

The Importance of the Absence of Interpretation in the Museum Context in Promoting Children's Participation in the Meaning-Making of Artworks

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1. Introduction

From its inception, the discipline of art history has involved developing and applying modes of interpretation to derive meaning from works of art. Art museums represent an institutionalized model of interpretation. Specialist guides and exhibition catalogs all represent ways of interpreting and understanding the meaning of works of art. However, based on a constructivist system of knowledge, such interpretations create preconceptions about the meaning of the work. It does not contribute to the diversity of its expression. For school-age children at the peak of their creativity, an overemphasis on the presence of interpretation removes their motivation to interpret on their own, making them become replicators rather than producers of the meaning of their work. At the same time, their contribution to the meaning of the work that their unique way of intuitively responding to it is ignored. This paper will, therefore, first argue for the importance of children in the multiple productions of meaning in works of art. It will then build on Davis and Gardner's "Three-Window Approach" to show how the absence of expert discourse in museums (referred to as the absence of interpretation) facilitates the participation of schoolchildren in the meaning-making of works of art.

2. The Diversity of Interpretation

2.1 The Ambiguity of Art and Critical Pluralism

As visitors to art museums, we are often troubled by the meaning of the works. In modern aesthetics, there are many critical debates about the importance of multiple interpretations of artworks and the significance of the interpretative process. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss the multiple interpretations of artworks and their compatibility before elaborating on the viewer's role in producing meaning in work. The position of this paper is based on critical pluralism, showing that multiple interpretations are more compatible with the ambiguity of artworks. Therefore, multiple interpretations cannot be avoided and are necessary.

Since the beginning of modern art at the end of the 19th century, new artistic practices and phenomena have emerged, and the concept of art has become increasingly blurred. Although the question "What is art" has been asked and answered repeatedly, no one has yet been able to provide a clear and unified answer. Critical pluralists believe that the ambiguity of art has led to the creation of multiple interpretations.

Regarding the expression of the art subject, art is usually a spiritual activity that arises from the artist's dialogue with the art object. Even for the same expressive object, each person's perception and feelings vary greatly, so artistic expression is even more impossible to be consistent. It is precisely because of these individual aesthetic differences that the diversity and uncertainty of artistic expression can be brought about, thus presenting the characteristic of ambiguity. Different aesthetic inclinations, temperaments, cultivations, and so on can produce many interpretations for the viewer of art. Even though many art historians have

tried to erase such subjectivity, it is inherently embedded in the work and cannot be completely erased. Conversely, if a work has limited scope for interpretation, then its artistic life is also limited. The ambiguity of art forges the continuity of its vitality.

Thus, based on the ambiguity of art, critical pluralists argue that works of art at least potentially offer multiple possibilities for a correct interpretation, open to the interpreter when engaging with them as art (Kieran, 1996). This pluralist view does not seek to deny that one particular principle of interpretation may apply to various situations. However, it merely suggests that there should be no prioritization of different interpretations. Before passing judgment on a work, we need to consider different interpretations. Different and opposite interpretations cannot simply be subsumed under a blanket monistic interpretation. The different assumptions we bring to bear on our engagement with a work of art may not only affect how we legitimately interpret the uncertain aspects of the work.

2.2 Rebuttals from Critical Monism

Although pluralistic interpretations can no longer be denied, critical monists attempt to counter critical pluralism by assessing the correctness and importance of interpretations. They argue that interpretations can be assessed as true or false based on broader beliefs such as artistic intent, the historical context of the art, artistic conventions, norms, etc. Thus, while a plurality of interpretations exists, not all interpretations are reasonable and correct due to the ambiguous nature of art, and some interpretations are destined to be less valuable than others. Rather, we should define the correct understanding to synthesize a single, plausible interpretation of the work. However, one of the fatal flaws of critical pluralism is that it links the value of interpretation to correctness. The value of our interpretive engagement with a work of art is not only assessed by whether it is true, correct, or reasonable. Perhaps one interpretation may align more with the artist's intentions, form, style, etc. However, other interpretations may also offer more vivid imagery, and novel perspectives, expanding or initiating new artistic conventions. Take Freud's interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* as an example. Although many have questioned the irrationality of Freud's understanding of human nature per se, people have developed insights into human behavior because of this interpretation (Matthew, 1996). While some interpretations may not be the most appropriate for a particular work in a given context, they may indirectly facilitate insight into a particular situation or motive, enhancing the imaginative space of the work in question.

2.3 The Significance of Multiple Interpretations

The ambiguity of art prompts a plurality of interpretations, and different interpretations should all be considered in equal measure. Their value cannot be judged simply by whether they are correct or true, and different interpretations can achieve their utility in different contexts. In the museum context, art and interpretive practice is an imaginative form of dialogue, not a critical contest with one winner and many losers. Often the controversy over the meaning of a work arising from the ambiguity of art promotes imagination, providing the viewer pleasure, interest, and insight. Therefore, considering multiple interpretations in museum education is necessary to promote meaning development in work.

3. The Significance of Audience Interpretation in Facilitating Meaning Making

3.1 The Role of The Museum Between The Viewer and The Artwork

Among the many interpretations offered for a work, that of the viewer contributes to its meaning. As mentioned above, the authority for the interpretation of a work of art should not be left entirely in the hands of experts and scholars but should be left to the public. The work of art itself assumes an educational dimension, and the reality it deals with should be placed in a wider cultural space for the viewer to learn and apply. For its interpretations to make sense of reality, they must be linked to the viewer's experience.

The museum acts as an intermediary between the artwork and the viewer. It builds bridges between the work and the viewer's life by sending them original artworks and art resources. As early as the 1980s, Pitman-Gelles noted that one of the key tasks of museum education was "to enhance the visitors' ability to understand and appreciate original works of art and to transfer these experiences into other aspects of the visitors' lives" (Pitman-Gelles, 1988). By integrating the knowledge of the artwork into existing knowledge, the viewer not only applies this new knowledge in his or her life outside the museum but also contributes to the production of meaning in the artwork.

3.2 Constructivist Model for Audience Interpretation

In exploring the building of interpretation in museums by visitors, this paper adopts a constructivist mindset - a vertical system of knowledge building. The constructivist theory assumes that learners do not pour knowledge into empty containers but come to us with a wealth of already organized knowledge. A priori knowledge plays an important role in this structure as a system, and they hang new knowledge on top of the already existing knowledge structure. Only when new knowledge is combined with old knowledge do the concepts obtained become more solid.

This idea is widely used in the field of education, where teachers link concepts from different courses to help students learn to construct blocks of information (Jeffery-Clay, 2015, cited Duschl, 1990) and in the field of museum education, Jeffery-Clay suggests that museums should contribute to knowledge building by allowing visitors to make connections with their existing knowledge and thus contribute to the development of meaning and meaningful learning from the artwork (Jeffery-Clay, 2015). It is, therefore, necessary to promote the participation of visitors in creating meaning in the artwork.

4. Children as an Important and Special Category of Audience

Children play a special and important role in the interpretation of many audiences, and since the second half of the twentieth century, driven by the child rights movement and the wave of child participation, children's rights have come to the fore in the field of social research, and their level of research competence and participation has been fully recognized. As learners and researchers at the same time, children enjoy a range of intuitive responses that are different from

Those adults include energetic, capable, curious, active, playful, and so on (Piscitelli & Weiver, 2003). As Hyder argues, we have underestimated children's research abilities in the past, and even younger children can make rational decisions in research (Hyder, 2002), so it is clear that the interpretations offered by children should not be underestimated and that their learner characteristics can offer a new perspective.

In earlier years, art museums tended to be the least welcoming type to children, with "ever-present security staff, overwhelming architecture, silence, quiet and artworks displayed at adult heights ' marking the marginal status of children as visitors" (Weier, 2004). Yet, they can expand the meaning of the work. In the art museum context, the traditional way of viewing a work involves observation, discussion, and copying, but young children extend this to playing, singing, dancing, or acting. Jeffers notes that when children are allowed to engage actively with museums, they can offer imaginative new perspectives on works of art.

5. The Presence of Interpretation

5.1 The Presence of Interpretations in Museums

Although a growing number of art educators have become aware of the importance of multiple interpretations, controversy persists over what interpretations museums should provide for works of art. Some museums believe that art can speak for itself, while others believe that expert interpretation should be provided to the viewer. This section will refer to the presence of experts and institutional discourse as *the presence of interpretation* and explore how this traditional tendency towards interpretation affects the viewer's creation of meaning for the work.

The most traditional interpretive tendencies in museums belong to the essentialist view of the work of art. Like critical monism, it believes art carries certain truths that can be revealed correctly. "The proper approaches come from the techniques employed by more established art historians, such as historicism, formalism, and so forth" (Arriaga, 2010, p.28). These interpretive methods examine

various artistic elements, such as formal or stylistic, historical, biographical, etc., aspects (Arriaga, 2010, p.28). These interpretations consider that the criterion for correct interpretation is within the context in which the work of art was created. If the artist's intentions are known, then the artist also has the right to correct and, above all, correct interpretation. Thus, experts can interpret works and create meaning for them.

In museum practice, this interpretive tendency is reflected in the discourses of curators, experts, and artists. Expert discourses such as artist talks, curatorial notes, and museum guides are seen as authoritative interpretations of the meaning of the work. The purpose of this is to disseminate knowledge about the content of the work rather than to engage the viewer. Often there is no room for interpretation by the audience, who are expected to play a passive role in helping to reproduce the expert discourse. Conversely, the educator is seen as "someone who merely reproduces the knowledge expressed by the curator" (Arriaga, 2010).

5.2 Gombrich's Perceptual

Indeed, when the interpretations in the museum allow visitors to focus on discerning what the artist was trying to say in creating a particular art object, they are following Gombrich's Perceptual. The expert can make assumptions about the artist's intentions by analyzing the context in which it was created. Based on the psychology of artistic perception, Gombrich sees artistic creation as a cultural practice in which their identity, personal agency, etc., forge the development of their artistic style. When artists come into contact with nature, their cultural and artistic practices forge the final presentation of the artwork. His two influential books, *Art and Illusion* and *The Story of Art* chart the truth of artistic perception through empiricism. Thus, while he did not unite all works of art from similar backgrounds under one truth, as other cultural historians have done, he still believed that the meaning of each work and the artist's background were inseparable. As Gombrich states in the preface to *The Story of Art*, he wants the reader to be aware of "the artistic aim of the masters" (Gombrich, 1950). In museum practice, by providing a personal context for the artist's creation, the viewer can focus on discerning the meaning of the work created by the artist.

Bryson argues that this perceptual approach places the viewer in the passive position of perceiving art. According to constructivist theory, when the artist's intentions are implanted in the viewer's mind in a preconceived way, it is difficult for their perception of art to escape this preconception. Their task is to adapt their perceptions to the artist's intentions by changing them.

However, as discussed in Section 2, the meaning of an artwork should not be limited to the artist's intentions. While the information provided by experts in museums about the artist's background does contribute to the identification of the artist's intentions, it is not the same as an interpretation of meaning (Mayer, 2006). Rather, in a vertical system of knowledge building, it hinders the production of meaning. Secondly, an important purpose of museums is to help connect the work to the cultural context in which it exists and the viewer's personal experiences, thus helping art to better educate in reality. When the viewer merely copies and absorbs the artist's intentions, the viewer cannot connect to their own life. The artwork thus becomes surreal.

5.3 The Influence of the Presence of Interpretation on Meaning-Making in Children

There is little research on the extent to which the presence of interpretation affects the production of meaning by the viewer of a work. However, we can speculate on the results through several interpretation and viewer perception studies. Most of the findings in this area point to the presence of interpretation of artworks influencing viewers' perceptions. Any written information presented alongside a visual artwork must necessarily take away from the experience that the artwork is intended to elicit from the viewer, as the artist Schwartz (2007) suggests in a non-empirical article. This is because it forces the viewer to focus on the presented textual information. In a museum experiment with undergraduate students by Spetch (2010), it was noted that the artist's statement (as a type of interpretation) led viewers to perceive a more directional interpretation of the work.

Conversely, viewers feel confused about ambiguous works or do not provide any artist's statement. If one follows Gombrich's perceptual, a clear and oriented interpretation of the work is useful for understanding the artist's intentions. However, according to constructivism, it may limit the viewer's ability to make meaning of the work.

As children are not considered capable of art appreciation at an early age, most of the current research on the impact of expert discourse on viewers' perceptions has been conducted in adult groups, with an inadequate sample size of children. The only relevant study for children comes from the Lublin Museum of Art (Szubielska, 2018). The study focused on the impact of museum-guided tours on children's aesthetic judgments. The results show that the presence and absence of guided tours do not make the exhibitions more attractive to school-age children (6-7 and

8-9 years old). Rather, it changed school-age children's interpretation of what they saw, showing that school-age children produced interpretations that were more in line with the title of the exhibition when prompted and, conversely, deviated from the title of the exhibition. Similar to the adult study, while the researcher argues that this positively impacts understanding the artist's intentions, it also suggests that museum interpretations can manipulate viewer perception.

Although there is no research to measure whether expert interpretation impacts the audience's engagement with the production of meaning in work, the current study has confirmed that the presence of interpretation influences the direction of children's interpretations. If, based on a constructivist perspective, this interpretation becomes a preconception of the work for children, then it can limit the production of meaning in the artwork. In the end, however, it has to be admitted that there is still much room for improvement in this area of research, for example, the distinction between different abstract and figurative works, the criteria for aesthetic judgment, and what information is provided by experts, and how it is discussed concerning categorization. The results of the current research, therefore, remain to be seen.

6. The Absence of Interpretation

So far, we have learned about the importance of audience interpretation, especially children, in facilitating meaning-making in the work. However, while the presence of expert discourse in the museum facilitates the viewer's understanding of the artist's intentions and their reproduction, it hinders the viewer's participation in the meaning-making of artworks. It is, therefore, inevitable that the elimination of expert discourse in facilitating children's interpretations is an approach referred to in the following section as the absence of interpretation. This section will explore the role of interpretive absence in promoting meaning in artworks based on three strategies for children's education.

Davis and Gardner outline three art education strategies for children that Mallos calls the "Three Window Approach." These are: "the experiential window," "the narrative window," and "the aesthetic window" (Mallos, 2012). Like the "listen, look, do" model of learning in schooling, Davis and Gardner emphasize the significance of multi-sensory experiences in facilitating children's interaction with the work. They help children to better interpret the work on their own and to generate more creative interpretations. In a kind of dialogue with the work, all three windows give children the authority of

interpretation that would otherwise be in the hands of experts.

6.1 “The Experiential Window.”

The first window is “the experiential window.” It is mainly through a playful approach that allows children to make meaning of their work independently. Today, the importance of hands-on learning has been confirmed by many educationalists. The concept of “hands-on Learning” is widely used in the practice of museum education. In the opinion of Duckworth, Piaget emphasized that children’s perceptions of the world are shaped by their behavior and experiences. (Duckworth, 1990). David and Gardner’s “the experiential window” was born out of Piaget’s educational concept of “hands-on learning.” It invites children to use physical movement to touch, manipulate or respond to artwork (Mallos, 2012).

A common practice of “the experiential windows” in museums is playful interaction with exhibits and children. Children frequently create new forms out of common objects during play, alter existing forms by combining them in novel ways, or construct forms from pre-existing materials. Through direct interaction with the exhibits, they change traditional forms and create new meanings with their own hands.

Many children’s museums use playful and interactive strategies. Experimental studies have shown that children independently connect to previous experiences and construct meaning during their interaction with exhibits. For instance, in an exhibit at the Taipei Children’s Art Museum, the curators allowed kids to immerse themselves in Chinese artworks by turning them into an unknown three-dimensional realm where they could freely assemble objects (Lee, 2019). The findings suggest that the children’s direct contact with the materials stimulated their curiosity and motivation to interpret. Through direct contact with the working medium, children were encouraged to think about the work’s intent and unconsciously would use their knowledge of life to construct meaning.

This example demonstrates how experiential windows can inspire children to engage in the meaning-making of works through perception. British Museum scholar Hooper-Greenhill (1994) notes that 70% of visitors’ memories during an exhibition are acquired through hands-on participation. Observing the dynamics of live audience handling and discovering interactive exhibits is an important principle of modern museum displays. While the dynamics of an exhibit can also catch the viewer’s eye, it is the dynamics of being able to participate in it

that interest the viewer. The most demonstrative value of participatory dynamic displays is playful engagement; that is, the audience’s role in the display is both a source of motivation and a guide to the outcome of the display. At the same time, the lower the age, the higher the proportion of interactive exhibits and the less descriptive text. This shows that “the experiential window” stimulates children’s curiosity and enhances their perception of the exhibits in a playful way, allowing them to actively create meaning for the work rather than passively listen to it.

6.2 “The Narrative Window.”

The second window is “the narrative window.” It is a way of allowing children to experience work through storytelling. The fundamental role of narrative in the creation and interpretation of human culture has been widely demonstrated by psychologists. In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner (1990) explores the characteristics of storytelling about museums. One of these features concerns people’s understanding of the world and themselves through narrative. Children combine their desires with family norms by constructing a story about their behavior. Bruner argues that this becomes the primary tool for making meaning. As children engage in a narrative, they actively think and express their interpretations of the work, thus becoming one of the producers of its meaning.

One way of encouraging children’s narratives in museums is to directly involve children as guides in the presentation of the work, which is a way of placing the power of interpretation directly in the hands of the children. According to research, kids exhibit higher motivation levels and feel more connected to the educational experience when given choice and control in a museum (Sykes, 1992; Paris, 1997). Recently, children have been recruited to serve as docents for school and family visits as part of various art museum programs. They are empowered to control the route and content of the entire visit and to explain their ideas about the art they are viewing.

A study conducted in the United States by Carol Jeffers (1999) explored the impact of such child-led exhibitions in facilitating the interpretation of works. The study focused on a group of school-age children with little experience with art museums and had them interpret for their adult peers (teachers and parents). No expert provided an interpretation of the works throughout the guided tour, and the adult peers simply used prompts to encourage the children to explain the meaning of the works themselves. The adult peers in the project all recognize the value of

the children in constructing the meaning of the work - they can point out the parts of the work that are difficult to find and make sense of. At the same time, each child constructs a different meaning for the work based on their own experiences.

It is thus clear that the absence of expert discourse in “the narrative window” allows children to dominate the interpretation of the work. At the same time, the affirmation of their adult peers reinforces their motivation to interpret. Under such conditions, children are more

Likely to assign a wide range of meanings to the work. Unlike “the experiential window”’s focus on behavior and perception, “the narrative window” is more directed at the role of language in facilitating children’s production of meaning. Language is a more demanding way for children to engage in active meaning production than behavior, as they have to make sense of and express meaning through words that convey their feelings and experiences. As a result, children’s interpretation of the work can also be more intuitive, and easier to gauge their involvement in its meaning-making.

6.3 “The Aesthetic Window.”

“The aesthetic window” is a way for children to describe objects visually and in terms of their aesthetic qualities. Indeed, this strategy has been demonstrated in child-led excursions. As mentioned earlier, adult peers can guide children’s thinking through guiding questions at the heart of the aesthetic window. Children are assisted in making meaning based on their own experiences and feelings about the artwork by adults prompting them with facts about it and encouraging them to support their claims with proof.

“Visual Thinking Strategies” (VTS) are a common form of aesthetic windowing. By focusing on the dialogical interaction between museum educators and children (child-adult/peer interaction), VTS encourages children to make sense of the work in their way by asking and answering questions.

Today, VTS has been adopted in many school art curricula and has remarkably promoted children’s critical engagement with the meaning-making of works.

Instance, VTS is used in Burchenal and Grohe’s School Partnership Project (SPP) at the Gardner Museum, where both school and museum educators concur that the main goal of art museum education should be to develop students’ abilities to see and analyze their work (Burchenal and Grohe 2007). Three questions at the start of the VTS encourage students to make decisions and support their claims with examples.

1. What is happening in this painting?
2. What do you see that makes you say this?
3. What else can we find out?

According to SPP educators, VTS allows pupils to apply their prior knowledge and experience to interpret the meaning of artistic creations. The museum educators answered each question largely impartially and avoided purposefully attempting to understand the artist’s motivations. Students developed a personal connection to the Gardner Museum, its collections, and special exhibitions through numerous visits (up to four in an academic year), and they gained confidence in expressing their thoughts regarding photographs (Burchenal and Grohe, 2007). This initiative’s outcomes reflect the exciting conversations and actions that VTS’s debut sparked. Other meanings were developed throughout these discussions, and they all complemented one another.

Indeed, VTS as a strategy for aesthetic windows demonstrates how children can enhance their thinking about the qualities of a work with guiding questions, thus creating additional, richer, and often more mature meanings for the work. Unlike experiential and narrative windows,

Aesthetic windows are often more systematic and structured and are appropriate for school-age children and even for higher grades. Because the guiding questions often rely on observation and require them to give sound evidence to support their views based on their life experiences or other curriculum knowledge. On this level, “the aesthetic window” facilitates children to create more considered and critical meanings for artwork.

7. Uncertainty as to the Effect of the Absence of Interpretation

The absence of interpretation leaves more room for creating meaning in artworks, where children can relate the museum to their experiences. Nevertheless, the absence of interpretation is inherently a relative concept. In a strict sense, it is difficult to detach museum interpretation entirely. Even if experts do not interpret the work, other intrusive factors can affect the viewer’s understanding. For example, the arrangement of the works, the space of the exhibition, the light, etc., all subliminally give children hints. In other words, the interpretation is already present when they first enter the museum. In addition, when educators are involved in the process, different modes of education inherently contain corresponding values. Therefore, measuring how much the meaning of children’s output is independent is difficult. Secondly, even if we try to erase expert interpretations in

museums, there is not enough qualitative and quantitative research on art museums, and the role of the absence of interpretation is not fully established. Also, given the limited funding available, there is a need to select a few of the most effective strategies for promoting children's participation in the meaning-making of works. To address this challenge in the future, Design-based research (DBR) is encouraged by Reisman (2008). Although DBR is frequently used in science museums, it is useful for examining how young children learn. Researchers and museum employees can work together to examine the effects of various educational strategies on children's learning and the learning process in various museum settings through the design process.

8. Conclusion

Back in the last century, John Cotton Dana (1917), a modernist art museum director and pioneer of museum education, stressed the importance of museums in opening up their interpretive powers. He advocated that museums should prioritize education over their traditional roles of gathering and exhibiting objects of art. Art museums are responsible for bringing the meaning of art to light rather than propagating the words of experts. Therefore, based on the educational purpose of museums, this paper argues that museums should open up their interpretations to audiences and promote the creation of meaning in artworks. However, a review of museum interpretation reveals that the presence of expert discourse hinders the audience's participation in the meaning-making of the work.

For children, in particular, the value of their interpretation needs to be given the same weight as that of expert interpretation. Art museums are often seen as imposing due to the overwhelming architecture and artworks displayed at adult heights. Conversely, children are seen as marginal players in interpretation, having been largely indoctrinated with expert discourse. However, research has shown that children's creative interpretations and ability to respond intuitively to works can create different meanings for artworks. Therefore, based on the above review, while the role of the absence of interpretation and the utility of different educational strategies is yet to be investigated, the current absence of interpretation may be a starting point to facilitate children's interaction with the work.

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