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Placing Museum Education in the Intersection of Art and Life

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Placing Museum Education in the Intersection of Art and Life

Probing the structure, process, and flow of communication in the museum enables educators to acknowledge how teaching in this setting could take a multi-dimensional approach, while also discussing questions such as: How are the visitors' experiences at the gallery constructed? What is the context in which visitors make meaning? What makes visitors become interested in certain aspects of an object but not others? Olga Hubard's book *Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences* re-examines the notion of visitor-centered museum education, using descriptive, reflexive, and critical lenses to suggest the ways in which museum educators might perceive, understand, and navigate the complexities of gallery teaching.

There have been a number of publications that probe the implications of interactive learning based on visitors' participatory experiences in interpreting art, especially focusing on

importance of conversations taking place in the museum space. For instance, Stainton (2002), along with other authors included in the book *Learning Conversations in Museums*, focuses on how conversations can serve as a way of informal museum learning. Stainton does this by illustrating how conversations reflect and change a visitor's identity and knowledge. In relation to the sociocultural context of learning, Falk and Dierking (2000) also explain the role of narrative and sharing "sociocultural information" in making social interaction with peers and groups (p. 48). By negotiating meanings of the artwork with social groups and peers, sharing personal and cultural beliefs while relating the object to their own background and knowledge, visitors turn the act of viewing objects into a collaborative learning experience. While Stainton (2002) and Falk and Dierking (2000) mainly focus on the interaction between peers and groups in their theories, Hooper-Greenhill (1999) uses the word "conversation" to describe the internal dialogue between the viewer and the objects, claiming that it can take "a number of forms and range across a spectrum of intellectual and everyday fields" (p. 21).

The book is yet another important publication, joining the increasing body of literature pertaining to museum education practice. While the above museum professionals and educators are widely celebrated for shaping the foundation of visitor-centered museum education theories over the past decade, however, *Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences* introduces new theories into the well-established concept of visitor-centered museum, further contributing to the complexities of the educational implications of this approach. Moreover, the book offers a more refined focus on the performance of gallery teacher as the connective link, which facilitates meaningful museum experiences. Its intended audiences encompass art educators working in a broad range of institutions, acknowledging their important role as mediators that facilitate varying interpretive strategies as both educator and viewer engage in collaborative meaning-making. Derived from the author's extensive experience as an art educator in various institutional settings, this book delineates an intricate web of visitors' dialogue, theoretical concepts, and institutional aspects to examine how museum education becomes a field that sits on the continuum of a broader pedagogical undertaking that connects art and life. For example, the book introduces detailed anecdotes of how objects, ideas, and people converge to form a narrative, which represents the past and recreates the present by recontextualizing artworks according to their own time and space. It provides a close-up examination of teaching and learning moments in which objects are conceptually placed in cross-cultural intersections.

The book consists of three parts focusing on the most significant elements that structure the basis of museum education as a whole—dialogue, cultural contexts, and embodiment. The ways in which the author analyzes dialogic approaches towards art, examines the personal and cultural contexts brought by the viewers, and discusses embodied engagement with art, suggests a framework that structures the reader's perception of museum education

supplemented with first-hand experiences delineated in accessible and relatable language. Although compartmentalized into separate chapters, the diverse elements of gallery teaching are interwoven and presented as interconnected texts, which correspond to the viewers' way of perceiving artworks based on a collage of experience, memories, knowledge, and cultural history. My experience of the book was like navigating through islands dispersed in the ocean, visiting one after another, coming back and seeing how they are mapped out in the sea and form connections with others. The book is a convergence of specific practices of gallery teaching, spreading out a variety of contents and contexts of interpretation possibilities and situating them within a larger discourse of art education. This method of highlighting the interconnectedness of theories, anecdotes, examples, and practical suggestions seems to represent the author's own understanding of gallery teaching, which became my own reading of museum education through her studies.

Hubard does well to manifest ways to bring aesthetics and daily life into the field of education. The discussions reexamine the values of creative process and art appreciation, underscoring the relevance of merging art's intrinsic formal language and pre-established knowledge shaped by the museum with extrinsic contextual aspects, such as various perspectives from diverse viewers in order to suggest a holistic approach towards art inquiry. She advocates for a multidimensional pedagogy based on theoretical and practical concerns that becomes a platform for viewers' interactive experiences.

In this light, the book focuses on how gallery teachers play an integral part in facilitating such "meaning-full encounters" for the viewers (p. 6). In the course of unfolding her perspective on gallery teaching, Hubard examines how to cultivate the ability to find the extraordinary in interactive experiences in the museum that "stimulate, enter viewers' lives in ways that matter in ways that feel alive and relevant" (p. 5). Bridging the gap between binaries such as modern/postmodern, rational/emotional, theory/life, and body/mind is one of the ways to create meaning-full encounters. The narratives, theories, and inquires push us to reexamine these dichotomies by placing these concepts on a continuum instead of locating them on opposing extremes. Engaging in gallery teaching in between binaries is to learn within the museum instead of learning about it. The knowledge emerged from this interaction is felt, embodied, and dynamic. The author's method of suggesting practical implications of gallery teaching also follows this strategy of balancing two different approaches. Each suggestion is presented in a transparent way, revealing both advantages and disadvantages. The reader, then, is able to locate multiple entry points to connect relevant ideas within this careful deployment of ideas and gauge how the author's suggestion might be useful in one's respective educational setting. Museum education in this sense is to develop multidimensional inquiries from various directions in order to discern what becomes absent and present from

different viewpoints. It is to think of museum as place of knowledge and also knowledge in making.

Curriculum envisioned by the author enables students to actively embrace the meaning that art delivers to the real world, as well as to incorporate the various experiences and memories into their relationship with art. Through this process, curriculum opens the space where gallery teaching could enact the idea that art intervenes in life and vice versa. In the following paragraph, I highlight three pivot points from the author's overall discussion regarding gallery teaching within the multilayered space of the art museum.

First, the author claims that it is essential for educators to successfully facilitate the dialogue between museum's discourse and students' discourse based on the notion of participation, which requires the viewers' active involvement through a series of actions and interchanges. By focusing on different modes of lively group dialogues that have been gathered during her educational activities in museums in Part I of the book, the author suggests how to create dialogues based on students' lived experiences to flow smoothly by building up the atmosphere for lively cultural interactions. It is essential to acknowledge the value of collaboration and provide an open-ended structure to encourage this practice between diverse groups. Focusing on the audience's participation in interpreting artworks, Hubard suggests vivid examples of how museum educators could encourage the viewer's meaning-making activity by creating an environment in which viewers actively share and negotiate their own interpretations of the artwork.

Second, the book suggests ways to cultivate the diverse conceptualizations of art that encourage students to imaginatively interacting with the surrounding social and cultural aspects and interrogate the complexities of traditional, conventional, and official knowledge suggested by the museum. Based on these suggestions, museum educators facilitate enriched interpretations that mobilize the viewers' positionalities in a productive and progressive way. An important aspect of gallery teaching, which is also emphasized by the author in many different arguments, is to acknowledge that its purpose is not to reduce teaching to facilitating students to merely share their experiences using artworks as instruments. In this case, teaching becomes a "banal notion of facilitation" and student experiences become an "unproblematic vehicle for self-affirmation and self-consciousness" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 117). This superficial application of gallery teaching is questionable since it fails to recognize the possible tensions occurring within and between students' different experiences. Hubard's arguments, though, continuously underscore that it is important for educators to understand the limitations of students' and teachers' own perspectives and, as a supplemental gesture, provide connection points within broader dimensions of diversity and public issues in today's society.

Third, the author introduces an embodied approach towards gallery teaching, which is a timely and significant issue that requires further investigation in the field of museum education. Sensual information gathered by external stimulation from art enables viewers to be attuned to the unpredictable creative moments that emerge in educational settings. Again, teaching in this light stems from the process of deep listening to viewers' experiences, memories, and knowledge that form real-life events, and incorporating these particularities to develop a multiplicity of curricula. The physical as well as emotional experience elicited by art, in the authors' perspective, enables us to share understandings of human realities in a powerful way.

Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences is intended for art educators working at schools, museums and communities who are interested in the domain of curriculum, creativity, and imagination among the diverse theories of art curriculum and pedagogy. Since the chapters in this publication are a collection of previously published journal articles and essays from various edited volumes, which focus on similar topics, readers might think some of the underlying discussions are redundant and repetitive. However, the overarching framework of the author's argument is well supported by varied narratives, distinct but interconnected methods, and myriad reflections derived from the author's educational experiences, which engage us to think imaginatively about museum education as a vibrant experimental ground where theory and practice intersect and reveal the multifaceted nature of art education.

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