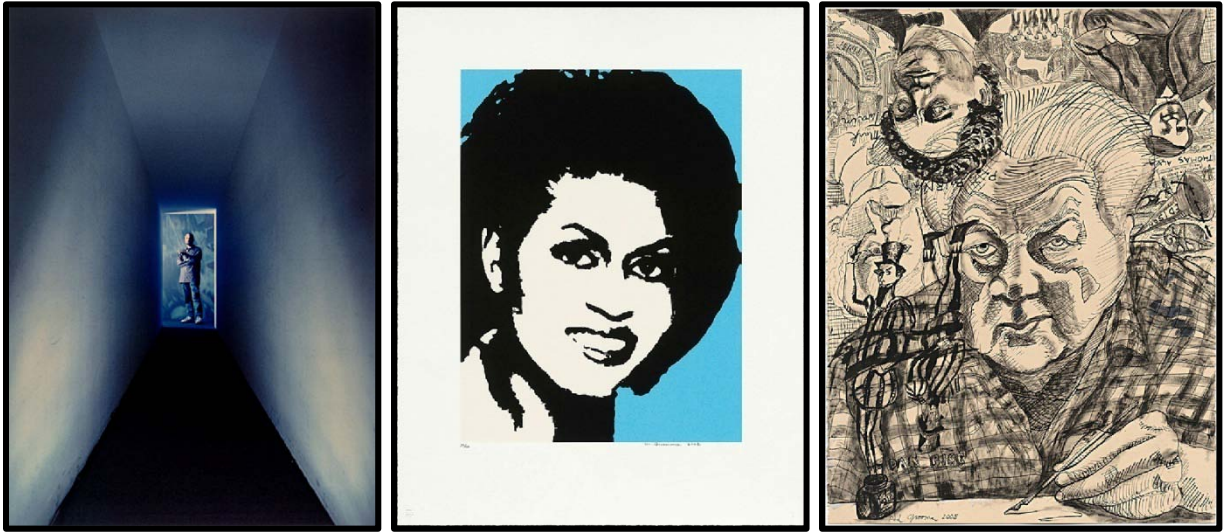



NOT JUST PASSING THROUGH



A STUDY OF VISITORS TO *AMERICANS NOW* AT THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

September 2011

 Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
Washington, DC 20013

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Foreword

The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) has asked the Institution's Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct several visitor studies of the Gallery's diverse exhibitions. As the number of these studies increases, OP&A and NPG staff hope to arrive at a deeper understanding of how visitors observe, interpret, and respond to individual portraits and to exhibitions of portraiture.

The results of this study suggest that NPG exhibitions such as *Americans Now* play an important role in helping visitors to understand the cultural diversity of our nation. They underscore the old idea of America as a complex melting pot consisting of many individual entities that add their own distinctive flavors.

In addition, personal and emotional responses to the art and to the people it represented were common. Although the images on display in *Americans Now* celebrated accomplished Americans, many visitors identified not only with the public achievements of the subjects, but also with their personal struggles, gains and losses, strengths and weaknesses, and pleasures and pains. In many cases, visitors saw experiences familiar to themselves reflected in the Americans portrayed in this exhibition. Other visitors commented on the character traits powerfully captured in the faces they encountered, such as inquisitiveness, creativity, and the ability to push oneself to the limit. Several talked about how the labels clarified both the historical significance of the sitters and the artistic treatments they received at the hands of the portraitists whose work was represented. In one case, visitors also commented on the potential significance of information omitted from labels.

In addition to providing practical feedback that NPG curators, educators, designers, and others may wish to consider when creating future exhibitions and program, studies such as this provide a more general opportunity to learn about how visitors respond to NPG's depictions of Americans and their cultural environment. The project was led by OP&A staff members James Smith and Lance Costello, and assisted by intern Andrew Goodhouse. Lance was primarily responsible for survey administration, with data collection also conducted by Andrew, OP&A research scholar Ikuko Uetani, researcher Sarah Block, and interns So Mi Park, So Hyun Park, and Jeong-A Noh. Andrew analyzed the survey data. Interviews were conducted by James and Andrew, intern Jane Cavalier, OP&A researcher Claire Eckert, and staff members Jarrod Green and Andrew Pekarik. James analyzed the interviews and wrote the final report. I thank all of these personnel for their sharp eyes and competencies.

I also wish to thank the NPG staff who were responsible for this exhibition, and who took time from their busy schedules to meet with the OP&A study team and provide guidance on research questions: Brandon Fortune, Curator of Painting and Sculpture; Anne Goodyear,

Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings; Frank Goodyear, Associate Curator of Photographs; Rebecca Kasemeyer, Director of Education; Wendy Wick Reaves, Curator of Prints and Drawings; Ann Shumard, Curator of Photographs; and David C. Ward, Historian.

Finally, I am grateful to NPG's associate director, Nik Apostolides, and director, Martin Sullivan, for their recognition of the importance of understanding visitors through studies like this one. They realize that not only is this the right thing to do for its own sake, but also that such studies can result in many constructive organizational and individuals benefits.

Carole M. P. Neves

Director, Smithsonian Office of
Policy and Analysis

Introduction

In early 2011, leaders of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to undertake a series of visitor studies of present and upcoming exhibitions. The first of these, *Americans Now*, was on display on the first floor of NPG from July 20, 2010 through July 10, 2011.

The works in *Americans Now*, drawn from the Portrait Gallery's permanent collection, featured living individuals prominent in a wide range of endeavors including sports, entertainment, the arts, science, medicine, and other fields. While all of the subjects were individuals of great accomplishment in their spheres of activity, not all were famous in the conventional sense. They ranged from celebrities such as Michael Jordan, Willie Nelson, Conan O'Brien, Barack and Michelle Obama, Martha Stewart, and George Clooney to talented but lesser-known individuals whose faces would not be immediately recognizable to the average visitor.

The works on display in *Americans Now* also reflected the wide variety of artists and media collected by NPG. They included paintings, drawings, black-and-white and color photographs, and time-based media works by artists including Chuck Close, Lincoln Schatz, Jason Salavon, Kehinde Wiley, Shepard Fairey, Red Grooms, Elizabeth Peyton, Martin Schoeller, and Mickalene Thomas.

The exhibition occupied the space normally filled by NPG's rotating displays of contemporary works, *Portraiture Now*, an exhibition from which *Americans Now* differed in the latter's exclusive focus on public figures of potential historical interest. *Americans Now* was put together by a team of curators from NPG who, in the introductory text, challenged visitors to consider with them the question of "which subjects presented here will still be well known one hundred years from now, ... and which subjects might only become footnotes to history."

Methodology

Quantitative Survey

For the quantitative portion of the study, every visitor¹ exiting the exhibition during seven survey administration sessions² conducted on June 18, 21, 22, and 23, 2011 was intercepted and asked to complete a survey. A total of 373 visitors completed self-administered questionnaires, with a response rate of 81%. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A, and frequencies of responses are given in Appendix B.

Survey respondents constituted a census of visitors present in the exhibition at the times it was administered. With some caveats, they may be treated as a representative sample of the larger population of exhibition visitors.³ Thus, the findings of the survey can, subject to the limits of statistical inference imposed by the sample size, be generalized to the overall population of exhibition visitors.⁴

Because the study team was interested in the percentage of visitors using the *Americans Now* exhibition space solely as a corridor through-space, survey administrators kept a count of visitors exiting the exhibition space who did not stop to observe works within it. All visitors who refused to take the survey were asked if they had observed any works in the exhibition;⁵ those who indicated they had not were counted as pass-through visitors. In some cases at less-busy times, survey administrators were able to identify pass-through visitors by observation, without inviting them to take the survey.

Qualitative Interviews

For the qualitative part of the study, OP&A staff conducted a total of 31 semi-structured interviews with visitors within and exiting *Americans Now* on various dates between May 11 and July 5, 2011. Interviews were conducted with a total of nearly 50 people, ranging in age from a seven-year-old boy (interviewed with his mother) to older visitors who appeared to be in their 70s or 80s. Interviewees included both residents of the

¹ Excluding visitors under 12 and organized groups. At busy moments, some exiting visitors were missed. Missed visitors were counted and weighted in the data analysis.

² Each session lasted one-and-a-half hours, and was comprised of three 30-minute segments.

³ The chief caveat is the assumption that the visitor population at the times of the survey's administration did not systematically differ from the visitor population over the course of the exhibition's run.

⁴ For the sample size of 373, the 95 percent confidence interval for survey figures is $\pm 5.1\%$ or less, depending on the survey response figure at issue. (The $\pm 5.1\%$ applies to a response figure of 50%; the confidence interval grows smaller as the figure in question approaches 0% or 100%.)

⁵ In some cases, visitors volunteered this information unprompted.

Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and visitors to the region from around the country and the world, including two exchange students from China and visitors from Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, and Scotland. Interviews lasted from a few minutes to over half an hour.

In conducting the interviews, staff used an interview guide developed in consultation with NPG curatorial and education staff, reproduced in Appendix C. While this guide served as an initial basis for interview questions, visitors were encouraged to talk freely about any topic relevant to the exhibition.

The qualitative interviewees do not in any sense constitute a representative sample from which quantitative inferences about the overall visitor population can be drawn. Thus, no mention is made of percentage figures when reporting the interview findings.

Quantitative Findings

Use and Perception of Exhibition Space

Initially, the study team considered the exhibition layout to be a central research interest. The concern was that visitors might not recognize that the *Americans Now* corridor area and the rooms off it comprised a single exhibition space, and would treat it as a through-space. To this end, survey administrators kept a count of the percentage of visitors using the *Americans Now* space only as a corridor through-space, without stopping to inspect any of the works on display. The survey also asked visitors how much of the exhibition they saw and when they became aware that the *Americans Now* space comprised an exhibition of contemporary portraiture.

Pass-through Space

Over the course of the survey administration, about 18% of individuals exiting the *Americans Now* exhibition used that space solely as a corridor through-space from one point to another, without stopping to observe works in it. However, the percentage of such “pass-through” visitors registered in a given half-hour survey segment varied considerably, from 0% to 25%, depending on the time of day and at which end of the exhibition corridor the survey was administered.

In general, far more visitors exiting the exhibition area toward the information desk (22%) were using the corridor as a pass-through space; visitors exiting at the other end of the corridor were much less likely to have passed through without observing works in the exhibition (9%). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the explanation for this is that visitors were more likely to have reasons to hurry toward the building exit or Kogod Courtyard—for example, to feed a parking meeting or meet a tour group—than to hurry toward the far wing of the Reynolds Center. The minutes immediately before tour groups were meeting at the information desk or in the Courtyard were particularly likely to be associated with relatively high percentages of pass-through visitors in the *Americans Now* space.

Study team members also noticed anecdotally that visitors who initially used the *Americans Now* space solely as a corridor through-space would sometimes later return to look at the works in it, and vice-versa. This study was not designed to quantify this phenomenon.

Individuals who passed through the space without interacting with the exhibition were not surveyed, and are not included in the statistics through the remainder of the quantitative findings.

Use

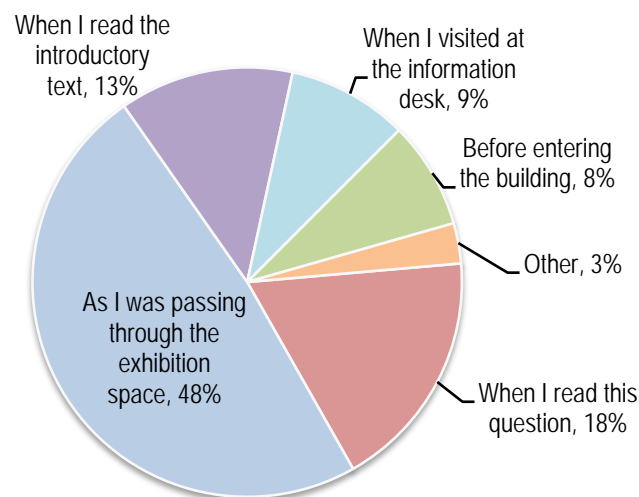
Seven in ten visitors to *Americans Now* entered the exhibition rooms on both sides of the corridor (69%); two in ten entered rooms on one side of the corridor (22%); and one in ten came straight through the corridor without entering any side rooms (9%).⁶ As discussed below, visiting rooms off the main corridor tended to be correlated with higher overall satisfaction with the exhibition.

Perception

About half of the visitors leaving the exhibition space said that they came to realize that this space contained an exhibition of contemporary portraiture when they were actually passing through it (48%). One in three indicated that they knew the space contained an exhibition before entering it, having learned this from the introductory text (13%), the information desk (9%), or before even arriving at the building (8%). One in five visitors reported passing through the *Americans Now* space without recognizing that they were in an exhibition, and realizing this only upon taking the survey (18%).⁷ (Figure 1)

However, as noted below, the question of when and if visitors consciously recognized *Americans Now* as an exhibition does not appear to have had any bearing on their satisfaction with it.

Figure 1: “When Did You Become Aware That the Corridor You Just Exited Was Part of an Exhibition of Contemporary Portraiture?”



⁶ Note that the last category differs from pass-through visitors who used the space *only* as a corridor through-space in that this 9% stopped to observe works in the main corridor area.

⁷ Another 3% found out from “other” places.

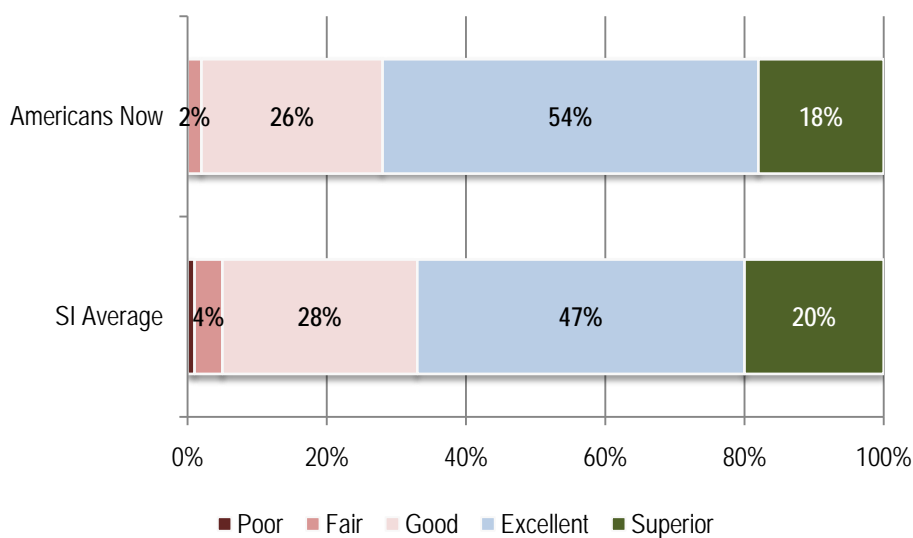
Overall Rating and Feature Ratings

Overall Experience

Visitors were asked to rate their overall experience in the exhibition, using a five-point scale that has been applied by OP&A across Smithsonian exhibitions: *Poor*, *Fair*, *Good*, *Excellent*, and *Superior*. In general, visitors who have criticisms with an exhibition tend to select one of the lower three categories of *Poor*, *Fair*, or *Good*. Visitors who are generally satisfied with their visit tend to mark *Excellent*; for most Smithsonian exhibitions, the modal rating is *Excellent*. Those who have very positive responses tend to mark *Superior*.

Less than one in three visitors to *Americans Now* rated their overall experience in the lower three categories—*Good* (26%), *Fair* (2%), and *Poor* (0%). More than half selected *Excellent* (54%), and just under one in five rated their experience *Superior* (18%). Taking into account sample sizes and the resulting statistical uncertainties, the results for *Americans Now* are very similar to those for the average Smithsonian exhibition studied by OP&A; in terms of *Superior* ratings, they are essentially indistinguishable. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Overall Experience Ratings for *Americans Now* and the Average Smithsonian Exhibition



The study team checked for a relationship between overall exhibition experience rating and the survey question, discussed above, that asked visitors when they consciously recognized *Americans Now* as an exhibition. No relationship was found, even when the focus of the query was narrowed to look specifically at the one in five visitors who completed the exhibition without consciously recognizing it was an exhibition. In other words, *visitors who did not consciously realize they were in an exhibition in Americans Now*

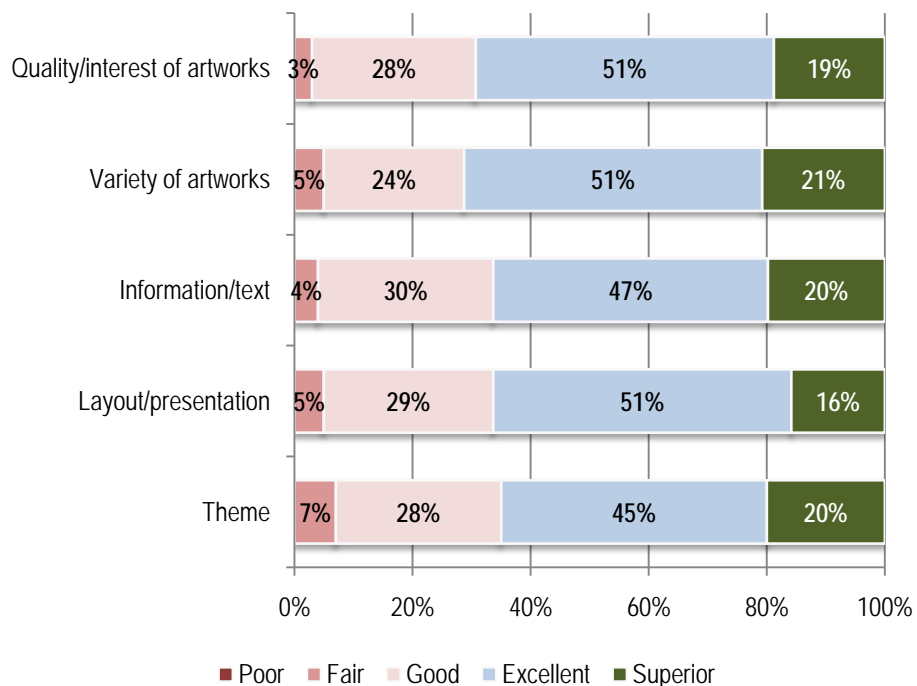
did not rate their overall experience with it any differently from those who did. As elaborated upon in the Discussion below, this strikes the study team as an interesting non-result.

A significant correlation was noted between visit paths and overall experience, with visitors entering side rooms likely to rate the exhibition as a whole more highly than those who looked only at works in the main corridor. Those who entered rooms on either or both sides of the exhibition were much more likely to rate it *Superior* as a whole (19% in both cases) than those whose visit was confined to the main corridor (9%). In terms of lower ratings (*Good*, *Fair*, and *Poor*), visitors who entered rooms on both sides of the main corridor were less likely to rate *Americans Now* in the lower categories than those who entered rooms on just one side (23% versus 38%), and the latter were in turn less likely to give it a low rating than those who did not enter any side rooms (38% versus 59%).

Features

The survey also asked visitors to rate, on the same five-point scale used for the overall experience question, five specific features of the exhibition: “quality/ interest of artworks,” “variety of artworks,” “information/text,” “layout/presentation,” and “theme.” This question, however, failed to identify any relative strengths or weaknesses of the exhibition. Visitors’ ratings for all features were statistically similar to one another, and to the overall experience rating for the exhibition as a whole. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Ratings of Exhibition Features



Visit Purpose and History

Most visitors were making a general visit to the Donald W. Reynolds Center (87%). Only one in twenty came specifically to see *Americans Now* (5%), while one in twelve came to see another specific exhibition on display in the Reynolds Center (8%). The majority of visitors—seven in ten—were making their first visit to Reynolds Center (70%).

Demographics

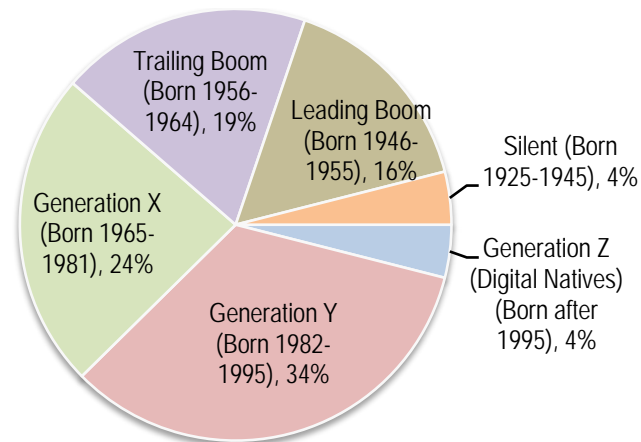
Sex

More women (60%) visited *Americans Now* than men (40%). Such an imbalance is not unexpected in an art museum.

Age

The average age of visitors to the exhibition was 39, and the median age was 37. One in three was between 16 and 29 (Generation Y, born 1982-1995, 34%) and one in four was between 30 and 46 (Generation X, born 1965-1981, 24%). (Figure 4)

Figure 4: Visitation by Generation



Visit Group

The majority of visitors were visiting with other adults (69%); about one in seven was visiting with youth under 18 (15%), and about one in four was visiting alone (24%).

Geography

One in five visitors was from the local Washington DC area (20%) and one in ten was from a country other than the United States (10%).

Qualitative Findings

Layout and Presentation

Thematic Unity

Many interviewees appeared aware that they were in an exhibition space that followed some curatorial logic. In some cases, this was because they noticed the relevant signage. In others, the realization came mainly through an experiential recognition that the portraits on display all had a contemporary feel, or depicted living persons.

At the same time, few were able to identify any clear thematic connection among the works, beyond the fact that they all depicted contemporary persons. Upon prompting, a few guessed that the theme might be “pop culture” or “pop history,” a description that applied to many but certainly not all of the works on display. Interviewees generally did not seem to think of *Americans Now* as an exhibition with an underlying theme or narrative. Rather, they tended to regard it as the part of the museum devoted to living subjects—the contemporary wing of the Portrait Gallery, so to speak:

I just thought it was a part of the whole museum, I guess. I didn't see it as a distinct exhibition. But you do notice the difference between the historical sections [elsewhere in the museum] and this contemporary section.

Interviewees' failure to see *Americans Now* as a thematic exhibition did not necessarily undermine their experience with it. Interviewees who were stumped when asked if they perceived an underlying theme nevertheless could enthusiastically discuss their interest in individual works, or their enjoyment of the exhibition as a whole.

Way Finding

Interviewees expressed differing responses to the non-linear layout of the exhibition, with three interconnected galleries off either side of a main corridor. Some dipped into the latter selectively, or not at all.

By and large, I tended to skip the [rooms off the main corridor]. I have to be honest, it did not always occur to me to walk in. I generally stayed in the main corridor.

One interviewee expressed some confusion about the lack of a clear path through the exhibition space.

There's no prescribed way to go through it. You can slip through the sides or go through the middle and zigzag back and forth.

By contrast, another saw the lack of a designated path as a plus.

It's sort of a free space to move through and do your own thing. It's not directing you to go into a specific room. You just kind of make your own free choice, which is quite nice. It's a very open space; there is no specific color scheme that differentiates the rooms. It's just one space that you go about as you please.

A few interviewees suggested that signage could have been more emphatic.

The only thing I would suggest is that you blow up [the signs] at the beginning, so I really notice. This is a little too subtle and understated. I mean, it's very tasteful; but I like to be hit over the head.

Indeed, one visitor found some signage so subtle that it posed something of a safety issue.

[My companion] walked right into one of these [text blocks at either end of the exhibition]. She was looking at the walls, and ran into it. ... Maybe [it would help if the block was] taller or more colorful. It's gray, and the floors and walls are both gray.

Presentation

Interviewee comments on the look-and-feel of *Americans Now* were for the most part positive, particularly with respect to the spaciousness and lack of clutter.

It's beautifully installed, and it's not overwhelming as far as having too many works in the show. It's judiciously hung, and there's an economy of [works] on a wall, which is terrific. I don't like to be hit with a salon-type style, with too much stuff. This allows me to look and not get a headache at the end of the show.

I really enjoy it, especially in this room ["Esquire's Portrait of the Twenty-First Century"], because there isn't a lot of clutter. It's very simple, and the text is very big and easy to read. In the other rooms, too, I think you have the right amount of works on the walls. Things are neither too bare nor too cluttered. I like the white space; it's very clean.

Labels

The labels also generally drew positive remarks when they were mentioned. However, several interviewees raised an issue that poses special challenges for curators of exhibitions that focus on well-known contemporary subjects: many visitors have their own opinions about what ought to be stressed in the labels, which may lead to some measure of disagreement with curatorial choices.

I liked reading the labels. It gives more insight for someone like me, who might not always know what's going on. The more I can learn about it, the more I can appreciate what the curator saw in it or what the artist was trying to do. But I think the downside is, for someone I already know, the labels don't always capture what I know about them. Like the [information on] Michael Jordan or Barack Obama. ... You think "Okay, that's one take on it; but maybe mine would be different."

For some interviewees, such disagreement was a matter of bemusement.

I find the labels useful. And sometimes it's fun to see the things they leave out that I happen to know.

I know you try to create a record of current, important people, so I wasn't surprised to see that you captured the founder of Whole Foods. I noticed [the label] gave him a little bit of a plug, saying that his stores are only a little bit more expensive than the other [grocery store] chains. Someone was being very kind to him!

In one case, however, serious concerns were raised about why the curators chose to leave out certain information. A couple visiting from Los Angeles strongly criticized the decision to leave any mention of Martha Stewart's conviction for insider securities trading off the label for her portrait. This struck them as a glaring omission, as a well as a missed opportunity for reflection on society's values.

FEMALE VISITOR: An iconic figure for home and hearth who is convicted of stock fraud and goes to jail—that's interesting, isn't it...?

MALE VISITOR: And her media empire has suffered tremendous reversals because of that. There's something a little Orwellian about this chapter in her life being entirely absent from the label. ... For us, the personal connection with individuals who have made it into this Gallery is a way of us finding who we [as a nation] are, and how we got to be this way. That brings with it a responsibility when you select subjects. If you have a convicted felon, you guys need to sit around the conference table, have a meeting, and talk about how you want to handle this.

FEMALE VISITOR: Here's someone who lived the American dream, going from a caterer to a mogul. And look what happened.

Responses to Individual Works

Time-Based Media Art

Another research interest for this study was visitors' responses to the non-traditional portraiture in *Americans Now*, in particular the two time-based media pieces, each of which occupied its own room: Jason Salavon's "Late Night Triad," and Lincoln Schatz's "Esquire's Portrait of the Twenty-First Century" (hereafter, the Cube).

Interviewees' reactions to these works defy generalization. Responses ran the gamut from delighted to dismissive. This section tries to reflect this range of responses.

Some interviewees found the time-based media works deeply engaging, sometimes spending long periods of time with them. They used variants of words like "amazing," "surprising," "interesting," and "unexpected" to describe the appeal of these works.

There was some early video stuff I didn't like, and that I always thought Circuit City did better. But ["The Late Night Triad"] seems much more interesting. They've really taken the video and done something with it. I'm just amazed at what these people can come up with.

I was in [the Cube] for a while because I was interested in how the Cube worked and in seeing some of the people who were in it that I had heard of, but had never really seen pictures of. ... The people [in the Cube] are not all what I expected them to look like, and the things they decided to do were different from what I would have expected. I found it interesting that Dr. Oz actually performed surgery while they were taking his picture. And George Clooney dancing with his mother—that was not what I expected from George Clooney. It gives you a different view.

I was in the ["Late Night Triad" room] for about five minutes. It's weird how all three of the TVs show something like the image you get when you go through a metal detector. [Laughs] That gives you sense of the artist, more so than of the people.

Those who expressed positive opinions of the time-based media works were in some cases challenged by the interviewers to explain whether they thought these works qualified as "portraiture" and belonged in the National Portrait Gallery. Responses included the following:

Oh, absolutely. I think whatever the medium is, if at the end of viewing it you have arrived at an image of the person it is portraying, then it is portraiture. Must portraiture be a photo or a painting? Absolutely not.

Yes, I think so. Because these are images of people, which are essentially portraits. It's not traditional portraiture, like oil paintings on the wall; but I still think so.

I don't think there's any one way to do a portrait, like oil on canvas. ... I saw an Andy Warhol thing where he did videos of people just sitting there, doing nothing, and then ran them on a loop for hours on end. ... Why not? You can't just say there's one way to do something, especially when you are talking about art.

On the other side, several variations on the theme of "I didn't get it" were voiced with respect to the time-based media works.

I didn't understand ["The Late Night Triad"] at first. I guess it is about American pop history, but I'm surprised they dedicated a whole room to it. ... I was like, "Why didn't they fine-tune these TVs...?" ... Honestly, when I was in there, I was thinking it was a waste of space. It's a lot of money for that little bit of [contemporary culture].

This ["Late Night Triad"]—I'm not sure what it is. ... It doesn't tell you anything about these people.

I find [the Cube] really strange. ... I just find it kind of bizarre. Quite hard to understand.

I'm not sure what they were trying to accomplish [with "The Late Night Triad"]. I just think it's out of focus. [Chuckles]

I was a little confused about ["The Late Night Triad"]. Not because it was portraits of the late-night hosts, but because on the wall there was some text about how it was done during the first six weeks of the Iraq war. That didn't come together for me—what [this work] has to do with the war.

One visiting couple suggested that for non-traditional works—including but not limited to time-based media works—many visitors might find additional explanatory text helpful.

FEMALE VISITOR: We're a little older than the boomers. We like film, but we don't like watching sheep grazing on a pasture in an endless loop on a television set; we saw that in London, and it was like, "Hmmm....?" ... We stopped somewhere around abstract expressionism. For us, that's the end of art. [Laughs]

MALE VISITOR: Like most people, we are not artists. [With the non-traditional works,] we don't necessarily understand their deeper meaning. Maybe we could use some more explanation about the art itself and how it is created, so we really understand what the artist wanted to express.

Other visitors expressed a lack of interest in the media works for reasons of personal taste, rather than a lack of understanding or appreciation.

The video doesn't keep my attention all that long. I think it's nice; I'm not going to say anything against it. It just doesn't draw me in as much. I think the still moment is more interesting.

It's nice. It's a novelty. It's cool. It's amusing. It's David Letterman out of focus, I think. It's clever, but it's thin. It evokes no emotional response.

For me, we are already bombarded too much by media. I like a gallery to be more quiet. ["The Late Night Triad"] is too stimulating. It's too busy.

Several interviewees, regardless of their own opinions of the media works, also mentioned a feature of such works that influences many visitors' responses to them: the time required to comprehend them. Such art is often unintelligible to visitors who do not read labels, or at least take some time to view it carefully. This automatically tends to make it more problematic for some visitors, especially casual visitors.

In general, I'm not into videos as much in museums. You want something that will draw you to it immediately. For a video, you have to sit and watch for a little bit. It's not that I don't have the time, but it just takes longer to get into it.

VISITOR: I didn't spend a lot of time on [the videos], because I'm coming through in such a quick fashion, so I didn't have time to spend looking through the videos.

OP&A: What made them less appealing to you?

VISITOR: I guess the amount of time it takes. The videos [in the Cube] run through for 90-second segments, and there are [a number] of them. I spent a couple seconds looking at them—maybe a minute and a half in total. That isn't a lot of time, but we're taking a tour of the various museums, so we're going through fairly quickly.

OP&A: And you don't have time for 90 seconds on each sitter?

VISITOR: Exactly. It doesn't seem like a lot, but it is when you're just walking through.

An illustration of this relationship between time and appreciation for video art occurred during one interview. In this case, a middle-aged man and his college-aged daughter, both initially dismissive of “The Late Night Triad,” became more engaged with it when challenged to guess the sitters, which required more careful consideration of the work than they had previously given it. The exchange occurred outside the door to the “Late Night Triad” room.

FATHER: [“The Late Night Triad”] was a little too far out for us. Well, for me. We just glanced in and kept going.

OP&A: Could you tell who it was?

DAUGHTER: We didn't even look.

FATHER [looks through door]: The answer is “no.” Johnny Carson...?

OP&A: No...

DAUGHTER [looks through door]: Jimmy Fallon...? ...

OP&A: No...

DAUGHTER [after a brief pause]: Oh, whats-his-face—Jay Leno!

FATHER: Boy, you really have to work for that one!

DAUGHTER: It's like the iconic talk show hosts.

FATHER: Well, now that I've been looking at it, I have to go in and see how they achieve that.

Other Works

Turning to the more conventional works in *Americans Now*, interviewees singled out many portraits for specific comment. The reasons people were drawn to particular works varied. One common reason was the immediate visual or emotional impact of a work or sitter:

The one of Toni Morrison—I don't know anything about art, but it's incredible. I don't know why, but she's just zeroed in on you. I don't know what the artist did, but he picked the right [subject] to paint.

I hardly knew who this chap Jay Z was. But I stood in front of that for a long time: the face, the profile, just the wholeness of who he is. I could dismiss his music very easily, perhaps; I'm not a rap fan, and I have a lot of problems with some of the misogynistic aspects of it. But the photograph of that human being made me step back, and now when I hear his music, I will have that image in my mind.

I knew who [Tony Hawk] was, but this is just too kicky! A guy on a skateboard on the kitchen counter, the baby sleeping in his wife's arms. It doesn't get better than that.

The Toni Morrison you have on the wall—I'm never going to recover from that.

I liked the Toni Morrison portrait. I almost felt like she was in the room with us. There's something about the white background that almost made it feel like she was standing there. It's very realistic, and you can get very close; I think she's life-sized.

[The portrait of Michael Jordan] is so remarkable. ... It struck me because of the impressive athleticism that just jumped out of the photo.

I looked at that portrait of LL Cool J, and I remember thinking "Did he have that done so it could hang in the National Portrait Gallery? Or was this in his living room at some point?" [Laughs] Either way, it's exciting to come down here and see LL Cool J at the Smithsonian.

[I enjoyed the Chuck Close anamorphic self-portrait], where you have to look at the reflecting tower to see the image. Chuck Close does some interesting things. You have to have a very interesting brain to come up with an idea like that—a very different kind of brain.

A personal interest in or connection to the sitter, or something the sitter represents, was also mentioned as a reason for being drawn to particular works.

When I first came in, Peter Sellars was on the wall. ... I looked at that and I said to myself, "You know, you have to dress funkier. You need to let go." Because in the text, it says "This is who I am—why wouldn't I be like this, outrageous?" And here I am, a 63-year-old woman, saying, "Absolutely! Why shouldn't I be more outrageous in the way I dress?" I tell you, if a portrait can do that, it's very powerful.

Because I'm a fan of cycling, I looked at the Lance Armstrong portrait. The bright color scheme also made it stand out.

I remember [my companion] saying that she had the same picture of Michael Jordan in her dorm room at college. Michael Jordan the icon that I grew up with is very different from the Michael Jordan that I see and know of now. So that makes me think about how he has transformed his body of work, you might say, and how it's continuously changing. So maybe his story is not done yet.

We're particularly interested in Asian people like us, who have become successful immigrants here in this country. We read the names; if they have a Chinese family, we are much more interested in them.

I like the gentleman [Jim Harrison] with the two stuffed elk heads. [Chuckles] I know people like that. We have elk in South Dakota, so it's commonplace.

In the case of the Obama "Hope" portrait, interviewees talked about the experience of seeing an original version of a hugely familiar and iconic work:

I like the one about "Hope." "Hope" was a beautiful one. It was fun to see "Hope." I've seen it on t-shirts. I've seen it as part of my culture—on television and on websites, on

all kinds of stuff. To actually see it was pretty neat, and to see how delicate it was. It was newsprint! What an interesting medium to work with. As part of our culture, it's an icon.

Is that the original? The one that made it all happen? It's a remarkable thing; an icon of the election.

Responses to the Exhibition as a Whole

Turning to responses to the exhibition as a whole rather than to individual works within it, a number of themes and contrasts repeatedly surfaced in the interviews. These included:

- Contemporary versus historical portraiture;
- Portraiture-as-art versus portraiture-as-people;
- The variety of works on display;
- Contemporary portraiture as a stimulus to intergenerational understanding; and
- The selection and organization of the works on display.

Contemporary Versus Historical Portraiture

The contrast between historical and contemporary portraiture was mentioned by a number of interviewees, often to express their appreciation, excitement, or in some cases surprise that the latter as well as the former was on display in the National Portrait Gallery.

I enjoy the historical works too, but like to see people like KRS-1. I grew up listening to him and LL Cool J and Jay-Z, and [watching] Michael Jordan. These are people I grew up in awe of. I like to see them along with the historical figures; I think it's a great mix.

I wasn't expecting things as modern as this, but it's interesting. It was interesting to see the LL Cool J painting; I would not expect to see someone like that who's "popularly famous" in this kind of setting. I expected to see historical portraits.

I was surprised to see these portraits of modern pop-culture people. I was expecting only historical figures. ... But I like having portraits of contemporary people here. I

appreciate both, and I think it is good to have the contemporary people too. They are part of history, even if it is more recent.

I just walked down from the Civil War section, and this is much more modern, which I enjoy just as much. I find it very interesting to see what these people look like, and how artists show them; it gives you some insight into them. With some of the older pictures, it's more static. Everyone is posed the same way. Even though it is still interesting to see how, say, General Sherman—who was absolutely horrible in many people's minds—is really a very nice-looking man. [Laughs] I'm saying this even though my family is from the South.

It's exciting to see LL Cool J in there; it's exciting to see Michelle Obama. Why not? Portraiture captures them in the moment, just as it captured George Washington in the moment when his portrait was done. Something doesn't necessarily have value just because it's old. It's exciting to come in here and see these portraits. It's mesmerizing.

One visiting couple was surprised that NPG in some cases gave contemporary pop-culture figures, whom they considered relatively marginal from a larger historical perspective, more prominence than revered Founding Fathers. This unexpected contrast stimulated them to reflect on what it means to be a public figure.

MALE VISITOR: I was surprised that there was that huge LL Cool J portrait, while Thomas Paine only has this tiny one.

FEMALE VISITOR: But it shows that people influence us in different ways. LL Cool J, I guess, has influenced a lot of people. Just not us.

Another couple, Chinese exchange students who were visiting in part to acquaint themselves with American history and culture, found it fascinating that NPG would choose to put the contemporary works in the first gallery entering visitors were likely to see.

I think this museum is very special, because most of the time when you go to a museum, the first thing they give you is history—what happened in the past. But when we first came in here, our first impression was of "Americans Now." It's sort of surprising, but still quite interesting.

Some interviewees suggested it was easier for them to personally connect to contemporary figures.

I think it's in some ways more interesting to see someone you know is alive, someone you could see or meet potentially at some point. It's less of just a monument to them.

Usually, I'm not a big contemporary art person, but I have really enjoyed this. Especially because we recognized [many of the sitters]. ... It's fun because you can relate to all the pictures.

A few interviewees, however, were less interested in the contemporary figures, because they considered them wearily familiar as a result of exposure in the popular media.

I looked at that portrait of Tom Hanks; but I know [all about him] anyway, so it didn't have any value-added. Same with George Lucas. I'm not really into celebrities. I sort of know them because of my culture, but really I'm not that interested.

These are people I see every day. I don't have to make a special trip here to see them, because you can pick up a newspaper or magazine and see their pictures in it.

A few interviewees took up the invitation in the introductory text to view the exhibition with an eye to which of the figures on display were most likely to be remembered by future generations.

I like this exhibit because it asks you to put yourself in the position of the Portrait Gallery and think about which portraits you would keep and which ones you wouldn't. You get the chance to be like the people that work at the Portrait Gallery.

On this point, one visitor with a unique perspective mused on the challenge faced by institutions such as NPG that are in the business of trying to predict what future generations will find interesting and significant.

I was trained as a historian, and sometimes you really do have to wait to take a full measure. Sometimes you have to wait until people are dead. Sometimes you have to wait a hundred years to see what true history is. But that is not your point here. Your point here is that you have to collect while you can. You may find that some of these people did not have a big impact on America, but I don't think anyone would fault you for that. You don't have that luxury [of historical perspective]; you have to chronicle and collect things now. It's okay if the guy [in one of the portraits] turns out not to be so important a hundred years from now, right? I see that as a historian.

Portraiture-as-Art and Portraiture-as-People

The issue of portraiture as art versus portraiture as visual biography was also raised by a number of interviewees. Some interviewees indicated that they tended to be initially drawn to a portrait for visual or artistic reasons.

I pay more attention to what the artist was doing first. Like this one [Bill Viola]; I don't know who this person is, but it's a very oddly framed portrait. I'm into photography, and this is a very different way of doing a portrait. So that's what I would notice first about this one, rather than who [the subject] is.

I was attracted by the pictures [themselves]. To tell the truth, I don't know many of these people. So I was mainly attracted by the pictures—the visual impression of the works.

Others took precisely the opposite position: that the initial impetus that attracted them to a work was curiosity about, or recognition of, the person portrayed in the portrait.

I'm a psychotherapist, and I'm interested in portraits because I like to look into the eyes of the people. I like to look at the people.

However, few interviewees seemed to see the issue in terms of an exclusive “either/or” choice, and many discussed their attraction to both aspects of a work, artwork and subject.

I think [the person in the portrait is] what draws you in at first, but from there you start to look at the art itself. Like the guy who started Whole Foods; I loved that one, because it's this beautiful picture with all this color. But it's also something you can relate to, because you've been to Whole Foods.

It works both ways. You can say, “This is an interesting photograph; I wonder why they took it.” Then you find out it's Andre Agassi, and you go, “Oh, well, that makes sense.” Then you come down the hall and you wonder “What's important about this person?” And you read the label and say, “Yeah, she's doing some good things.”

It varies from work to work. KRS-1, Eryka Badu, Joyce Carol Oats—in those cases, I'm looking at it for [the sitter]. But with the portraits of Obama, Agassi, and LL Cool J, it's more the presentation.

With the exception of a few mentions of Chuck Close, interviewees did not mention specific artists. References to particular works were invariably in terms of the subject, rather than the artist. A few interviewees did, however, comment on the range and depth of artistic talent on display in the exhibition as a whole.

I'm amazed at the amount of talent that's out there, that we've never really heard of. Most of these artists and photographers [represented here] I've never heard of before. So I think it's very exciting that the Smithsonian is giving these people exposure, because they certainly deserve it.

Every artist approaches their subject differently. I know I'll be exhausted on the train home. But it's a good sort of exhaustion. It doesn't give me a headache.

What I'm loving about it is that you have such a wide range of artists interpreting the lives of these men and women.

The study team also asked some interviewees whether recognizing the sitter was a factor in their responses to specific works. While a few indicated a greater inclination to view works depicting sitters they recognized, many did not think this was as important as the intrinsic aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual appeal of a work.

OP&A: Can you connect to portraits of people you do not know, and who might not even be particularly famous?

VISITOR: Sure! Are you kidding? Does anyone know the name of the woman in that famous Dorothea Lange Oklahoma dust bowl photograph? I certainly don't know that woman's name. But I see her world in that photograph. I see what challenges she faced and what she overcame. She inspires me.

Indeed, for some interviewees, part of the appeal the exhibition lay in “meeting” interesting new Americans.

For the people I'm not familiar with, I'm interested in finding out why there is a portrait of them on display. I find out about people I had absolutely no idea about.

More generally, one interviewee eloquently described the general connection to human experience offered by many of the portraits on display.

The last time I was here, I was so moved by the power of the individual faces and the portraiture that I said [today], “Okay, I'm back in Washington; I have to go back to

these faces.” ... For me, art has a deep emotional connection, regardless of the era in which the painting was done and whether it’s abstract or not. I’m looking for some connection to my humanity and the complexity of human life. When you are younger, life seems a like a very do-able, survivable proposition, unless you have a hard upbringing. But as you get older, you learn how complex and tragic life can be. So today, I’m here looking at weather-worn faces, rendered in many ways. I’m looking at young faces. And I know that everyone I’m looking at has probably had some hardship in his life. I look at Lyle Lovett and we know he’s had broken marriages. I look at Tony Hawk, and I think he’s probably had a lot of injuries. To me, there’s almost nowhere I could go in the city where I could touch the humanity and the complexity of what it is to be alive. These paintings and photos render it brilliantly. ... I just can’t say enough about how readily one can go into one gallery and see at least one work that just pulls something up for me.

Variety

Directly or indirectly, one of the most commonly-cited reasons for the appeal of *Americans Now* was the variety of works on display—in terms of style, media, emotional impact, and perhaps most importantly, subject.

OP&A: How do you feel about non-traditional portraiture in the National Portrait Gallery?

VISITOR: It adds variety, so it’s not just a bunch of oil paintings. It’s something different to look at and experience.

OP&A: So would you get bored if it was just rows of oil paintings?

VISITOR: I don’t think I would get bored, because I like stuff like that. But this is definitely captivating too.

We initially viewed this as a hallway to where we were ultimately going. Yet this immediately grabbed us, and kept us not only glancing in, but thoroughly—albeit briefly—walking through all the exhibits, because it presented such a range of subjects, medias, styles, and impacts on us.

What to me is so extraordinary are the various media that are used here. I find black and white photography to be amazingly powerful. ... I’m delighted that you have video here, because that’s where we’re heading; we’re heading to a very different world than

just oils and brushes and watercolor. For me, some of the most potent are the photographs and renderings from photographs; I think it's important to note that the Toni Morrison [painting] comes from a photograph.

It's cool for me to see people that I know from all different walks of life, and people I don't know too. It's cool that the curator chose to highlight different walks of life. ... For someone like me, who is not necessarily into all kinds of art, I can see things I recognize subject-wise, and go from there.

They're all Americans, but I like the diversity. ... I like that [NPG] takes the rich and the poor, the old and the new, the ethnic differences, and the [different] types of art, such as sculpture versus very modern video art.

I think collectively it is eclectic, which is interesting. So you see all kinds of people. You see athletes. You see someone on a couch with two deer heads.

They did a good job of balancing types of works. On this side, I strolled by and none of those works really appealed to me. But you have something for everybody.

MALE VISITOR: I've been so impressed by the range of media, whether photographs, paintings...

FEMALE VISITOR: ... The cool cylinder thing [Chuck Close]...

MALE VISITOR: ... The cylinder thing—my goodness, how imaginative! ... It's so impressive. The range of media.

There's a little of everything, from sports to media to politics. There is literally everything.

It seemed to be a good representation of everybody—not just a certain group or a certain region or whatever. There are people in here that probably everybody coming through here can relate to.

Intergenerational Comprehension

A theme that came up in several interviews which was not anticipated by the study team was the role that contemporary portraiture can play in promoting cross-generational cultural understanding, particularly in terms of older individuals connecting with aspects of recent pop culture. This point came up several times, even though the works in the *Americans Now* exhibition were by no means exclusively, or even predominantly, portrayals of younger popular-culture figures.

I'm aware of a generational difference. I think we're feeling very aware of our age, and a disconnect between generations. Looking for that connection is difficult for me, because I don't know why [some of these subjects] are here. ... But I would like to have more of a connection to what the [younger people] would like to see in a museum. It can't be just for those of us who are turning 70 to decide what [exhibitions] are like.

VISITOR: I'm in my sixties, but I have a twenty-year-old. I think [museums today] are not reaching a whole lot of young people, and by bringing in contemporary subjects and art, [you do that]. I didn't know who LL Cool J was, so I asked some young people who were looking at him, and I learned about him. So I was learning from my son's generation—complete strangers.

OP&A: So you think some of these portraits could connect older generations with younger generations?

VISITOR: Absolutely; they have done that for me already; there were at least three paintings where I'm thinking "I heard the name, and never knew who it was." It forced me into a conversation with perfect strangers so I could learn more.

Subject Selection

An issue that seemed to perplex or even frustrate some interviewees was their inability to grasp the criteria by which works were chosen for *Americans Now*. This was another issue that was not anticipated by the study team. Even granting that most interviewees, as discussed above, appeared to see *Americans Now* more as the “contemporary wing” of NPG than as a thematic exhibition, a few found the selection of portraits on display puzzling.

I am a little bit surprised by how few subjects I knew, and I don't know why they were chosen. I don't know why [Jim Harrison] was chosen, this writer. And Martha Stewart—why was she chosen? I guess I don't know the focus [of the exhibition]. The logic of the selection was not apparent.

VISITOR #1: What qualifies the people to get into this exhibition?

VISITOR #2: Do they submit a picture and say: "Here, I'll pay you a million dollars if you hang it in the Gallery"?

VISITOR #1: I would say that they wanted to be in here, so they donated their portraits. But I don't know; that's a guess on my part.

VISITOR #2: I am surprised that we don't see Mark Zuckerberg in here; he has had a tremendous impact on today's society.

OP&A: Are you interested in knowing more about Mark Zuckerberg?

VISITOR #2: Not really. But if you include Lyle Lovett, why not him?

Discussion

The study team initially considered layout issues to be a central focus for this study. The main concern was that visitors would not recognize that the central corridor area and the rooms off it comprised a single thematic exhibition. The findings essentially put this concern to rest. In general, *Americans Now* successfully engaged visitors regardless of whether they consciously perceived it as an exhibition.

While relatively few visitors seemed to see *Americans Now* as a full-fledged exhibition with an underlying theme or narrative—many appeared to see it as the “contemporary subjects” wing of NPG, and a few evidently failed to notice any curatorial logic at all during their visit—this simply did not seem to matter in terms of visitors’ experience of, and satisfaction with, the exhibition.

So while NPG perhaps could have done more to make visitors aware of the underlying threads that governed the selection and organization of works in *Americans Now*, it is unclear and probably unlikely that this would have made much of a difference in most visitors’ satisfaction. For better or worse, *Americans Now* succeeded on the strength of the individual appeal of its numerous and varied artworks—among which almost everyone could find something appealing, whether they were looking for art, history, inspiration, an emotional or personal connection, or something else. In any case, as one visitor pointed out, the relevant issue is *how* to use the building’s extensive corridor spaces for exhibitions, not *whether* to do so.

You do the best you can with a hallway. ... What else do you do? Just not use the hallway at all? I think you are doing the best you can. It is not the best place for an exhibit—a hallway people are traversing—but you’ve managed to use it well. You’ve done a good job.

The other major research issue stressed at the outset of this study concerned the non-traditional, time-based media artworks on display in *Americans Now*. Here, generalizations are more difficult, in part because the survey did not attempt to quantify attitudes toward such works, leaving qualitative interviews as the only source of information on this matter.

Certainly, some visitors found the time-based media works interesting and engaging. At the same time, others, while not necessarily considering such works inappropriate or detrimental to their enjoyment of the exhibition, were baffled by their presence in *Americans Now*, or in NPG more generally. The only general observation that the study team would make with regard to this issue is that, because NPG is not a contemporary art museum per se and because it tends to be associated in the public mind with history and tradition, NPG is bound to pull in many visitors who are not familiar with or favorably

predisposed toward non-traditional art. Curators might want to consider this in deciding upon the appropriate level of contextual information to provide for such works.

Two other issues that arose in the course of this study that struck the study team as interesting were the following:

- The variety of works on display in *Americans Now* was mentioned often and favorably by interviewees. The study team would suggest that the variety of works may account for a large part of the exhibition's ability to keep visitors engaged despite the lack of clear thematic unity. As mentioned by several interviewees, there was "something for everyone" in the exhibition, if the visitor was willing to spend a little time looking through it.
- The unexpected issue raised by a few visitors about the power of contemporary portraiture to bridge generational differences in perceptions of what constitutes "history" or "influence" struck the team members as thought-provoking, with possible implications for exhibition curators.

The views expressed by visitors on the issue portraiture-as-art vs. portraiture-as history and the issue of contemporary portraiture vs. historical portraiture were not, on the whole, particularly surprising or unexpected. However, they did indicate the range of ways in which visitors enjoy and relate to portraiture. For this reason, the study team included a wide selection of quotations on these issues in this report.

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

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National Portrait Gallery *Americans Now*

Is this your first visit to this building, the Donald W. Reynolds Center?

- Yes No

When did you become aware that the corridor you just exited was part of an exhibition of contemporary portraiture, *Americans Now*?

- When I read this question
 As I was passing through the exhibition space
 When I read the introductory text
 When I visited at the information desk
 Before entering the building
 Other: _____

Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition of contemporary portraiture, *Americans Now* (artworks in the corridor and adjoining rooms on both sides).

- Poor Fair Good Excellent Superior

Please rate the following features of this exhibition:

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Superior
Quality/interest of artworks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Variety of artworks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information/text	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Layout/presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Theme	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

When you passed through this corridor/exhibition, did you enter side rooms?

- No, I came straight through corridor
 Yes, I entered room(s) on one side of the corridor
 Yes, I entered room(s) on both sides of the corridor

Why did you come to this building today?

- General visit
 To see this exhibition, *Americans Now*
 To see another specific exhibition (Specify: _____)

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]

- I am alone Other adult(s) Youth under 18

Are you male or female? Male Female

What is your age?

Do you live in the United States or another country?

- United States, specify zip code:
 Another country, specify: _____

THANK YOU!

○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ C ○ R ○ L ○ I ○ P

Appendix B: Frequencies of Responses

Is this your first visit to this building, the Donald W. Reynolds Center?

	Yes	70%
	No	30%

When did you become aware that the corridor you just exited was part of an exhibition of contemporary portraiture, *Americans Now*?

	When I read this question	18%
	As I was passing through the exhibition space	48%
	When I read the introductory text	13%
	When I visited at the information desk	9%
	Before entering the building	8%
	Other (Specify)	3%

Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition of contemporary portraiture, *Americans Now* (artworks in the corridor and adjoining rooms on both sides).

	Poor	0%
	Fair	2%
	Good	26%
	Excellent	54%
	Superior	18%

Please rate the following features of this exhibition:

Quality/interest of artworks		
	Poor	0%
	Fair	3%
	Good	28%
	Excellent	51%
	Superior	19%

Variety of artworks		
	Poor	0%
	Fair	5%
	Good	24%
	Excellent	51%
	Superior	21%

Information/text		
	Poor	0%
	Fair	4%
	Good	30%
	Excellent	47%
	Superior	20%
Layout/presentation		
	Poor	0%
	Fair	5%
	Good	29%
	Excellent	51%
	Superior	16%
Theme		
	Poor	0%
	Fair	7%
	Good	28%
	Excellent	45%
	Superior	20%

When you passed through this corridor/exhibition, did you enter side rooms?

No, I came straight through corridor	9%
Yes, I entered room(s) on <u>one</u> side of the corridor	22%
Yes, I entered room(s) on <u>both</u> sides of the corridor	69%

Why did you come to this building today?

General visit	87%
To see this exhibition, <i>Americans Now</i>	5%
To see another specific exhibition (Specify)	8%

With whom are you visiting [Mark one or more]

I am alone	24%
Other adult(s)	69%
Youth under 18	15%

Are you male or female?		
	Male	40%
	Female	60%

What is your age?		
	<i>Average Age</i>	39 years
	<i>Median Age</i>	37 years
	Generation Z (Digital Natives) (Born after 1995)	4%
	Generation Y (Born 1982-1995)	34%
	Generation X (Born 1965-1981)	24%
	Trailing Boom (Born 1956-1964)	19%
	Leading Boom (Born 1946-1955)	16%
	Silent (Born 1925-1945)	4%

Do you live in the United States or another country?		
	United States, specify zip code	90%
	Another country, specify	10%

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Selection of interviewees: Approach either exiting visitors or visitors within the “Americans Now” exhibition space. Observe first to select visitors who have spent **at least five minutes** there and **have paused to inspect at least some of the works** (although not necessarily read labels or wall text).

General Background

Note gender and estimated age

- Where are you from?
- Who are you visiting with?
- Why did you come to the Reynolds Center today? (NPG? SAAM? A particular exhibition? Wandered by? Etc.)
- Have you visited the Reynolds Center before?
 - If so, are you familiar with this exhibition space and what it displays?

If yes, probe. Are they aware it is NPG (not SAAM) space? That the works change? That it is contemporary? That it comprises a thematic exhibition? Do they notice what is different about “Americans Now” (i.e., all NPG collections, all prominent subjects)?

Exhibition Layout and Design

- Are you aware you are in the middle of [that you just exited] an exhibition called “Americans Now”?

If yes, probe to find how they know this. (Read intro text? Noticed title? Noticed common threads underlying the works? Were told at the info desk? Etc.)

- Do you have some sense of the layout of this exhibition? (e.g., Where it begins and ends, which galleries are part of it, etc.)

Exhibition Content and Theme

- (**Cue:** You probably recognize some of the faces in the portraits, but not others.) Do you understand what all these people have in common? (Living subjects who are prominent in some field, if not necessarily famous to the general public.)

- Are you more interested in the faces you recognize, or the ones you do not recognize? Why?

- Did you learn about anyone new you think you will remember? What makes that person memorable to you?
- *(Cue: NPG once had a policy of collecting only historical portraits of deceased subjects. Recently, it started collecting contemporary works depicting living subjects.)* Did you expect to see contemporary works depicting living subjects here? Do you have an opinion about the decision to display living subjects in NPG?
- In this exhibition, did you notice anything that particularly connected to you or your life? Did you notice anything that connected to issues that you care about? (Explain.)
- What did like best in this exhibition?
- Is there anything you found confusing? What could have been done better?

Time-Based Media Pieces

Selection: Either find visitors at a time-based media piece or invite them to come along to see one.

- Did you expect to see contemporary works like this at NPG?
- Do works like this fit your personal understanding of “portraiture”? Why or why not?
- What are your thoughts about NPG exploring nontraditional notions of portraiture?

General/Miscellaneous

- When you look at a portrait, do you tend to be more interested in the subject, or in the aesthetics of how the subject is portrayed (the art itself)? Explain.