
Bringing in more elderly audiences with the power of digital technologies: A case study

Junko Iwabuchi
Keio University, Tokyo

Summary

The Contemporary Art Center in Mito, Japan has always had difficulties attracting elderly individuals since its opening in March 1990 because of the cutting-edge approach of their exhibitions. Noboru Tsubaki, an artist of international acclaim, was chosen as the director of special events in attempt to bring in senior citizens who would not normally come to the Center. His solution was to organize a workshop of Computer Graphics especially designed for them.

There could have been a less expensive way to attract elderly audiences to the Center and there should have been an easier way to let them know how to use digital technologies for appreciating Contemporary Art. But this particular workshop was quite effective in stimulating the minds of senior citizens and as a result, their interest in Contemporary Art and new technologies was ignited. The impact arising from the media-coverage also brought further new audiences to the museum successfully.

Museums of Contemporary Art: Why are there so many in Japan?

The Survey of Social Education published in 1994 by Japan's Ministry of Education shows that there are 651 art museums¹ in existence in the country and more than a half of these museums were built between 1981 and 1994. Dramatic increase of art museums, both public and private,

during this period is literally the memento of bubble economy. Lavish architectures and grand purchasing plans were laid out during the 80s at the height of mighty Yen, yet the museums after opening faced serious financial difficulties and many of them were left without budget for any further purchases.

An interesting tendency one may notice when visiting these new museums is that they only exhibit Contemporary Art. Even when the museums are not designated as Contemporary Art museums, in reality, they are and they only show and collect art works from the last 4 to 5 decades. My colleagues from other countries are often puzzled by this situation and ask me why Contemporary Art is so popular in Japan. In response, I must tell them with regret that this is because of a very simple reason. Art works from the 60s and the 70s are not as expensive as the 18th or the 19th Century paintings and for this same reason, they can collect several pieces with the same amount of money needed for purchasing just one Impressionist painting for example. They could not afford to purchase anything else, but the art works of our times. Then, a tragedy begins here. In Japan the public in general, as in any other country, is not so enthusiastic about Contemporary Art. But the problem is... since there are amazing number of museums of Contemporary Art; they have to live with it.

As 7 national museums facing privatization within two years time² and regional museums expected to follow the same path immediately afterwards, every museum in Japan no longer can afford to ignore opportunities to develop new and bigger audiences. Japanese museums are now committed to become audience friendly (that means

traditionally they weren't) and started to offer wide range of educational programs and outreach activities. Amongst many museums that are experimenting with something new, today I would like to talk about a unique case at the Contemporary Art Center of the Art Tower Mito in Mito, Ibaraki prefecture.

Senior citizens: For them to get familiarized with Contemporary Art

The city of Mito is located approximately 70 km north of Tokyo and has a population of about 250,000. The Art Tower Mito³ was open on March 22 in 1990 as a cultural complex consisting of theater, concert hall and art gallery and this gallery part is called the Contemporary Art Center. The Art Tower Mito is administered by the Mito Arts Foundation⁴, which is solely funded by the city and the construction itself was also financed entirely by the city of Mito.

The Contemporary Art Center opened without a permanent collection as frequently seen in many cases of Contemporary Art Museums opened during this period and was designated as a place to introduce the forefront of Contemporary Art in the form of temporary exhibitions. The citizens were excited about the beautiful new facilities designed by Arata Isozaki, a renowned architect, when it first opened. The theater and the concert hall became popular with wide variety of programs and regularly attended by the locals, but the Contemporary Art Center, on the contrary, seemed to have difficulties communicating with local audiences. In short, their prospective audiences did not like what they could not understand at first sight and was irritated by the subject

matter, which was to challenge conservative ideas and techniques of the former era. It is not easy to bridge between those who believe that art has to be something beautiful and pleasing to their eyes and a museum whose role is to promote contemporary works of art full of provocative images and messages.

When Mr. Tsukasa Mori, Curator, and Ms. Eriko Osaka, Director, of the Contemporary Art Center first approached Mr. Noboru Tsubaki⁵, an artist of international acclaim, in order to organize workshops in an attempt to attract audiences who would not come to the museum under normal circumstances, they did not have any solid ideas. They just knew Tsubaki as the artist who had had exhibitions with them in the past and also as someone who has outstanding communication skills.

At their first meeting, Tsubaki suggested that he would target his program for individuals who are 60 years old of age, or older. It was going to be a big challenge for them as this age group normally has the least attendance at any museum of Contemporary Art. Tsubaki points out that, in fact, senior citizens are the best people to approach as prospective audience to any museum because they are the only ones who can afford both time and money. In Japan too, young people are much more capable of understanding Contemporary Art, but unfortunately, students are often tied up with school activities and working young adults aren't able to come home while museums are open during weekdays. Senior citizens are the only ones who actually hang out near the Contemporary Art Center and at least they use the restaurant and bookshop on the premises. Then, why not approach them and make them into enthusiastic supporters of Contemporary Art? Tsubaki was determined to communicate with this particular age group, yet he had to think and design how to start a conversation with them.

In Tsubaki's opinion, Contemporary Art is a sheer reflection of our times, our society and our everyday life. It

may be difficult for senior citizens to enjoy and understand Contemporary Art if they have already lost in touch with the forefront of our everyday history being made. There are a lot of new values, vocabularies and skills to use and new technologies to be learned. Tsubaki thinks that we need to provide help for senior citizens in not being afraid of new values. This was going to be our first step. In order to accommodate a relaxed environment in which senior citizens can learn what young people do and think, Tsubaki called in his young colleagues who are computer game designers and system engineers. With them, he gave a 3-day-workshop for senior citizens to play around with computer graphics. Tsubaki originally works in real 3D, but recently, he has been incorporating computer generated 3D images into his sculptural pieces, using computer monitors and projecting images elsewhere.

In a paragraph from his program note for the participants, Tsubaki writes⁶:

A museum serves as the center for creating new visions and also as a laboratory. While some principle-based art education programs take place across the land without much preparation, it is important for museums and artists to take a pride in their role to offer radical new prototypes, and not just to be a factory reproducing the same old interpretation again and again.

Tsubaki, then, jokingly proposes 'why not play computer games with your grandchildren instead of just disregarding them'. He encourages technology-shy senior citizens 'why not take this once in a lifetime opportunity to get some hands on experience with the kind of computer software that is used to create special effects in recent Hollywood SFX movies'.

It is true that Contemporary Art does not always employ computer technologies. I am well aware of that. However, one must also admit that there is a growing amount of so called Media Art amongst the pieces exhibited at Contemporary Art

museums. Audiences are expected to use various types of digital tools for self-learning at any type of museums nowadays. Therefore, in this context, a radical approach taken by Noboru Tsubaki turned out to be quite practical as a prescription for getting rid of senior citizens' technophobia.

Once the dates were set for 3-day-workshop⁷, Tsubaki was determined to provide the best possible hardware and software for the participants and started looking for companies with executives who could share his vision. After heavy e-mailings and contacting every existing computer company, he came across two companies that were willing to support his project at the Contemporary Art Center. 15 high performance work stations were provided by an American company, Intergraph Computer Systems, Inc.⁸ and a one week special license to use Houdini, a powerful 3D CG animation software, was provided by Side Effects, Inc.⁹ which is a Canadian company. Both companies sent several volunteer/employees to help senior citizens to get familiarized with their products.

The main lecture on 3D CG animation was given by Noboru Tsubaki aided by his young colleagues, but they also talked about JAVA, VRML and showed some of their works on the web site via Internet.

Happy faces and enormous response outside

Since Tsubaki's main purpose of this workshop was to find and promote possible digital leaders of senior citizens for this community, the participants were limited to only 15. And these people were really well taken care of by tutors who were as young as their grandchildren. Since they shared a mutual goal to create something meaningful within a short period of time, they worked together quite closely and spoke openly about things they could not understand about each other. As they spent many hours together in the same room, senior citizens started talking about why they

do not like Contemporary Art and in return young ones talked why they enjoy Contemporary Art so much. It was very heart warming to watch these people mix together, talk and help each other. It was almost like a big family gathering, and evidently, all the participants had a great time.

In reality, we all know that it is impossible for anyone to master creating 3D graphics on computer within 3 days. But all the participants, both senior citizens and those who helped them, enjoyed their experience and the senior citizens in particular became far more tolerant towards technologies and new values by the time they finished this workshop. They started wandering off to the galleries during breaks and came back talking enthusiastically about a piece they vigorously hate. They were no longer afraid of talking about something they do not like. Now this is a big improvement for someone who has always believed that art has to be something beautiful and pleasing to the eyes.

This workshop was well publicized probably because it was carried out by a high-profile artist. The press, of course, loved this rather unusual combination of senior citizens and 3D computer graphics. As a result, the workshop was covered by several TV stations and featured in their news story.

Conclusion:

Is it really the power of digital technologies?

Although I set the title for this presentation as "Bringing in more elderly audiences with the power of digital technologies," I must admit that this workshop was heavily dependent on Tsubaki's mind, character and his tireless dedication. It is evident that his commitment for Contemporary Art and passion for communicating with others moved the heart of anyone involved in this project.

The executives at Side Effects, Inc. were so convinced and happy about the result that they now provide a limited free license to Tsubaki for use of the Houdini software in his CG workshop anywhere in Japan.

I have watched Tsubaki's other CG workshops as well, but each one is different and tailored to a specific audience group such as children under age 10, or a workshop for mothers/fathers and children, etc. People, even in this age of digital technologies, love good stories that embrace them and we know that computers by themselves still cannot produce a story with a purpose to please us. We all know that artists are there to produce their own works, but I think the role of artists as visionaries and good storytellers is now needed by society to take the next step.

I must conclude here that it is people who can bring in more audiences and digital technology can become a powerful aid when used properly. Technology is nothing more and nothing less.

Notes

- 1 Among these, 7 are national institutions, regional governments fund 247, and the rest are private. The total budget for new acquisitions at 4 national museums (Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; Museum of International Art, Osaka) in FY1995 was 1 billion JPY, which is merely an equivalent of 10 million USD, or less.
- 2 7 National Museums of Japan will be redefined as not-for-profit, independent agencies starting from the 1st of April, 2001.
- 3 It covers 150,000 sq.ft. of the ground and has a floor space of 241,500 sq.ft. in total.
<http://www.arttowermito.or.jp>
- 4 The initial endowment given by the city of Mito in 1988 in preparation was 100 million JPY (equivalent of about 1 million USD.)

- 5 The works of Noboru Tsubaki have been exhibited at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen; The Power Plant, Toronto; etc. His newest piece incorporating elaborate computer graphics will be on view at the Japanese pavilion of the International Exposition in Hanover next year in 2000.
<http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~pv2n-tbk/>
- 6 Summarized by Junko Iwabuchi for this quote. <http://www.nk-exa.co.jp/houdini/spectrum/houdini/exa/mito>
- 7 The actual workshop took place on 25, 26, 27 of February in 1999, concluded with a critique and a special lecture on 28 Feb.
<http://www.nkexa.co.jp/houdini/spectrum/houdini/exa/mito>
- 8 <http://www.intergraph.com/>
- 9 <http://www.sidefx.com/>

