What's up elsewhere?
Points of Departure

What begins in California inevitably ends up here, and for museums and galleries, that means more hi-tech interpretation.

In 2001 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art developed an experimental exhibition called Points of Departure: Connecting with Contemporary Art, based on 60 works by artists such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. Visitors explore the galleries using an iPAQ Pocket PC. These lightweight "wireless" computers show thumbnails of the artworks on their high-resolution color screens. By clicking on the images, visitors can access original video footage or archival clips of the artists talking about their work.

Each of the galleries focuses thematically on an aspect of contemporary art such as the use of objects, the presence of language, and issues of individual style. To facilitate each visitor's open-ended process of seeing and understanding these challenging themes, every gallery contains a "Smart Table". Driven by a built-in computer, these prototype devices display images, video and text on a flat, interactive screen set in a tabletop. The Smart Tables provide immediate access to in-depth, multimedia commentary by the exhibition's curators - Janet Bishop and John Weber - introducing the theme and ideas of each section of the show. The Smart Tables also provide commentary by other curators and artists, along with introductions to key works on view and activities related to the art.

The third experimental technology is a curatorial game that allows visitors to construct their own exhibition by re-hanging works in the exhibition in a virtual gallery in whichever way they like. The "Make Your Own Gallery" kiosks, located in a study gallery near the exit of the exhibition, provide visitors with a fun way to explore their own themes and ideas.

In an additional study gallery, visitors are encouraged to explore Making Sense of Modern Art, the Museum's multimedia introduction to 20th century art. It includes a new section on artists and work in Points of Departure, as well as extensive information about other work in the Museum's collection.

According to John Weber, "Our goal is to help visitors respond to the art in relevant, meaningful and ultimately satisfying ways. Multimedia technologies, judiciously and intelligently deployed, offer one of the most powerful means of helping museum visitors achieve insights and illuminations about these works. By making the ideas, historical context, social and biographical conditions and voices of art history more readily available, museums can provide visitors with an enhanced capacity to enjoy contemporary art and new ways to assess their responses to it."

Meanwhile, at San Francisco's Exploratorium children's science museum, wireless technology has been developed yet further. Here, infrared information beacons automatically connect with handheld computers to deliver interpretive content about the nearest exhibit via specially constructed web pages.

The educational use of this new technology is being evaluated by computer giant Hewlett Packard. A typical scenario for a school's visit goes something like this: In the classroom children visit the Exploratorium web site and develop their own web pages of ideas and questions about the exhibits. At the museum, they use handheld PCs to pick up their own web pages and the Exploratorium pages. They explore the exhibits, following the links that interest them most and making notes as they go. They then use networked digital cameras to take photos of the exhibits, save them to their web page, and communicate with each other using a bulletin board.

Back in the classroom the web sites are downloaded and a series of projects completed on the exhibition and their experience of it. Both the subject matter and the educational media combine to create a powerful learning experience about science and technology.

Interpretation using wireless technology is planned or underway at a number of UK galleries and museums, including Tate Modern. Ultra-new technology - it's coming your way soon...

See www.sfmoma.org or contact the editor for further information.

Editors note: the next edition of the journal will take a look at the use of new technology in interpretation, coinciding with an Interpret Scotland seminar on the same subject.

"Education is the movement from darkness to light"
Alan Bloom (1939-2001), US Writer and teacher