A Postmodern Puzzle: Rewriting the Place of the Visitor in Art Museum Education

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At the same time as the postmodern call to reexamine traditional notions of scholarship blazed new paths through many disciplines, art museum education was a field in transition. From the 1970s through the mid 1990s, the writings of art museum educators revealed changing and contested beliefs regarding their pedagogical purposes. This study focuses on how art museum educators wrote and rewrote theory and practice regarding the role of the museum visitor in meaning making. Theorists of visual literacy, museum literacy, and interactivity will serve as the guides to this intertextual historical examination.

For the past 30 years, postmodernism has challenged the foundations of many disciplines regarding what counts as knowledge, theory, and practice. Art education is replete with such examinations (Clark, 1996; Eiland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Hutchens & Suggs, 1997; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002). Multicultural, feminist, ecological, and critical theories have changed the landscape of art education theory and practice from the late 1970s until the present. During this same period, art museum education became a stronger presence within art education and signs of an influx of postmodern theory into art museum education had begun to appear in the literature of art education. Special issues of Art Education devoted to art museum education included articles reflecting the authors' engagement with postmodern theories (Hazeroth & Moore, 1998; Mayer, 1998; Chung, 2003; Reese, 2003; McKay & Monteverde, 2003). No historical inquiries exist, however, examining the paths of postmodernism through art museum education.

This study seeks to examine art museum educators' changing notions regarding the role of the art museum visitor in interpretation from the 1970s through the mid-1990s influenced, in part, by postmodern theory. Although these educators have not published prolifically during the past 30 years, the literature reveals visual literacy, museum literacy, and interactivity as bellwether discourses revealing changes in the field (Berry & Mayer, 1989; Yenawine, 1988; Rice, 1987; Rice, 1988; Williams, 1984/1992).

Chronicling postmodernism through art museum education entails a glance at art history as well. Until the mid-1980s, most art museum educators held degrees in art history (Eisner & Dobbs, 1986). When teaching or designing education programs, their ideas regarding what should be taught and how it should be taught were determined by what these educators learned regarding art historical inquiry in their own education (Muhlberger,
As Pluralizing art remained museum here in us what formation modernist write pedagogy tional (Barthes, reading of modernist act interpretation educators examine this means content (Mayer, Studies 1999). Moreover, the power relations in art museums privileged art historical interpretations made by the curatorial staff as appropriate content for dissemination to art museum visitors. However, what counted as scholarship in art history was changing from the 1970s through the 1990s, giving rise to the new art histories (Bal & Bryson, 1991; Bryson, 1988; Clark, 1984; Moxey, 1994; Preziosi, 1989; Rees & Borzello, 1986). Pluralizing the term art history reflects the diversity of theories from which art historians drew as they examined their methods. For example, developments within literary criticism were a potent source for retheorizing the interpretation of works of art (Bal & Bryson, 1991).

In traversing the tangled paths art museum educators followed during this postmodern period, I will embrace an intertextual approach to examine their writings. Intertextuality arises from semiotics, particularly a poststructuralist semiotic approach to reading texts. Semiotics, the study of signs, moves beyond written texts as it postulates all conveyors of culturally laden meaning as signs to be interpreted (Bal & Bryson, 1991). As such, not only artworks can be considered as texts to be interpreted, but also the theories and practices of interpretation and pedagogy used by educators to unlock meaning from artworks become signs revealing values.

The semiotic theory of intertextuality changed where the center of interpretation resided. Poststructuralist semiotics moved the center of the act of reading from the text to the reader. Interpreting texts became less a modernist project of determining authorial intent and more an interaction of reader, text, and their many contexts in a construction of meaning. As French semiotician Roland Barthes stated, “And no doubt that is what reading is: rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives” (Barthes, 1985, p. 101). Meaning is dynamically rewritten with each reading and reader.

As will be seen, art museum educators moved the center of the educational endeavor from works of art to visitors, rewriting their beliefs and practices of teaching in the art museum. This shift in the center of their pedagogy signaled that art museum educators desired to enable visitors to write the text of artworks into the texts of their lives. Because such modernist and emerging postmodern conceptions of art museum education acted upon each other through intersection, displacement, and transformation from the ‘70s through the mid-‘90s, an intertextual reading of what art museum educators wrote during this period is fitting. This leads us to the following questions: How did art museum educators write and rewrite the role of the visitor from the 1970s through the mid-1990s? To what extent did this rewriting correspond with postmodern theory? Herein lies the puzzle.

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Visual Literacy, Museum Literacy, and Interactivity

Responding to the profound effects of the television on human experience in the 1950s and 1960s, education and the new field of media studies theorized and defined visual literacy (Sinatra, 1986). At the heart of visual literacy was the idea of teaching the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and use meaning derived from our increasingly media-saturated visual experience. In the 1970s, art museum educators also began to describe their mission as teaching visual literacy (Newsom & Silver, 1978). Initially this referred to developing in visitors the formal looking skills, such as compositional analysis, needed to perceive the meaning an artwork engenders (Lee, 1978; Newsom & Silver, 1978). During the ‘70s and ‘80s, multiple conceptions of visual literacy emerged and sometimes vied with each other.

Carol Stapp, a professor of museum education at George Washington University, coined the term museum literacy in 1984. She drew upon cultural sociology to theorize the museum as a product of its cultural contexts, not of disciplines such as art history. Accordingly, interpretation of images is affected by the ideological position of those in authority, rather than by the context of the artist. Stapp’s definition of museum literacy, therefore, focuses on visitors not only deriving meaning from artworks, but also understanding the institutional codes of the museum and drawing upon its holdings for their own purposes (Stapp, 1984/1992). Art museum educators embraced museum literacy philosophically, but as will be discussed, they faced challenges when trying to merge it with existing practices (Patterns, 1992).

Visual literacy and museum literacy concern the educational aims of art museum educators, whereas interactivity relates to teaching method. Visitor participation in educational programs was key to interactive teaching (Grinder & McCoy, 1985; Sternberg, 1989). As art museum educators became more aware of John Dewey’s beliefs regarding learning by doing, Jerome Bruner’s assertion that learning occurs properly in an active, stimulating environment, and Viktor Lowenfeld’s claim that all the senses are needed in the learning process, art educators increasingly developed and advocated the use of interactive teaching techniques in the art museum (Sternberg, 1989). By abandoning lecturing and developing new teaching techniques, educators endeavored to replace passive listening with active interchange between visitor and museum teacher.

New Art Histories

Even as art museum educators rewrote their practices of visual literacy, museum literacy, and interactivity during the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, art historians were writing the new art histories. In 1974, art historian T. J. Clark called for an approach to deriving meaning from artworks that was anchored in life’s social matrix, not in the object (Rees & Borzello, 1986; Bryson, 1988). By the mid-1980s, a range of approaches to art history

emerged that were informed by Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and critical theory (Harris, 2001). These changes reflected an examination of the ideological contexts of interpretation, whether it was derived from the artist, an academic art historian, a curator, or a viewer. The subject position of the interpreter replaced the object as the source of meaning. From critical theory, semiotics provides an illuminating example of one new art history.

In 1991, art historians Norman Bryson and Micke Bal published the seminal article, “Semiotics and Art History,” detailing what changes in semiotic theory offered art history. They drew upon the work of theorists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes. According to these authors, “semiotics challenges the positivistic view of knowledge” in art history (p. 174) and it unveils the polysemy of meaning through the examination of issues of authorship, context, and receivers. A singular, truthful or definitive interpretation of an art object, as traditional practices sought, is a myth. Bal and Bryson (1991) theorized that interpretation was centrally concerned with reception, with viewing works of art.

With a semiotically informed new art history, the meaning of artworks is dynamic, ever changing as each interpreter reads them according to his or her ideological context. In his essay “The Death of the Author” (1977), Barthes referred to literary criticism, yet his ideas held considerable import to art history. Barthes stated:

Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature... We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer ... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (p. 148)

Modernist art history, as classic criticism, paid scant heed to the viewer (reader). The intent of the artist (author) was the focus of interpretation.

Utilizing theories in addition to semiotics, scholars engaged in postulating the new art histories shifted meaning making from the object and artist to the interpreter. Through these intertextual cross-fertilizations, art history theory and practice was being rewritten. Despite the introduction of reception theory into art history, however, no theorizing of how a lay public might construct meaningful interpretations of artworks appeared. This project remained for art museum educators to pursue.

Art Museum Education: A Shifting Terrain of Practice

A panoramic view of art museum education in the early 1970s reveals an already changing field. Art museum educators were discontented with the experiences provided museum visitors, especially school children, by the “walk and talk” lecture tours that characterized 1960s educational practice (McCoy, 1989; Muhlberger, 1985). Merely looking at the count-
less expressionless faces of children revealed how ineffective, unengaging, and downright boring these tours could be. A visit to the art museum should not be like taking a dose of cultural medicine—it’s good for you but tastes bad going down. Whether one’s guide was an educator or curator, visiting an art museum in the 1960s could feel like test preparation. The goal of the lecturers was to transmit expert information about the collection. Content typically included relevant dates, facts, stylistic explication, recitation of symbolic meaning, and significant comparisons among works (Newsom & Silver, 1978; Grinder & McCoy, 1985; Muhlberger, 1985). Art museum education was a young field whose practitioners were educated as art historians. The ideological context of their knowledge, goals, and teaching practice was academic art history. Pedagogically museum educators copied what they saw during their schooling. Like a professor, the museum teacher was an authority figure modeling to the passive visitor accepted disciplinary practice.

The civil rights and feminist movements, however, stimulated significant social change during the 1960s. Art museums experienced an increasing call to be socially relevant (Newsom & Silver, 1978). Practice could not remain narrowly within the discipline of art history. The activism of the ‘60s initiated a rewriting of museum pedagogy in the 1970s. These social movements were not the only contexts acting to change theory and practice at the time. Art museum educators also looked to educational psychology, the psychology of vision, and pedagogy in developing interactive practices (Grinder & McCoy, 1985; Sternberg, 1989). Docents began to learn creative drama, creative writing, questioning strategies, looking games, storytelling, hands-on activities, or any other technique that might captivate the eyes, mind, heart, and engage the voices of museum visitors (Sternberg, 1989). Enlivening art learning through interactive techniques was a new hallmark of art museum pedagogy during the 1970s.

Interactivity became the advocated pedagogy of art museum educators in the ‘70s through an intertextual dialogue of social movements and disciplinary theories beyond art history. The degree to which this rewriting of pedagogy reflected postmodern theory, or was still inscribed within modernist notions of art history practice, is revealed through an examination of art museum educators’ writing regarding the goals of interactive teaching. Although art museum educators sought to displace passive listening, with active interchange through the interactive tour, what was the museum visitor to gain?

Defining Visual Literacy in the 1970s

In 1978, The Art Museum as Educator was published. This 800-page tome is a compendium of case studies chronicling the state of art museum education practice in the 1970s. Editors Newsom and Silver articulated visual literacy as the goal of educational practice. In Lee’s (1978) opening
essay, “Art Museums and Education,” he asserted visual literacy, which he includes within the term *aesthetic education,* as the “primary task” of the art museum. Echoing the concerns expressed in media studies, Lee wrote,

Most critics could agree that a lack of visual perceptiveness is a major failing of people educated in our literary and auditory society. Aesthetic education would then seem to be a unique and all-important activity for an art museum. (p. 25)

Whereas Lee, who was not an educator but the director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, wrote of visual perceptiveness, other writers on the function of art museum education used phrases such as “aesthetic awareness,” “appreciation,” “skill of looking,” “know how to see,” and “reading objects” (Newsom & Silver, 1978; Goodman, 1984; Osborne, 1985). Lee identified the content of this education as “the color wheel, the concepts of values, saturation of hues, the simultaneity of negative and positive shapes, the mathematical structuring of pictorial composition, and all such elements” (Lee, 1978, 25). Lee also connected the development of visual literacy as foundational to pursuing the higher humanistic study of art history and culture.

In her introductory essay to the second chapter of *The Art Museum as Educator,* Adele Silver (1978) posed a series of questions that write the purpose of art museum education intertextually as aesthetic experience, imparting the understanding of art history or all history, exploring intriguing and provocative ideas, and as letting works speak for themselves. She also referenced Rudolph Arnheim’s theory of vision as applicable in the museum in order to gain a “creative grasp of reality.” Museum visitors needed to “relearn to use their eyes, to see” (p.77). Visual literacy, according to Silver, encompassed all of these goals. Writing in the late 1980s of the preceding decade, Danielle Rice (1988/1992) defined *visual literacy* as “making sense of art and being able to apply to daily life the learning and experiences derived from original objects in the museum setting” (p. 144). The focus of this goal couples the skill of looking with application to one’s own life. This practical function of visual literacy was integral to its definition within education as well (Sinatra, 1986).

Interactive educational practice, serving to advance visual literacy, came into being at the intersection of art history, media studies, aesthetic education, and educational psychology in the 1970s. These varied texts construct visual literacy as teaching visitors how to see (how to look at works of art), then to apply the meanings they derive to their lives. This practice was modernist to the extent that these skills were centered on deciphering or reading meaning from within the conventional contexts of artworks—the artist and his (gender intended) life. From this perspective, the subjectivity of the visitor did not influence interpretation. The context of the visitor’s life entered the process not as generative in meaning making, but as posteriorly connected to interpretation. Visual

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6Lee’s essay aligns his definition of aesthetic education with that of art educators such as Manuel Barkan, Elliot Eisner, Vincent Lanier, and Ralph Smith who called for the inclusion of appreciative, critical, and historical content in art instruction (Efland, 1990). Lee does not, however, cite the literature of art education as a context for his ideas.
literacy of the '70s was a reading process. The idea of applying interpretation to the visitors' own lives through interactive pedagogy, however, would be a significant step toward enabling them to write meaning into the texts of their lives.

Into the 1980s: Visual Literacy and the Master Teacher

During the early 1980s, a new dialogue arose among art museum educators regarding master teaching (Yenawine, 1988). A basic component of master teaching was visual literacy. Although the use of the word master evokes modernist notions of power over museum visitors, the context of its use reveals a complex interplay of political positions within museum practice and a rewriting of the identity of the educator.

Art museum educators' discourse on master teaching reached its peak in 1988. That fall the *Journal of Museum Education* was devoted to reporting the outcomes of the November 1987 summit of 25 representatives of the American Association of Museums Education Committee and the National Art Education Association Museum Education Division. Attendees discussed the key issues of the day, defined their position and purpose, and wrote an agenda for reform, which included the establishment of master teachers. Multiple perspectives of master teaching interacted in the journal's articles and commentaries (Brigham, 1988; Judson, 1988; Rice, 1988; Williams, 1988; Yenawine, 1988). Yenawine's feature article, "Master Teaching in an Art Museum," includes the term in the title, but in the text he used phrases such as "great teaching," "expert teaching," and "the best teaching." The functions Yenawine identifies as characteristic of great teaching include enabling learners to "get" a concept readily by providing helpful information, focusing attention, connecting contexts of the artwork's past and present to the learner's life, aiding the learner in developing systems that integrate new information in useful ways, creating an inviting and stimulating environment for reflecting, and maintaining an ethic that learning is open to all (Yenawine, 1988). As Rice (1988) pointed out, good teaching was not prized among institutional values, however. As a result, art museum educators advocated the creation of the master teacher. As curators are valued for their scholarship, museum educators should be esteemed for their teaching skill. Rather than wanting to assert power over visitors, museum educators sought to come out from under an oppression they experienced.

Williams's (1988) commentary presents a different point of view on master teaching. She embraced the modernist notion of the master teacher as "expert model" for the visitor. Williams wrote that the art museum educator should look to and model "the skills, attitudes, and empowering ideas" of the "greatest experts on our staff—our curators" (p. 21). The goal of this practice was to allow the novice to enjoy the encounter with artworks in "much the same way that experts do" (p. 20).
Although Williams wrote of empowering visitors, the tenor of her words privileged the authority of the art historian.

Rather than the expert model, Yenawine (1988) identified visual literacy as foundational to good teaching. Like a classroom teacher constructing a lesson plan, Yenawine identified the objectives of visual literacy. He wrote that,

Lessons in visual literacy will:

• introduce a subject, topic, or theme and suggest why it is significant in terms of the art and culture to be discussed
• define essential vocabulary
• direct the viewer's attention to certain of the physical and illusionistic; properties in the work, including subject matter, formal elements, principles, and materials or media and related technical issues
• analyze the functions and relationships of the properties listed above
• provide other pertinent background (history, biography) in appropriate amounts and at various times to illuminate the subject and define its relationship to a variety of contexts, past and present
• provide suggestions that encourage thought and perhaps generate discussion about how all these factors contribute to meaning
• demonstrate the possible variety of meanings, including insight from artists themselves and from other experts and, most important, acknowledging the right of the individual to shape his or her own conclusions
• summarize the presentation in order to emphasize both the process and the outcome of the discussion. (Yenawine, 1988, p. 19)

Williams and Yenawine differed in their vision of the outcomes of master teaching. Through great teaching, Williams's visitor emulated that master museum interpreter, the curator. Yenawine's visitor reserved the right to construct personal meaning.

The essays in The Journal of Museum Education were not the only writings in the 1980s that addressed the role of visitors in the interpretive process. Many art museum educators wrote about how important they believed it was for the art museum experience to be of personal value and relevance to the visitor (Caston, 1989; McCoy, 1989; Muhlberger, 1985). Danielle Rice (1987) indicated, however, that the ideal was not the real. In their practices art museum educators allowed the instrumental development of "reading" skills to supersede the interpretation of personally relevant meaning. Rice expressed criticism of the tendency of art museum educators to narrow visual literacy to a discussion of formal elements and principles devoid of a meaningful context.

Although he did not cite sources that informed his conception of visual literacy, Yenawine's description of such lessons paralleled developments...
associated with the emerging new art histories. Works of art were interpreted in terms of present and past interpretations. Meaning was not singular, located exclusively within the work of art and the artist's intentions. Meaning was constructed through an interactive dialogue between work, viewer, and their respective contexts. Art museum educators were rewriting, transforming visual literacy. Yet, as the competing notions of master teaching reveal, in art museum pedagogy of the 1980s, modernism was embedded within the postmodern for some museum educators, while it remained powerfully entrenched in the beliefs and practices of others. During this decade a new literacy discourse also arose to rewrite art museum education as it proceeded into the '90s.

Empowerment in the 1990s: The Discourse of Museum Literacy

Carol Stapp's "Defining Museum Literacy" appeared in Roundtable Reports in 1984. In this manifesto, Stapp proposed that

basic museum literacy means competence in reading objects (visual literacy), but full museum literacy signifies competence in drawing upon the museum's holdings and services purposefully and independently. Museum literacy therefore implies genuine and full visitor access to the museum by virtue of mastery of the language of museum objects and familiarity with the museum as an institution.

In a word, the museum literate visitor is empowered. (Stapp, 1984/1992, p. 112)

Stapp claimed that although she provided the term, museum literacy was an old concept. She situated museum literacy among the writings of those museum educators (i.e., George Brown Goode, John Cotton Dana, and Theodore Low) who articulated the function of the museum as being in the service of people, not objects. Furthermore, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and anthropologist Nelson Graburn, who each asserted that meaning making is a culturally learned practice, informed Stapp's theorizing (Stapp, 1984/1992). Through these intersecting dialogues, Stapp transformed what it meant to be literate in the museum and placed the empowered visitor at the heart of practice.

As the discourse of museum literacy built in the late '80s and into the '90s, empowerment became its keynote theme. In 1987, Danielle Rice wrote that the museum was the "ideal forum in which to teach the human value systems underlying institutional structures" (p. 18). Issues regarding the museum's responsibility to community, race, ethnicity, disability, and gender challenged the field (Museums for a New Century, 1984; Rice, 1988/1992). The 1991 publication of the American Association of Museums Task Force on Museum Education's Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums was a powerful confirmation that museum educators were rewriting museum literacy into the text of their profession. This report called on all museum professionals to commit to the centrality of education in mission and public role, to be
inclusive through the embrace of diverse audiences, and to exercise
dynamic leadership both within the museum and in the community in
order to fulfill the institution’s public service (Excellence and Equity,
1991). In regard to pedagogy, art museum educators’ talk of teaching
turned to talk of learning (McCoy, 1989; Patterns in Practice, 1992).
Participation no longer referred to interactive teaching techniques alone,
but to “sparking intellectual participation” (Patterns in Practice, 1992, p.
114). Learning strategies needed to be more complex than the now traditional interactive tour. Rice (1995) identified this postmodern art
museum pedagogy as a reciprocal, interpretive dialogue between viewer,
work of art, and their respective contexts. The role of the educator was to
function like an ethnographer who has the task of interpreting the
cultures of visitors and scholars for one another (Rice, 1995). Museum
educators wanted to empower visitors as freely functioning agents not
dependent on morsels of scholarly information in order to navigate the
strange, labyrinth world of museums.

Rewriting practice, however, proved more difficult than writing
theory. For example, Williams’s (1984/1992) response to “Defining
Museum Literacy” appeared to adopt the notion of museum literacy. She
wrote that the art museum has a responsibility to “empower” and “enable”
visitors to have “personally significant experiences with museum objects”
(Williams, 1984/1992, p. 118). Williams acknowledged the importance
of valuing the viewer’s own response and allowing the viewer to establish
what is important in the encounter with the work of art. She then went
on to outline a practice that she claimed leads to museum literacy, but
once again privileged the expert model for the visitor. Williams outlined a
formalist series of steps, commencing with the analysis of elements and
principles, which the viewer should traverse on the way to finding the
meaning of an artwork. Stapp (1992) later acknowledged that although
her article was well received, few museum educators grasped the key
differences between visual and museum literacy. In crafting new practice,
overcoming the pedagogical habits of the past can be the greatest chal-
lenge. Williams’s essay illustrated this dilemma. Perhaps museum edu-
cators had not moved as far as Stapp proposed, but as shown here evidence
appeared that art museum educators were writing a pedagogy of museum
literacy.

Conclusion: The Puzzling Path Revisited

From the 1970s through the mid-1990s, the path of art museum
education was a circuitous route continually looping back on itself as art
museum educators wrote and rewrote their conceptions of visual literacy,
museum literacy, and interactivity. The signpost guiding these educators
along the way was their desire to place the museum visitor within the
process of interpretation. Step by roundabout step, art museum educators
moved visitors to the center of meaning making as they taught them how
to see in the '70s, enabled them to make personal connections with artworks in the '80s, and empowered them to construct their own museum meanings in the '90s.

To what extent did this rewriting of the field correspond with postmodern theory? Stapp (1984/1992) and Rice (1989) are the first educators to reference postmodern discourses from cultural sociology and literary theory in their writings. Roberts (1989/1992), however, noted an affinity between the values of museum educators and those emerging from critical theory. She further pointed out that museum educators themselves may not have realized how "radical" they were, as this study bears out, in their commitment to viewers constructing personal meaning. Art museum educators' writings on visual literacy, museum literacy, and interactivity reveal that they tended to be on a parallel, not an intersecting, path with postmodernism and the new art histories during the '70s and '80s. In the '90s, art museum educators directly cited or responded to postmodern discourses including those found in the new art histories (Hazelroth & Moore, 1998; Mayer, 1998; Rice, 1995; Roberts, 1997). Unlike the new art historians, however, in the text of their professional lives, art museum educators wrote a practice that centered not on broad, ideological notions regarding receivers (viewers), but on the lay viewer, the art museum visitor.

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