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By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

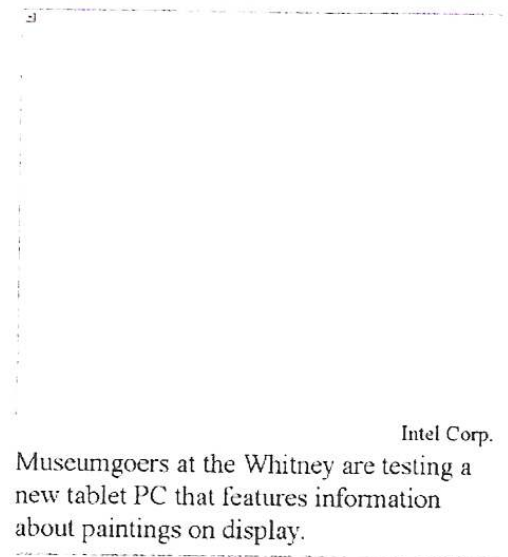
Take One Tablet and Enjoy the Exhibit

I am standing in front of Jackson Pollock's "Number 27, 1950." In full view of a guard at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), where the painting hangs as part of the exhibition "[The American Century: Art & Culture, 1950-2000](#)," I touch the work.

Alarms do not ring, nor does the guard bark a reproach, because the Pollock I've poked is not the masterpiece on the wall but a digital reproduction displayed on the handheld computer I am toting through the Whitney's galleries. My touch cues an excerpt from Hans Namuth's famous footage of Pollock drizzling paint on a canvas. The video clip appears on the screen of the inch-thick, clipboard-sized tablet PC that rests on my arm.

The Pollock painting and four other pieces are featured in a software program called "Gallery Explorer" that runs on the tablet PC and supplements the works with audio commentary, video clips, still images and interactive games. A stylus-like pointing device controls access to the multimedia content.

The tablet PC is part of an experiment being conducted this fall by the Whitney and the microprocessor giant Intel Corp., sponsor of the two-part, century-spanning exhibition. About 100 people selected by the museum's staff will tour the Whitney's fifth-floor galleries, where all five pieces are installed, and share



Intel Corp.
Museumgoers at the Whitney are testing a new tablet PC that features information about paintings on display.

their thoughts about the devices with the project team.

The experiment is notable because, at a time when museums are still debating the merits of interactive kiosks and struggling with ways to make their Web sites mean something, the Whitney and Intel are studying how personal-computer technology might -- or might not -- enhance the museum-going experience.

In a telephone interview from his office in Hillside, Ore., Ralph C. Bond, Intel's educational technology manager, said, "This is an initial experiment, and it primarily has to deal with answering a super-simple question: Is it a good idea to have multimedia in your hand when you're wandering around, or is it a distraction?"

Judging from a recent test drive, the idea definitely has potential as an alternative to the standard audio tours available at many museum exhibitions. Despite the tablet PC's colorful display and 3-pound weight (which took its toll on my tendons over the hour I spent with it), I had no trouble remaining focused on the original art works. And even though the multimedia content was limited, I still appreciated the historical tidbits that were supplied -- and enjoyed being able to access them at my own pace.

After his own spin through the galleries, Maxwell L. Anderson, director of the Whitney, said: "I love seeing Hans Namuth's film of Pollock while standing in front of 'Number 27, 1950.' It's what the Whitney's all about -- providing a context for the contributions of American artists."

The Gallery Explorer program offers guides to each work for adults and younger people. Anderson provides the adult narration, which mainly consists of biographical notes and some historical stage-setting. Children get a candy-colored interface, games and a woman's voice that seeks to involve them through exclamations like "Way cool, you found the painting by Jackson Pollock!"

Bond acknowledged that the experimental nature of the project, as well as the difficulties involved in acquiring rights to multimedia elements, constrained developers.

For example, the adult tour for the Jasper Johns painting "Three Flags" (1958) has an audio clip from the McCarthy hearings and an (anachronistic) excerpt from Jimi Hendrix's performance of the national anthem at the 1969 Woodstock festival. But the sole video footage shows a flag fluttering in the breeze. Johns is alive and still painting, so an interview with the artist and reproductions of his recent work might have made for better bonus material.

On the other hand, the games for children seemed excessive. Even if they wanted to make their own Rothko paintings by dropping

adjectives like "giggly" and "cranky" onto a dark field to create blocks of color, children should probably engage in this exercise at the end of the gallery tour, not while standing in front of Rothko's compelling canvas.

By far the most illuminating content is an extended commentary on Alex Katz's "Ada, Ada" in which Anderson verbally guides visitors through a variety of ways to view and interpret the 1959 "cutout" portrait of the artist's wife. As helpful as the remarks are, though, they would have functioned equally well as part of an audio-only tour.

Like all of the tours, the Katz content progresses in a linear fashion. Bond said future tours might more closely resemble the structure of a Web site, with a small copy of a work surrounded by buttons that lead to different content areas. This would allow, say, someone who already knows Pollock's biography to skip it.

The Gallery Explorer program has already evolved since an early field test in July for about 50 users during the first half of the American Century exhibition. Scrolling subtitles have been added for the hearing-impaired, an indication that handheld computers may someday become multipurpose devices that can be used for audio, closed-captioned or multimedia tours.

Another recent update is the frequent suggestion to stop staring at the screen and start looking at the art.

"Remember, you're standing in front of the artwork with this thing in your hand, and the natural inclination -- certainly among younger people -- is to keep your face buried into that screen," Bond said. During the first test, "we just figured people would get it, they would just intuitively know when they should be looking at the screen and when they should be engaging the real art work in front of them. Wrong, big wrong."

The visual prompts work, but they have a curious side-effect. With the viewer's attention directed to either the art or the screen, there is little left over for the other people in the room. Museums are a social space, but during an hour in a crowded gallery, I rarely noticed my fellow art-lovers.

Bond said the \$2,000 tablets would have to become considerably lighter and cheaper to succeed in the marketplace, particularly in the cost-conscious world of nonprofit arts institutions. The tablet PC is based on a Mitsubishi pen computer with a built-in hard drive, but future versions may retrieve

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The Whitney has no specific plans to use the devices before they are more fully developed. But Bond said Intel is in discussions with the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) about using handheld computers for a future-oriented show scheduled to open there at midnight on January 1, 2001. David A. Ross, the director of SFMOMA, has hinted that the exhibit might include Internet-based art works, and handheld devices might be one way to view them.

Scott Sayre, director of museum media and technology at the [Minneapolis Institute of Arts](#), believes that museums will continue to incorporate computer technology into the museum-going experience.

The Minneapolis museum conducted its own five-week experiment with handheld computers in 1996, using Apple's Newton to lead 1,100 users through its period rooms. The conclusion, Sayre said, was that the technology was not yet ready, if only because dramatic lighting in the museum made the Newton's watery display unreadable.

Sayre recently took a tablet PC through the Whitney and was generally pleased with the results, saying, "For each person to be at their own place with that kind of content is really revolutionary."

But Sayre also envisions a day when the computing device is worn, rather than carried. Already, he said, he has seen demonstrations of slightly oversized glasses that permit users to look at an embedded computer display or the world in front of them.

He added that developers need to continue to work on ways to structure information for such tours, because "it means a complete rethinking of how we present this material."

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