

## Communicating Art in Museums: Language Concepts in Art Education

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### **Introduction**

In the early decades of 20th-century Russia, when Kasimir Malevich was experimenting with suprematist compositions, Wassily Kandinsky with geometric abstractions of universal space, and Alexander Rodchenko with constructivist sculptures, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky wrote that “art is a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life.”<sup>1</sup> This assertion has a familiar ring in museum education today, as it resounds the current interest in museums as social arenas for learning. Museum education may be said to be undergoing a theoretical shift, from a focus on individual encounters with authentic objects to sociocultural perspectives that emphasize activities, artifacts, and, perhaps most important, language as mediators in meaning-making processes.

Sociocultural theory, with Vygotsky as a key figure, opened the door to an expanded view of museums as learning situations, allowing us to move from one dimension to the other without losing sight of how they fit into a more complex whole.<sup>2</sup> A rich body of work has been produced in the past decade highlighting the complexity and difficulty of defining learning in museums, and reinforcing an understanding of museums as places for social interaction and experience.<sup>3</sup> Recent research on ways in which identity, community<sup>4</sup> and types of discourse<sup>5</sup> figure into meaning-making processes in museums are examples of the influence of constructivist, and more recently sociocultural, views in the field of museum education.

What are the implications of a shift of focus, from the individual to the social, for art museum educators and researchers? One outcome is seen in the greater attention being paid to how visitors interact and what they talk about in encounters with works of art. As mentioned above, different forms of conversation, or discourse analysis, are emerging as an important research methodology. However, according conversation greater importance in aesthetic education is not unproblematic for museum education. Rather, it enters into a long-standing philosophical debate about the kinds of communication strategies that allow for the most meaningful experience for visitors: those encouraging experience of the artwork's internal, aesthetic qualities, or those emphasizing the artwork's contextual framework. For art museums, connections between education and art are riddled with controversy over the extent to which language—in the form of labels, docents, audio tours, or even speaking aloud—interferes with or supports aesthetic experience. This festering problem in art museum education stems from two fundamentally different views on the relationship between language and interpretation.

Representing a cognitivist view of aesthetic experience, Michael J. Parsons points to the importance of conversation in interpreting art, particularly contemporary art.<sup>6</sup> What are the philosophical premises of his understanding of language and its relationship to art, then, when he claims that the interpretation of artworks is mental activity that results in understanding? On the other hand, which view of language's role in interpretation is expressed in Anna M. Kindler's concern<sup>7</sup> that emphasizing contextual information may hinder direct and intuitive aesthetic experiences based on acts of perception? I suggest that the growing interest in connections between learning

and conversation invites a closer look at these two understandings, both of which are anchored in cognitivism and represented in a broad range of constructivist studies. An examination of the philosophical premises of this familiar discussion within art education will also highlight some fundamental differences between constructivism and sociocultural theory.

In this article, I will first explore the philosophical origins of these two conflicting views on the role language plays in the aesthetic experience of art—simply put, more versus less “talking.” In particular, I will consider the relevance of these arguments for contemporary art. This debate will then be compared with a sociocultural perspective on language and the link that is made by Vygotsky, among others, among activity, artifacts, and language. Finally, I will draw connections between interpretation challenges in contemporary art and concepts of meaning-making in sociocultural theory and examine their relevance for museum educators.

### **Theory and Contemporary Art Museums**

As concepts of aesthetic experience belong to the realm of art theory, it is perhaps best to begin by acknowledging its place as one of four disciplines constituting an approach to art education known as Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE): art history, art criticism, art theory, and art production. Each of these disciplines represents different theoretical perspectives and interests, and all are interwoven into the interpretations that are made in encounters with artworks. As with other subjects such as math and science, the aim of theory is to provide a conceptual framework that enables us to relate to complex phenomena—in this case, works of art. An understanding of the nature, meaning, and value of art (aesthetics) has traditionally been viewed as

For museums of contemporary art, however, theory is also a means of equipping visitors to deal with questions regarding the ontological status and interpretation of works of art, questions like, *Why is it art? What does it mean?* Answers to such questions are found neither on small, white labels nor by contemplating a work's visual qualities; they are not considered to have quantifiable "answers" at all. Rather, the development of theoretical concepts applicable to contemporary art may more aptly be described as a "meaning-making process"—that is, realized through discourse with others, by means of an artwork's semiotic content, in keeping with individual learning trajectories and anchored in specific cultural situations.

Part of the challenge for museum educators, then, lies in the fact that contemporary art theory, no longer concerned primarily with aesthetics, has become difficult to define and delimit as a field. Since classical times, concepts of beauty have provided a framework for understanding nature and man-made objects, with aesthetics evolving during the German romantic period of the late 18th century to deal philosophically with the unique character of art. Based on the theories of idealists Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, among others, aestheticism purified the domain of art from all that was foreign to it, rendering the work of art an autonomous object to which one could relate.<sup>9</sup> Yet as the content of art increasingly became "art only," conventionalized by museums and art historians, artists became interested in challenging and exceeding its limits. In the early 20th century, the historical avant-garde, specifically the Dada movement (1919–20), served as the critical undoing of aestheticism as the essential

framework for describing, understanding, and explaining works of art. In the 20th century, the status of art has continued to be called into question by artists and theorists alike. Some wonder whether the concept of art has itself become an empty one, declaring that the artwork is merely another cultural object, unable to claim a unique, independent identity. These critics maintain that, today, it is not so much a question of how pretty much “anything” can be art; now art itself can be pretty much anything.<sup>10</sup>

As it became increasingly difficult to associate artistic product with aesthetic object, art theory and consequently aesthetic education became, and remain, difficult to define as praxis. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, artists as well as art theorists, critics, and art historians have explored any number of poststructuralist strategies in self-reflexive analyses and experimentations with established art discourse practices, exploring new perspectives to provide frameworks of meaning. This development has led to a situation where participants reflect more or less according to their own needs, creating intermediary contexts for understanding.<sup>11</sup> This process, in which artistic and reflective activity, artifact, language, and social world are continually transformed and transforming the very concept of art is, in itself, an apt illustration of sociocultural theory.

### **Kant and Cognitivism**

Yet, while theorists struggle with the inadequacies of aestheticism in approaching artworks today, Kant’s view of aesthetic experience as the “quickenings of cognitive faculties” continues to underpin art education strategies.<sup>12</sup> The early contours of this approach are seen as early as 1915, when Vygotsky undertook the task of defining a

scientific method and system of art psychology, analyzing the elements constituting an artwork, objectively re-creating an aesthetic reaction and establishing its general laws.<sup>13</sup> The work of art psychologist Rudolph Arnheim, for example, or Howard Gardner's Project Zero research at Harvard University, represent a continuation of a view of aesthetic experience as rooted in perceptual processes and cognitive faculties. This approach gained a foothold in aesthetic education in the early 1960s, when Jerome Bruner's cognitive science became forged with learning theory and Jean Piaget's cognitive development schema.<sup>14</sup> However, in contrast to what was criticized as a behaviorist stimulus-response model (early Vygotsky), Bruner's constructivism emphasized intrinsic motivation; this understanding of learners as active agents has since been integrated in cognitivism in all its variations.

Constructivism continues to wield influence in art museum education and research. Personal experience and insight are considered a legitimate part of student interpretations, for example, along with the formal analyses and contextual information. An important aspect of constructivism is nonetheless the focus on the individual in relation to artifacts and the outside world and the belief that it is possible to make objective judgments about these individual learning experiences. This belief encourages instrumental criteria to be developed for educational and research purposes, in order to categorize and evaluate these judgments. As discussed below, the belief that it is possible to identify learning with individual cognition is what most clearly distinguishes constructivism from sociocultural theory, which maintains a view of learning as activity mediated by cultural artifacts and language, subject to the transforming nature of social and historical processes.

## **Dewey and Phenomenology**

One motivating factor for the major evaluation and assessment reforms initiated in the 1950s, and still strongly present in art education, was an aim to counteract John Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience, which some believed had unfortunately resulted in allowing personal emotions to serve as justifications for value statements. We now turn to the other prevalent view of what constitutes aesthetic education: the experience itself.

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey objects to Kant's compartmentalization of the aesthetic from other modes of experience, criticizing Kant's concept of aesthetic experience as "anæmic" (sic).<sup>15</sup> Dewey studied and was influenced by Hegel, who envisioned aesthetic experience as allowing the mind to break out of its isolation and unite with the material world.<sup>16</sup> Dewey's concept of experience is bound to interaction, between our environment and us, with art uniquely capable of engendering and heightening a sense of belonging to the universe as an organic whole.

Moreover, Dewey insisted that a distinctly aesthetic experience of works of art (in contrast to intellectual or practical experiences) is determined, among other factors, by the sense perception of cultural objects—qualities of things experienced. Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics emphasize the corporeal aspect of direct and immediate experience in encounters with art. Such an understanding of the integrated nature of experience and of an essential, physical relationship between things and us may be likened to a phenomenological view of the world, whereby artworks are seen as subconsciously charged with values emanating from all experience and contact with the world. Kindler's emphasis on the necessity of aesthetic response thus ultimately

echoes Dewey, who cautions that in order for art to serve more than social or institutional functions, it must be linked to some existentially privileged and distinctive mode of experience.

This does not mean that acts of judgment are no more than “impressionist criticism” for Dewey; a total rejection of the possibility of objective values is not an acceptable alternative.<sup>17</sup> In order to move beyond mere personal impressions, the grounds for an artwork’s analysis must be accounted for and then judged accordingly. In other words, a work’s objective characteristics provide the best basis for making judgments because the act of looking ultimately heightens perception, and hence enlarges experience.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, language is essential to this process, as meaning is created through individual reflection in the moment.<sup>19</sup> For Dewey, language functions both as organizing principle and an integral part of experience.

### **Language Concepts and Interpretation**

I have so far identified two general language concepts embedded in prevailing theories about how art is interpreted and understood. To summarize, cognitivism presumes that meaning is assigned through language, comparable to using a set of representational tools. The other predominant view is rooted in phenomenology and pragmatist aesthetics, where understanding and immediate experience are possible—and even desirable—without the cognitive act of interpretation. Instead, language and reflection become an integral part of aesthetic experience.

Although these respective views represent a complexity of positions and tensions, they share one important, common trait in that they reveal a long tradition of focusing on

continues more or less implicitly in art education practices, even though artworks are often experienced and made sense of through dialogue with other visitors, students, teachers, and docents. It also ignores the fact that since the historical avant-garde, contemporary art has been directed toward the social sphere, demanding participation and interaction and transgressing acts of pure perception and contemplation for the work's interpretation, and perhaps very realization. Let us now consider sociocultural theory for an alternative view on meaning-making processes, and its potential to inform teaching and research methods in contemporary art museums.

## **Vygotsky and Sociocultural Theory**

Lev Vygotsky, a key figure in the development of current sociocultural theories, emphasized in his later writings the importance of activity in a system of social relations when describing human processes of knowing. In constructivism, human development is conceived as a relatively isolated process, determined to a large extent by individual activity in relation to the external world and surroundings. While a similar importance is placed on our activity in relation to the world, sociocultural theory emphasizes that the world is interpreted for us from the very beginnings of life, mediated by means of language, artifacts, and collective human activity. Language is not a fixed system accessed for the occasion; rather, words and meanings are developed and change through use in speech—a dynamic merging of word and thought mediated by artifacts. The individual is always either interacting with others or dealing directly with the surrounding world of objects, and this activity is always of a transforming nature.

In sociocultural theory, cultural artifacts such as artworks also mediate knowledge of the world. Vygotsky presents an object-centered concept of activity, whereby meanings are embedded in a culture's tools, which include language, and through use these necessarily play an essential role in the development of knowledge. Artworks are also cultural entities, objects coded by the social and linguistic practices of a particular time in cultural history with meanings that are variable and subject to change over time. As members of specific cultural and social traditions, talk is essential to the meaning we make of the artifacts we encounter, according to Vygotsky. Moreover, this is a reciprocal process; just as interpretations and knowledge are subject to change, so are they always rendering changes over time in the aesthetic objects they appropriate.

## **Conclusion**

There is, then, an appealing and unique compatibility between sociocultural theory and contemporary art theory in three main areas. First, both regard language and interpretation as open concepts, developed through use in social contexts. Second, artworks and the meanings assigned them are viewed as culturally and historically specific, and thus dynamic and subject to change. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, discourse has an essential role in meaning-making. Thus, there are fundamental differences in language concepts between sociocultural theory and constructivism that have implications for education and research in contemporary art museums. A constructivist approach may emphasize the importance of discourse but tends to consider conversation as a reflection of activity in social and cultural processes, as observable and categorical phenomena in individual cognition. In

sociocultural theory, the relation between thinking and words is not static; the activity of knowing, in all its dimensions, becomes the unit of analysis.

Gordon Wells points out that learning is not just developing the learner's discipline-based knowledge, but developing skills that will enable the learner to participate creatively in a social realm.<sup>20</sup> The challenge for art museum educators and researchers lies in reconciling this sociocultural perspective of meaning-making with the instrumental focus on measuring learning. Rather than continuing concerns with what counts as learning, sociocultural theory urges educators to ask what else counts as learning—what are the different dimensions that enter into learning? From this perspective, the at once profound and naïve question *Why is it art?* is not only embedded in cultural and philosophical traditions but is part of their transformation as well, as new understandings are developed through discourse.

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6. Michael J. Parsons, "Cognition as Interpretation in Art Education," in *The Arts: Education and Aesthetic Knowing*, ed. Bennett Reimer and Ralph A. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 70-91.

7. Anna M. Kindler, "Aesthetic Development and Learning in Art Museums: A Challenge to Enjoy," *Journal of Museum Education* 22, nos. 2-3 (1997): 12-16.

8. While an account of the extensive body of research related to aesthetic education from a DBAE perspective is not possible here, it should be noted that this work is implicitly referred to in my discussions of cognitivist and constructivist views on art

education and is based here largely on readings in *Evaluating and Assessing the Visual Arts in Education: International Perspectives*, eds. Doug Boughton, Elliot W. Eisner and Johan Ligtoet (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), and *The Arts, Education, and Aesthetic Knowing*, eds. Bennett Reimer and Ralph A. Smith (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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