

EVALUATION OF XINGU VILLAGE EXPERIENCE

HORNIMAN MUSEUM 14TH-15TH DEC 2018

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I wish we had more time to observe the objects first to then explore in the iPad! BUT THANK FOR THE AMAZING EXPERIENCE!

The event made me think about how museums can simplify our understanding of communities. The sounds & video give an immediacy to our relationship with the people.

Part of the reason I was interested was due to the fact that information about this area is quite scarce / not commonly shared. Unique experience!

Video was very absorbing. Enabled you to pick up information about the tribe, but also left more unanswered questions, about their culture etc.

Terrific & great to see one-on-one of how the tribe lives - great to have such a good mix of input + objects + film

I really enjoyed the experience. It was especially nice for me as a Brazilian to see a little more about different culture inside Brazil.

I think the iPad is a bonus to the iPad.

I thought that it was quite unique as I am intrigued to learn about people who are different from me. But I thought the tech was quite clunky and wasn't very clear. 9 years old boy in year 5

Wonderful exhibition. Thought-provoking + interesting.

IT WAS A GREAT AND TOTALLY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE! AMAZING TO MEET SOMEONE FROM THE XINGU TRIBE. THANK YOU! HORNIMAN! CAROLIA

Having the sounds was great and made it feel interactive. The dim light + the way the space was arranged really added to the experience + created a lovely intimacy with the objects + subject.

A beautiful + humbling experience. Well presented + worthwhile - enjoyable. Privileged to meet an authentic tribes person. Will recommend it to everyone. - thank you

I liked how the video was filmed by them and it showed what they wanted us to see rather than just people filming what isn't really real life for them.

A wonderful education for young people - integrating technology with visual/hearing arts.

Lovely images 3D installations sounds and Q&A. Very immersive and interactive.

The idea to bring real people from the Amazon and their unique culture to London is great. It would be fantastic to have a museum of London in Xingu!

A fascinating way to discover how different people around the world live especially meeting a person from the village.

An excellent exhibition thank you for organising this event!

INTRODUCTION

The 'Xingu Village' experience at the Horniman Museum invited its audience 'to embark on an immersive journey into the heart of Brazil and visit the Ipatse village which is home to the Kuikuro indigenous people of the Xingu.' And, in doing so, to gain a 'rich understanding' of the day to day life, environment, myths and storytelling, dance, graphism, decorative painting, crafts and cultural practices of another people.

The result of a research project led by People's Palace Projects at Queen Mary, University of London and a number of partners including the Horniman and the Kuikuro Indigenous Association of the Upper Xingu, the 'experience' piloted and tested the notion of whether the traditional museum gallery experience might be enhanced and augmented through a curated interplay between a series of VR/AR tools and traditional Kuikuro objects and artefacts.

Beginning with a blaze of coloured 'tongues' of wool, emerging from the mouth of one of the Xingu tribe and threading their way across the atrium, the 'experience' offered visitors a multi-sensory insight into another culture. An affecting metaphor for the different 'languages' through which we process our understanding of the world, these threads drew us into a journey of discovery. Prefaced by an introduction by Paul Heritage from Queen Mary, we were then invited to meet, and follow, singer and performer, Yamalui Kuikuro, into a darkened tunnel where we began to encounter the world of the Kuikuro as we made our way through the sounds and noises of the Brazilian rain forest. Emerging into the 'Ipatse village' as created for us by Takumã Kuikuro's 3D projected film, we then came face to face with the life and ways of its inhabitants, not only through the objects and artefacts chosen by the Kuikuro to represent their culture, but by engaging, through interaction with virtual reality headsets and iPads, with the stories of the people who had selected them.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this evaluation was to work with People's Palace Projects and the Horniman Museum to understand the ways in which such an 'encounter' might affect its audience. And to begin to understand the ways in which these new, more immersive technologies might impact on:

- enabling museum visitors to 'experience' the sites and cultures of indigenous communities
- facilitating greater understanding of the lives, rituals and beliefs of these communities
- advancing the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of real and/or 3D scanned indigenous objects/art works within memory-based collections
- creating 'uncurated' group experiences of daily life within these communities

Recognising the importance of this event as the first prototype or iteration of this approach, it seemed important to begin by sharing the experience, and observing responses, with at least one group of visitors. And then to use this shared sense of the event to conduct a number of short post-experience interviews (10 in total) over the two days. Those audience members who were not able to take the time out to do this, were invited to interact in a less structured way by offering immediate thoughts and responses on post-it notes that were then shared as part of the display. I also worked closely with the team from People's Palace Projects and Tim Corum from the Horniman Museum, to share immediate responses and insights and feed the learning that was emerging back into the process.

WHAT WE LEARNED

WHO CAME

Although we had originally planned to collect demographic data by asking those people who stayed behind to speak to complete the Horniman visitor survey, not everyone got round to it, so this was supplemented through observation, and some noting of things such as gender, age and whether people were alone or in small groups. We also asked people where they had come from that day, how they had found out about the event and why they had chosen to come.

10 groups of people, over two days took part in the hosted conversations: about 65 visitors out of 207 visitors in total. Some other, less formal, chats also took place. Of those who did complete the visitor survey (about half), the majority identified themselves as White British or Other White Background. The Other in this case being Brazilian: many of whom lived fairly locally although some had come from other parts of London. A small number of local visitors identified themselves as Black British Caribbean and were locals who came regularly. Others were visitors to London and included Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.

On Saturday morning most of those joining the conversation were older couples or small groups of friends. From Saturday afternoon onwards, there were significant number of groups of parents with young children and babies. Although the publicity for the event suggested it was more suitable for over 12s many of the young parents suggested they regularly brought their children, often meeting with friends, to most things at the Horniman and thought they would be interested by the augmented reality. Most had found the event on the Horniman Facebook or museum website but some had been invited by friends or colleagues working on the project.

WHAT WORKED

As visitors came out of the experience and joined in the conversations, they were generally enthusiastic. Words used were: Excellent, Insightful, Fascinating, Really Special, Fantastic, Brilliant, Fun, Unexpected, Awesome, Cool, Impactful, Terrific. Wonderful! One person described themselves as 'vibrating' as they emerged. Many spoke of it as being a 'privilege', even using words such as 'spiritual', 'magical' and also 'humbling'. Those with children old enough to take part spoke about it as a 'wonderful education' for them.

Questioned further about their experience, thoughts were divided between what they had particularly enjoyed, what they felt they had learned, what they thought was important about the experience and then some discussion of some of the glitches/challenges – most of which focused on the technology.

Approaching the Space

- **The Atrium** A number of people spoke about having 'loved the introduction in the main space' and the sense of 'something different' even before they came to the desk to pick up tickets. Although most had not fully understood the thinking behind the wool threads and the notion of tongues, voices and language they had enjoyed the idea of already feeling you were 'somehow connecting to the tribe'.
- **The Introduction** People enjoyed being welcomed into the space. They were 'delighted' and 'felt honoured' to meet Yamalui and to hear him speak. They wished they 'had been able to ask him

questions', when invited to do but most of them felt a little too 'overwhelmed' at this stage. But they valued being given some background to the project and the partnership.

- **Meeting Yamalui** Yamalui's presence in the museum attracted the attention of more than those who were signed up to the 'Xingu Village' experience. Children, in particular, were fascinated by him and wanted to speak to him or just to be near him. As one visitor noted, 'how amazing that there are only 800 people in this tribe and my children and I have met one of them.' Others spoke of the powerful impact of Yamalui's presence, of what they saw as his bravery in presenting himself, his songs and his culture alone; 'Illuminating his world and what happens in it, such a special thing for our children.' Given the opportunity to ask questions later, many spoke of the 'specialness' of the experience in being able to do that. They wanted to tell him how honoured and 'lucky' they felt to have met him in the flesh and how privileged they felt to have him 'visit Forest Hill', often wanting to share what they saw as similarities between his world and theirs. Including the trees of Forest Hill and Brazilian forests. Although some would have liked Yamalui to have explained more of his and Takumã's involvement in the project and ways in which they felt they had 'owned it' from the first moment they met him, as they felt this was integral to their later understanding of the experience.
- **The 'Rain Forest'** A significant number of people identified the walk through the 'rain forest', as an important way to move into the experience, describing it as, giving them time, 'to leave this world behind' and being 'a way of breaking from world you are in to go to world you want to go to' or as something that, 'actually brought me into a different state of mind.' Others mentioned the opportunity to slow down and feel like 'you were leaving our hurried world behind you', noting, 'It was good it was quite slow' and 'could even have been slower.'

People spoke about the 'magical atmosphere' and the 'beauty of the sounds' and described a sense they were really walking in the 'rain forest' and could 'almost smell the earth' beneath them. Others explained it as having created 'a sense of adventure' and feeling 'a thrill' as they entered the darkness. 'And then we were suddenly there.'

In the Space

People's views about being in the space were often coloured by how many people had been in the small gallery with them and what access they had had to the different technologies. But most seemed to be in agreement that the 'mix of the real and the augmented was part of the power' of the Xingu Village as an experience.

- **The Film** Everyone was enthusiastic about Takumã's film, describing it as 'totally absorbing' and the 3D projection effects, which they spoke of as 'stunning'. People enjoyed the sense it gave them of the 'topography' of the village and 'a real sense of dimension' which they felt made it 'impact' in a different way. They felt the film offered, 'a small window into people's lives' that left you 'wanting more'. The ways in which the sense of passing time was captured was mentioned by a number of people, 'when the white clouds came across it was somehow magical.' While audiences loved the sense of ceremony and something special, they were also thrilled by ordinary details like 'the young women playing football' and spoke about enjoying the tone of 'playful irony' that was part of the film. 'When we saw

the iPhones coming out near the end it made us aware of the real connections between us as well as the differences.'

- **Objects, artefacts and augmented reality** While many visitors' responses to the augmented reality were not without some sense that 'everything wasn't quite there' or 'was in new days', almost everyone appreciated it being used as 'you experience things in a deeper way'. Many thanked the Horniman for trying something like this out and mentioned feeling 'close' to the Xingu tribe in a more special way than if they had just seen the objects, feeling it 'brought us somehow closer to another culture'. People spoke about the holograms giving them a more vivid way to look at the objects and artefacts. 'If I had just had to read about them, I probably wouldn't have paid the same attention.' 'It was so much richer than just reading it'. Most felt it gave them 'more of a real sense of the people these things belonged to,' and felt they had been given a greater awareness of people's personalities. 'I felt I had a personal relationship with the man whose story I was seeing. That he was speaking directly to me. And it impacted in new ways because of that'. This included things such as, 'realising we had a shared sense of humour – like the guy who joked about charging tourists more for things.'

Others spoke of being 'moved' to be able to see into these people's lives in a such a unique way through the holograms and videos, one visitor explaining the impact it had had on him and his group of friends, all of them young parents, as 'Our emotions are part of the way we understand knowledge, and this got to our emotions.' Another noted that 'Usually we just read the written text and that already distances us ... because it is someone else's thoughts' but felt although 'the objects are beautiful in themselves, this was something different.' The fact that the objects had been selected by the people spoke about them was felt to be central to sensing 'a crossover between the objects to the culture', including the choice of a football shirt as well as tribal artefacts. The fascinating mixture of the day to day with the ceremonial was something frequently commented on.

- **The Conversations** The post-experience conversations, whilst intended to capture people's immediate responses to the augmented reality, slowly became an integral and important part of the experience for many visitors. Some stayed and talked for up to 15-20 minutes and spoke about 'loving the idea of the q and a' or thinking it 'was a great idea to have a table where you could speak to others after an exhibition'. People noted how we often just leave an exhibition and then have nowhere to go with our thoughts and questions. Some suggested the Horniman could make it a permanent feature. The decision to invite Yamalui to join us for these, when he was able, was particularly significant. But people were equally interested to have the opportunity to speak to and ask questions of someone from the museum, and Tim Corum's continued presence, as Director of Curatorial and Public Engagement, added another level. As did the constant interchange between Portuguese and English and back again, dependant on whether visitors themselves were from Brazil or wanted to try out what knowledge they had of the language.

What felt Important

- For a significant number of people, the curation and selection of the objects and artefacts by the villagers themselves was crucially important. As, was their recognition that Takumã was the filmmaker. People spoke about realising the importance of 'self-representation' and noted that 'giving a voice is important' which they felt you didn't get a sense at many exhibitions. They mentioned a strong

sense that villagers had been given the 'power' to tell their own story and that came across in the holograms and videos.

- Others spoke about the possibility it offered to 'not just be observers of others' lives' but 'to see it from their point of view.'
- For those Brazilians living in the UK, there was a particular resonance. 'It was so amazing for my kids to be able to experience this'. 'They were to see and experience their own inheritance.' 'It's not even something we get a chance to do when we return to Brazil – to go to these places and to meet the people.'

GLITCHES AND CHALLENGES

As this was a pilot it seems important not to entitle this section 'what didn't work'. Instead I have tried to focus on things people felt they missed or things they felt could still be improved on. Apart from a few parents who wanted to let us know that the entrance tunnel had been a little scary for their younger children, one girl describing it as 'spooky', most of these comments concern the technology and the space.

- **Technology** Some members of the audience were themselves involved in using or developing similar technology. They spoke about it 'needing work', being 'not quite there' but also noted it was '80% there' and 'all very doable'. Other visitors, while they often mentioned 'technical glitches' also went on to say they didn't mind them. The specific glitches people commented on were not always the same, but included noting that:
 - the iPads not always working – some level of distortion, especially around the sound
 - the glasses were better than the iPads but not available to everyone
 - use of iPads and glasses often distracted people from the film
 - the holograms were sometimes difficult to access, although the glasses were better
 - 'the concept is clear, but it doesn't quite bridge the gap yet'

Two women commented on the fact they felt the technology might be more of a sop to men and children. 'Children like gadgets, men like gadgets.' They felt they would have learned as much without it. Another was concerned that 'the technology itself might become the focus for younger visitors'.

- **The Space** a number of visitors mentioned challenges in the gallery itself and spoke of:
 - a lack of space in the room, especially when there were more than 6/8 people
 - a lack of space around the objects to take real advantage of the technology
 - a need to be able to move to see things better but other people being in the way

One noted, 'I felt a bit trapped in my seat. I wanted to go and stand by the object and move but felt I couldn't'. A significant number wondered:

- if it might have been better to have the film in a room by itself?

Others clearly felt a little overwhelmed by the number of people in the team and observed:

- 'there were more people watching us and organising us than visitors',
- 'it felt like we were and constantly being observed and photographed'
- 'it seemed people kept telling me what to do'

- **More Of?** Many people, however, also noted what they might have wanted more of, rather than being critical of the experience as a whole. This included wanting more interaction with Yamalui, including learning earlier that he and other villagers had been partners in the project from the beginning, feeling a need for 'more context' and 'more explanation', especially afterwards, when they wanted to know if what was shown in the film was 'every-day life or special?' observing:
 - It was a great introduction but 'left me with more questions'
 - I would have liked the man from the village to have been in, or interacted more, with the film
 - You had to gather things yourself and I wanted a bit more narrative or interpretation

But others loved the fact 'the film made you think about things and didn't explain everything to you' and imagined they might go online now and 'find things out for myself'.

THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This was always intended as a light touch, formative evaluation of a pilot project: a more structured approach to sharing the learning that emerged over the two days and part of an active learning process for everyone involved. The thoughts that follow are intended to bring what were sometimes very particular comments into a wider context.

What was clear, from all the conversations, was the 'Xingu Village experience' had clearly impacted positively on its audience and left most of them wanting more of this kind of intervention from museums and galleries. Most were sorry it wasn't available for longer as they had hoped to recommend it to others. Knowing that they were among a hundred or so people able to see it meant they often spoke about being 'privileged to be there' and many prefaced their feedback with the words, 'Thank you!' Even those who only encountered Yamalui in the corridor or were able to touch some of the tribal objects at the table in the music gallery expressed pleasure and gratitude at having this opportunity.

Those who did participate in the complete experience spoke of it as being 'a unique concept and opportunity' and something they had never done before or certainly not encountered in a museum or gallery previously. They felt it was a way in which museums could begin to become 'living places', and their content become 'much more 3-dimensional' and 'more relevant'. As part of that, most had valued the way the augmented reality technology brought objects to life in a new and engaging way, even when it wasn't perfect. Most presumed the technology could be improved on quickly and saw this as a good initiative to see how it might work with audiences.

They enjoyed the mix of things like iPads, holograms and more traditional approaches such as film, objects and live encounter and responded to what they described as the 'multi-sensory' nature of the experience and the intriguing 'polarisation of high tech and low tech'. Each individual intervention was mentioned positively by someone; from the visual impact of the threads across the atrium to the introduction to Yamalui, to the sound 'journey' through the jungle, the objects and artefacts, the film and holograms, and finally the opportunity to sit down and speak about it afterwards. Parents with children were pleased it could 'be enjoyed on so many levels' and most felt they were going away knowing more but also wanting to learn more because of the unique and multi-layered nature of the experience. As one man commented, 'it is something that just sticks with you.'

The notion of agency played an important part in many people's responses. They were supportive of the inclusiveness of the partnership and the power given to the villagers to influence many of the choices. Most people understood, and mentioned, the importance of giving indigenous people a voice within the museum. There was a concern that they should not be 'commodified' or objectified because of differences in culture but that this should be seen, as Yamalui himself expressed, as an exchange between equals. There was also a strong sense, even from one or two of the children, of an understanding of the implications the current political climate has for indigenous people such as the Kuikuro. One child writing a post-it note stating, 'I think their president is a bully!' The need for greater visibility and real representation was recognised and although Yamalui spoke of the strength of the people of the Xingu and their culture, people felt it was important that this event had highlighted their existence and their lives.

People spoke about the ways in which the experience not only enabled them to understand a different culture but to also, 'to see outside ourselves, to see where we belong in the bigger picture.' There was a fascination, when given the opportunity to speak to Yamalui or Takumã with how people earned their living, how the children were educated and their relationship with the towns and cities of the places that surround them. Those visitors, and there were a number, who came from cultures where manioc, or cassava, was still part of their own diet, spoke about the personal connection they had felt with some of the objects and wanted the Horniman to think of ways in which the local Caribbean and other communities might share their stories in similar ways. They felt food should be central to this and would be an important way of the museum creating an affinity between itself and the people who come to visit.

In the end, many people spoke about having spent more time than they had expected engaging with the experience, but also with speaking and thinking about it afterwards. The concept of time came up in a number of conversations as people explained that the mixed approach had 'engrossed them' in ways they had not expected, that the experience overall had a 'kind of intensity' that 'made you feel like you'd been there in that village for ages' and that the combination of the different approaches had given them the possibility to 'really get immersed in people's lives' in ways that went beyond their usual museum experience. People were also full of ideas of how the museum might use these kinds of technologies with other objects and artefacts – especially in the music gallery where we held our conversations. Many people suggested technology might be used to bring the instruments to life and help us understand how they were used and played as well as what they sounded like.

There was a general consensus that 'much more of this kind of thing should happen'. And that it should be a two-way process. Many felt there was much for us to learn from the Kuikuro people. Especially about the ways in which they had preserved strong links with their cultural identity and their roots, while still being clearly part of the modern world and its technology.

Perhaps people's reactions are fittingly summed up in the words of a member of one of the research councils funding the project. 'It was brilliant, and powerful, and I just didn't expect it to have the impact it had.'