

CHAPTER EIGHT

BUILDING
MEANINGFUL
INTERPRETATION
AROUND
UNSETTLING
CONTEMPORARY
ART

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FROM NOVEMBER 2014 through April 2015, the Portland Art Museum hosted the installation of a complex, unsettling, and physically-immersive multimedia installation piece entitled *The Enclave* (2013) by Irish contemporary artist and photographer Richard Mosse. Consisting of six monumental double-sided screens installed in a darkened gallery, paired with a powerfully haunting soundscape, *The Enclave* presented a unique challenge for the Portland Art Museum’s education team as they tackled issues of interpretation, visitor reflection, and public learning.

In *The Enclave*, Mosse employs discontinued military film stock to document the largely overlooked humanitarian disaster in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – in which 5.4 million people have died since 1998. In a kind of advocacy of seeing, *The Enclave* attempts to cast this forgotten tragedy in a new spectrum of light, to make this forgotten humanitarian disaster visible. Furthermore, Mosse aims to keep the experience as open as possible, allowing viewers to bring personal experiences, memories, stereotypes, and media images to the process of making meaning with this complex work. According to Mosse, “The work does not prescribe a set of responses, and remains ambiguous in an unsettling and seemingly irresponsible way.”

Given these expectations for ambiguity and complexity, the museum’s education team decided to construct an extended series of meaningful opportunities for visitors and staff alike to respond to and react with the installation. These opportunities encouraged personal reflection and physical engagement within the space of *The Enclave* and provided open pathways for further learning. Opportunities offered incorporated a range

in levels of engagement from which to choose.

This case study explores the strategies used by the museum to connect a variety of visitors with this unsettling work of contemporary art. These strategies include:

- an in-gallery interpretation space designed for visitor reflection and response;
- printed postcards inviting visitor written responses;
- a Tumblr site¹ on which the museum regularly posted visitor responses to *The Enclave*.

While these interpretive strategies serve as the focus for this case study, the museum also partnered with the locally-based international development non-profit organization, Mercy Corps and the Mercy Corps Action Center, whose staff facilitated workshops for museum staff and docents as well as teachers and students participating in a joint school program between the museum and Mercy Corps.

In addition, the museum hosted an extensive series of public workshops and conversations which specifically encouraged open dialogue and personal reflections paired with viewing *The Enclave*. Throughout these interpretive strategies, our goals were to allow for open, personal, even emotional responses to the piece; to encourage visitors to physically engage with the space of the piece; and to provide pathways for further learning, especially related to the situation in the DRC.

In-gallery interpretation space

Early in the education team's thinking about how to facilitate visitor experience with *The Enclave*, it became clear that

visitors walking out of the installation would need a way to work through their reactions and responses. In the absence of a tour or multimedia guide, it would fall on the content of the interpretive space to empower individuals to tackle *The Enclave* independently. Simply entitled *Reflecting on The Enclave*, the in-gallery interpretation space helped visitors transition from a state of being acted upon by the exhibition's visual and auditory forces to having the freedom and quiet to react to what had just transpired. The space did not provide visitors with the museum's point of view or any curatorial voice. The museum remained silent and instead provided a comfortable space for visitors to have and share their own perspectives (Figure 1).

This small "living room" space included a love seat, cushioned armchairs, and a small end table with a bin of pencils. Housed across from the seating area were five clear acrylic holders, each of which held one deck of interpretive postcards. The front side of each card displayed a still photograph from the exhibition and the backside displayed the interpretive prompts: I saw... I heard... I felt... Five cards were placed in the rack with the photograph facing forward and one card was placed in the rack with the interpretive prompts facing forward. This arrangement indicated to visitors the card's multi-interpretive purpose. Sitting on a pedestal directly below the cards was a clear acrylic box with a slit in the lid. Cards filled out by visitors could be seen inside the box. The nature and placement of these items invited visitors to look at, pick up, write on, and add a card to those already in the box.

Attached to the side of the box was a sign inviting visitors to *See what others have shared* via the project's associated Tumblr site. This information indicated to visitors that they



FIG. 1: *The Reflecting on The Enclave* interpretive space, Portland Art Museum.

could read others' responses and that their responses were aggregated into an ongoing community commentary about *The Enclave* extending beyond the museum.

Response cards

Knowing from previous experience that cards are popular take-aways for visitors, these postcards aimed to provide visitors with an opportunity to say *I saw this* or *I witnessed that*. Therein lay one of the project's most significant challenges. With six simultaneous screens and a 47-minute runtime, visitors emerged from *The Enclave* having witnessed entirely different scenarios. Some saw rolling images of stunningly beautiful landscapes. Others witnessed a funeral scene juxtaposed with a dangerous birth. A body abandoned in the grass. A sprawling internal displacement camp. Our challenge was to find the emotional or thematic touch points that could translate this immersive experience into static interpretive cards.

Our interpretive media team segmented the piece into major themes or experiences: war and conflict, the role of the photographer, nature and the sublime, Africa and the other. Cross-referencing this list with the potential photographs approved by the artist's gallery, we chose six images that we believed could serve as touchpoints for a range of potential experiences: a sublime landscape, a military roadblock, a group of civilians, an individual soldier, a young woman, and a damaged village.

We deliberately selected images that were highly polysemic. For example, the landscape, *Platon*, echoed picturesque tropes of art history (Figure 2). It also could speak to environmentalism, highlight the surreal nature of the pink film stock, represent the work's otherworldliness, or, as we saw in



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REFLECTING ON THE ENCLAVE

November 8, 2014 – February 15, 2015

To learn more about this piece and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, visit portlandartmuseum.org/enclave

*Water and pink
shrubs. Men and
women with guns.
Grass that
hid the soldiers
from death.
Death found
them anyway.*

*a lullaby over
the water.
I don't know
the woods, but
they sound
hopeful.
A deafening
buzz, a heavy
scream,
Approaching,
foreboding,
darkness.*

*Anxiety and
sadness upon
knowing
what was
nearby, but
coming
felt...
And this death
is on loop.
One lived to see
and die and
live, Reunited but
not long.*

Image: Richard Mosse, *Platon*, North Kivu, eastern Congo, 2012


Farm near Bhambwwe, Masisi Territory, North Kivu. This rich pastureland is fiercely fought over in an escalating territorial conflict. Originally owned by indigenous Congolese tribes, who subsist by growing crops and hunting bush meat, this landscape was seized by pastoralist tribes, such as the Tutsi, who have cut through the primordial forests to create pasture for their cattle. Farmers are dispossessed through intimidation and human rights violations. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

FIG. 2: Sample visitor response card from the *Reflecting on The Enclave* interpretation space, Portland Art Museum.

the response cards, embody an idea of hope. By contrast, we did not select a photograph called *Madonna and Child*, which featured a uniformed soldier holding a baby in the pose of the Virgin and Child. This image, while incisively poignant in highlighting the complexities of villain and victim, left little space in which the visitor could create meaning. By offering the visitor a broad range of photographs, we invited them to self-select the image that matched their experience.

Initially, we had planned to further draw out these themes through a variety of questions printed on the verso of the cards: Who is the victim and who is the villain? What is the man on the right thinking? What about the man on the left? Due to a compressed project timeline, our initial prompts were developed without the benefit of visitor testing. Therefore we used a docent training session as an *ad hoc* focus group.

After standing in *The Enclave* ourselves and observing docent educators processing their experience, we redeveloped the prompts entirely into the three, simple, sensory-based statements: *I saw... I heard... I felt...* These words, which were repeated over and over in the training session, were familiar to us from educational research, particularly Harvard's Project Zero Thinking Routines, which employed them. They provided enough guidance to bolster processing and reflection, but to still afford room for a variety of responses and types of meaning making. Moreover, by splitting the prompts into bite-sized statements, we also hinted to visitors that it was OK to have a range of responses from simple to complex, and to navigate the space on the reverse of the card in whatever way they chose (Figure 3).



P REFLECTING ON THE ENCLAVE

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I saw the bombs fall in Ireland, over land rather than the people. We still fight to be free, and one day... everyone will be. I heard... I felt...

Image: Richard Mosse, *Ruby Tuesday*, North Kivu, eastern Congo, 2011
Rebel under Colonel Duga from the armed group known as Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain (APCLS) walking to a rendezvous with FDLR Colonel Sadiki in the jungle west of Lubero, Massif Territory, North Kivu. Shortly after this meeting Colonel Sadiki was assassinated by his comrade Cheka, a notorious warlord who accepted a bounty for the killing, allegedly from Rwanda. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

FIG. 3: Sample visitor response card from the *Reflecting on The Enclave* interpretation space, Portland Art Museum.

Visitor responses

In total we printed 7,000 cards, of which around 4,000 were taken by visitors and around 500 slipped into the box in the gallery. Although each response was unique, the methods by which visitors used the cards could be categorized in three ways:

- *Lists*: Some visitors took the prompt literally, charting what they saw, heard, and felt. They wrote in vertical columns over the words, sometimes even using lines to divide their cards into three spaces. They outlined and circled the light grey text to emphasize it. They drew lines between the printed words and their handwritten texts.
- *Notes to the museum*: Often marked with explicit salutations to the museum or the artist, visitors used these cards to give us feedback in the form of concerns, thank you notes, and a frequent request to turn down the volume (the artist preferred the audio component of the piece to be quite loud, providing a physical experience of sound as well as of the projections).
- *Journaling*: By making the background text light grey, we had successfully signalled to visitors that almost the entire card could be used to write or draw. Many visitors did exactly that, often writing stream of consciousness, free association, or personal reflections. Many show cross-outs and hesitations, reflecting the questioning and thinking that happened in the space. For example, one visitor wrote, “There was something about this. Something I’m not entirely sure what it was. Something about this just made my something click. All I can say is brilliant: I’m leaving with a lot to think about and a really

heavy heart. But that’s what art does, right? Makes you think. Amazing.”

In terms of what the visitors wrote, we saw five overall themes emerge from the visitor responses:

- *Peace on Earth*: Visitors who shared prayers, wishes, and hopes for those involved in the conflict. This was, interestingly, often correlated to the image *Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams*. In this case, visitors took the opportunity to speak directly to the woman depicted: “Sorry about the war” [sic] or “Plz be safe.”
- *Cynicism and despair*: Although there were uplifting moments in *The Enclave*, the artist did not shy away from depicting violence, destruction, and conflict. This response was almost a direct inverse of those in the first category.
- *Intellectual connections*: These visitors related *The Enclave* to their prior knowledge of politics, literature, and film, bringing in comparisons to Kubrick, *Heart of Darkness*, *Invisible Children*, and others. As we know, adults learn by relating new ideas to their existing matrices of knowledge and experience. In this way, we saw them working through *The Enclave*, demonstrating learning and engagement as well as an interest in thematically related topics.
- *Self-absorbed artists*: Many visitors attacked the piece, challenging the validity and morality of a white artist receiving accolades and making money by speaking for black communities and “capturing” images of black bodies.
- *Descriptive processing*: Many visitors did not attempt to reach conclusions. They listed what they saw, heard, and

felt, sometimes filling the entire card just with descriptive words.

Tumblr site

The Tumblr blog site was where all these varied responses came together. It provided a trans-temporal community in which viewers could find echoes of their own experience in the words of others. With over 100 posts shared on the site, it also provided a broader view of the museum audience (and the city of Portland) as a whole responding and reacting to *The Enclave*. Like the in-gallery interpretive space, the Tumblr site was designed to be as simple as possible both aesthetically and functionally. Visitors scrolled through back-to-back cards: image, comment, image, comment. As an institution, we provided no annotation or categorization. The cards were posted in a random order, free to complement or contradict their neighbors. Even the introductory text was completely neutral:

While *The Enclave* is on view at the Portland Art Museum, visitors are invited to reflect upon this immersive experience and share their thoughts with the museum. These are some of their thoughts.

Framed in this way, the site offered visitors validation. The museum posted, without comment or hierarchy, every type of response: those who called out Richard Mosse as a “self-absorbed artist”; those who wrote only one or two words; and those who made spelling or grammatical errors. Viewed together, the stream emphasizes that there is no single interpretation or meaning for this work and that, in the museum’s

eyes, no one viewer's voice is more important or correct than the others'.

This approach carried inherent risks. As a department, we were committed to posting all responses, and yet aware that, given the racially charged nature of the work, we might encounter hate speech or other offensive content. There were cards that we did post that were difficult to endorse, such as one which read:

The people in this area of the continent are guided by superstition fed by rage and terror. No education or very little. No chance, no changes, no hope – only renewed conflict + murder.

Overall, however, we had only one card that we chose not to share because of its references to suicide.

In five months, our Tumblr site received a little over 1,000 page views: 10% of visitors viewed between ten and twenty response cards in a visit; 5% viewed between 30 and 40; 30% returned to the site at least once and 180 began following the museum on Tumblr. Even months after the exhibition has closed, we still gain new followers and see new reposts. Perhaps most interestingly, however, is the fact that no one card has emerged as the most shared or iconic image from the project. Although a few Tumblr users reblogged a batch of cards at once, most chose one or two, frequently non-sequential cards, to share with their followers. As virtual visitors, they selected from the diversity of responses offered, to find the few that resonated with them as individuals.

My intention with this work was to create a dilemma in the viewer's heart. If some viewers were struck by the beauty of war – and sometimes war is beautiful – then, I hoped, those viewers would then be appalled by their response: by taking aesthetic pleasure from someone's misery, pain, or death. And in that moment, perhaps they might stand back from themselves in the act of perceiving – take a moment to think. – Richard Mosse

As contemporary art continues to challenge museum visitors in a variety of ways, it is important for museums to carefully reflect on the ways in which visitors will experience and respond to unsettling, immersive, complex, and socially-relevant works of art. In our experiences with *The Enclave*, having a set of interpretive strategies that allowed for individualized reflection as well as collective sharing allowed for a more meaningful experience for many visitors. The opportunities for personal reflection and extended learning offered by the museum for *The Enclave* have helped to anchor the museum as a museum of its place, not just a museum in its place – and these experiences might provide guidance to other museums as they plan interpretation around similarly complex contemporary art.

NOTES

1. The exhibition's Tumblr site can be found at: <http://pdxartmuseum.tumblr.com>.