

Live Encounter Tagging System / A Test Case Review

A LIKELY SCENARIO

You enter the museum's exhibition gallery, look around and observe the works on display. Your attention might first be triggered by a visual fascination, a sensorial reaction to an image or object. Then the mind joins in, demanding context and reason, so you turn to the label, the title card. What happens next depends pretty much on the prior knowledge you may have obtained related to the art on display; in other words, the reference points you gathered before your visit, which will allow you to decode the provided label, and then turn back to the artwork with an enriched point of view.

A typical label presents the following details:

NAME OF ARTIST
year of birth – death

NAME OF WORK
year of creation

materials, dimension
source

Obviously, to the undiscerning visitor these details provide almost no access to an artwork. I'm sure any of you can recall a frustrating moment when reaching for the label for additional clues, only to find the work in question is called 'Untitled'.

BACKGROUND

LETS, an alternative information system for art institutions, was conceived with the ambition to respond to fundamental questions related to the role of the art museum as a contemporary knowledge hub. LETS aims to incorporate the museum in a network-based reality that reshuffles information hierarchies, welcomes informal knowledge accumulation, and enriches both the visitors' experience and the museum collection. Further plans for the system include developing tools for advanced activation of the meta-data, generated collaboratively by visitors and curators. Analysing and experimenting with this bank of relational keywords conveys great potential for increasing the personal, meaningful impact of art and offering open-end museum experiences.

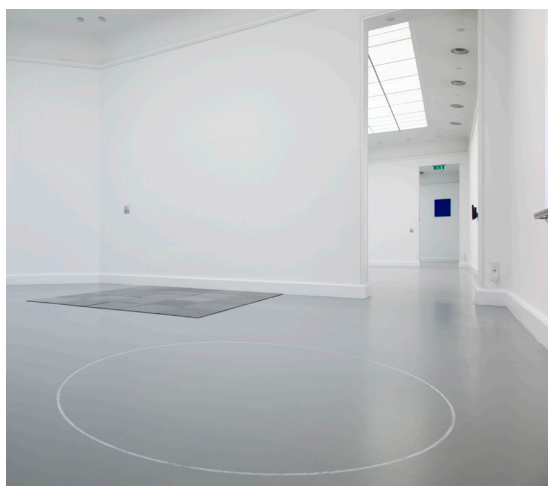
The LETS system was developed in the Van Abbemuseum in association with *Play Van Abbe*, an 18-month programme launched on November 2009 with the aim of examining the role of the art museum in the 21st century.

TAG

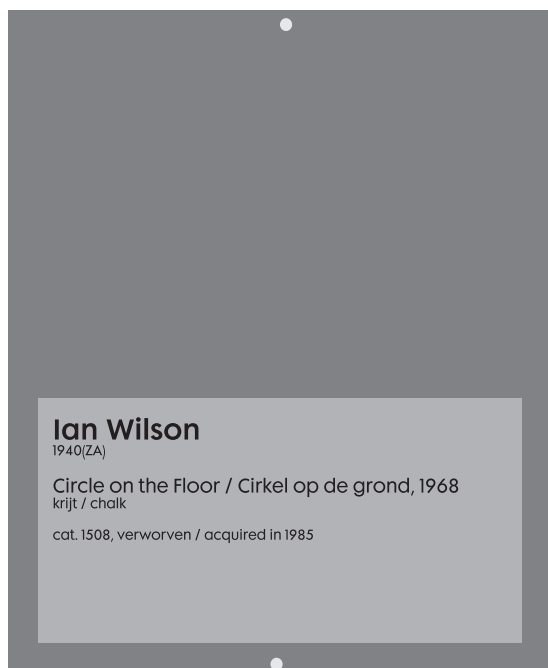
After recognising the above situation, LETS was created in an attempt to essentially answer two questions:

- 1 What kind of information can we supply about an artwork, which will provide the visitor with an **immediate access point** to the exhibited art (increasing inclusivity)?
- 2 What kind of information provided will trigger **independent interpretation** of an artwork (increasing engagement and reducing exclusivity of imparting knowledge)?

The tool chosen for the task was the tag or keyword, a concept borrowed from Web 2.0 applications. A tag is attributed to a piece of information by either the author or the user in an associative and informal manner. A bank of tags generates metadata (data about data), which enables intuitive



Ian Wilson, Circle on the Floor, 1968. Photo Peter Cox



search and information retrieval. We identified tags as a potential bridge for fruitful exchange between the museum (curators and artists) and the visiting audience, information that is more relevant and accessible compared to that displayed on traditional labels.

A BRIEF GLANCE AT LABELLING HISTORY

The history of museum labels stresses the correlation between museum information structure and the target audience at the time. As Ingrid Schaffner notes in her extensive essay Wall Text 2003/6, labels were needed as inventory pieces in the age of private art and curiosa collections, where they were directed towards those privileged guests ("The Grand Tourists") who shared similar interests and journeys as the hosts. In the 19th century, with the birth of the modern museum and of the middle class who was invited into them, the debate on information strategies began (the British House of Commons even set a rule obliging museums to attribute descriptive labels to the displayed object in order to save the public the expense of a catalogue). But at a certain moment, along with the establishment of the White Cube ideal for the display of autonomous art, labels received their 'tombstone' format and were generally reduced to minimum, again approaching only an art connoisseur audience. Interestingly, one of the few examples diverting from this pattern belongs to none other than Alfred H. Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. With his strong commitment to education, Barr used experimental information formats in the galleries with the aim of accustoming his visitors to the innovative forms of Modern art.

DO YOU EVER SAY:

"Modern art is..."

"I don't like modern art..."

"The trouble with modern art is..."

But can you generalize about modern art?

Look at the two paintings on the wall, for instance. Both are large, both are of women's figures, both are by famous artists, and both were done in the early 1930. But otherwise they could scarcely be more different.

The Picasso **Reclining Woman** to the right is a decoration in bright colors and flat half

abstract patterns. The subject is absorbed into the design – and the design, gay and colourful, is what makes the picture worth looking at.

The Siqueiros **Proletarian Victim**, on the contrary, is heavy and sombre in color, and so boldly modelled that the figure seems almost to heave itself out of the flat canvas; and the subject is treated with passionate seriousness.

Which do you think is more truly “modern”?
Which do you like more?

1942 wall label by Alfred H. Barr, Wendy Woon. At Play, Seriously, in the Museum, Inside/Out, A Moma/MomaPSI Blog.

rond
round

binnenkant
inside

buitenkant
outside

Ian Wilson
1940(ZA)

Circle on the Floor / Cirkel op de grond, 1968
krijt / chalk

cat. 1508, verworven / acquired in 1985

THE SYSTEM

The first stage in constructing our alternative information system was to ask curators to attribute tags to the works in their exhibitions. They were requested to come up with words that uncover their motivation for including the specific work in the exhibition, or: what does this work of art mean to you, the curator, at this point in time? These key words were displayed on a new format of title cards wherein the traditional ‘tombstone’ details were moved to the bottom and the tags displayed as primary data. This framework was named ‘**static tagging**’.

The next level of the process was to enable ‘**interactive tagging**’, inviting visitors to contribute their own tags and thus turn the title cards into a conversation item.

Interactive tagging also marked the cue for defining the role of the museum as editor, refining the relation between a democratic form of classification by visitors vs. top-down processes. Modern society has entrusted the museum with the role of cultural and artistic editor: as the choices of what to collect and preserve practically compose cultural narratives. Similarly, the moment came for us to decide on criteria for valid and non-valid tagging, and an interdepartmental team was gathered to define editing criteria.

First and foremost it was clear that the goal for LETS was to collect **additional** meanings - we started by looking for words which assign an association or information to the exhibited art, ones which supply new lead for others to use. These tags we called ‘**interpretational**’ tags (see *system* for Sol Lewitt’s *Untitled (wall structure)*). We also defined two types of tags which weren’t beneficial to the system, those that don’t provide that additional layer of interpretation, ‘**descriptive**’ tags which only describe what is seen in the artwork (*canned soup* for *Campbell Soup* by Warhol) as well as ‘**judgmental**’ ones (*breathtaking* for Ian Wilson’s *Circle on the Floor*).

Another criterion was length; since only contributions that could later be used as key-words in a search engine would count as valid, we were obliged to filter some results. So even though we were receiving nice full-sentence tags from visitors (‘my mother acts like this too!’ on Martha

Rosler's *Kitchen Semiotics*), we had to let these go. The editing process is never easy, since different words can be understood in multiple ways. The guiding principle is therefore to aim to include as many tags as possible, and we are constantly re-formulating rules and sub-rules as we go along.

In practice, according to the above criteria, a routine of editing rounds was scheduled in which the oldest and non-valid visitors' tags are removed, leaving on only the curators' tags and most recent visitors' tags. All removed tags (valid and non-valid) are fed into excel sheets for documentation and study. The valid ones are inserted as keywords into the museum collection's computer system and now serve as search words for their matching artworks in the collection.

TAG PUSHERS

A significant component in operating the LETS system are the museum hosts, a team of dedicated volunteers, partly serving as guards but mainly initiating conversations with visitors on the floor. For interactive tagging the hosts were recruited to serve as 'tag pushers', introducing visitors to the system and inviting them to join in. Hosts would stock up with blank tags and a pen, initiate casual conversation, actively facilitating the visitors' participation. Here we noted the first achievement of LETS, one that we hadn't intentionally planned: the hosts were delighted with their active role and most importantly with the new 'conversation starter' they were supplied with. One of the main obstacles in a museum environment is how to start talking to a visitor about art without intimidating or being suspected of patronising ('what do you think about this artwork?' is a weird way to start talking to someone you're meeting for the first time). What the tags did was to supply a practical reason for opening a conversation – explaining the appearance of the peculiar metal plates and words in the exhibition halls; from there it was much easier to continue discussing art, interpretations and meanings.

CONCLUSIONS SO FAR

Interactive tagging was first implemented in the exhibition *In Between Minimalisms* (Play Van Abbe, April-September 2010, curators: Christiane



Berndes and SUPERFLEX) to which the statistics and conclusions brought here relate.

During five months of exhibition 521 tags were gathered, an average of 17 tags per work, 351 of which were marked as valid. Ian Wilson's *Circle on the Floor* was tagged *my space*, *breathing space*, *tap dancing* and *point of view*; Sol Lewitt's *Untitled (wall structure)* work received *arrangement*, *ladder*, *simplicity* and even *the new Billy*¹. Sometimes the visitors sent us on a research journey, which is how we found out that *Blaafarveværk*, attributed by a visitor to Yves Klein's *Blue*, indicates the name of the Norwegian factory which in the 19th century was the main producer of cobalt-blue pigment. In Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* there was a 'dispute' between the curators and visitors - the former opted for *art market* and *supermarket*, referring to the original artistic intentions behind the work, and the latter responded with *timeless* and *nostalgia* - I presume they were recalling a sentimental value of the work. And in the case of Donald Judd's *Untitled (Progression)* from 1969, the tagging system proved

its potential as bottom-up information system, when two different visitors contributed the word *Fibonacci*, informing others on the artist's mathematical source of inspiration and providing a useful key for reflection, not to mention the *raison d'être* of the work.

The hosts were asked to fill feedback forms after their 'tagging shifts', which gave us a general picture of participation patterns. Visitors who refused to actively tag generally belonged to an older age group, and as might be expected, younger visitors were more open to this type of experience. However it's important to note that almost everyone, including those who didn't actively tag, was observed reading and inspecting tags contributed by others.

Additional research for the LETS project was carried out by: Andreina Castillo and Annette Eliëns.

NOTE

1 Referring to the famous shelving system by Ikea.

A large dashed rectangular frame containing two columns of empty rectangular boxes for text entry. A scissors icon is positioned on the left side of the frame, indicating where to cut out the page.