

INSTITUTION Exploratorium

LOCATION San Francisco, California

Shedding Light on Shared Humanity

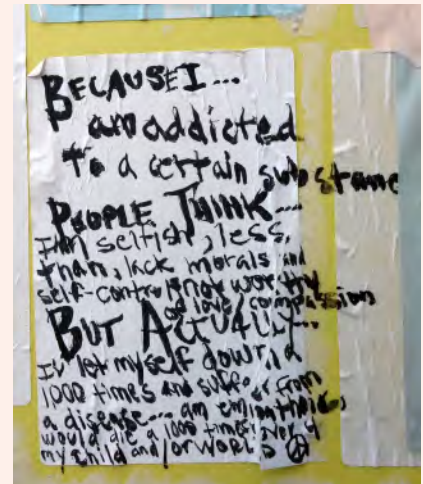


Fig.1. Bright-yellow pillars define and create spaces for *Middle Ground* exhibits.

In August 2019, a pop-up installation appeared outside San Francisco's Main Library in the city's Civic Center neighborhood. *Middle Ground: Reconsidering Ourselves and Others* consists of tall, bright-yellow pillars topped with an assortment of chairs; the pillars support an array of interactive experiences (fig. 1). Several invite or require collaboration with others. Some are playful: grasp a bronze hand, then join hands with other people, and danceable music

begins to play. Others may prompt sober reflection on how we think about and behave toward people we encounter in public spaces (figs. 2 & 3).

The installation, created by the Exploratorium, brings splashes of color and whimsy that transform a formerly austere concrete plaza. *Middle Ground* includes a small pop-up cafe and invites all passersby to linger for a few minutes, or longer. It feels generous (fig. 4).



Figs. 2 & 3. The exhibit includes a talk-back opportunity that invites passersby to share their unseen stories.

I encountered *Middle Ground* on an early summer evening after the neighborhood's office workers had departed for the day. A handful of people, perhaps folks who live nearby, stopped to explore. A woman with two young children started the music playing, and they had an impromptu dance party for a few minutes. The kids moved on to an exhibit that looks like you're playing tug-of-war.

The plaza is a crossroads where transit riders wait for their buses, museum- and symphony-goers hurry to and from their cultural experiences, and some of the city's unhoused population seek services and shelter inside the library. I found myself appreciating how the exhibits brought warmth and welcome to a space where people might be confronted with hardship or feel suspicion directed toward

them. Seeing this social experiment in action gave me hope that it's perhaps working even better than the designers and planning partners could have hoped.

Middle Ground is part of San Francisco's Civic Center Commons initiative, described on the initiative's website as "a collaborative effort to breathe new life into the City's central civic spaces" where "diverse communities – from low-income Tenderloin families and unhoused adults, to technology employees and new residents, to visitors of cultural and civic institutions... may overlap in Civic Center public spaces, but they don't necessarily connect."

Tamara Schwarz, Director of Exhibit Development & Strategic Planning at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco



Fig. 4. Whimsical exhibits engage visitors in playful, social ways.