Roving Reference for
Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors
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Overview:
The blockbuster exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors* (July 7 – September 30, 2018) offered a fun and high-profile opportunity to pilot exhibition-driven roving reference at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Staff from the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives answered 600 questions in the Kusama Lounge, a space unique to the CMA among various venues for the travelling show. The lounge featured books about, or illustrated by, Kusama, near the timeline of the Japanese artist’s life on the wall. It was positioned between the first Infinity Room—Where the Lights in My Heart Go (2016), which was exclusive to the exhibition’s presentation in Cleveland—and the rest of the exhibition on a separate floor. Partnering with the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives were docents, who also had shifts in the lounge.

Only 5% of visitors were very familiar with the artist prior to coming to the museum. 39% were not at all familiar, confirming our prediction that it would be beneficial to have staff present to answer questions about the artist. In addition to gathering such quantitative data, CMA Visitor Services staff recorded qualitative data such as this inspiring comment: “Art can truly be a transformative experience.”

**Sample Q&A:**

**Q.** How do you pronounce the artist’s name?

A. It’s contextual: it’s different in Japanese than in English, and not all English-speaking countries have the same pronunciation. For instance, in Australia, according to the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, the pronunciation is ‘Yay-oi Koo-saw-mar.’ Although artsresource.com recommends ‘yah-YOY koo-SAH-ma,’ arts blogger Greg Allen’s suggestion of ‘yah-yoy Koo-saw-mar’ is arguably more authentic because in Japanese, each syllable has the same amount of emphasis. Vowels are pronounced very short in Japanese, so ‘Kusama’ sounds more like ‘K-as-ma.’ This is similar to many English speakers skipping over the first ‘o’ in ‘laboratory’—a linguistic trait known as elision. The online video, How to Pronounce Kusama Yayoi Correctly (youtube.com/watch?v=5GtCwiMr_qg) is helpful. If you’re wondering about the reversed order of her name in the video, that is the standard in Japanese.

**Outcomes achieved:**

**Made visitors feel welcome:** A visitor from Japan was excited to use his phone to share kaleidoscopic images with lounge staff that he took when he first saw Kusama’s work back home five years ago. Exhibition staff would have had the time for such interactions, as they ushered in group of visitors to the Infinity Rooms every 20 to 30 seconds.

An elderly woman enjoyed her conversation in the lounge so much that when it was time for her to join the line to see the show, she told her family jokingly, “You go ahead!”

**Removed barriers to knowledge:** Many visitors expressed that they would have appreciated the show much more if they had not had the knowledge they gained from the lounge before entering the show; people had the option of visiting the lounge before, during, or after the show and even if they weren’t ticket holders.

**Enhanced profile of library/archives:** A post about the initiative on The Thinker, the CMA’s blog on the social media platform, The Medium, had over 1,000 views as of March 2019. Many visitors to the lounge also came to see the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives’ exhibitions for FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art (July 14-September 30, 2018) after chatting with lounge staff.

**Directed traffic to other galleries in CMA:** A couple returned repeatedly to the lounge because, as new visitors, they appreciated recommendations for galleries within the museum. They wanted to make the most of their outing as they had a two-week-old baby with them, and this was their first time away from home since the birth.

**SWOT analysis:**

**Strengths:** Supporting the museum by engaging new audiences was fulfilling for library/archives staff and almost all interactions between staff and visitors were extremely positive. Also, all outcomes were achieved.

**Weaknesses:** Different approaches were taken by two departments for engaging visitors and tracking data. Also, visitor surveys didn’t account for the lounge because elements assessed were common to all CMA exhibitions.

**Opportunities:** Signage or staff greeters could recommend the lounge and staff could distribute surveys in or near the lounge. Also, non-library/archives staff could implement the roving reference independently. Library and archives staff could provide training in: roving reference’s concept; strategies for engaging patrons such as asking, “Have you seen the show?” and using welcoming body language; and best practices for data collection such as differentiating between directional questions and substantial reference questions.

**Threats:** Coordinating two reference areas is demanding on staff in terms of time.