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21 October 2022

Goghing to the Exhibit: A Review of Toronto's *Immersive Van Gogh*

The *Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit* is a multi-sensory experience that digitally projects animations of Vincent Van Gogh's most recognizable and celebrated works, recreating the artist's brushstrokes, pencil sketches, and signature in real-time. The exhibit's design allows audiences to walk through an open space and experience Van Gogh's paintings through a new dimensionality of movement. Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* (2010) emphasizes the importance of presenting "opportunities for diverse visitor co-produced experiences" within the institution, inviting participants' involvement in the "creat[ion], remix[ing], and redistribut[ion] of content" (Simon ch.1). The exhibit itself demonstrates that art is something that can be appropriated and reimagined; I argue that this influences *how* the visitor experiences the work and challenges their ideas of art through the ingenuity of its technological mediation. The exhibit's strengths include its accessibility to high-quality replications of artworks that might otherwise be inaccessible unless by travel, its Artist in Residence program, and the flexibility of movement within the exhibit space. However, using Simon's "Principles of Participation," I argue that including more participatory elements would enrich the visitor experience. With the right tools to contribute their own "stroke" in the larger narrative, the visitor can be elevated to the role of a legitimate contributor to the ongoing making of art.

In its curatorial design, *Immersive Van Gogh* offers a large-scale visionary aesthetic that invites visitors to encounter the art as an active, living entity. Accompanied by classical

compositions, audiences can experience the art as actively *being* created—as opposed to a static, completed final masterpiece bound by a frame and hanging on the wall in an art gallery. Though the original texture and palpability of an oil painting cannot be replicated exactly, this exhibit challenges the notion that "museum art is untouchable" (Nodelman 9) through its design, projecting 600,000 cubic feet of moving paintings on the surrounding walls and floor ("Van Gogh Exhibit Toronto: The Immersive Experience"). Whereas framed paintings sit at a certain eye level on the gallery walls, these projections allow people of all ages to engage with and "touch" the art. The gallery's open space layout has chairs for viewing and a secondary viewing area that requires stairs; however, this aerial viewing is not wheelchair or stroller accessible. While the exhibit offers an intimate and immersive experience and does not require extensive artistic knowledge to be enjoyed, it poses some accessibility challenges, including a sensory alert for individuals with epilepsy or sensitive hearing. This could further pose challenges for neurodivergent individuals, young children frightened by loud noises and would be a limiting experience for the visually or auditorily impaired.

While the exhibit itself could function as a social object, the "socially networked experiences" (Simon ch. 4) Simon discusses might be more likely to arise out of a discussion of the displayed paintings from the exhibit's artists in residence. The spectacle nature of the exhibit fosters a more individualistic experience for the viewers sharing the space. Individuals remained primarily in their spheres and discussed the exhibit quietly amongst their respective circles. However, the exhibit's gift shop includes a wall of paintings that are iterations of Van Gogh and other local exhibitions, which presents the opportunity for discussion cross-exhibits. The paintings are collected from The Artist in Residence Program, Immersive's "…paid opportunity for artists to build connections, expand creative networks, collaborate, and share work with other

artists and the general public" ("Artist in Residence - Lighthouse Immersive"). This opportunity, while demonstrating the exhibit's commitment to collaboration and co-creation and highlighting vital elements for active engagement—such as providing materials to "create visual artwork onsite" ("Artist in Residence - Lighthouse Immersive")—is selective participation for a specific demographic. Simon argues that sustainable and impactful participation involves "…offering every visitor a legitimate way to contribute to the institution, share things of interest, connect with other people, and feel like an engaged and respected participant" (Simon ch. 1). While other opportunities within the exhibit are offered, such as choreographed yoga classes, it is a paid experience that may not be versatile or appealing to a variety of visitors. The gaps in this visitor experience can be addressed through the right "tools" and direction by staff to encourage creation and networking within the space.

Simon references technologist Clay Shirky's book *Here Comes Everybody* in discussing how an institution can meet its participant's needs by "…provid[ing] access to tools for participation that are easy to understand and use" (Simon ch. 1). The *Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit* demonstrates significant potential for a more creative engagement with the site both culturally and artistically. Providing visitors with some art materials and sketch pads could incite participation through interpretive drawings of their visual-sonic experience—offering visitors the opportunity to partake in creation, experiment stylistically, and engage in discussion with fellow participants.

Guaragna, Arianna. Photograph of *Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh projected floor and walls of the *Immersive Van Gogh* exhibit. Toronto. 7 Oct. 2022.

Guaragna, Arianna. Photograph of a young child approaching the projections on the walls and looking up. Toronto. 7 Oct. 2022.

Guaragna, Arianna. Photograph of a Sensory Alert sign by Lighthouse Immersive at the entrance of the exhibit. Toronto. 7 Oct. 2022.

Guaragna, Arianna. Photograph of collected artworks from the Artist in Residence Program. Toronto. 7 Oct. 2022.

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16 December 2022

The Climate Change Storytelling Project: Reimagining the Climate Call to Action Through Young Voices

Political and moral discourses concerning climate change have become a reality of the everyday lived experiences of children and young people globally (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 192). Discourse on the climate crisis' social, political, moral, and environmental implications permeates young people's lives from various media and educational sources. The museum is a viable institution where climate change education is explored through diverse curatorial strategies. Washington's National Children's Museum's *Innovation Sandbox* exhibit demonstrates an effective educational and participatory design that incorporates climate change education with interactive technologies. The exhibit's structure promotes "social and emotional development," self-discovery, and decision-making and encourages a deeper understanding of human-environmental causal relations ("Innovation Sandbox"). Pedagogically, *Innovation Sandbox* fulfills what Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles argue is a "creative, participatory and technologically-mediated" approach to climate change education (192-193). However, the exhibit presents the opportunity to legitimize young people's epistemological and dialogical contributions by exploring their understanding of the climate crisis and unique perspectives on change for the future.

The National Children's Museum's *Innovation Sandbox* demonstrates opportunities for cognitive development through play-based inquiry by enabling young people's exploration,

manipulation, and engagement with their environment (Henderson and Atencio 247). Henderson and Atencio argue that "[i]n play activity, children transcend the immediacy of the present and physical reality and explore new realms cultivated by the power of their imagination" (246). Experiential learning and play-based inquiry are integrated elements of *Innovation Sandbox*'s current exhibit experiences. *Weather Worlds* is an "immersive digital experience" utilizing green screen technology to allow children to manipulate elements of the weather via bodily movements ("Innovation Sandbox"). *Climate Action Heroes Quiz* is a comprehensive maze of questions guiding children towards careers for different "climate action heroes" and their specific roles in positively impacting their communities ("Innovation Sandbox"). Henderson and Atencio argue that "[w]ithin a museum context, learning is embedded in the interactive processes between participants and with the media at hand. Museum learning is, therefore, dialogical as well as hands-on" (247). The current exhibit experiences facilitate active engagements with technologies and scientific concepts. For younger children, the ability to manipulate, explore, describe, and organize is a critical component of engagement, whereas older primary-aged school children are less dependent on physical manipulation and can engage in critical thinking and mental processing (Harlen 63). For primary school children, "[e]xposure to alternative ideas" from classmates, teachers, and other secondary sources is fundamental for learning (Harlen 63). While play-based inquiry and experiential learning are effectively incorporated into *Innovation Sandbox's* exhibit design, greater emphasis on the dialogical component of the museum learning experience would augment the current pedagogical methods and promote reciprocal learning amongst children.

While programming and material collections are often designed *for* children in the museum context, these institutions often neglect to incorporate material created *by* children

(Patterson). *Innovation Sandbox's* current design does not display objects in the traditionalist notion of a museum exhibit, rather, it seeks to have child participants engage with technologies and curated spaces. While the curation of the exhibit effectively facilitates participant interaction and play-based inquiry designed *for* children—incorporating children's material culture as a complementary aspect of the exhibit design would legitimize children as viable creators as well as consumers of knowledge. Patterson and Friend regard children as "crucial citizens whose knowledge, perspectives, and experiences are valuable" (167). In the museum context, children's material culture is often overlooked or underprivileged in favour of adults' material culture (Patterson and Friend 168). My envisioning for an exhibit extension is the creation of *The Climate Change Storytelling Project*—a co-creative project between child participants and curators that incorporates the material culture of children reflecting their perspectives on climate change.

My envisioning is grounded in the methodologies explored by Hayman et al. in "PUTTING SCIENCE LITERACY ON DISPLAY"—a case study examining an interdisciplinary model for children's science and literary education through collaborative learning. The museum literacy project was conducted with a group of second-grade students as a multidisciplinary instruction of air and weather topics supplemented by related literature (Hayman et al. 59). Students were tasked with investigative research on a chosen topic which they presented to other students in the form of visual displays and PowerPoint presentations (Hayman et al. 61). Hayman et al. contend that "[m]useum literacy offers multiple opportunities for literacy engagement…[students] are motivated to learn science content and to share their knowledge with others; in doing so, literacy achievement is enhanced" (58-59). The museum literacy project involved converting the school library into a museum space wherein students could continuously refine their communication and presentation skills in order to appropriately

convey their scientific knowledge to their peer audiences (Hayman et al. 61). This project demonstrates an effective strategy to motivate learning through rigorous engagement with curricular topics and empowers students to share their scientific knowledge. Moreover, the project allowed for the classroom to become an extension of the museum by enabling young people to engage in discourse by presenting their ideas and explaining the relevancy of their visual models.

The dialogical component of the museum literacy project enables students to gain a more salient comprehension of scientific topics and refine their communication skills (Hayman et al. 61). I argue that a multidisciplinary approach to children's science education as an extension of the National Children's Museum's *Innovation Sandbox* would reap significant educational benefits for children and legitimize their perspectives and knowledge. The extension would comprise visual, auditory, and literary submissions from children ages 6-12 years old answering the prompt: "*What Action Do You Think Are Necessary to Combat Climate Change?".* This extension values young people's knowledge of climate change and encourages collaborative efforts that forefront children's voices in discourses addressing the multiple facets of the climate crisis in how they pertain to their lived experiences (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 203). Moreover, this extension forefronts children's material culture and de-centres adult power dynamics maintained within the museum space (Patterson and Friend 169). Rather than display objects *belonging* to children and *codified* by adult curators, this exhibit extension would privilege the perspective and voices of young people by giving them agency to articulate their ideas about climate change on their own terms.

The Climate Change Storytelling Project is inspired by the museum literacy project's initiative to engage students in scientific inquiry and creativity. Young people are often dispossessed of agency and greatly affected by precarious social, cultural, environmental, and

political situations (Patterson and Friend 168; Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 192). Thus, the need for climate change education must be balanced with opportunities for engagement and intervention by young people. *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* intends to place young people in the vanguard of the call for climate action. Thus, the current structure of climate change education and the museum as an educational institution must be re-examined. Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles highlight existing literature on climate change education, identifying a predominance in "top-down" approaches that focus primarily on "scientific knowledge, formal curriculum, behaviour change, or mitigation/adaptation" (202). In their research, an innovative alternative of "bottom-up" participatory approaches was also identified as a viable opportunity to have communities engage with issues through the creation of "climate change projects" (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 202). *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* will adopt a "bottom-up" approach through three distinct participatory strategies that will centre young people's perspectives within the exhibit space and enable them to engage in an open dialogue about the future of climate action.

The curatorial dream for *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* diversifies "sensory modes of experience" to appeal to museum visitors' different learning styles, motivations, and preferences (Allen 28). As a museum for young people, appealing to different learning styles is vital for accessibility and comprehensibility. *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* will appeal to a "multi-sensory" and "multimodal" design (Allen 28) through three participatory strategies: *Creativity and Creation*, *Literary Imagining*, and *Oration and Advocacy*. Each of these curatorial strategies employs narrativization as a technique for knowledge dissemination, communal dialogue, and affect-driven education. In the context of science museums, personal narratives are often marginalized in favour of a single authoritative voice whose role of educating and guiding inquiry is legitimized by the institution (Allen 28). This hierarchical

structure is replicated in classrooms, wherein a single authoritative voice is responsible for educating while students are positioned exclusively as learners. Thus, narrativizing children's ideas about the future of climate action offer a dialogical potential that engages with multiple perspectives that are equally authoritative and valuable.

The curatorial strategy of *Creativity and Creation* refers to visual and tactile dioramas, artworks, presentation boards, and physical models created by children to reflect their ideas about climate change and the actions necessary to address its effects on the world and their communities. Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles identify research studies on "affective approaches" to climate change education appealing to "emotional and somatic responses to climate change issues" through engaging with visual arts, imagery and narratives (202). These physical models aim to encourage child participants to express their ideas about climate change and redress through visual media as an accessible and aesthetically engaging educational tool. For visual learners, observing and engaging in dialogue about the displayed projects will allow them to broaden their perspectives by understanding *how* children visualize the effects of climate change. The strategy *Literary Imagining* will include collections of letters, poems, journal entries, or creative literary pieces written by children articulating their proposed climate change interventions. These written pieces can be addressed to a particular person or organization, such as a government leader, organization, or even their future selves. *Oration and Advocacy* will utilize children's voices to address the climate crisis and advocate for individual and systemic change. This strategy will consist of video recordings up to five minutes in length expressing ideas about climate redress in the form of storytelling, monologues, speeches, and other oration formats. Patterson and Friend criticize the oversaturation of Western epistemologies and artistic and cultural traditions in the museum space as a symptom of persistent inequality within the institution (173). The intended goal of *Oration and Advocacy* is

to platform children's voices within the institution while also legitimizing oral storytelling as an effective epistemology with significant cultural and educational value. These three curatorial strategies can be made accessible on the museum's website with details of the institution's vision along with a list of educational resources for young people to access. Video, visual, and literary digital submissions would be accessible to young people globally through online submission to the institution, allowing for diverse perspectives. However, physical models would require direct submission to the institution, limiting access to children in local communities.

The Climate Change Storytelling Project will be a co-creative project that balances the values of participants and the institution. The museum curators will be responsible for reviewing and accepting submissions and organizing the exhibit space while ensuring that the participants are the authoritative voices governing the exhibit's content and shared vision. Nina Simon outlines three core reasons why cultural institutions undertake co-creative projects:

1. To give voice and be responsive to the needs and interests of local community members
2. To provide a place for community engagement and dialogue
3. To help participants develop skills that will support their own individual and community goals (chpt. 8).

The three curatorial strategies demonstrate Simon's conception of co-creativity by forefronting community engagement and providing space for authentic dialogue. To further encourage discussion between visitors, children submitting material or video contributions will be required to submit a question or series of inquiries directed at the audience. Incorporating inquiry into these narrative projects will aid in consolidating visitor experiences of the exhibit

with previous understandings of the climate crisis and promote further contemplation (Allen 29).

*The Climate Change Storytelling Projec*t exhibit will be located in the National Children's Museum's Visiting Exhibit Hall, a space reserved for innovative travelling exhibitions that reflect the changing world ("Visiting Exhibit Hall"). This space has been utilized for a diverse range of exhibits and would provide significant latitude for curators to arrange the various facets of the exhibit. As a storytelling project, the linearity of material and digital content is not emphasized; rather, the exhibit should be organized to enable flexible movement throughout the space. Visitors should be able to begin at any section of the exhibit and make connections between different aspects of the project. Physical models will be displayed in protective freestanding glass cases arranged in the exhibit space. Physical models will be labelled according to the creator's description and include an inquiry prompt reflecting their model. The display of children's models will be reconceptualized according to Patterson and Friend's research exploring material collections interpreted *by* children themselves (169). While curators will have authority over the physical placement of the models within the space, the models themselves will reflect the interpretation of the creator. Written letters, poems, journals and other literary pieces will be arranged on a storytelling wall situated at an appropriate eye-lever for young people and wheelchair users. This arrangement will function to document children's conceptions about the future of climate action and amalgamate perspectives by visually arranging them as a collection of narratives. The audio and video elements will utilize projection technology to display footage onto sections of the gallery's walls. Curators will be responsible for sequencing videos into a comprehensive format that will include closed captioning, sign interpretation, and translations where appropriate. The final video format will play on a loop and end with a series of inquiries posited by the storytellers.

The National Children's Museum incorporates numerous opportunities for physical interaction; thus, *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* will emphasize dialogical interactions between visitors as its primary objective. Pallud argues that in authentic learning, interactions with instructors and classmates are conducive to a "successful learning experience" (467). Particularly in the museum context, where learning is non-linear and exploratory (Pallud 468), the role of parents, teachers, and adults in guiding and encouraging inquiry is vital. The museum literacy project similarly emphasizes the importance of educational and motivational support for young people (Hayman et al. 58-59). Allen addresses the issue of "cognitive overload," particularly in science museums, as a symptom of overstimulation and a limitation to effective learning (20). Given the multisensory design of the exhibit, cognitive overload is a potential challenge facing visitors, particularly young people and neurodivergent individuals. The National Children's Museum's website contains accessibility details, including additional resources made available upon request ("Plan Your Museum Visit"). Complimentary sensory backpacks are available to help mitigate sensory stimulation with noise-reducing headphones and fidgets ("Plan Your Museum Visit"). Other forms of mobility accessibility, such as elevators for strollers and wheelchairs, are available in addition to other resources, including a designated zone for mothers and a quiet zone ("Plan Your Museum Visit"). Tactile barriers to the exhibit's design present a challenge to visitors with vision impairments. However, description and inquiry labels will be accessible in braille format for greater comprehensibility. The exhibit's commitment to accessibility is central to a successful storytelling objective and dialogical experience for a diversity of visitors.

The participatory strategies of *The Climate Change Storytelling Project* seek to integrate knowledge on climate change and extend it in the form of storytelling projects that engage young people's ideas in a variety of visual media and technological formats for an authentic

learning experience. Pallud examines how engaging with interactive technologies impacts museum visitors' learning experiences, primarily focusing on usability and interactivity (465). This research focuses on the "cognitive and affective reactions" of individuals while interacting with their environment (Pallud 467). Pallud integrates these internal processes in examining authentic learning, arguing that "authentic learning should encourage the analysis of real-world problems" such that learners engage with and reflect on real-world situations (467). Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles similarly argue for renewed "forms of climate change education that directly involve young people in responding to the scientific, social, ethical, and political complexities of climate change" (191). Moreover, Hayman et al. demonstrate the benefits of integrating scientific discourse into storytelling through the museum literacy project, which encourages young people to engage meaningfully in topics that enhance scientific knowledge and literary skills (61). The museum literacy project's interdisciplinary model provides a foundational structure for *The Climate Change Storytelling Project*, which emphasizes collaborative learning amongst young people as a strategy for authentic engagement.

The Climate Change Storytelling Project, through its three curatorial strategies, presents opportunities for meaningful engagement with young people's ideas about climate change and provides the space for inquiry and dialogue amongst community members. The project emphasizes children as mutual environmental stakeholders and valuable sources of knowledge and agents of change. Oversimplified, adult-interpreted, and romanticized perspectives of children's lived experiences are frequently reflected in museums and exhibits about and for young people, often stifling or excluding children's voices entirely (Patterson and Friend 167). While play-based inquiry has a critical role in effective exhibit design and provides opportunities for learning and engagement, more opportunities for child-centred discourse within the institution should be explored. Multimedia storytelling empowers young people and

platforms their knowledge about the global effects of climate change from their unique approaches to climate redress. Children's museums, as a site of children's culture and education, must value young people as informed members of their institutions and the global community with immense potential for conceptualizing alternative perspectives of the world.

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