

When Artists Make Interactive Works of Art for Children: The Contemporary Arts Center's UnMuseum®

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In 2003, the Contemporary Arts Center opened the new, 84,000 square foot Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, designed by Zaha Hadid opened in downtown Cincinnati. The Sara M. and Patricia A. Vance Education Center, the UnMuseum®, a gallery of interactive works of art for children, occupies the entire sixth floor. The UnMuseum, so-named as a place where children are encouraged to touch the art, is exceptionally popular with museum visitors, who find it completely different from any other museum experience they have had.

The Center, which does not have a permanent collection, has held exhibitions since 1939 of the most advanced art of its time. At the time the UnMuseum was conceived, the Center was already accustomed to commissioning artists to create site-specific installations. The Center also had a 20-year history of giving tours to groups of visiting school children and knew that kids love contemporary art. But contemporary art is not always appropriate for children and adults don't always understand it. The idea of asking leading contemporary artists to create new works of art for children was a natural extension of the Center's mission, and since children want to touch everything, the work would be interactive.

There were several overlapping goals for the UnMuseum. One was to attract families to the Center. Thousands of school children visited annually, but the Center was never a destination for families. This was in part because of the lingering memory of the 1990 Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, but probably more because few adults know how to approach contemporary art and see no reason to share such an experience with their children. The UnMuseum set out to create work that was friendly to beginning viewers of all ages.

Another important goal for the UnMuseum was to break new artistic ground. The Center prides itself on being the research and development site for new art and envisioned the UnMuseum as an exciting opportunity for artists as well as visitors. From the outset, the Center intended to commission projects for children that were equal in scope and caliber to projects worthy of any serious venue for new art. With the number of artists doing site-specific installations, and a trend toward interactivity in contemporary art, this goal seemed well within reach.

The Center undertook a series of "prototypes" while the new building was still four years away from completion, commissioning one installation per year to see what could be learned from audience surveys and hands on experience. The first works was Allan Wexler's *Above and Below: The Hypar Room* (1999), which coincided with a traveling mid-career survey of work by this New York artist. The second was *Leaf Leap: All the World's Leaves* (2000) by Los Angeles artist Kim Abeles.

Both works attracted a modest number of families who had never been to the Center before and both were well liked by visitors who, in surveys said they enjoyed themselves but were unsure of

what they learned. The works of art for children were especially successful with docent-led tours, however. In the *Hypar Room*, docents could talk about geometry and problem-solving. With *Leaf Leap* they could talk about leaves. (Children study trees in 4th grade; the number of school tours doubled.)

Encouraged by the potential of works of art for children to be the foundation of extraordinary school tours, the Center commissioned a third project that explicitly tied into curriculum standards for science. The Center asked Los Angeles artist Paul Tzanetopolous, who created *Color Complex* (2001), to collaborate on didactic content. Tzanetopolous is a scientist and a curriculum manager at a grade school, so was happy to comply, contributing to lesson plans and teacher's packets about light and color.

The UnMuseum prototypes did attract families to the Center and although visitors loved the work, without the mediated experience of a docent-led tour, the work was treated like playground equipment. At this juncture, the Center confronted the twin challenges of visitor expectation and educational objectives, identifying two distinct types of experiences for visitors. Students coming for school tours talked about the work, having an enriching experience with the art. Families who came expecting an attraction for children had a good time, but the kids could get very rowdy, presenting safety concerns as well as doubts as to what they were getting out of the visit.

An UnMuseum Advisory Board (UMAB) of parents, teachers, a child psychologist and other experts on children met throughout 2002 in order to help the Center define its objectives for the UnMuseum. The main conclusion drawn from these meetings was that what parents wanted from the UnMuseum was, above all, an experience with art they could share with their children. The art experience, they explained, is qualitatively different from a recreation experience, and isn't an educational experience either. Art to them was magic and wonder. They didn't want another playground, or to invest valuable family time in label reading and learning. They wanted a shared experience with art.

The UMAB was unanimous in recommending the inclusion of hands-on art-making in the UnMuseum. The Center intended to include an area where visitors could make art all along, but didn't want anything that resembled a classroom. Artist Andrea Zittel, known for her investigations into structures for living, provided the solution: the *Art Lab*, a set of irregular terraces that can serve as table tops or seating areas, depending on the user. The *Art Lab* serves as a space for casual and spontaneous creativity. Families spend hours making art with supplies they can help themselves to. Toddlers like to climb it, and grown ups sit on the lower levels and relax. The walls around it fill up with drawings by visitors of all ages, including many by teenagers and adults.

The *Growing and Raining Tree* by Chico MacMurtrie and Amporphic Robot Works is a computer-run, servo-controlled robotic tree that tracks visitors' movements and squirts water into a pool at its base. Despite the headaches that come with the tree's breakdowns, the tree supplies one of the essential experiences of the UnMuseum: the Wow Factor. If the UnMuseum

“teaches” visitors anything about contemporary art, it is that artists can be wildly imaginative and that art is not far removed from disciplines such as science and engineering.

The UnMuseum has other work that is whimsical and fun, another defining feature of the UnMuseum experience. A suite of works collectively entitled *Zeloso* by Cincinnati artist Tony Luensman comprises six interactive sound pieces, including the *Inflatable Piano*, which emits cartoony bleeps and squeals when the keys are pressed. Works that offer visitors a surprise or reward in the form of a sound are especially popular.

Docent-led tours remain the mainstay of the Center’s education program. In commissioning new work to replace work that had worn out, the Center renewed its commitment to serving visiting school groups, presenting work that relates to academic subjects studied in school. (One education program, the GE Foundation UnMuseum Visit, supplies elementary teachers with packets containing lesson plans for each of the works.) One such work is the visually striking *12 + 12*, by Cincinnati artist Steve Zieverink. Visitors press a button labeled with one of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale and see a colored square light up as they hear the sound. *12 + 12* is rich with possibilities for exploring the science of sound and color in a tour setting, but button-pushing toddlers love it as do adults, who try to pick out recognizable tunes.

Like much of today’s art, work in the UnMuseum employs a diverse range of processes and materials, including carpentry, computers, robotics, light, sound, water, metal, fabric and found materials. These choices of media reflect the range of approaches being used by many of today’s most celebrated artists. Non-traditional materials are also the obvious and best choice for making interactive work, not only for their strength, durability and scale, but also for the potential for interactivity presented by computers, sound, and light.

The UnMuseum doesn’t set out to teach people about art, or anything else for that matter. The work in the UnMuseum *is* art and, as such, does what the best contemporary art does: it fascinates, amuses, challenges, and engages. If it imparts a lesson about contemporary art, it does so by presenting first-rate projects by today’s artists and inviting visitors to have an enjoyable, participatory experience with it.

The problem of visitor expectation that surfaced during the research phase solved itself once the UnMuseum was installed in the new building. The UnMuseum occupies a large, open gallery that is every bit as visually striking as the rest of the museum. A visit to the UnMuseum is not limited to children and families, but is an integral part all visitors’ experience of the Center. People who pay their \$7.50 admission fee—\$3.50 for children—understand that they are coming to see art. What they see in the UnMuseum is an extension of the type of work they might find in the other galleries, depending on the exhibition. It is only more fun for the young and young at heart. Children still run around and act like children, but that’s why it was named the UnMuseum in the first place.