Engaging Strangeness in the Art Museum: an audience development strategy

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Abstract

What is the public art museum's role in enhancing hesitant viewers' engagement with contemporary art, especially its more challenging and conceptual aspects? In considering this question, the notion that contemporary art is too difficult for general audiences to engage with directly is refuted. It is suggested that the capacity for viewers to make sense of contemporary art, understood as the discursive practices that have come to the fore since the 1960s, is hindered not by the art but by the art theory that hesitant viewers employ. As representational and formalist aesthetic codes remain the dominant modes of responding to art, for the art museum to become more inclusive, there needs a greater emphasis on discursive approaches to experiencing art. From an examination of claims made across disciplines that advocate discursive practice, including George Hein's constructivist museum, Helen Illeris's performative museum and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic conversation, a strategy for the enhancement of the experience of contemporary art for the hesitant or disconnected viewer is proposed that involves reorienting the role of the public art museum from expert speaker to expert listener.

Key words**:** constructivist museum, art museum education, art interpretation, audience engagement, audience development

The idea of going to an art gallery is delightful and life affirming for some people and confronting, confusing, uncomfortable or irrelevant for others. My interest in the experience of art from the viewer's perspective arises from working as a contemporary gallery director in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I was already aware that people spend very little time engaging with artwork and that this applied as much to my peers and colleagues as it did to the 'general public'. However, a pivotal moment occurred during a visit to National Gallery of Victoria a few years ago. I had decided to take a guided tour of a contemporary art exhibition just to see what happened. The enthusiastic volunteer guide steered us around the gallery looking at selected works then, pointing to one particular work, said 'I haven't been able to find anything out about this work so I'm afraid we'll have to turn or backs on that one.' It was not that a volunteer guide had not been provided with sufficient information about this work that concerned me, but rather, that a person who obviously enjoyed art enough to devote her time to sharing it with others had no capacity to engage with a work directly on her own. She needed officially sanctioned information to give her confidence and security. This experience was reinforced during a number of years as theory lecturer to first-year art students at the local tertiary art school. Here, I encountered both young and older students as baffled as anyone about what they were being asked to look at and decipher. They were energetic about making judgements, but often this meant unsophisticated outpourings of taste and prejudice with reliance on the codes of formalism and self-expression. Their approach was ultimately very unsatisfying, particularly when contemporary art was under consideration. I became fascinated with the question: What is the viewer supposed to do when they look at a work of contemporary art? It is this fascination that has lead to the question under consideration here: What can the public art museum do to facilitate greater participation in the experience of contemporary art?

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First, though, what do I mean by contemporary art? While some think of contemporary art as art that is made today, I wish to use a more specific definition. Arthur Danto's division of art provides a useful structure (Danto 1997). He discerns representation, expression and formalism as the dominant forms of art prior to the 1960s and nominates Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes (1964), as a work that articulated the displacement of the aesthetic object and reintroduced the philosophical or discursive turn first made apparent with Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades in the early 1900s.

The formalist aesthetic, as advocated by major post-war art writers and critics, Clement Greenberg (1961), Susanne Langer (1953) and Susan Sontag (1996), asserts that the aesthetic experience is of necessity non-discursive and non-propositional. Therefore, I argue that not only are aesthetic judgement and discursive interpretation alternative ways to appreciate artwork, they are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, aesthetic judgement should not involve interpretation and, on the other, interpretation precludes the purity of aesthetic judgement. The interpreter of a discursive artwork might use aesthetic judgement, but as utility is anathema to aesthetic judgement, there is an impasse.

It is the mismatch between codes, which challenges sensibilities to such an extent that positive engagement with contemporary discursive art becomes well nigh impossible for many members of the public. In examining what the public art museum can do to enhance viewers' experience of contemporary art, an assumption espoused by some museum professionals and often by artists themselves that contemporary art is too difficult for general or hesitant viewers to engage with directly, is questioned. I argue that because the representational and formalist aesthetic codes remain the dominant modes of responding to art, the capacity for viewers to make sense of contemporary art is limited. Therefore, I propose that, for the art museum to become more inclusive, greater emphasis needs to be placed on discursive approaches to experiencing art that are focused on the needs of the hesitant or disconnected viewer.

Public art museum professionals have handled the discomfort that viewers experience with contemporary art in a variety of ways. In my experience, some museums deal with the situation by providing a range of exhibition opportunities so the viewer can make alternative pathways through the galleries. Some curators and educational officers provide additional information and experiences in the hope of bridging gaps in knowledge. Some directors and managers ignore the issue on the basis that not all art is for everyone. Some espouse the belief that it doesn't matter if the experience is uncomfortable as that response in itself is valid. One consequence is that many artworks are passed by with barely a sideways glance. Is this the best we, as art museum professionals, can do?

In the 1960s the seminal research undertaken by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel (1966) discerned how people 'naturally' self-selected as museum goers, with those who are brought up to feel comfortable with the museum paradigm choosing to become visitors and those who do not share the values projected by the museum, framing their lack of interest in terms that protected them from feeling rejected (Bourdieu & Darbel 1991: 110) - those who are excluded through what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, referring to 'the violence which is exercised on a social agent with his or her complicity' are not even aware of this exclusion. To paraphrase Bourdieu, art museums were just not their thing. Bourdieu's recognition of the naturalising aspect of enculturation means that the attitudes and behaviours that attribute to a cultivated person are invisible. To counter the inequities that such an unspoken enculturation inevitably creates, Bourdieu promotes a form of objective reflexivity that actively engages those in positions of power with unpacking the circumstances and privileges that have given them their position in the first place (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

Bourdieu's significant influence is reflected in changes over recent decades as museological practice shifted from a position of imparting specialist knowledge to one of foregrounding the experience of the visitor. The articulation of this development also owes much to constructivist education theory and the journey from teaching to learning that follows a similar trajectory.

The Constructivist Museum

Constructivist education is built on a number of major theories of learning, which seek to acknowledge and empower the learner as an active participant in the construction of knowledge

and meaning. Its essential features are, that the individual constructs meaning through their engagement with the world; that learning occurs in a social context; and that engaging the new is contingent upon prior knowledge. In this regard, the two institutions – the museum and education – converge in the constructivist museum described comprehensively by George E. Hein (1998, 1999). To paraphrase Hein, the constructivist museum is recognizable by, its lack of a predetermined sequence; the acknowledgement of multiple learning modalities; the presentation of a range of points of view that allow the visitor to make connections with familiar concepts and objects; and the encouragement of comparisons between the unfamiliar and the new through a range of activities that utilize their life experiences (Hein 1998: 35; 1999: 77-8).

Participation

Constructivist educators agree that active participation is essential. This is not a new insight but has been a fundamental principle of education theory since the influence of John Dewey's Experience and Nature in 1929 (Dewey 2003). The assumption is that we learn best by doing, and that merely supplying a range of experiences and supporting material for the viewer to look at is insufficient. As a consequence, active participation has become a primary focus for the design of learning experiences in the museum environment. For example, in 2007, the European Union, through its Socrates Grundtvig Programme, published Lifelong Museum Learning: A European Handbook (Gibbs *et al.* 2007), in which constructivist theory is advocated as the desired model for the museum into the new century.

Constructivist principles are made manifest in museum education programs, which often invite visitors to participate in activities relating to exhibition themes. These activities can involve making artworks and objects, as well as theatre, role-play and other performance-based activities, the aim being to encourage participants to engage their imaginations in response to the ideas engendered in the exhibition. This is an area in which the art museum is increasingly active, particularly with regard to young people, with some art museums having specific education rooms that include studio facilities offering regular art activities in and out of school time.

While learning by participation is a fundamental principle of good learning, practical activities for adults are offered less often. Adult programs are more likely to involve verbal communication of some kind. Audio tours, tours with museum guides who can answer questions and engage the viewer in discussion, and talks by artists and curators where questions can be asked about the exhibition's purpose, content, meaning and value have become standard aspects of the art museum's public programs.

Through these add-on activities, art exhibitions are used as catalysts for learning by providing new experiences and creative challenges, the aim being to entice audiences to engage with what the museum has to offer. Paradoxically, beyond the constructive play for young people and the verbal programs for already-interested adult viewers there are few options for those reticent or uninitiated adult viewers who might benefit from practical experiences more akin to what the younger viewer is offered.

Contextualization

While constructivism is applied in principle across much of the museum sector, there are some particular implications for the art museum. Most often the constructivist approach focuses on diversity, both in terms of the learning needs of the viewer and the ways in which art objects can be interpreted. The intention is that by offering a range of opportunities, viewers will find a path through the art museum that suits them best and they will be able to make new connections and build their own interpretations.

While this may be an admirable aim, contextualization in the art museum is not straightforward. In fact, providing information beyond minimal labelling has been a difficult hurdle to overcome. In the 1980s, Simon Wilson, while education officer at the Tate in London, by his own admission 'unsuccessfully urged the adoption of wall texts and captions' (Lord & Lord 1997: 105). The negativity from within the institution that he had experienced in response to this

seemingly simple idea led to him 'finally going public' at the 1987 London conference of the Association of Art Historians with a paper entitled 'Curators … and the myth of the self-evident art work'. In this paper, Wilson railed against the silent white cube and the dominance of the point of view held by museum staff who continued to advocate minimal support material on the premise that to do otherwise would disturb the integrity of the autonomous experience. This is the same position taken in a more recent context by many of the contributors to The Discursive Museum (Noever 2002) published on the occasion of the MAK symposium of the same name held in 2001. In his contribution, 'Against the discursive museum', James Cunos is adamant that discursivity generated by additional contextual materials takes out the 'resonance and wonder' from the experience of the artwork (Noever 2002).

Philip Wright, in his chapter in The New Museology entitled 'The quality of visitors' experiences in the art museum' (Vergo 1989: 119-48), pre-empted the difficulty that the contextual shift would pose for the art museum. He noted the resistance of the curatorial sector of the art museum toward interpretation and education as well as their pervading aesthetic, but concluded with the hope that 'A possible loss of mystery for some of the more connoisseurial visitors might be more than compensated for by a gain from contextualization for those less knowledgeable' (Wright 1989: 141). In other words, for those in the know the minimal approach might suffice, but for others less familiar with the art museum environment, contextualization could provide the keys to connection.

This situation is by no means resolved. Nevertheless, despite the persistence of the white cube, wall texts, room brochures and other contextual material have been seeping into public art galleries, becoming almost standard practice, at least in exhibitions of historical artwork. Contextualization can put artwork into broader historical, social, personal and political contexts, placing emphasis on the value of discussing ideas that surround the work and forging personal connections.

Direct Experience

A limitation of the constructivist approach as it is applied in the art museum is the degree to which the artwork is essential to the experience. There is a sense that the artwork is often used as a trigger for a learning experience rather than an engagement with the artwork per se. Learning experiences can be built on the wide range of materials, ideas and activities that surround the artwork rather than on the materiality of a particular work. The value of the art experience is seen as being located in the connections made by the individual learner and in learning in general. In fact, the artwork may not even need to be present at all except for providing the initial impetus for learning. Irrespective of the value of such an experience and the learning that the contextual material may have generated, this is not a direct experience of the artwork.

From my observations, strategies that involve direct engagement with contemporary art are surprisingly rare. One exception is Muka Gallery's Youth Print Exhibition, an innovative annual project undertaken at the Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand that looks at art appreciation rather than the practicalities of art making. The exhibition of prints by significant New Zealand artists is specifically for children; adults are not permitted to enter the exhibition space. The object of the exercise is not only to have the young people look at art independently, but also to have them purchase one of the high quality prints, all of which are for sale at an exceptionally reasonable price of $NZ65 (currently approximately $US55, £33 or €40). The ingenuity of the project is that the children make their choices without their parents' influence. This is achieved not only by excluding parents but also by hiding the names of the artists and not allowing the work to be collected until the end of the show. As a consequence, a particularly interesting off-shoot of the experience is the intense conversations between children and parents that are generated as the parents, who have no direct visual cues as to who the artist is, endeavour to work out what they have paid for. However, while this strategy successfully involves young viewers looking at the artwork and making choices, the project does not seek to understand the nature of the direct engagement the young viewers undertake or on what basis they make their choice.

An example of a program that has evaluated the viewer's direct engagement is an experiment, 'Explore a Painting in Depth', conducted by interpretative planner and audience

researcher Douglas Worts and his colleagues at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Canada, between 1993 and 2003 (Clarkson & Worts 2005). The purpose of the experiment was to increase the time that visitors spend in the gallery and their focus on the artworks. The experiment provided multiple points and methods of access to the collection, all of which were optional. As the researchers describe,

> [The experiment] consisted of a booth that offered seating for two visitors and, opposite them, The Beaver Dam, a 1919 landscape painting by the Canadian artist J.E.H. MacDonald. There were headphones and a touchpad for selecting among three audio programs. One program provided a three-minute curatorial introduction to the painting. A second offered a three-minute 'portrait of the artist' using the words of his friends and relatives. The third, the 'Exercise for Exploring', was the heart of the experiment. It lasted 12 minutes and engaged the visitor in a creative process with the imagery of the painting. (Clarkson & Worts 2005: 257-258)

Analysis of the experiment revealed that the most engaging aspect was the 'Exercise for Exploring', in which viewers expressed personal narrative readings of the work. The researchers describe this activity as follows,

> Viewers are asked to scan the painting slowly all over, then close their eyes and "see" the artwork with the eyes of the imagination. Viewers are asked to choose a spot in the picture, to imagine going to that spot and to look around the picture from that spot and explore it. The narrator asks whether visitors can sense the temperature, hear sounds, and feel textures. They are asked to choose a particular color, focus on it, and note the feelings they associate with it. They are asked to focus on a particular shape and imagine becoming that shape and moving about as that shape. The exercise continues with an invitation to let the imagination play freely during the ensuing minute of silence. During this "solo" period, images flow in that bring the creative process to culmination. (Clarkson & Worts 2005: 263-4)

At the end of the session, viewers were invited to relay their experience, thoughts and criticisms on special cards by writing, drawing and combinations of both. The researchers describe the results as follows, '[h]undreds of cards reported that the painting, which at first seemed dull and boring, seemed to "come alive"'; '[i]n the intimacy of the booth, patrons found a place for a personal, reflective encounter with an artwork'; the exercise 'allows sufficient time for the imagination to bring forth personal images and felt meanings'; and '[a]ctivating the creative imagination may produce an intensity and depth of experience that many describe as spiritual' (Clarkson & Worts 2005: 268-271).

Clarkson and Worts's research certainly shows that this approach has the capacity to enhance the visitor experience in the art museum. It is pertinent, however, that the artwork chosen for the experiment was an early twentieth century representational landscape, although the researchers note that the strategy applies 'as readily with abstract as with figurative artworks' (Clarkson & Worts 2005: 263). No consideration is given to whether the approach is transferable to the experience of discursive contemporary art.

The overall experiment adheres to the constructivist principle of multiple modes of learning by providing options for cognitive engagement through the mediation of alternative strands of information and experience. However, no analysis is provided on whether dialogical interactions between 'the multiple forms of meaning' actually occurred. On the contrary, the artwork is used to trigger the individual viewer's imagination through free-flowing idiosyncratic monologue rather than dialogue. Dialogue with the artwork is in fact actively curtailed, as viewers were asked to look at the work for a while and then close their eyes. It was in separating from the work and entering the individual's imagination that the nub of the experience was assumed to be located. As a consequence, I contend that in this experiment the viewer has become active while the artwork has become passive. Questions arise about what constitutes direct experience of the artwork and whether the particularities of the individual artwork were really important to the process beyond the initiating moments.

An approach that does aim to engage viewers directly with the artwork and to validate their claims by reference to the particularities of the work is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a teaching program devoted to connecting directly with art designed by psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine.

VTS is based on Housen's five stages of aesthetic development (Housen 1983, 2002) and are paraphrased as follows:

> Stage 1. Storytellers who weave what they see into stories;
>
> Stage 2. Constructive viewers who determine value in terms of their sense of what is realistic;
>
> Stage 3. Viewers who adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian (facts and figures on place, school, style, time and provenance), leading to explanation;
>
> Stage 4. Viewers who experience a personal encounter with art though appreciation of the subtleties of line and shape and colour;
>
> Stages 5. Viewers who know the ecology of a work – its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies.

These developmental stages owe a lot to the work of Piaget as well as to Vygotsky's belief that thought is actually dependent on speech. In essence, VTS links peer interaction with the teaching of viewing through verbalization using a non-directive interview based on a series of specific open-ended questions: What is going on here? What do you see that makes you say that? What more do you see? What do you see that makes you say that? What else can you find?[1] Students answer these questions in response to looking at particular artworks and they assess their responses in terms of evidence that they find in the work.

The limitation of VTS is not so much its methodology but rather in the kind of artwork to which the program allows the novice viewer to be introduced. Housen's developmental stages equate quite well with the following five approaches to art appreciation: narrative, representation, formalism, self-expression and connoisseurship. What is more, Housen believes that adult beginners need to start their experience of art at stage 1 and, as a consequence, should only be shown artwork that is intentionally narrative, as she believes this is all they have the capacity to deal with (Rice & Yenawine 2002: 9). This would seem to rule out a capacity for viewers who may not be at the more advanced developmental stages to engage with discursive contemporary practice. It also could be logically concluded that an encounter with contemporary art outside the controlled environment of VTS is not possible.

However, it is relevant to note that developmental theory no longer has quite the immutable impact on contemporary education theory that Housen and Yenawine assume. The rigorous application of Piaget's developmental stages is being questioned by research that observes that if children are in a supported environment, they can engage in behaviours that were previously considered far beyond their developmental capabilities (Connor 2007). What is more, conflating developmental stages with a progressive view of art history and artistic styles is based on an assumption that needs further evaluation especially in the light that there is often a considerable amount of familiar content in contemporary art that the novice viewer is well able to discern and relate to.

In addition, both VTS and Worts's experiment share the constructivist belief in the importance of affirming the experience and the identity of the viewer. The viewer in the 'Explore a painting in depth' experiment undertook a personal journey, while the child or adult beginner in VTS is encouraged to find and verify personal narratives in response to selected artwork. Further, in the constructivist museum in general, the viewer is encouraged to find a personal route through the museum spaces and exhibitions. It is assumed that connection will derive from the viewer's response to being drawn towards what they like and with what they feel comfortable.

A Contradiction

I question the assumption that making the experience easy or self-directed is a necessary pre-requisite for effective viewer engagement in the museum. Elaine Heumann Gurian in her

advocacy of the constructivist museum (Gurian 2006), provides support for this claim in her discussion of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. Although this not an art institution, its lessons are relevant.

In her description of the Holocaust Museum, Gurian acknowledges that learning differences and diverse forms of presentation that connect to the full range of senses have been utilized in constructing the experience. However, some aspects of what is offered run counter to the constructivist prescription. First, this museum does not allow the visitor to find their own way without 'a predetermined sequence' (Hein 1998: 35) but instead imposes 'an optionless route' on the visitor (Gurian 2006: 173). Second, rather than limiting the amount of text, there is 'seemingly endless text' (2006: 173). Nevertheless, Gurian notes that many people follow the prescribed route and read the texts thoroughly (2006: 173). Despite breaking these basic rules of the constructivist museum, Gurian describes this museum as extremely successful, stating that it is considered an essential place for dignitaries and tourists alike to visit and revisit. Gurian, almost in passing, notes that these anomalies are dealt with because before they enter the museum visitors 'emotionally prepare themselves to come and take a journey of personal introspection' (2006: 173). In other words, visitors through a sense of confronting history or fulfilling an obligation, make a deliberate decision to undertake an extremely difficult experience. This would imply that it is not the difficulty itself that determines whether people are willing to take on an experience, but rather their capacity to decide to take it on. What is important is that visitors are aware of the paradigm they are entering. In the Holocaust Museum visitors make the choice to engage with difficulty.

Following on from this anomaly, I would draw attention to the fact that people often choose to do things that are frightening, difficult or unpleasant, particularly with regard to sport and entertainment. However, when it comes to contemporary art, the possibility that visitors might choose to engage with difficulty is rarely promoted by those involved in museum education and curatorship as a positive possibility.

Nevertheless, the power and potential of contemporary art has been articulated in significant art policy circles. For example, in the forward to Turning Point: A Strategy for the Contemporary Visual Arts in England, a ten-year strategy for strengthening the visual arts in England, contemporary art practice is seen as the model on which visual education can be reformed; 'Contemporary art is a driving force in popular culture, nurtured through creative innovation, entrepreneurial risk, new curatorial processes and critical debate'.[2] In addition, Catherine Regnier, speaking at Evaluating the Impact of Arts and Cultural Education, a European and International Research Symposium held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2007, stated 'the complexity and ambiguity of … artwork helps develop the capacity to construct and deconstruct chains of reasoning and argument' and, further, that thinking about art 'promotes a shift from a monolithic to a more complex vision, from a unique interpretation to multiple interpretations' (Rouhete 2008: 18). While advocating the value of contemporary art is an admirable aim, these policies are perhaps necessarily light on detail. Unpacking the way in which engagement with discursive practice is actually undertaken by audiences less familiar with its potential needs further consideration.

Looking at Painting

One publication that seeks to undertake this task of unpacking the process of engagement is How to Look at a Painting by New Zealand curator and art historian, Justin Paton (2005). This small, easy-to-read volume encapsulates the author's desire to extend his personal approach to looking at paintings to those who may be struggling to connect.

The title of this publication suggests that looking at painting is not as easy as the simple act of looking might imply. Paton stresses that looking at a painting is not about instant response but, rather, it takes time and effort. At the same time he feels that one of the main misconceptions people have is that 'art is unavailable to you unless you're in on all its hidden meanings.' Instead, he suggests that '[m]uch that painting has to tell is already right there, in its body language' (Paton 2005: 27), by which he means, the way the paint is applied, how controlled the paint is, and 'what is the painting's attitude to its frame' (2005: 28). The viewer's job is to put in the necessary effort.

Paton presents a ten-step guide for looking at paintings (Paton 2005: 110-11). In summary, these steps are:

1. Respect the thing;

2. Take time;

3. See as many paintings as you can;

4. Ask, what did I notice rather than what do I think;

5. Try turning doubt into a question;

6. Seek out writing about the context;

7. Imagine who the work is for if it is not for you;

8. Wade through art's lows;

9. Trust your impressions;

10. Trust the painting.

Perhaps if Paton's steps were offered to all gallery visitors, the problem of engaging with contemporary art would be solved. However, there are a couple of aspects in Paton's description of what he does when he looks at a painting that are not disclosed and which I believe limit the effectiveness of his approach.

The first limitation is inherent in his statement that '[w]hen something is puzzling or beyond belief, what we most want to do is look' (Paton 2005: 21). That viewers actively seek to dispel puzzlement is an assumption that is far from being a universally accepted response. While some viewers who are faced with difficulty may choose to follow through, many others do exactly the opposite and run away or reject what does not fit readily within their expectations. The idea that everyone has a desire to come to grips with the strange or with what is outside their comfort zone is far from common practice.

Paton's description of his own experience of On Kawara's major works One Million Years (Past) and One Million Years (Future) highlights the difficulty inherent in engaging with puzzlement. On Kawara's works consist of small, mostly black, paintings each painted with a date and made within the timeframe of a particular day. Paton tells us that he was in a rush when he came to the exhibition and was 'a little irritated by the long row of dates and their no-comment demeanour' (Paton 2005: 54). He bought the catalogue and left. It was through the images in the publication that he subsequently discovered the intensity of the work. He uses this example to conclude that looking at art takes time. In doing so, he invokes what he calls 'the rule of the third impression', which he outlines as follows;

> The first encounter with a painting establishes terms: What kind of work is this? What set of rules is it playing by? The second steadies or unsettles those terms: How are those rules opened out and adapted? How subtle, how distinctive, are its plays? By the third impression it's usually clear whether the engagement is going to last: Does the painting have the necessary patience and stamina? Is there something in it that refuses to be explained away and keeps you coming back? Does it hold on to some of its secrets? (Paton 2005: 53)

Returning to the On Kawara example, what Paton fails to take into account is the fact that he almost missed the work himself because his first impression was one of irritation. It was his habit of buying catalogues that saved the day. While Paton is seeking to arm the viewer with a strategy that might enable them to encounter contemporary art, getting past the first impression is a risky business.

The question, therefore, remains can anything be done to encourage the hesitant viewer to go beyond their first impression if that impression is a negative one? Paton assumes that we start by being drawn towards an image. While this is a common sense assumption, it does not take into account that contemporary art is often activated by some form of repulsion or negation. It is not that Paton is unaware of this aspect of contemporary artwork. He notes, for example,

in his discussion of an exhibition of work by New York artist John Currin at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2003, that 'everything was fractionally off' and that the artist 'wrapped odd emotions and iffy politics in a seductive painterly skin' (Paton 2005: 41).

A second limitation of Paton's approach is that he does not deal with the acceptance of the 'off', the 'odd' or the 'iffy' sufficiently. For him, this reference to the strange is a passing observation. He does not fully comprehend that it is by gathering the faults, the problems and the unfamiliar, as he was able to do once he had the time to linger with On Kawara's images, that the keys to an engagement with the work were provided. As I understand it, instead of the viewer trusting their first impressions, as Paton suggests, what is required is for us all to notice our first impressions and, in doing so, name up and engage those aspects that we might prefer to avoid.

A third limitation is that while Paton engages in meta-reflection to produce his ten-steps, he does not appreciate the mechanism he uses to do this – that he actually writes down what he notices and/or vocalizes his thoughts within a collegial environment. Paton says it is good to go to the gallery with 'good company' and that the time he spends talking about art with his students is very rewarding, but he sees this as additional rather than essential to his process. From my perspective, Paton's book itself is evidence of the activity of rewriting or speaking what he sees. Each chapter is rich with descriptions of how his eyes move over an image and what he is able to notice as a consequence. It is also important to note that Paton buys catalogues and reads interpretations by others that support or extend what he is able to notice. What interests me is that Paton does not link these looking at, reading about and speaking about activities. For him, the looking is understood as the primary action, with reading and speaking as a bonus available to the interested viewer should they so choose. Paton returns again and again to the idea that looking at painting is a silent, individual and private experience.

What is problematic is that while looking at art may appear to be a private experience, this does not mean that the individual is totally responsible for creating the conditions in which this experience is made possible. Paton's ten-step approach to looking at art does not recognize the degree to which his environment and cultural milieu supports his capacity to perform the role of interpreter of contemporary art, despite the fact that his background is a strong element in many of the examples he presents. Neither is he overtly aware of the degree to which he has normalized his capacity to choose to 'wade through art's lows' and 'tease out significance of what you've already seen, rather than fretting about unseen meanings' (Paton 2005: 9). In other words, he knows that the viewer needs to engage with the strange, but he is unaware of the particular conditions that enable him to do so – that he lives, works and plays in an environment which is conducive to this engagement. Paton's constructive list of suggestions assumes a viewer who is already familiar with the art museum experience. What is missing is how to create the conditions in which it is safe for the hesitant viewer to move actively towards what they perceive as strange.

A Psychoanalytic Possibility

One discipline that actively seeks to construct safe space in order to promote encounters with the strange is psychoanalysis, in particular that form attributed to Jacques Lacan. The practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to bring the patient into an encounter with aspects of their thinking and behaviour that have been displaced or misplaced. Analysis is a specific mode of attention to the speaker that focuses totally on listening to what the speaker says, not just in words, but also in their actions, silence, slips and gaps (Schneiderman 1983, 1990).

In a museum context, visitor studies is an area of research that is increasingly engaging the strategy of listening to visitors' responses as a data-gathering device. In such studies, visitors agree to talk aloud about what they are doing and thinking as they walk around the museum or exhibit. This has become a relatively common practice despite the labour-intensive data collation and processing required in evaluating the results.

Such an approach is articulated in Museums Actively Researching Visitor Experiences and Learning (MARVEL): A Methodological Study (Griffin *et al.* 2005), a study that specifically examines the efficacy of this method of data-gathering in two major museums in Sydney. The study compared two primary tools of data-gathering: visual observation of visitors' behaviour,

and listening to visitors talking about their experiences. In comparing the difference between the two, the study concludes,

> [V]isual observation data tells [*sic*] us that people are learning and aspects of how they are learning. It gives a good indication of the extent and nature of visitors' use of hands-on exhibits. It also provides information on a number of behaviours which do not involve talking such as reading, manipulating, looking at objects etc. Listening data tells [*sic*] us more about how they are learning as well as some information about what they are learning. It gives a much deeper understanding of the learning that is taking place, how visitors are relating what they see to other experiences, how the exhibits stimulated discussion which is not always directly related to what they see. (Griffin *et al.* 2005: 13, emphasis in original)

While the conclusion that listening to visitors talking tells more about their learning than observation might seem obvious, no mention is made in the study as to the relationship between learning and the method of talking aloud. In a study carried out at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in the United Kingdom by Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri (2001), in which visitors voiced their responses to the interviewer, the researchers do consider the effect of their method on the visitors' responses. This study concludes,

> Although we realized that the interviewer would be bound to have an effect on the visit, we considered that this effect would not change the interpretative repertoires that visitors carried with them. They might perhaps use the repertoires more extensively than usual, that is, make a longer visit and talk more than they would if they were visiting on their own, but as the object of the study was to identify thought patterns, this extension would be a positive aspect, and would produce more data. (Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri 2001: 4)

Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri appreciate that in talking to the interviewer, the viewer's engagement was of a longer duration and higher intensity. However, there is one aspect of this intervention that the researchers did not take into account. Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri conflate thinking and speaking and in doing so assume that there is symmetry between the two – that what we think and what we speak are the same thing. From a psychoanalytical perspective, this is not the case; on the contrary, the dynamic of psychoanalysis is in noticing the differences and incongruencies between what is thought and what is said. Moreover, it is through an encounter with the incongruency that the chance to make adjustments arises. Thus, articulating thought, rather than just thinking it, is fundamental to discursive interpretation. This approach to listening, sometimes referred to as 'active listening', is often used in the art gallery, as a technique in effective teaching.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, recognition of incongruencies is not something we can do on our own. It takes the voice of the analyst, naming up what is said in a way that brings the incongruency into consciousness. To move a viewer from hesitancy to engagement requires a shift in their thinking and behaviour that allows the recognition of something strange for which initially there was no space. In an art context, this lack of space is a consequence of an assumed theory of art that is at odds with the art theory inherent in the artwork. Contemporary artworks are made from the stuff of life and the world, which is generally more familiar than foreign – beds, rubbish, child-like drawing, sharks, diamonds, twigs, blood, urine, elephant dung, to name but a few. So it is not the material itself that is difficult to understand, but rather the capacity for the hesitant viewer to recognize how such material could be art at all.

In the constructivist museum, the independent and self-directed viewer is a desired outcome. However, if the viewer is not cognisant of the full range of codes of engagement and simply uses what is most familiar to them, their independence and self-directedness is compromised.

In her critique of the constructivist approach to learning in the art museum, Danish educator Helene Illeris discerns three ways of performing. The first is the disciplined eye,

> … linked to enlightenment ideas of the museum as an educational institution where paintings and sculptures are selected because of their indisputable value

as masterpieces and hung according to "educational" principles taken from the logics of the new "science" of art history: school, style, nationality and chronology. (Illeris 2009: 19).

The second is the connoisseur's eye, 'related to "natural" faculties such as sensibility and taste' (Illeris 2006: 19). The third is the desiring eye, focused on

> … individual involvement and presence combined with a willingness to share personal experiences […] concerning not only the museum collections and exhibitions, but a range of topics and problematics related to their personal life experiences [… and] where audiences can choose between a range of educational offerings, according to individual interests and needs. (Illeris 2006: 20)

Illeris argues that, while the constructivist approach encourages learners to engage independently and in accordance with their need to define and affirm their identity, this paradigm is, ironically, a generator of exclusion because the desire for the individual to take total responsibility in relation to learning in the art museum deflects attention from the cultural conditions in which the individual operates.

As the focus for her concerns, Illeris points to research revealing that many young people between fourteen and nineteen years of age 'generally act in a very competent manner in their encounters with complex, interactive art forms such as installation, interactive videos and site-specific art' (Illeris 2006: 20). As such, some educators describe these young people as 'the perfect audience' (2006: 20-21). She refers to research that has found that young people are taking responsibility for their own learning, and that not only are they independent learners but 'they actually demand to follow their own paths to learning by refusing to accept knowledge taught by an educator in any traditional way' (2006: 21, emphasis in original). While this might sound like a victory for constructivism, in considering what she refers to as the 'unmarked side of the construction' Illeris suggests that 'young people of today feel they do not have anyone else but themselves to blame if things go wrong [… that they] have internalized the power structures of the educational process and see it as an individual problem if they fail' (2006: 21). Illeris is concerned that 'the desiring eye of contemporary learner-centered pedagogy has just as strong disciplining functions as the disciplined eye of the authoritarian pedagogy or the connoisseur's eye of the pedagogy of taste' (2006: 22). In other words, the aspirations of constructivist learning may have unintended negative consequences.

As a possible way out of this conundrum, Illeris advocates 'transparency of shared metareflection where all participants are given the opportunity to understand, comment on and eventually change the preconditions for the learning situation from an informed position' (2006: 22, emphasis in original). In other words, if the constructivist educator is truly interested in empowerment, they need to expose the methods they are employing to both themselves and their students.

While Illeris does not refer to the various interpretative codes operating in the art museum, taking her call for transparency a step further and into the contemporary art museum context would require all the operating codes to be made apparent. Some codes are readily available due to history and convention. We can appreciate narrative artwork when we can retell the story. We can translate the principles of shading, perspective and proportion and foreshortening of representation. We can read the expressive drive of marks and textures. While we may not like formalist abstraction, we can judge the balance of line, shape and colour. The code that is invisible to many is the discursive code, which is needed to engage with the contradiction, ambiguity, questioning and conversation of discursive art practice. This code also needs to be made apparent in the art museum. To implement a strategy that does not include the discursive code assumes that the codes that are more readily available are sufficient for engaging with discursive practice.

While narrative and aesthetic codes are familiar and operational in the art museum, the code for engaging the strange and unfamiliar that is often the space of contemporary discursive art practice is rarely made apparent. Instead, interpretations by others, such as the artist or the curator, are offered to viewers as a bridge to engagement. It is a mistake, however, to assume that serving up an expert interpretation to counter the viewer's puzzlement will achieve results

that are equivalent to the making of the interpretation in the first place. It is not sufficient just to think about art or let someone else fix the difficulty with information; discursivity, by its very nature, needs to be performed by the viewer in the presence of the artwork.

At the same time, as with the patient in psychoanalysis, the viewers cannot encounter the strange on their own. It was noted previously that expert interpreters of art operate in a collegial environment in which they speak, are listened to and are acknowledged. The expert interpreter can reflect on the gaps and mistakes in the interpretative conversations in which they are immersed. Once they are skilled in this dialogical process, such interpreters are able to present themselves as independent operators. I argue that this is an illusion – that as this process has become second nature, they are unaware of their use of, and need for, this support. Therefore, rather than relying on an expert interpreter to do the work, the circumstances need to be created in which the viewer can hear their own conversation with the artwork.

Enacting a psychoanalytic stance in the art museum requires the viewer to respond in a way that enables them to check whether what they are saying is really what they mean. The agent of the museum needs the capacity to reflect what is being said. This is not simply a repetition of what is said. Rather, such reflections could relate to the art theory that the viewer is communicating, including through their silences or angry outbursts.

'My child could do that!' could be reflected as 'So art should be precise and realistic?'; 'I wouldn't buy that!' as 'Good art should be tasteful and match the furniture?'; 'Where's the craftsmanship in that?' as 'Art should be well-made by the artist's hand?'; and 'You must be joking! It's just a pile of rubbish!' as 'Art should be about important things?'

Active listening reflections could also relate to details in artworks that viewers find odd, wrong or out of place. In contemporary discursive practice it is through the perceived 'faults' in the work and the elements that the viewer rejects that the meaning resides. Naming those elements that viewers are critical of or reject and suggesting that viewers might engage with these elements rather than dismiss them is an option to be considered.

Difficulties arise in the context of discursive art practice if the museum educator, as active listener, does not have the capacity to recognize and hear the discourse in what is being said. If the active listener works within an expressionist or formalist code and is not aware that encountering the strange really matters, the opportunity to shift into the discursive code will be lost. Making the discursive code apparent in the art museum is therefore a necessity if a genuine experience of the art, as distinct from an affirmation of what is known already, is to be offered.

Applying representational, expressionist and formalist codes to discursive art practice only goes so far. Inevitably, the purity of the code will be challenged, rejected, turned upside down and inside out, be it in a tiny detail or on a grand scale. If the art museum can only hear the representational, expressive and formalist codes they will miss the capacity inherent in contemporary art to encounter the other and that would be a waste.

I believe there is a need for the role of an analyst to be enacted in the art museum setting. Curators, education and public program officers, guides, attendants, and even marketing personnel are all in positions where engaging with viewers is already part of their job description. Each or any of these positions could be readily extended to incorporate this role. However, as has been described, the role is very specific and those who take it on will need to be trained in ways that may be unfamiliar or even contrary to their regular ways of working. They will need to be able to make genuine offers of invitation and to perform the role of active listener if their visitors are to perform their role as discursive viewers. In other words, the role of the museum will need to move from expert speaker to expert listener; and this will require the capacity to hear and reflect the discursive code.

Notes

1.   Housen, A. & Yenawine, P. (2001) 'Basic VTS at a Glance', *Visual Arts in Education*, <http://www.vtshome.org/system/resources/0000/0018/basic_vts_at_a_glance.pdf>, accessed 4 August 2011

[2.] Jackson, T. & Jordon, M. (2006) 'Turning Point: A strategy for the contemporary visual arts in England', *Arts Council England*, <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/ turning-point>, accessed 4 August 2011

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