BOOKS

Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences

REVIEWED BY JOÃO PEDRO FRÓIS

Art is something that happens as a person and an art object interact.
—John Dewey, 1934

The discovery of the true meaning of a text or work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.
—Hans George Gadamer, 1976

To interpret an artwork is to make sense of it for oneself and learn what it means to others.
—Terry Barrett, 2006

More than a space for viewing and conveying information about works of art, the art museum today is a platform for the cultural experience of artists, curators, and the public. Some museums have become paradigmatic entities of contemporary culture — spaces for representation and social participation where the public can cultivate its passions and enhance its creative imagination.

Two factors are important for the transformation and growth of such institutions: getting to know their audiences better in their different psychological, social, and cultural dimensions, and developing programs catering to them. These priorities have become increasingly apparent in articles published in scholarly journals and books discussing visitors’ aesthetic experience and assessing the impact of programs aimed at them (Barrett 2003; Bitgood 2013; Burnham and Kai-Kee 2011; Funch 1997; Kirchberg and Tröndle 2012; Villeneuve 2007; Yenawine 2000). These studies and programming efforts were perhaps more common in other types of museums since the second half of the twentieth century. Though there are

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exceptions, elevated focus on these areas in art museums seems to have arrived somewhat later.

The book *Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences* by Olga Hubard, professor of Art Education at Teachers College, Columbia University (New York City), offers up-to-date reflections on art museum and gallery teaching. Hubard’s propositions are the outcome of her own broad experience in art museum education, interpreted through a range of theories on museum education. From my perspective, Hubard’s approach is innovative, considering the scarcity of monographs available on the topic.

The book’s content is guided by two goals. The first goal lies in a theoretical direction where communications theory is applied within the context of the art museum to foster and inform new practices in aesthetic education. The second goal is making available a set of strategies that have been designed and tested to interpret works of art. In her view, dialogue is the fundamental communication process on which her approach to art museum education hinges. Dialogue about art comprises the structural backbone of educational activities in galleries: through dialogue, observers can interpret works of art, communicate with peers, and become “wide-awake to life” (Dewey 1934), gaining greater awareness of their inner and outer worlds.

The book starts with an introduction that describes art museums as socially responsive entities: art museum education goals are to facilitate deep experiences of artworks, and for that, strategies of mediation of meaning can help people experience art. This is followed by ten articles organized into an equal number of chapters. With the exception of Chapter 5, Facilitating Interpretative Dialogues: Some Concrete Suggestions, all the articles were previously published in journals and adapted for this book.

The first part of the book, encompassing the first five chapters, is entitled Group Dialogue, which focuses on verbal group interactions and accepting viewers’ differing understandings of artworks. Strategies for spoken interaction fall within the framework of what Hubard calls “gallery teaching,” where she also discusses three equally important kinds of dialogue: predetermined, interpretive, and thematic. All three may be used in a single conversation about a work of art and guided by two work-tools: interactive communication and listening to each other, things that the museum educator should emphasize in group-work. Speaking, listening, and being silent in inter-group communication are vital elements in mediating creative sense-making.

The book’s second part, Negotiating Cultural Contexts, contains two chapters focusing on a reflexive theoretical framework designed to aid art museum educators. This part deals with the way in which participants’ various interpretations about works of art can be brought together in group dialogue. Hubard gives tips for productively viewing of works of art. Each outcome of dialogue about works of art with other people is unique and at the same time, so is the discovery of personal sense-making and consciousness-raising (Freire 1980).

According to Hubard, it falls to the art museum educator to “steer” different interpretations thus leading to the build-up of meaning about the artwork being considered. The individual differences in interpreting the works of art are therefore a capital gain for the educator who accepts the postulations and cognitive consonances-dissonances arising about the artwork. In fact, these conflicts are essential for
developing individual aesthetic meaningfulness. The art-museum educator has a risky job demanding subtle management to maintain balance in the group. This work involves leading the participants to think and work out things for themselves, dealing with silences and subsequent flows of interpretation. The educator must also record the first conventional interpretations, often imbued with cultural prejudices, and help articulate final interpretations about the art.

In the third part of the book, Embodiment and Meaning Making comprising three chapters, focuses on the so-called embodied view of meaning. Hubard stresses the importance of the emotions to clarify and build up knowledge, aided by artistic and poetic resources that activate other sensory modes. For Hubard, art is not exclusively the language of the emotions, but she does not deny the role of emotions in art interpretation. In fact, emotions as a set of not easily accessed phenomena play an important role for the understanding of contextual, historical, or biographical information about art the museum facilitator should have in mind when dealing with groups. As the expressions of human beings with multiple layers of meaning, works of art demand observers' effort and participation to glean meaning from what they are looking at and by contextualizing them semiotically, perceiving what these works of art mean to others.

The last chapter touches upon a topic that has not been sufficiently dealt with in the literature. It speaks about aesthetic education in regards to using reproductions of works of art. Many different formats of reproductions may be deemed valuable because they allow access to the pictures by their mobility and usability, characteristics that help towards the potential democratization of art.

Knowing about the way people interact with art works and new mediation strategies for working with art gallery visitors is vital to museum education. This is Olga Hubard's main argument that goes hand-in-hand with another: that museum education can develop people's aesthetic appreciation when visual thought is communicated through speech as previously held meanings are reformulated.

The author tackles complex theoretical questions and ways of interacting in non-formal yet complex contexts through the lens of a variety of academic disciplines from educational psychology, the philosophy of art, aesthetics, education, to the neurosciences. These perspectives help us gain a better understanding of the topic she is concerned with here, which is the way people experience and make meaning of art. She draws on John Dewey’s conceptions of art and experience and Hans-George Gadamer’s ideas about the transformative power of art via interpretation, characterized as aesthetic experience. In addition to these major twentieth-century philosophers, Hubard also aptly gathers a series of intermeshing propositions about art and aesthetics put forward by Nelson Goodman (1976) and Langer (1953), as well as ideas concerning educational strategies and dialogue techniques with works of art by Terry Barrett (2003), Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011), and Philip Yenawine (2000). Hubard also relies on George Hein’s (1998) constructivist educational approach applied to a museum setting, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) postulations about the dimensions of aesthetic experience, and John Falk’s (2009) study of the ways museum visitors conceptualize their experience.

Hubard’s approach to art museum education also suggests that viewers need to learn how to decipher artistic details in a work of art such
as the formal ones. Indeed, it is important that viewers are made more aware of visual terms, although it is not enough to make them more aware of the artistic elements or detailed information about the work of art. What matters most is the way people experience art and how the learning experiences’ outcomes result meaningfully in the “viewer’s lives.” In taking the life experiences of the viewers as a departure point, as well as their ways of thinking – more so than what skills and specific knowledge they have about the works of art – everyone has the ability to look at works of art and participate in dialogue with them without obeying other demands. The author clearly shares this point of view with us: the visitor’s experience, combined by various kinds of dialogue and education strategies, is the center of the educational activity. The information provided by the museum or gallery setting should trigger discussion about perceptions of artworks without inhibiting the person’s flow of thought. The art museum has a duty to cultivate this type of experience.

There are challenges facing Hubard’s approach to art museum education. The book does not discuss the impact of such educational experiences in a museum environment on participants, studied over a period of time. The author, therefore, provides us with the chance to open up new perspectives and theoretically founded practices to rigorous research in art museum education. These museum practices can and should be reconsidered from different academic perspectives. The appeal of this book is that the author successfully responds to the need for innovation in art museum and gallery education by proposing accessible strategies that avoid the didacticism or lack of information frequently seen in these institutions. Hubard’s approach promotes the viewer’s agency. In writing about original ideas and practices that are theoretically supported, innovative, and feasible, this approach to art museum education in the field of museum studies makes a pertinent and relevant contribution. Hubard invites all museum researchers and educators to reflect on and discuss the experiences of art museum visitors, turning such experiences into useful tools.

REFERENCES


