

Future Museum Symposium 2023
Joy Bivins

I have watched many iterations of technology use in museums and other cultural institutions over the last two decades. One thing I am sure of is that by the time it is installed, it is old. And, that old technology often alienates the audiences we most want to engage. When I am in museum spaces, I only use technology as a way to more deeply engage an object or image. While it is regular practice to create options for using the devices we bring with us into galleries, it often feels like a way to just add on more content when what you really are trying to do is create an experience, tell a story, or perhaps increase your understanding. Technology has to be about relatively straightforward goals and, most importantly, it has to work. Otherwise, the very thing that you are trying to convey becomes frustrating to the user. Technology is best when it fosters the creation of community, facilitates your experience of the ordinary in a novel way, and allows you an entry point into content that you hadn't expected. Since most of my professional experience has been in institutions that invite people to engage history and historic narratives, the latter idea is the most provocative to me because it provides the most possibilities for engagement, especially for people who have been excised or unconsidered in the ways history is constructed.

My most memorable and visceral experiences in museums have typically been when the power of place is activated and there is an interaction between my own accumulated knowledge and physical space. In these instances, I have gained deeper understanding which heightens the experience and I "see" in a new way what I thought I knew. I long for museums to utilize technology as a means of creating more authentic or even imaginative experiences of the past and (of) place. Questions that excite me include: what are the ways that technology can be used for museum visitors to see in new ways? How can museums provide ways for visitors to have a more robust experience with an image or object with which they are already familiar? An example of this could include utilizing technology to create surrogates of objects so that visitors can have a more tactile or tangible experience. In these ways, then, technology (defined broadly) becomes a method for bringing the past or a past closer to the audience where ultimately the distance between audience and objects, or stories, or whatever else contracts. In this imagined model, less would be more and slower and/or more deliberate experiences create greater impact. I think there are many ways to test this repeatedly within museum experiences and potentially create a broader understanding of what it means to effectively use different kinds of technologies in museums.