The Color Factory

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Sponsored experiential exhibits, optimized for Instagram and all manner of other social sharing channels and visual diarizing, have become de rigueur—see, for example, the Museum of Ice Cream and Rosé Mansion. The string of pop-ups includes a dizzying variety of selfie stations, selfie booths, Boomerang-friendly locations and more—with colors, sets, and motifs designed to seduce the keen visual diarist or self-promoter.

The latest iteration? The Color Factory—except this time, while the installation is visually stimulating, the organizers are encouraging contemplation, even encouraging visitors to put their phones away.

Described by its founders as a “collaborative interactive exhibit,” Color Factory first opened in San Francisco in August 2017, and celebrates color and creativity. Artists, designers and makers all came together to build a series of spaces saturated in “hues that invite curiosity, discovery and play.”

Color Factory proved so popular it was expanded in to a nine-month run, including the US East Coast. The New York edition, opened August 20, comprises 16 unique rooms, created in collaboration with local artists to “connect you to the colorful moments around New York and in your own daily life.” The New York Color Factory is partnered by Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum and sponsored by Maybelline, Gymboree and the Anagram balloon company.
Each separate installation is designed to foster “meaningful connection” to the people and world. Christine Wong Yap’s Complementary Compliments installation is a perfect example of this new take. The Queens-based artist, whose work explores interdependence and what makes humans flourish, invites visitors to observe, draw and admire the friend or stranger seated across from them. The activity offers a chance to take time to reflect upon and share what makes another person unique—a rarity in bustling New York.
Secret Colors by Molly Young turns visitors’ focus inward, offering an opportunity for self-discovery via a live-action flowchart. Starting with “sunrise or sunset?” visitors are led through a series of questions painted throughout the room, culminating with a color-inspired personality assessment. In keeping with the theme of introspection and individuality, Young suggests keeping the results of the quiz to oneself. She asks, “When was the last time you had a secret all your own? Something you didn’t share with a single soul (or a single follower)?”

From partnerships to paint colors, the experience is also deeply rooted in New York. Lower East Side favorite Il Laboratorio del Gelato provides ice cream at one of the snack stations and Sleepy Jones designed a limited-edition pajama set for sale in the gift shop.
Even the color palette is New York-themed, with shades that pay “special homage to all the colors that make New York City unique,” including hues drawn from a light grey subway tile and a bucket of mauve chrysanthemums spotted in a bodega. This is echoed in Andrew Kuo’s installation, a room of infographic merry-go-rounds that split spinning wheels into pie charts detailing quintessential New York experiences, from Thoughts on a Subway on 7/30/2018 to advice For the Best New York Life. Kuo shares amusing observations about living in New York, from “Meditate regularly to prepare for common supermarket drama” to “Phones were invented so we wouldn’t have to worry about talking or smiling.”

While phones are not prohibited at Color Factory, visitors are encouraged to fully engage with the exhibit by putting them down. To facilitate this, photo booths are integrated into the installations “in hopes that it will free you to put your phone away, be in photos with your friends and family, and appreciate the exhibits more fully.”

While there is a mounting backlash against cynically Instagram-optimized experiences, Color Factory has taken the experiential museum format and attempted to develop it into a vibrant celebration of humanity, “encouraging visitors to consider how color can help define a place and contribute to our sense of togetherness.”
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Visual and Instagrammable experiences remain flavor of the month, but among today’s sophisticated influencers, micro-influencers, wannabe influencers, and sharing-obsessed generation Z, a new level of savviness is emerging. In response, brands and companies hoping to create visual stimulus and sharable experiences must up the ante to remain compelling. Sharing everyday experiences or those too deliberately set up for Instagram is increasingly becoming “basic.” Watch this space.

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