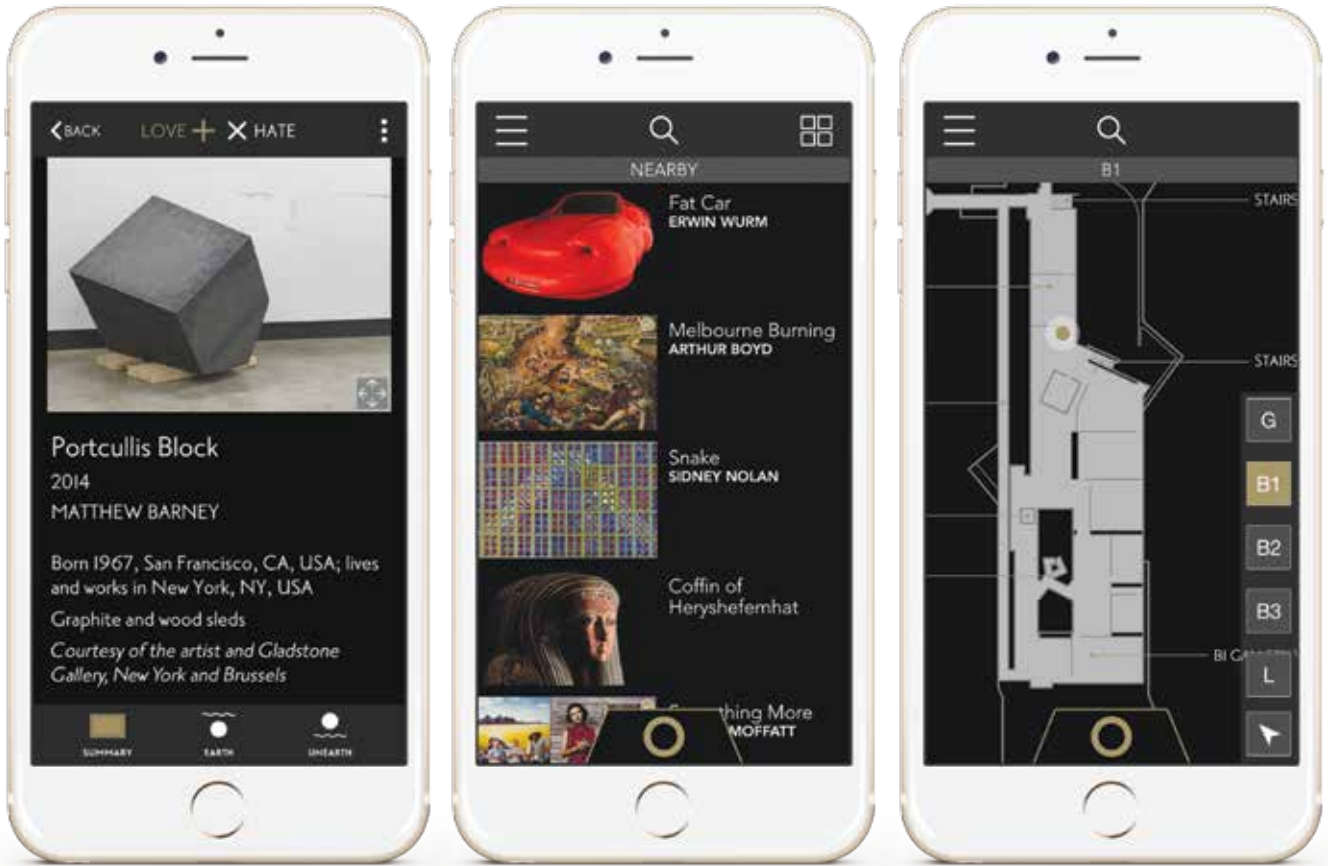




ART
+
TECHNOLOGY

BY JO LOUDON AND SCOTT BREWER



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Located in Hobart, Tasmania, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) opened its doors in January 2011. Privately owned by David Walsh, the world-class museum, known for its unique and playful brand, does not shy away from displaying thought-provoking art. Those who visit MONA will be impressed by: the variety of art on display; the custom-made buildings that house the art and their overall experience.

There are no guided tours, directional signage or labels on walls at MONA. Included in the cost of admission, every visitor is given a customised iPod Touch based guide. The O, an interactive mobile guide, enhances the visitor's experience. The mobile guide allows visitors to learn, interact and further enhance

their experience while at MONA with descriptions of art, audio interviews with artists and songs. By entering their email address, visitors can save their tour, access a list of viewed artwork, share with friends and find out what they missed.

Jo Loudon interviewed Scott Brewer, Co-Founder of Art Processors the company that created The O, to discover more about technology that is changing how people learn and engage with art.

Jo - What is unique about The O?

Scott - It was one of the first 'smartphone' based museum applications designed to work seamlessly with the design and user experience of the museum in mind. Importantly it was conceived of by David Walsh, as such MONA would not exist in

the way it does today without The O and The O would definitely not exist without MONA.

JL - How does the technology work?

SB - In short it uses an indoor location system (Enso Locate) to provide the user with a list of artworks based on their proximity to these works. There is, obviously, quite a bit more to it than that, but boiled down to the very core concept that's it.

JL - How does in-built GPS benefit the customer and the museum?

SB - It benefits the museum by allowing visitors to gain access to rich information about the artworks without having an impact on the aesthetics of the space.

Photo: Leigh Carmichael

So works can be shown in the optimum way without distractions from wall labels or other features. For the visitor, it allows for a closer inspection of the works themselves and a deeper understanding of the often-challenging world of modern art and antiquities.

JL - I saw a tweet by @monamuseum about pushing 240 mobile devices around the museum on a trolley to load test the system. How many people can use The O at once?

SB - It was designed so it could be used simultaneously by all 1340 visitors MONA can hold, The O can support more than that, but sadly due to fire regulations MONA can not.

JL - Visitors can interact and vote whether they Love (+) and Hate (x) each item they view. Does this influence future exhibitions or act as a way of engaging visitors?

SB - It was initially designed so that David would be able to use the feedback to alter placements of work (he said he wanted to move the most hated works to be front and centre to challenge the visitor) but since launch this has only happened once when they removed a rather well loved work.

JL - At the end of your visit there is an option for visitors to save their tour. How does this encourage further learning?

SB - The content contained within The O is rather vast, if you were to read every word and listen to every audio track you would be in MONA for more than a day. The saved tour functionality allows people to continue their research outside of the physical space in their own time.

JL - With so many people interacting and willingly providing information about their MONA experience, how do you utilise the data collected?

SB - To be honest, we don't really. A summary is sent to front of house staff so they can keep track of how many people have been through the doors, but other

than that the main point of the data collection is to allow visitors to relive their experience through the saved tour functionality.

JL - What feedback have you had from visitors about The O?

SB - Lots! Funnily enough, prior to putting the feedback form into The O, all the feedback we received was from blogs or articles and was always positive. Since allowing people to provide feedback within The O we now receive a lot of poorly typed negative feedback about the lack of chairs or the distasteful art (and the occasional nice thing too, but most of those come from email or personal comments on social media).

JL - Who creates the content for The O?

SB - David Walsh creates a lot of the content himself and there are a number of other contributors Senior Research Curator, Jane Clark and Elizabeth Pearce writer and a researcher for MONA, have been creating content from the start and continue to do so. Depending on the exhibition other people may be brought on too.

JL - Employees provide visitors with a quick overview of how to use The O. How do you train/retrain employees on how to use the device?

SB - Knowing that these devices would be made available to everyone who comes to MONA (while they can all take one, it is actually around 93% of visitors who do) a lot of time was spent working on the process and user experience to minimise the effort needed and speed up the potential wait times. There is a two page PDF that goes over the main points for staff and the use of the application itself is kept as simple as possible with a two step process of 'push this button to update your location' and 'select the artwork you're interested in'.

JL - What other adult learning opportunities do you think would benefit from technology like The O?

SB - Multitudes. With the decreased cost

in indoor location (the initial system for MONA was many hundreds of thousands of dollars, the replacement system was tens of thousands, it won't be long before this is effectively free), the opportunity to provide easy to access contextual information should be everywhere. This can really change the way people need to search for and access this data making it simpler for all kinds of uses, the benefits for all kinds of industry are vast.

JL - Are there any lessons learned that you would like to share?

SB - Developing software can be a thankless pursuit. When it breaks people love to criticise you and when it works the praise is often passed to the content or experience. I think this can be forgotten sometimes when you are using something that 'just works' but it is what every software developer should be shooting for. To this end I would like to thank you for taking the time to ask us about our process and thank you for recognising its place in the jigsaw that is MONA.

Scott Brewer is a co-founder at Art Processors, a digital agency with offices in Melbourne and San Francisco that is responsible for changing the way you engage with artistic spaces. He can be found on Twitter as @goawaygeek

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