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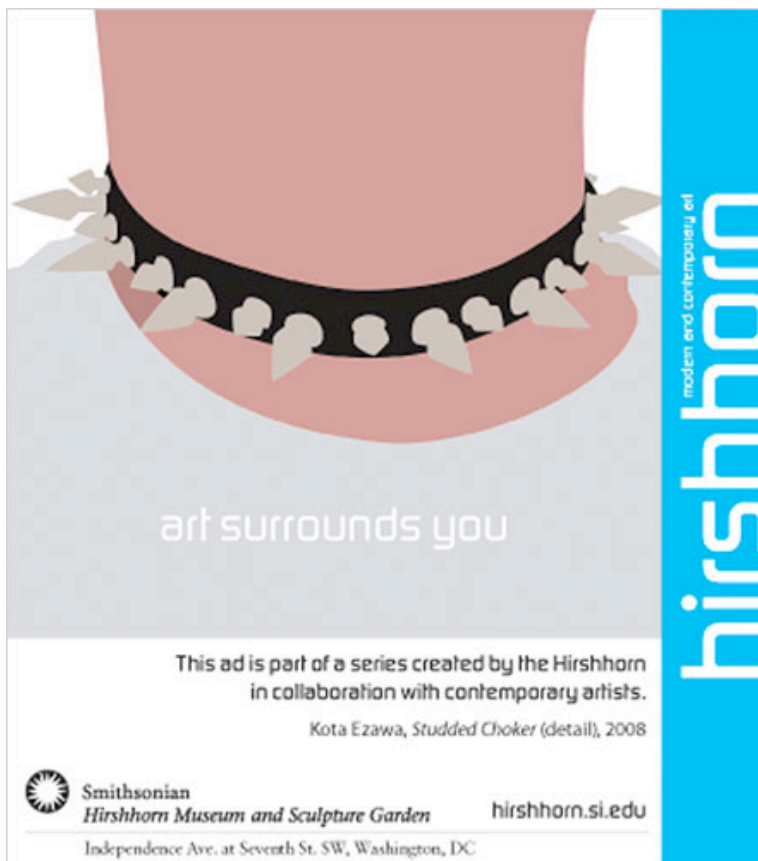
An Identity Crisis? Hirshhorn Embraces It

By RANDY KENNEDY
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WASHINGTON — “Um, interesting painting, but could you please tell me where all the airplanes are?”

It is not the kind of question that employees of art museums hear very often. But then again, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the oddly turret-shaped gallery just across the street from its always

mobbed neighbor, the National Air and Space Museum, has never been like most other Modern- and contemporary-art museums.



Since it opened in 1974 with the huge and fiercely personal collection of the financier Joseph H. Hirshhorn as its lodestone, it has become a well-regarded and often pioneering place to see art. But those who run it also know that it has always been, in one sense, an accidental museum, visited by a lot of people who know that it is part of the Smithsonian Institution and wander in because it is free, but have little idea what's inside.

Many of these visitors have never seen contemporary art before, at least not on purpose. And quite a few come in scanning the rafters for the Spirit of St. Louis.

“We get that question a lot, the airplanes,” said Gabriel Riera, the museum’s director of communications and marketing.

But it was not until the last few years that the museum began surveying visitors to convert its assumptions into actual numbers. What it found was striking: of the Hirshhorn’s 750,000 or so annual visitors, 58 percent reported being there for the first time. Sixty-four percent said they were at the museum as part of an adult group tour, following an itinerary that probably reflected little individual choice and low interest in contemporary art.

“It’s a museum with low intentionality, I guess you could say,” said Beth Tuttle, a former deputy director

of the museum who was recruited in 2004 to help with such research.

But while such a sizable, haphazard attendance of people wearing shorts and fanny packs might push some institutions into a full-blown identity crisis, the Hirshhorn has come to see it as a significant part of its own identity.

And now, as it stands at a kind of crossroads, seeking a new director after the departure last year of Olga Viso, who left to run the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the museum is trying for the first time in its 34-year existence to define itself in the public's mind.

Over the last few weeks it has begun blanketing Washington — via buses, street banners, newspapers, even coasters in bars and restaurants — with an advertising campaign that relies on the motif of a circle, trying to make a friendly brand emblem out of its sometimes intimidating round, near-windowless building, designed by Gordon Bunshaft. (Ada Louise Huxtable, who was the architecture critic for *The New York Times* when the building opened, called it “neo-penitentiary modern.”)

The ads, developed with the help of prominent artists like Hiroshi Sugimoto, reflect the museum's not-easy-to-reconcile desires to welcome newcomers to contemporary art but not to smooth over its edges or to alienate the museum's sophisticated cadre of regulars. One ad uses an image from the video artist Kota Ezawa, showing a neck encircled by a black spiked choker, along with the campaign's slogan: “Art Surrounds You.”

“We have, in a way, at the Hirshhorn this extra agenda, to reach two very different audiences: the people who know us and know why they're coming here, and the people who we really are introducing to this kind of art,” said Kerry Brougher, the museum's acting director and chief curator.

Or as Ms. Tuttle, now a marketing consultant who continues to do some work for the museum, put it: “We're not trying to make everybody happy. We're trying to stimulate them and make them think and make them maybe think a little differently about the world once they go back out into it.”

The marketing campaign is only the most visible manifestation of the ideas the museum began exploring more than four years ago under Ned Rifkin, Ms. Viso's predecessor, to find ways to understand better who is coming through its doors and to stake out its own position in the rapidly expanding world of contemporary-art institutions.

From the beginning, the museum wanted to involve artists deeply in efforts to rethink its role. Before it turned to marketing and advertising consultants, it first contacted the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, whose highly praised work (now in shows at the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center) often focuses on how people experience public spaces.

While many of Mr. Eliasson's ideas for the museum remain unrealized — judged to be

too complex or perhaps too experimental — Ms. Viso said he helped museum officials, in terms of perception, see the importance of everything outside their galleries. He argued that the Web site, the phone system, the signs in and around the museum, the lobby, the guard station and the gift shop had a large part in framing visitors' opinions about the museum long before they saw the first work of art.

“We were doing a great job in the galleries but not in the public spaces,” Ms. Viso said. “He stretched us as an institution to think far beyond what a staff might do just thinking practically.” (Ms. Viso's new home, the Walker, is an apt standard of comparison for the Hirshhorn: in 2007 only 35 percent of its 611,000 visitors reported being first-timers.)

Mr. Brougher and other Hirshhorn officials said they eventually came to see a greater involvement by artists — not just in ad campaigns and planning, but in speaking, teaching and spending more time at the museum — as a crucial way to reach newcomers. That way, they realized, the museum could put faces and possibly even personal histories alongside sometimes enigmatic works.

The idea has extended into the galleries, where the museum has started “Ways of Seeing,” in which artists are invited to rummage through the permanent collection and organize exhibitions. (The first such show, by the California artist John Baldessari, opened in 2006 and was critically well received.)

“Engaging the artist this way is not like anything I’ve encountered before, or at least not to this level,” said Arthur Cohen, a marketing consultant for cultural institutions whose firm, LaPlaca Cohen, has been involved in the museum’s efforts. “And I think it makes a lot of sense for a place that on many days can be full of people who got up that morning not intending to see contemporary art.”

One recent afternoon in the museum, Pearl Granat, of Lake Worth, Fla., and Rhoda Avezzano, of Closter, N.J., were standing in front of a Sigmar Polke painting with bemused expressions. The two longtime friends had rendezvoused in Washington to enjoy themselves and were in many ways exactly the kind of visitors the museum hopes to hook.

It was their first time there, but as occasional museum patrons, they wanted to see art, not airplanes. They had read about the museum in a guidebook, and Ms. Granat was interested in the Hirshhorn’s well-known sculpture collection.

Now they were walking through a gallery of the museum’s recent acquisitions, chuckling occasionally at works — like Mona Hatoum’s “Entrails Carpet,” a shiny silicone spread of what look like intestines — but reporting that they were enjoying themselves a lot. They said they might even visit the current exhibition, “Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image,” a mazelike show of often surreal video art.

“We might go in, but we’re not sure,” Ms. Granat said. “It’s really dark in there.”