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## ‘Too Much to Look At—Sea, Seagulls, Art!’: The Experiential Appeal of Art Exhibitions in Public Leisure Spaces

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**Title:** 'Too Much to Look At—Sea, Seagulls, Art!': The Experiential Appeal of Art Exhibitions in Public Leisure Spaces

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**Abstract:**

It is no longer new to suggest that leisure spaces are increasingly designed around the premise of a visitor who is active, rather than passive, and who seeks to participate rather than observe. Even the most orderly leisure spaces, like museums and art galleries, are refashioned to accommodate a more performative definition of the visitor and a more fluid understanding of the space in which experiences occur.

This is part of a context in which cultural institutions are under considerable pressure to adjust to changing demands in the public sphere and to become more deeply embedded in a variety of other social institutions with which they share a cultural boundary. Through this new process of sharing, boundaries themselves are crossed, obfuscated, or reinvented as both producing and consuming leisure experiences are better understood as negotiated, and less determined or predictable. This is the case in established museums and art spaces, and can be expected to be even more pronounced when the gallery space is the most popular city beach in Australia. For the twentieth consecutive year, Sculpture by the Sea has transformed Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach and coastal walk into a sculpture exhibition. This year's event drew over 500,000 visitors and has also extended its reach to include exhibitions at Cottesloe Beach, on the west coast, and at Aarhus in Denmark.

This paper examines how the recent Sculpture by the Sea exhibition at Bondi performs against the latest currents of theory and method in public space, art, museum, and visitor studies. Specifically, we will examine how these goals and desires are advanced through a setting that is not neutral in the process, but intervenes as a highly physicalized and socialized place. Bondi Beach is visually and viscerally 'present' and is open to the elemental forces at play where land meets the sea. As a social space, Bondi is one of the epicenters of Australian beach culture and is idealized as a place that is permissive, relaxed, free, and fun. Our observations are informed by interviews with event directors and contributing artists and through fieldwork at Sculpture by the Sea.

We engaged the method of 'captured' or 'casual' conversations as a way of gauging multiple visitors' experiences and attitudes, through natural and unobtrusive observations of social interaction and modes of behaving (Leinhardt, Tittle, and Knutson, 2000). This paper argues for the importance and re-modelling of this technique in novel leisure spaces, claiming that an evidence-based "bottom-up" approach presents a clearer picture of how people perceive and negotiate their world, their emotions, and their relationships with others in these hybrid, liminal spaces (Eggins and Slade, 1997). In the final section, we contend that investigations into the communicative, meaning-making, and socio-cultural processes employed by visitors to large, open events in real time can promote a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the fluidity and intersectionality of public leisure spaces, the shifting nature of tourism, and the changeable and complex motivations and desires of the audiences it seeks to entice and entertain.