

EXPERIENCE-BASED ART EDUCATION: HOW PREJUDICES ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART CAN LEAD TO ENRICHED EDUCATION IN MUSEUMS

Eva Van MOER

HIRL cvo

Frans Stienletlaan 11, 2610 Wilrijk, Belgium

E-mail: eva.van.moer@hirl.be

Abstract

Every form of communication, even every culture, is depending on the interaction between expectation and perception. Every perception is related to anticipations and therefore to comparisons. What we understand or see is not simply a given, but is the product of past experiences and future expectations. When understanding fails, expectations become prejudices.

A big stumbling-block in interpreting artworks in a museum of contemporary art is having confidence in the concept of multiple interpretations. Because contemporary art is characterised as 'open-ended', understanding does not always occur and viewers are confused or even disappointed.

In this study we investigate the process of understanding contemporary art and focus especially on the formulation of prejudices during a museum visit. We underline that the prejudiced nature of understanding does not have to lead to negative or empty experiences but creates openness to future experiences. Prejudices send people back to re-inspect the initial experience. It is important to bring museum visitors to understand their own constructed meanings by reinvestigating their initial interpretation through inquiring. Museum educators should develop tools which allow visitors to position themselves and make them think from various contexts. This kind of education leads to enriched (re)interpretation and experiences.

Key Words: *museum education, experience-based art education, prejudices about contemporary art*

JEL Classification: **I, I2, I23**

1. INTRODUCTION

This study reflects on qualitative research that explores how individual adult visitors process aesthetic experiences in an art museum. Our attention focuses on the viewer and his abilities, experiences and expectations that influence the encounter with an art object.

Through qualitative analysis, we investigated how visitors understand contemporary art. We gathered reactions from individual adult visitors while visiting an art museum with a collection of contemporary art. The reactions were retrieved from conversations between the individual visitor and the researcher while touring in the museum. Beforehand, the adult visitor was asked to select one or several artefacts from the exhibition. The selection was based on the viewer's own preferences: the visitor was free to pick and choose the exhibits he wanted to talk about. Only the selection of favourite objects was elaborated in a conversation between visitor and researcher and took place in the immediate presence of the chosen artefacts.

Visitors were requested to “think aloud”; this means to talk about what they saw, thought and felt about the chosen artworks. The objective of talking was to elaborate on the reasons for choosing their favourite object and to put their experiences while interacting with the artefact into their own words.

70 adults were accompanied during their museum visit. They were all recruited with relevant background characteristics and were between 18 and 80 years old.

The conversations were held in the *Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.)* in Ghent (Belgium). This museum displays contemporary art and owns a collection of artefacts set in the context of international developments since 1945. The collection includes works by internationally renowned artists like *Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, David Hammons* and *Yves Klein* and by Belgian artists like *Panamarenko, Luc Tuymans, Marcel Broodthaers* and *Jan Fabre*. Young national and international artists are also well represented in the collection. S.M.A.K. constantly pursues a dynamic interaction between the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions.

2. ANALYSIS

All conversations were recorded. We transcribed each interview and the data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a computer software program for qualitative data analyses. ATLAS.ti is based on a Grounded Theory approach, meaning that analytical categories are obtained inductively from the data. The data were read and reread to identify codes and categories until data saturation occurred (Glaser, 1998; Murh, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

We analyzed while focusing on the viewers themselves. We looked at the ways in which persons interact with artefacts and concentrated on the adults' processes to come to an interpretation. The viewers' interactions with the artefacts can be briefly described in four ways: a perceptual response, based on the senses; an intellectual response where cognitive elements are emphasized; an emotional response, which concentrates on affective components; and an (inter)active response in which visitors undertake concrete actions to come to an understanding of the meaning of the artefact.

The process of meaning-making is a holistic experience, where the sum is greater than the parts. This makes analyzing and categorizing visitors' interaction with artefacts difficult. Hence, the four processes of meaning-making can not be neatly packaged into distinct categories: it is often not clear in what dimension an interaction can be classified. We made a categorization based on the degree in which a specific process was present. We talked about an intellectual response when cognitive processes prevailed over emotional, perceptual or interactive aspects. In Kesner's (2006) opinion, art experiences involve the whole spectrum of reactions, from gut reactions (subconscious level) to developed thoughts (conscious level). The four processes cover both levels of experiences.

3. PERCEPTUAL PROCESSES

Most art theorists are strongly convinced that aesthetic experience is always embedded in the perceptual activity of the viewer. Perceiving an art object by the five senses is the most direct way to know the object. According to Beardsley (1982) the most important characteristic of an aesthetic experience is its object-centeredness, meaning that it focuses on the qualities of the art object itself. These qualities are external to the self and belong to the object itself, or as Beardsley calls it they are 'phenomenologically objective'. Therefore, he argues, it is important to have a

direct aesthetic experience of artworks: viewers have to directly grasp the qualities of an art object in perception. This direct perception of qualities is itself an act of cognition because it presumes knowledge of those qualities. Arnheim (1969) acknowledges in his book *Visual Thinking* the union of perception and thought. He states that “the operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself” (Arnheim, 1969:13). Goodman (1969), who sees artworks as examples of the symbol system, acknowledges perceiving as a form of cognitivism too. Because artworks use symbolic entities to refer to the worlds we live in, they require understanding of what they refer to. In a similar way, Merleau-Ponty (1945) regards perception as both a physiological event and an intellectual judgement because every object of perception is embedded in a context. Dewey (1934) emphasizes also the importance of contexts in his book *Art as Experience*. He sees the making of meaning as recognizing relationships: perceiving art is not only about identifying the elements of the artefact, but about identifying how these elements are related.

Joy and Sherry (2003) studied the aesthetic experience as a multisensory approach by stating that “if you use only one of the senses, you acquire one-fifth of the aesthetic experience” (Joy and Sherry, 2003:277). Our study confirms this. Given the visual nature of art objects in the museum, most reactions were based on sight:

“If you turn your head this way you can recognize the shape of a star.”

But perception is more than just visual perception. All senses were switched on during the museum visit. Respondents expressed the need to touch the art object itself:

“The artwork looks like it is soft-textured. I would like to handle it, but I do not dare to touch.”

Touching is not always possible in museums. Touching requires proximity because there is a point of contact between object and body (mostly hands). As the last example shows visitors are aware of the museum’s policy not to touch because of rules of conservation. Providing samples of different materials, reproduction or duplication of originals can compensate the restriction of touching artefacts and make it possible to physical interact in the museum (O’Neill and Dufresne-Tassé, 1997).

Sound, mainly present in video installations, was also highly appreciated by the participants of our study. It often gave a surplus value to the experience:

“(I really think that) the sound gives an extra dimension to the artwork. When the old man picks the apples from the branches of the tree, they make a creaking noise.”

The final two senses are taste and smell. Both senses are chemical ones, meaning that the original object is transformed in particles that can be dissolved on the tongue or smelled by the nose before it can be absorbed in the body. Odours, for example, have effect before they can be recognized (Joy and Sherry, 2003). The participants of this study were not allowed to taste artefacts or pieces of them. Smell, on the other hand, played a crucial role in the exhibits shown during the period of recording. We noticed that the odour of artefacts was an important reason for choosing a particular work of art. Materials like coffee, soil (earth), fat and wax release a very distinct smell which stimulates olfactory nerves.

*“The work of art that attracted me the most is this one. You can smell it already from afar. This is amazing! I can really imagine that people would visit a museum to see such an artwork. It is certainly **my** reason for visiting the museum because it appeals to multiple senses.”*

This last utterance is a clear example of the multisensory character of the art experience.

4. COGNITIVE PROCESSES

The cognitive psychologist Rudolf Arnheim defines 'cognitive' as "all mental operations involved in receiving, storing and processing information" (Arnheim, 1969:13). As we already mentioned, Arnheim urges not to split cognitive operations from perception. Moreover, visual perception *is* visual thinking as cognitive processes are indispensable features of perception itself. This means that all thought mechanisms "operate in direct perception, but also in the interaction between direct perception and stored experience, as well as in imagination" (Arnheim, 1969:294). Our data show different kind of cognitive processes:

"I like to use my imagination, especially my childlike fantasy. It reminds me of Walt Disney: the trees and figures can begin to sing at any minute."

"This portrays the Eastern Bloc. That period is behind us now. A lot of people picture the consequences of the Iron Curtain nostalgically. They like the idea of a protected community where everybody had work and nourishment."

Viewers understand some of the context and grasp some of the qualities but are also aware that there are further relationships and qualities to be recognized and seen. There is always the possibility of seeing more.

"This artefact has got something intriguing. I don't know exactly what it is but it certainly makes me think. I really can appreciate that I don't fully understand it. I really like it when I have to search for meaning."

According to Parsons (2002) viewers are always in this kind of situation because it is impossible to grasp everything there is in an artwork.

5. EMOTIONAL PROCESSES

Collingwood (1938) makes two different kinds of distinctions concerning experiencing feelings. First, he talks of 'feeling' as a perceptual dimension referring to things that can actually be felt through the senses. Thus, when people 'feel' colours, sounds, scents, smells and so forth. Secondly, Collingwood refers to 'feeling' as a state of mind. When we speak of pleasure, fear, joy, sadness ... we distinguish another kind of sensation that can be called 'emotion'. In this study is the latter definition of feeling the focal point of the emotional dimension. The other description of feeling is already discussed in the perceptual dimension.

Csikzentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) study of aesthetic museum experience reports that visitors show a broad variety of emotional responses. This study confirms their finding. Many visitors reported positive emotions such as happiness, pleasure, poignancy, surprise ... as well as negative responses such as anxiety, fear, distress ... Consider what some participants had to say:

"The artefact overwhelmed me. It took me by surprise... It made me literally gasp!"

"Raveel is amazing! When I see this painting by Raveel I get a warm feeling. Every time I'm looking forward to being reunited with it again. It is an emotional and pleasant reunion."

Humour is linked to feelings of being excited or struck by the artefact. Several of the respondents in this study appreciated humour a lot:

“I like the artwork with the mattress a lot. I like the idea of the mattress that is fallen asleep and snores loudly. An artwork can move me in several ways: it can touch my heart, my soul or sometimes it gives me a certain feeling. In this case the artwork makes me smile and gives me a happy feeling.”

Emotional reactions were mentioned by nearly every respondent. The power of the work of art to generate feelings is highly valued by all visitors. Csikzentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) see emotions as the primary mode of the aesthetic experience.

6. THE (INTER)ACTIVE DIMENSION

The three previous processes are elaborately discussed in literature. In general, the aesthetic experience is divided into three sorts: any encounter with art objects in an art museum involves perceptual, cognitive and affective components (Kesner, 2006; Carroll, 2002; Matravers, 1998; Shusterman, 1997). However, in this study we determine a fourth element in processing aesthetic experiences. Certain visitors felt the need to undertake actions that contributed to the full understanding of the art works. Our data show two different kinds of action: interaction with the art object itself and, more indirectly, consulting information about artefacts.

A large number of visitors used educational tools provided by the museum. They read either the labels or the texts or both. The labels gave basic information: the name of the artist, the title of the artefact, the year in which the object was made and occasionally the year of birth and the year in which the artist died. The texts provided information on the artist and his oeuvre: the method of working, the use of material, the lifestyle and the way of thinking. Some texts mentioned the reasons why the curator chose to exhibit a certain artist or art object. The educational tools were mostly used to acquire information on what an artwork was about.

Another type of action was the physical interaction visitors had with certain artefacts. Contemporary art objects differ from modernist artworks. While the latter can be described as a self-enclosed object which the viewer looks at it in a receptive and contemplative way, a contemporary artwork invites people to engage in. In other words, a modernist work has to be ‘viewed’ while contemporary art objects demand ‘participation’ (Bourriaud, 2002). Our data validate this notion.

“Here, I wrote the name of my friend Vera in the coffee. The fact that you are allowed to have a part in the creating process of the artwork makes the artwork really good.”

The interactive character of some contemporary artwork can be linked to the sense of touch, one of the perceptual processes we already explained earlier. Material interactivity in the museum has the merit of creating alternative conditions for interrelating with original objects and prevents ‘museum fatigue’ which is created by an overload of intense mental activity of comprehension (O’Neill and Dufresne-Tassé, 1997). Before the existence of contemporary artwork, Dewey (1934) wrote about the importance of non-linguistic forms of thinking and the role of the body in understanding artworks. Bodily experiences encourage taking a break from more receptive approaches and give viewers a change to experience art objects in a different manner (Costantino, 2007). One of the respondents illustrates this:

“Nowadays people are allowed to interact with art objects. People are usually not acquainted with physical contact in museums because touching is often forbidden. By standing in the middle of this installation and by touching it, I am more aware of art object itself.”

This description of the different ways of interacting shows that art experiences involve a whole spectrum of reactions. The fact that educational means still address only a restricted number of experiences – often cognitive responses – contradicts with our previous observations.

7. STUMBLING-BLOCKS IN READING ARTWORKS LEAD TO PREJUDICES

7.1. Uncertainty about multiple interpretations

Because contemporary art is characterised as ‘open-ended’ which implies making multiple interpretations, understanding does not always occur and viewers are confused or even disappointed. An example:

“I don’t find any real explanation of what this artefact signifies. I miss it because I would like to know what it means. I am interested in the artist’s intentions. But I am rather disappointed. Now I am making an assumption and I don’t know if it is the right one.”

Other research about interpretation of contemporary art confirms this. Meanings of contemporary (visual) art can be defined as contradictory, multiple, open-ended and unstable (Charman and Ross, 2006; Elias, 1993). In their study, Charman and Ross described that their respondents initially showed unease while interpreting the artefacts:

“The biggest stumbling-block in reading artworks was having confidence in the concept of multiple interpretations. At the beginning of the week the group exhibited an enthusiasm to identify a single authoritative voice to deliver what was considered the definite meaning of a work. Most often this ‘true’ voice was taken to be the artist’s intention. (...) Many of the initial interpretations (...) shared this need for recourse to a ‘comfort blanket’ of authority or expertise, which seemed to demonstrate a lack of confidence in developing open-ended interpretations based on participants’ own experience of looking at the work.” (Charman & Ross, 2006:32)

In our study, we observed the same phenomenon.

7.2. Different expectations

Besides the lack of confidence in the concept of multiple interpretations, another problematical experience we detected in this study is the formulation of prejudices (Van Moer, 2007). According to Gombrich (1980) every form of communication is depending on the interaction between expectations and perception. Miscommunication can occur when interpretations conflict with the viewer’s anticipations. We noticed that some of these shattered expectations lead to constructing prejudiced interpretations:

“This can not be defined as an artwork. If I would ask someone to copy this work and give him the exact variety of supplies, then anyone could reconstruct this. That’s the reason why I think it can not be defined as art. Creating art is creating something unique.”

This reaction demonstrates that visitors construct prejudices, which especially focus on the nature and the value of art today. The respondent has his own definition of art and was disappointed because his expectation did not meet reality. In a way, the formulation of this kind of prejudices is identical to the dilemma between authoritative interpretation and multiple interpretations. Defining contemporary art is difficult and in spite of all discussions and philosophical answers the definition remains vague and plural (Page et al., 2006; Danto, 1981; Goodman, 1969). Visitors expect to recognize their ‘true’ definition of art, but are confronted with the manifold concepts of defining of contemporary art.

Gadamer (1960) underlined prejudices of interpretations in his book *Truth and Method*. He mentions that he doesn't consider the formulation of prejudices as necessarily obstructing coming to a meaningful understanding. Moreover, the prejudiced nature of understanding leads to openness to future experiences because it sends people back to re-inspect the initial experience. We note that Gadamer focuses on the possibilities of a problematical situation in the same way as Dewey did.

8. INCORPORATING PREJUDICES IN MUSEUM EDUCATION

In the above, we made a point why obstacles or problematic situations do not necessarily have to lead to negative experiences because they disengage the way to revise the initial experience. But how can art educators translate this idea into museum practice? Gooding-Brown (2000) developed a model of interpretation based on disruption. The basis for the disruptive model is found in the dilemma of authoritative interpretation and multiple voices interpretation. According to Gooding-Brown (2000) it is important to bring beholders to understand their own constructed interpretations of meanings by investigating the ways authoritative

The model exists of different stages. Starting from their own experiences with the artefact, visitors construct an initial interpretation. Leaving the original artefact (temporarily) behind, they reinvestigate their original interpretation through discussion and consultation of different sources (artists, critics, historians, cultural journals, art books, educators, personal experiences, other beholders). Then, they move towards exploring their own positions and how those positions may construct and influence interpretation. Finally, in returning to the art work, a reinterpretation occurs. Conversation in each stage is crucial. The educator occupies a supporting role in providing guidance, resources, tools ... so that spectators become active explorers, able to seek an answer to their own questions. Just as Dewey and Gadamer, Gooding-Brown emphasizes the necessity to start with a problematic experience "in order to provide more space for an exploration of potential for change" (Gooding-Brown, 2000:44).

We chose Gooding-Brown's model to illustrate how visitors may rethink their own position and how they can explore multiple contexts and realize their implication for interpretation. Although the disruptive model embodies Dewey's notions of inquiry learning and is ideal to use in an experience-based exhibit, it has its weak point. Because of its emphasis on talk and discussion, the model can not be used by individual visitors. We can see the benefits of talking with others about art experiences because it creates the possibility to clarify and justify what is experienced on a direct, face-to-face basis (Van Moer, 2007). But in addition to educational means based on discussion or talk, other tools suitable for both individual visitors as well as visitors in groups can be developed. Such tools may instruct how to use, do or see something; suggest actions to take; point out things to notice; pose questions to stimulate further inquiry ... Even small things can attribute to inquiry leaning. A general question about the definition of contemporary, for example, can be written on the little sign next to the name of the author and the title of the art work to enhance the thinking process. The most important thing is that tools should be developed to stimulate, improve, deepen and smooth the progress of visitor's engagement in the inquiry cycle.

9. CONCLUSION

The challenge for museums is to find ways to formulate exhibitions that start from genuine experiences and lead to inquiry. The museum occupies a mainly supporting role by focusing on engaging visitors into the inquiry process. Museums educators should develop tools which allow

visitors to position themselves and make them think from various positions. This kind of education leads to enriched reinterpretation and experiences. There is no point in underestimating visitors' abilities by giving them tools with ready-made outcomes and messages.

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