

# 14

## **GUIDING MEANING ON GUIDED TOURS**

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### **NARRATIVES OF ART AND LEARNING IN MUSEUMS**

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#### **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN DISCOURSES OF ART AND LEARNING**

Contemporary art theory operates with the tenet that artworks are open to multiple interpretations and that different strategies may be employed to draw out and reflect on a work's meaning. At the same time, interpretations produced by scholars, curators, critics, and artists are deeply rooted in perspectives on how people experience and learn about art, what Kress and Leeuwen (2001) call 'rhetoric/epistemological frames.' Professional art discourse, implicitly if not explicitly, draws on these frames when interpreting a work's meaning, historical styles and influences, and artists' intentions and productions.

In art museums, professional interpretations become embedded in a strata of potentially meaningful semiotic resources, which include the museum architecture, labels, exhibition displays, catalogues, guided tours, selection of museum objects, and the objects themselves (O'Toole, 1994; Kress & Leeuwen, 2001; Ravelli, 2003). A common approach to the design of semiotic resources entails the use of narrative, a primary mode of communication that provides meaning and engages visitors in museums. In this chapter, I explore the guided tour as a semiotic resource, the narratives that characterize this communication mode, and how narratives are used to mediate meaning-making activity.

In guided tour practice, it is possible to distinguish two familiar narratives on how meaning in art is learned and experienced. On the one hand, although not mutually exclusive, there is a perspective that meaning in art is produced in individual perception and experience through exposure to art. This view is common in art history, aesthetics, visual culture studies, and social semiotic approaches, whereby learning becomes associated with vague notions of neural patterns, perception, and affective response. On the other hand, there is a perspective that meaning in art is produced by art history and its discourses. This view is associated with contextual approaches in art history and assessment concerns in formal education.

In this chapter, I investigate the rhetoric/epistemological frames in art and learning discourses, theoretically, and the practice of these discourses in museums, empirically. This innovation on traditional analytical approaches makes it possible to address the 'gap' between contemporary art discourses, on the one hand, and learning concepts that inform art museum education practice, on the other hand. I bring to this study of museum practice my background as an art historian and a sociocultural perspective on learning. The latter entails an understanding of learning as emerging through social interaction, mediated by cultural tools and artifacts.

## FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The focus of this study is the meaning-making activity of high school students on guided tours in modern art museums. I present empirical material gathered from observations of guided tours, which are analyzed as communicative events mediated by signs and tools, including the work of art, but also speech, gestures, and text, in the broadest sense. I explore narratives about art and learning that are embedded in concrete discourse in art museums, and I investigate the role of art history in meaning-making activity on guided tours.

The chapter is organized in the following manner. I first present the theoretical significance of a situated, mediated understanding of human activity for studies of meaning making. I then present case studies of guided tours with museum educators who consciously use contrasting narratives to frame their discursive activity. I conclude by discussing the contributions of this study to museum research and the implications of the findings for bridging the gap between art and learning discourses.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Mediated Activity

Sociocultural perspectives build on the Russian cultural-historical school of thought from the 1920s and 1930s. However, since the translation and publication of key works by psychologists Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Leontev (1978, 1981), and Luria (1976, 1982), a broad range of sociocultural research traditions and interests has developed in the human sciences. It is nonetheless possible to say, in general, that sociocultural approaches aim ‘to explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs, on the other’ (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 11). The key to explaining these relationships is the concept of *mediation*.

The principle of mediated action is that the mind develops through social interaction and that historical-cultural ‘tools and signs’—physical orientations, semiotic resources, language, and particularly speech—powerfully influence this development (Wertsch, 1985, 1998). Moreover, just as semiotic resources mediate human development on the individual level, so too are ‘cultural tools’ in constant transition across different temporal and spatial scales through use. From a sociocultural perspective, cultural tools are taken as ‘acquired knowledge that is objectified into a collective memory’ (Engeström et al., 1984).

In this sense, cultural tools may be understood as integrated in all aspects of bodily and mental interaction with the world. To understand meaning making in encounters with art, then, analysis must take into account the interactions of actors as they are mediated by specific cultural, historical, and institutional settings because meaning-making processes are seen as grounded in the material body of the actor(s) but also in collective, cultural activity, through discourse and interaction (Roth & Pozzer-Ardenghi, 2005). Therefore, meaning is not understood in an isolated, abstract, or disinterested sense but as a multimodal composition that is ‘generated by a particular semiotic activity and a particular social language’ (Wertsch, 1991: 85). At the same time, as an inherently social process, there is an *expressive and relational* aspect to meaning making, as event. This is the influence of Bakhtin (1986) on sociocultural perspectives on discourse, which stress the inherently dialogical character of meaning as emerging in the relationship between utterance and speech genre. In this study, meaning making on guided school tours in art museums is explored as such a dialogical event.

## Narratives as Mediational Means

The most important tool in museums for mediating meaning is narrative. It is, as Roberts (1997) puts it, the ‘heart and soul’ of what museums do. Although I do not focus on narrative theory as such, narratives are conceptualized and explored in this chapter on several levels. First, narratives in art museums are taken as value-laden discourses that have developed over time into institutionalized ways of thinking, collecting, and explaining art. In this sense, narrative is produced by and reproduces cultural-historical practices evolving on quite long time scales and may be analyzed as such (Lemke, 2000). Embedded in cultural and social practices in museums, narratives are *mediational means* and may be studied as ‘part of the “cultural tool kit” that characterizes a sociocultural setting’ (Wertsch, 2002: 57).

Which narratives shape practices in modern and contemporary art museums? As mentioned earlier, the answer to this depends on whether one is investigating the *production* of narratives about art in curatorial practice or examining narratives as *mediational means* in educational practice. Although curators engage with political, feminist, and sociological discourses to interpret contemporary artistic practices, there appears to be what Ricoeur (1981) calls a ‘temporal lag’ between curatorial narratives and those that museum educators draw on in their discursive practices. In my study of art museum education theory and practice, I have chosen to explore two familiar narratives as they are used in guided tour activity. The one narrative posits the significance of art history as central to art’s meaning. The other narrative about art’s meaning stresses the direct relationship between artwork and observer subject. I refer to these familiar, contrasting narratives as contextualism and formalism, respectively. On guided tours, contextualist and formalist narratives are resources on which educators draw in their discursive practices, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or not.

However, these narratives have not only developed from contrasting views on the nature of art, but they also represent different notions about what counts as knowledge and learning. Although debate about whether ‘information’ compromises aesthetic encounters is familiar to museum curators and educators, the underlying epistemologies of these respective views are rarely explored from a learning perspective. Therefore, the first question posed in this chapter is: What are the learning perspectives underlying formalist and contextualist narratives in art museum education?

It is in regard to meaning-making processes that a second understanding of narrative is useful. Describing the tensions that arise *between narratives* in processes of collective remembering, Wertsch (2002) puts

forward an understanding of the 'dialogical function' of narrative. Wertsch argues that, although specific narratives are embedded in concrete discursive practices, they are also open to contestation, negotiation, mastery, and appropriation. It is this dialogical activity of mastery and appropriation, as I have argued elsewhere (Pierroux, 2005), that *becomes* learning in museums. My second research question thus explores the dialogical function of contextualist and formalist narratives in museum education practice. How do these narratives enter into meaning-making processes on guided tours in art museums?

### **Guided Tours: A Communicative Genre**

My decision to use data from guided tours is based on the assumption that narratives will be more apparent in this institutionalized discursive setting between educator and high school students than in settings where casual museum visitors 'pick up' ideological positions in their talk from museum texts or other mediating resources. Is it possible to reconcile an emergent, relational concept of meaning making with the guided tour, an event that is organized, structured, and purposive? In the museum research literature, the guided tour, as an activity that is constrained both verbally and physically, is frequently contrasted with 'free choice' learning, in which visitors may move about freely. Guided tours may be considered a communicative genre, which in Linell's (1998: 239) terms is 'originally interactionally developed, then historically sedimented, often institutionally congealed, and finally interactionally reconstructed in situ.'

Yet it is this *in situ* aspect of guided tours, as a face-to-face, discursive activity with speech the essential tool, that allows them to be conceived dialogically. The role of speech is crucial to sociocultural understandings of mediation, as Wertsch et al. (1995: 12; italics original) explain: 'For [Vygotsky], speech is a *process, if not a form of action*, that uses language as a *means*.' Speech is not only a mediating tool, but is, in itself, an active reconstruction process, a 'dynamic merging' of word and thought in socially situated communication and discourse. Therefore, although guided tours give the impression of being monological rather than dialogical, as a communicative genre, they also may be 'more or less open' depending on unfolding activity in different situated social encounters (Linell, 1998). Accordingly, guided tours are considered in this study discursive sites in which participants' utterances come into play and exchange, with each other but also as responses to narratives specific to this institutional practice. It is thus through studying discourse and interaction at Bakhtin's 'utterance level', as Billig (2001) points out, that both emergent and ideological meaning may be identified, that is, *inside* multimodal compositions.

## **Formalist and Contextualist Narratives**

The two contrasting narratives that I call ‘formalism’ and ‘contextualism’ are systems of beliefs that are rooted in antiquity and run as an undercurrent in literary discourse through aesthetics, art history, visual studies, and art education. That these narratives are relevant today became apparent during my study of how modern and contemporary art is taught in museums, specifically during my observations of guided tour discourse with middle- and high school-level students and through my interviews with museum educators.

Although contextualist and formalist positions overlap and merge, the practical problem that stems from these narratives is familiar to museum educators: how to balance an object-based focus on the artwork with information from the disciplinary domain of art history? In the instance of guided tours for school groups, for example, art history is information that teachers often expect from museum educators. Yet museums frequently posit the primacy of the art object over ‘correct’ meanings, contending that language-particularly complex theories-hinders (aesthetic) art encounters and undermines observers’ opportunities to make their own meaning. In the following, I briefly sketch the histories of these narratives.

### **Formalism in Art Museum Education**

A formalist perspective considers form inseparable from content because it is grounded in the social and cultural conditions of a specific time by means of the creative act. This makes it possible to analyze or decode the meaning of an art by relating grammar, composition, style, and palette to the historical and cultural conditions of its making. Recent studies within linguistics and semiology that adopt such formalist strategies include systemic functional linguistics (SFL) analyses of visual and ‘displayed’ art (O’Toole, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) and, more recently, multi-modal analyses of visual images, museum architecture, and art exhibitions (Fei, 2004; Hofinger & Ventola, 2004). In terms of reception, the art object is seen as a system of (more or less arbitrary) signs, a composition, to which the observer relates intuitively and directly, that is, through cognition and senses.

Learning theories grounded in formalist approaches in art museum education thus stress unmediated, visceral response as the most genuine. They may also take the pragmatic view that most observers do not have disciplinary knowledge to bring to bear on their experiences of artworks, and that in contemporary art every ‘meaning’ is valid (Yenawine, 1991). The observer constructs meaning ever more deeply through increased

'exposure' and perception is central. Such 'exposure' theories are based on the premise that cognition is not passive, but that

we learn constantly through experience and exposure (. . . .) As is common elsewhere, the appreciation of art is likely to be partial at first, but it can be developed subsequently by a kind of bootstrapping, without resort to the formal study of theory or history. (Davies, 2006: 75)

Philip Yenawine, former Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, has developed a particular approach that I situate among formalist educational practices. Yenawine works with developmental psychologist Abigail Housen and promotes an educational method in art museums called the Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS). This inquiry-based strategy supports young (elementary school) or inexperienced observers as they construct meaning by cultivating rather than 'moving beyond' intuitive responses. Based on Housen's research on aesthetic understanding, VTS recognizes that concepts in art history and aesthetics, particularly in modern and contemporary art, are typically beyond the young or inexperienced observer's understanding (Housen, 1999).

Housen and Yenawine propose that observers instead be taught how to develop their perceptual and reasoning skills over time, empowering them to develop aesthetic understanding based on close looking and a guided inquiry-based strategy. VTS is a quite specific but also open-ended approach to meaning making that has been likened to the creative act of the artist. Yenawine explains in a demonstration video (Yenawine & Rice, 1999) titled *Contrasting Practices III*:

It begins with asking people to look in silence at the work, and I follow a period of examination with questions. What's going on here? What do you see that makes you say that, and (. . .) what more can you find? I paraphrase what people say. And I link answers that relate one way or another. I also point to what people mention as they talk.

## Contextualism in Art Museum Education

Response to VTS has been quite positive among museum educators. However, such object-based, 'formalist' approaches are contested in museums' work with schools, which prioritize assessment and disciplinary content, that is, art history. Kemal and Gaskell (1993: 1) provide a useful general definition of art history as 'seeking to define the circumstances in which the art object was initially produced and perceived, and to follow its reception through time.'

Protests against a formalist approach generally follow the argument voiced by Associate Director of Education Danielle Rice at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Rice is concerned that viewers may walk away with misunderstandings and ‘wrong answers’ without contextual information. Rice maintains that specialized disciplinary knowledge is expertise that viewers seek from contemporary art museums, and educators are obliged to share contextual information in a manner that enriches encounters with art. Rice also participates in the demonstration video (Yenawine & Rice, 1999), and she argues:

I think listening is really important...but I do also believe that it's very important to get them inspired and motivated to want to go out to learn more and . . . to figure out how to interpret objects by bringing their own responses to bear and the responses of historians, artists, critics, etc.

### **Summing up**

To go over the main points thus far, I propose that formalism and contextualism represent specific narratives (Wertsch, 2002) within aesthetics and art history concerned with the ontology of art: questions of what constitutes a work of art. In the formalist perspective, the art object is constituted through subjective perception of its formal characteristics. In the contextualist position, perspectives in art history about the significance of object, artist, and its making are essential to understanding an object as art. Moreover, in the context of an educational setting, I propose that formalist and contextualist narratives bring central epistemological problems to the forefront: questions of what constitutes knowledge about a work of art. In my view, formalist understandings are at the core of the VTS, which situates meaning in individual cognitive and sensory processes, while contextualist strategies in museum education prioritize art history and thus bring social and cultural resources into encounters with works. As mentioned, these are complex philosophical positions necessarily reduced for analytical purposes.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES**

### **Interaction Analysis**

The methods used in this study are grounded in Interaction Analysis (IA) (Jordan & Henderson, 1995), an interdisciplinary approach to studying

human interaction. IA has roots in ethnomethodology, ethnography, and conversation analysis, among other disciplines, and has the larger goal of identifying how actors organize and use social and material resources in activity. An important premise for conducting research in IA is that theories of knowledge and action must be grounded in empirical evidence, that is, in verifiable observations of moment-to-moment verbal and non-verbal activity in social settings. This means that, to the largest extent possible, analysis is free from predetermined categories about mental faculties and human behaviors (Jordan & Henderson, 1995).

In sociocultural studies, detailed attention to social interaction is important to understanding the relevance of language, semiotic resources, the physical setting, and participants' physical orientations and gestures for meaning making. Video recordings are made to capture this level of detail and to make interactions accessible for multiple replays and collaborative interpretations with other researchers. In this study, the argument of 'contrasting practices' put forth in the demonstration video became a theme for analyzing the interactions and discourse of the participants. This video was then analyzed in relation to video and audio data that I had collected in Norwegian and North American art museum guided tours from 2002 to 2004. Video analysis sessions were conducted with InterMedia researchers to look at the raw video data and discuss its character and possible means of selection. These sessions informed the approaches I have used to study contrasting narrative practices and how they organize and structure guided tour discourse and meaning-making processes.

In the following section, I present the data and the methods used to code and analyze discursive moves. I discuss this first analysis and then move on to a sequence analysis of selected discourse segments. I conclude with a discussion of these two methodological approaches in terms of their relevance for my research questions.

## Discourse Analysis Methods

It is important to acknowledge that classroom and museum discourse studies build on broad and established traditions in conversation, interaction, and discourse analysis. I draw on familiar tools from these traditions, among them, the analytical concepts *moves* and *functions*. In this study, moves are 'utterances', the basic discourse unit determined by the change of speaker. In analyzing the moves in the data, I observed characteristics of an Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979; Mercer, 1995), which involves three moves: the educator's initiation, the student's response, and the educator's follow-up. However, it should be noted that moves in the turn-taking

pattern are conceptualized as relational entities. In this sense, ‘a move’s “own” content is always understood in relation to its local (and other) contexts’ (Linell, 1998: 175). A dialogical perspective such as the one I adopt thus entails a more open understanding of discourse than the IRF model may suggest (Wells, 1999; Rasmussen, 2005).

I also noted that each move generally contains more than one function. Function is an analytic category based on the concept that language may be used in a regulatory manner and that different communicative functions may be identified in individual parts of the move (Halliday, 1978; Wells, 1999). The purpose of using a coding scheme in this bottom-up approach, which is based on replays of video recordings and analysis of the unfolding interaction of participants, is to identify similarities in the organization and structure of talk in the different guided tours—the kinds and instances of communicative functions the educators used in their discursive strategies and the responses these elicited (Wodak, 2001).

Following analysis of the coded discourse, and to explore more deeply the relations between the structure and organization of discourse, social interactions, and meaning-making processes, I select segments of talk and analyze the development of meaning *in sequence* in the data. This method of sequential analysis corresponds with the fundamental dialogical perspective that utterances should not be analyzed in isolation from their relational positions (Linell, 1998). I conclude with a discussion of what kinds of information, practices, and understandings are made apparent by using these different methodologies: coding and sequence analysis.

## DATA

### **The *Contrasting Practices* (CP) Video Data**

As mentioned earlier, museum educators Yenawine and Rice demonstrated and documented their respective approaches to gallery teaching in a video titled *Contrasting Practices III*. In this video (CP), taped at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, two different classes from the same middle school were invited to discuss the work titled *Tori*, which was made by artist Eva Hesse in 1969 (Figure 14.1): one class with Yenawine and one with Rice. In the introduction of the tape, the educators explain that the video has been produced with the express aim of demonstrating two contrasting teaching methodologies.

This video serves as the foundation for my empirical analysis. Furthermore, the video invites comparison with my own observations and analysis of guided tours with school groups, and it frames my main



**Figure 14.1.** *Tori*  
(Hesse, 1969).

research questions: How are formalist and contextualist narratives embedded in art education discourse? What is the role of art history as mediational means in art museum education?

The primary data in this study are these two different ‘gallery talks’ with middle-school students in the CP video. These different groups of students were similarly seated on chairs in front of Hesse’s sculpture, which was placed on a raised platform. The educators stood in front of their respective classes and moved about during the talk, pointing and calling on the students as they raised their hands. However, because the CP video had been edited, and to give a richer description of the school field trip experience, I include in my analysis recorded observations of two additional tours with high school students at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. The data set thus comprises four gallery talks: two 10-minute talks in the CP video and two 1-hour tours that I observed and recorded in 2004.

The latter were selected from a larger corpus based on their suitability as comparative data; these two tours had approximately the same number of students (12–15), the same age (15–17 years), and were from the same kind of schools (public) as the students in the CP video. All of the museums included in this study are located in the same part of the United States (northeast), and all of the educators are familiar with the VTS. In addition, similar types of art works (modern, contemporary, and abstract) were discussed on all of the tours and are part of the permanent collections at each museum.

### **The MoMA data**

In contrast to the discussion of one work each in the CP video, the MoMA data includes discussions of three different works on the tour, and each discussion has been analyzed separately. It is a thematic tour (‘landscapes

and cityscapes'), and the educator had visited the students at school the previous week to introduce the theme, presenting and discussing slides. The classroom teacher was present on the tour and engaged in 'whole-class' conversation at one point during the tour (three moves).

The MoMA tour data is audio recordings, supplemented with field notes to record physical activity. Although video data are considered ideal for interaction analysis, the lack of visual data is not considered a disadvantage here because participants' orientations and the physical exhibition space are managed quite similarly in all of the data. The students' movements are confined in the sense that they are closely seated on folding chairs while educators stand and move about. Similar, too, is the use of hand raising and pointing as the main gestural means, not unlike whole-classroom discourse settings.

### **The PMA Data**

The PMA data also include discussions of three works on the tour, with each discussion analyzed separately. Like the MoMA data, it is a thematic tour ('modern and contemporary art'). The classroom teacher was present here as well, occasionally reminding the students that they had seen or discussed a reproduction of a particular work of art in class. In all, there were three such instances of teacher comments during the 60-minute tour.

The data from the PMA tour are video recordings. A single handheld video camera was used, making it possible for me to capture participants' talk and orientation to each other, to artworks, and to other artifacts at a detailed level. The museum educator used a remote microphone, allowing two sound feeds and the possibility of isolating each track in playback. Because the students were stationary and seated in a large group in front of artworks when the educator was talking, it was a relatively simple setup and thus possible to capture most of the interactions and discourse. I had met and recorded the students the previous week in their classroom and they seemed comfortable with the camera.

Finally, regarding the data, it is important to point out that neither the MoMA nor the PMA museum educator I observed had formally been trained in VTS. However, the MoMA guide reported that this specific questioning strategy is taught during their training, although the use of theme-related and contextual information to supplement this approach is also encouraged.

In this sense, there is a similarity between the specific questioning methods used on the MoMA tour and Philip Yenawine's method on the CP video. Likewise, the educator I observed on the PMA tour aimed to convey art historical information, not unlike the method endorsed and

demonstrated on the CP video by Danielle Rice. In contrast to MoMA training, however, no explicit methods are taught as part of the training at PMA, and educators employ a broad range of approaches that have been developed on both an individual and collaborative basis. These similarities, between the MoMA tour and the formalist approach in the CP video, on the one hand (no or little information), and the PMA tour and the contextualist approach in the CP video, on the other hand (emphasis on art historical information), were considerations that entered into the data-selection process.

## CODING ANALYSIS

### Functions

As mentioned, classroom discourse structures have been identified as features embedded in gallery tour activity (Xanthoudaki, 1998; Pierroux, 2005), with museum educators guiding discussion using a triadic dialogic structure (IRF) that is common to whole-classroom interaction. Because the students were on school field trips in museums, a coding scheme was developed to be sensitive to both types of institutional talk, drawing on conventions from classroom (Cazden, 1988; Wells, 1999) and museum discourse analysis (Leinhardt et al., 2002).

#### Moves/Functions

The talk from each of the four tours (CP formalist, CP contextualist, MoMA, PMA) was first transcribed in its entirety from video and audio data in keeping with interaction analysis conventions (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Each tour transcript was analyzed using a 'bottom-up' approach. In the initial phase of analysis, talk functions were quite broadly defined. During analysis of participants' orientations to previous and subsequent utterances in context, multiple functions *in each move* were identified and defined in the transcripts using *HyperResearch* as a tool. The video recordings and field notes were occasionally consulted during this process to support inferences about participants' interactions and talk functions. Similarities between functions were identified and organized into categories.

The categories of these 'communicative functions' were developed based on Wells' (1999) research because of parallels (such as the IRF pattern) between educator-led discussions in classroom settings and museum educator-led discussions on guided tours. Wells' methodology is rooted in a sociocultural view on language, which he combines with Halliday's

(1978) concepts of genre and register, extending them to encompass social action beyond linguistic behavior. The researcher tool *Hyper Research* was used to organize, compare, and eventually label the functions in each 'move' directly from the transcripts. The categories in Figure 14.2 describe the functions in the educators' moves.

***Reformulating & summarizing.***

Rephrasing a student response as a question to be confirmed, making previous utterances a possible focus for the next utterance, labeling utterances as arguments; repeating utterance. Used in conjunction with physical pointing, connecting, and extending.

***Connecting.***

References to either ideas in previous utterances (possibly from discussions of other works in the same tour) or themes.

***Requesting explanation & requesting further explanation.***

Keep talk afloat in the form of open questions prefaced with 'what, where, and what more.'

***Requesting opinion and information.***

Questions that require yes or no answers or request specific information.

***Extending.***

In a reformulating move, information or observations are added to the previous utterance.

***Providing information.***

Educator contributes art historical information, observations, or personal interpretations.

**Figure 14.2. Functions in educator talk.**

To label the functions in student moves, I use perspectives from classroom and museum discourse analysis. However, the function categories were also developed to be sensitive to the interpretive nature of the students' activity, drawing on interpretation perspectives in art history (Baxandall, 1985). The function categories for student talk shown in Figure 14.3 thus reflect characteristics of interpretative processes, such as making associations and inferential explanations. Specific analytic attention was paid to semiotic resources used in art museums: object-related talk and gestures, disciplinary terms, concepts, and rhetorical and narrative elements, museum labels, and texts.

**Analyzing.**

Talk that is often phrased as questions, involves reflection on how objects were made (cause and effect), intentions, materials, and processes.

**Describing.**

Indexical, object-related observations that compare and note resemblances to other things in the world.

**Interpreting.**

Proposes a mood, intent, theme, idea, narrative, and includes personal associations such as 'it reminds me of' and 'it seems like.' Often includes aspects of analysing and describing.

**Giving opinions.**

Brief answers containing information, yes or no responses.

**Clarifying and extending.**

Responses to educator's request to build on or relate to previous utterances, either their own or others.' Clarifying is often object-related and involves pointing and describing ('up in the middle there'). Extending is a continuation of a previous utterance to further develop an idea.

**Arguing.**

Expresses disagreement with a previous utterance.

**Figure 14.3. Functions in student talk.**

In addition to categorizing the functions of talk in each move, I have noted the frequency of directly object-related talk among both students and educators. By this I mean that the object is pointed at, either physically or through reference.

## Coding Results

I first discuss the communicative functions in educator and student talk on the two tours in the CP video. In keeping with the analytical distinction made earlier, the 'visual thinking' questioning strategy of Philip Yenawine (PY) is presented as formalist, whereas the gallery talk with Danielle Rice (DR) represents a contextualist approach. The frequency of each function in relation to the total moves is represented in percentile. The percentages for each tour add up to more than 100% because there was more than one communicative function identified in many of the moves. It was not possible to compare total moves in the different tours since the CP tape had been edited. However, the IRF pattern was consistent across the data, with teacher and student moves equally divided.

I then consider data from the formalist tour in the CP video in relation to the MoMA tour and discuss similarities between them. Next, I present codes from the contextualist data in the CP video alongside the PMA tour and consider similarities between the two contextualist approaches. I conclude my coding analysis by considering similarities and differences between the discursive functions of formalist and contextualist approaches.

### Formalist Tour-CP Video Data

Most striking in the CP formalist educator moves is the high frequency of *reformulating and summarizing* (62%), *requesting explanation* (44%), and *connecting* (27%) activity. Also salient is the total lack of *providing information* (0%) and the use of a large amount of *object-related* talk (48%). Student moves mainly involve *clarifying and extending* (38%) and *describing* (25%) activity. Students are not engaged in *giving opinions* (0%) but spend a good deal of time *interpreting* (22%) and *analyzing* (14%). In general, the coding suggests that all educator initiate and follow-up moves support the building of student responses based on object-based descriptions. Accordingly, student interpretations are closely linked with *describing* activity, both their own and that of other students. This further suggests that interpretations are based on a joint, collaborative process in which descriptions and ideas of fellow students are picked up, elaborated on, and argued against. The talk is mainly *object-related*.

### Contextualist Tour-CP Video Data

In the CP contextualist approach, the educator almost equally divides her time among *reformulating and summarizing* (26%), *requesting opinion* (26%), and *requesting explanation* (20%). By the educator move *requesting opinion*, I mean instances in which the educator first makes statements and provides information to which the students are expected to directly respond (giving opinions in the form of agreement, disagreement, or brief answers). In addition, the educator *provides information* (11%), *makes connections* (15%), and *extends* (13%) student responses. The educator uses less talk (11%) that is directly *object-related*. Student moves mostly involve *interpreting* (27%), *giving opinions* (20%), and *clarifying and extending* (14%). In general, the coding suggests that students give opinions and make interpretations based on information provided by the educator. The educator initiate and follow-up moves elicit opinions and information-based interpretations rather than support student responses based on *describing* or *analyzing*. The talk is mainly information-related.

However, it is important to note that the CP tape was edited for demonstration purposes, which may explain why it was not possible to identify any *describing* or *analyzing* activity in the student moves here. It is apparent that the educator encouraged some describing activity in the first few minutes of the talk that was edited, although neither the students nor the educator took up or referred to these descriptions again in the talk that is presented on the video.

To sum up the analysis of the CP video thus far, in the formalist data, students appear to make interpretations based on the object-related descriptions and analyses of fellow students because these are clarified and extended through a specifically structured communicative genre. In the contextualist data, students make interpretations and give opinions based on information supplied by the educator rather than on their own object-related descriptions and analyses.

### **Comparing Formalist Tours-CP Video and MoMA Data**

I next consider how the CP formalist data compare with my own observations of a MoMA gallery tour, in which a similar questioning strategy was employed. As explained earlier, the session on the CP video consisted of one discussion of one artwork with duration of approximately 12 minutes. The MoMA tour had duration of approximately 45 minutes, with three 12- to 15-minute talks about three different works. Therefore, in coding talk from the MoMA data, instances of each function were first totaled for all three discussions and then averaged for a representative mean.

The most important difference to be mentioned is that, because the MoMA tour was thematic, information was introduced during the tour (5%). This difference is perhaps reflected in the lesser amount of time that students spend *describing* (8%) than on the CP video (25%). However, the data also suggest several important similarities between these two formalist strategies. Significantly, talk on both tours is largely *object-related* (48% and 45%). Furthermore, both educators stress *requesting explanation* (what, where, and what more questions), *reformulating* (rephrasing student responses), and *connecting* (referring to previous utterances) as their main discursive strategies. This similarity suggests that the most important activities for educators working with a formalist approach are to support an ongoing dialogue among the students. Similarities between student responses in the two groups are apparent as well because both spend the most time *clarifying and extending* (building on or relating to previous utterances), *interpreting* (proposing a mood, intent, theme, idea, and narrative), and *analyzing* (reflection on how objects were made, intentions, materials, and processes). This suggests that students are mainly encour-

aged to jointly construct meaning through works of art when VTS questions are the mediating tool: what's going on here, what do you see that makes you say that, and what more can you find?

### Comparing Contextualist Tours-CP Video and PMA Data

Like the MoMA tour, instances of function types for all three discussions on the PMA tour were first totaled and then averaged for a representative mean. Also similar is the thematic framing of the PMA tour. However, in contrast to formalist approaches that downplay the use of information in principle, both contextualist educators consider art historical information an essential part of a guided tour. This is reflected in the data in the frequency of *providing information* in both contextualist tours.

The PMA tour has a slightly higher frequency of *providing information* (15%) than the CP contextualist tour (11%). At the same time, student *interpreting* is much less (11%) in the PMA tour than in the CP contextualist tour (27%). This may perhaps be explained by the more frequent use of art concepts and terms in the PMA tour, which was thematic. A greater emphasis on art terms and concepts may also figure into the high percentage (59%) of *analyzing* talk, which in any case is a strong contrast to the apparent absence of analyzing talk among students on the CP video contextualist tour. In other words, the PMA educator supports talk that analyzes works of art (reflection on how objects were made, intentions, materials, and processes) rather than interpreting them (proposing a mood, intent, theme, idea, and narrative). How is this done?

The answer seems to lie in that the PMA educator frequently *request-explains* (53%) in conjunction with *providing information* and *using art terms* in comparison with the CP video contextualist data (20%). There was also more directly *object-related* talk (34%) in the former than in the latter (11%). This suggests that information was provided in a manner that kept talk afloat by means of open questions, linked to the artwork, and prefaced with 'what, where, and what more.' That talk is 'kept afloat' more in the PMA contextualist data is seen in an overall higher frequency of student responses and student *analyzing* (59%) and *clarifying and extending* (31%) responses.

This is an important contrast between two contextualist approaches. The students spend most time of all tours *interpreting* (27%) in the CP video when the contextualist educator *provides information* (11%). When the PMA educator provides (even more) information but also combines this with moves that keep talk afloat, the students spend less time *interpreting* (11%) but are more active, use more art terms, extend and clarify their responses, and make object-related analyses. In other words, com-

paring the two contextualist approaches, the PMA tour has more dialogic characteristics.

## Discussion of Coding Analysis

What kinds of conclusions may be drawn from this analysis of the communicative functions in educator and student talk? First, we see that it is possible to identify characteristics of guided tours as a communicative genre in that similar moves and functions are identified in all of the data; educator initiate and follow-up moves include *reformulating*, *requesting opinion and explanation*, *connecting*, and *extending* activities, and student response moves include *interpreting*, *analyzing*, and *describing*.

Second, there are similarities in the kinds and instances of talk in the respective *Contrasting Practices* tours and the two museums that adopt (more or less) these two practices. This suggests that there are functions and patterns in discourse that are characteristic for the contrasting practices of formalism and contextualism. In other words, there are connections between specific narratives in art and learning theory, formalism and contextualism, and their manifestation in concrete discourse as compositions. In the formalist approaches, interpretations of art are based primarily on student descriptions and analyses, whereas in contextualist approaches, students make interpretations and analyses based on information from the educator. A similarity between theory and practice is apparent in both the formalist and contextualist data.

To summarize, in this analysis, museum educators consciously or unconsciously use types of utterances oriented toward the production of the specific narratives I have identified as formalist and contextualist. Embedded in what the educators call 'contrasting practices' are ontological and epistemological positions in art and learning theory, fundamental views on what counts as art, and what counts as knowledge about art. Analyzing aspects of discourse in terms of functions in utterances and the frequency with which they occur provides information about 'modes of instruction', narratives, the patterns of participation that are produced, and the types of knowledge and activities that are favored and embedded in these contrasting narratives (Rasmussen et al., 2003).

## SEQUENCE ANALYSIS METHOD

### Unpacking Categories

Yet insight into the kind of discursive work that is being done still leaves me with questions about *meaning making* as a dialogical process and an

intersubjective, situated activity. As a method, coding enforces a definition of multimodal compositions that is deliberately and conventionally abstracted from dialogue. In this sense, the coding scheme represents what Bakhtin (1986: 75) describes as ‘potential meaning’, making generalizations that overlook the dialogic overtones of ‘real-life dialogue’).

A dialogic approach allows me to unpack the categories that I have developed and examine the emergent nature of talk and interaction, in sequence and inside the composition. Meaning is analysed as co-constructed sequence by sequence, even when one participant has unequal topic control, as in the guided tour setting (Wells, 1999). In particular, I am interested in exploring the category *interpretation* as it emerges in sequential talk. *Interpreting* has been identified in the data analysis as a function that proposes a mood, intent, theme, idea, and narrative and includes personal associations such as ‘it reminds me of’ and ‘it seems like.’ As a category, however, *interpreting* gives little information about the content of meanings that are produced in the chain of communication. This raises the question of what similarities and differences there might be in the interpretations?

In the following, I first present segments of talk, in sequence, which I have selected from the formalist tour in the CP video. All segments were selected according to their relevance as data for analyzing *interpreting* activity. I analyze these data and continue by presenting and analyzing segments of talk from the CP contextualist tour. I conclude the sequence analysis by reflecting on similarities and differences in interpreting and meaning making on the respective formalist and contextualist tours.

### Sequence Analysis: Formalist Data

The questioning strategy recommended in the VTS entails asking three questions: ‘What is going on here?’, ‘What do you see that makes you say that?’, and ‘What more can you find?’ The formalist CP video session thus begins with the educator (E) asking the question what is going on here? In the ensuing discussion, students analyze processes of making (molded, paper-mâché, sloppily made); physical characteristics of the objects are described (different heights and sizes, glassy appearance, randomly placed, dull in color, transparent), as are resemblances (raviolis, unironed clothing, cocoon, beehive, pea pod, and overstuffed pillows, hot dog roll, swaddling). Educator moves are concentrated on *reformulating*, *requesting further explanation*, and *connecting*. Well into the discussion, building on descriptions and referencing previous comments, an *interpretation* of a more somber nature is put forward:

*Sequence 1*

1. P: It looks like it's the aftermath of the birth of something and they all, everything came out and left the shells there, sort of in a big pile. (*interpretation*)
2. E: OK, so this is like the shell after—
3. P: Just, like the pods or the cocoon—
4. E: Yes, so that idea of either pods, or cocoons, or something else and these are, these are left over after the event, a kind of birth event has occurred. Good, what more can you find?
5. H: A hotdog roll, put the hot dog inside. ((laughter))
6. E: OK, good, so maybe it's waiting for the hotdog. Yep?
7. J: Kind of like after war or crime, like, the body bags, c a u s e there are these bags and they kind of have a slit, like, where you keep the person, especially the one, the very back one, looks like you could put a human, or a dead animal or something, and zipper it up. (*interpretation*)
8. E: Right, this is interesting, because we have had ideas about birth, or things coming out of it like a chrysalis, but this is the opposite end of the life, thing, where maybe these are body bags, but the bodies have been removed. Yes?

At this point, students begin to argue with emerging interpretations and position themselves in relation to what in a sense become reified meanings.

*Sequence 2*

((tape edit))

9. E: Oh, yeah, not pigs in a blanket, but babies in a blanket. ((laughter)) So maybe like, they call them a sort of a blanket that you swaddle a child in when they are little? Yes, swaddling clothes, OK, great. Yes? You. ((points to a student))
10. P: I think that the general theme is aftermath, whether it's about a football game, a crime scene, war, death, whatever it is. It has definitely happened after something (*interpretation*)
11. E: OK, so sort of thinking about a lot of these different ideas that have been brought up, so you're thinking that the aftermath, whether, whatever it was, battle, football game.
12. P: [...] whatever it was, it was the aftermath of something. (*interpretation*)
13. E: This is after something has happened and some kind of ending, yeah?

((tape edit))

14. P: Well, we are definitely drawn to some sort of action [...] whether it was before, during or after, but it is such a still piece, so its really so weird that we draw action from something so still. (*interpretation*)
15. E: OK, good, it's kind of ironic that something that seems so still is, has all of these ideas important about some kind of action.

((fade out))

### Analysis of Formalist Sequences

In the previous sequences, interpretations are based on what the students see, that is, art's formal characteristics. Significantly, no contextual or disciplinary information is provided. Following a relatively long period of describing, several students begin to argue for a definitive interpretation of Hesse's sculpture that is somber rather than trivial in nature. The museum educator remains impartial, indicating no preference for one interpretation or another, as students begin to associate the work not only with war, abandonment, and chaos, but hot dog rolls and swaddling blankets as well.

Implicit resistance to interpretations that are not 'serious' enough becomes apparent, however, when P breaks (2: 10) with the more tentative character of the talk and makes the exploratory hypothesis that the 'general theme is aftermath.' In tracing the development of this interpretation, we see that P is actually extending a previous utterance (1:1: 'It looks like it's the aftermath of the birth of something . . .'). This utterance is then picked up several turns later by J (1: 7), who connects the work to 'war, crime, and body bags' while ignoring a third student's more playful 'hot dog' comment (1: 5). The boldness of P's interpretation (2: 10: 'It has definitely happened after something') suggests a personal responsibility for her thinking, an investment in a meaning that nonetheless developed over several turns through peer comments about pea pods, cocoons, birth, and death. It is in this sense that Bakhtin's (1986) notion of addressivity, or the speaker's response orientation, is useful in understanding meaning making as a process.

### Sequence Analysis: Contextualist Data

The next CP session begins with the educator (E) announcing that she is going to try something; she is going to provide the students with three different kinds of information, and she is going to ask their opinion about

whether it makes a difference in how they see the piece. However, instead of providing information, she first asks the students what kinds of materials are typically used to make sculpture. The students respond with materials such as clay, wood, and metal. She then points out that this particular sculpture is made of fiberglass and that, according to the students' answers, it is 'an unusual material for a sculpture.' The educator then requests explanation (3: 1) about what makes a good work of art.

*Sequence 3*

1. E: And, when you think of what makes a good work of art, what are some of the criteria that you use? What makes a good work art? What's important? Yeah?
2. J: Well, like, it should catch the person's eye, like, it needs to be interesting.
3. E: It should be interesting. ((points to a student))
4. L: It needs to be, like, different from others.
5. E: It needs to be original, it needs to be new, different, right? OK, what else? What else is important in a work of art? (5.0)
6. E: It needs to say something, communicate something. It needs what? ((bends towards a student in the front row))
7. P: It needs to catch your eye.
8. E: It has to mean something. ((points to a student))
9. J: It needs to have a lot of different meanings.
10. E: Yeah, it could have a lot of different meanings, in fact, the best works of art have a lot of meanings, you all saw different things in this piece. ((reference to describing activity edited from tape)) Well, the reason I ask you that is because the first piece of information that I'm going to give you is about the artist's importance. Obviously if a work of art is in this museum, the artist was important. Her name was Eva Hesse, and she was important because she was one of the first artists to make art out of new materials like fiberglass, artists before that only used wood and metal and clay ((pointing to different students as she mentions the materials)) and all those things you said, and the other reason she was important is because she was one of the very first artists to make sculpture out of lots of different similar pieces ((gestures indicating many several pieces placed together)). If you think of a sculpture, right, ((moving her hands up and down)) it's usually a thing, and she made sculptures with all these

different pieces. So, this was one of her contributions to, uh, contemporary art and many other artists thought wow, this is really interesting, and this is really important, and she became very important. Now, does that piece of information make anybody feel differently or see something different in the piece? (3.0) Yes? No? (Several students shake their heads no, but no one answers.) Not very much.

As the students respond (3: 2–9), the educator *reformulates* their responses using art terminology. We see this in (3: 4–5) when the student's use of the word 'different' is reformulated with the more correct art term 'original' and again (3: 7–8) when the student says 'it needs to catch your eye', which the educator reformulates as, 'it needs to mean something.' Examining the follow-up move of reformulating *in sequence* makes apparent how the educator both extends or translates students' everyday knowledge using vocabulary from the disciplinary domain of art history and enculturates the students in the production of certain narratives or ways of talking about art. The educator signals the next student response (3: 9) 'it needs to have a lot of different meanings' as a good place to present the first piece of information.

First, however, the authority of the art museum, and hence the significance of the information she is about to provide, is asserted in the next sentence when the educator emphasizes the artist's importance by pointing out that the work would not be in the museum otherwise. She then confirms that the use of fiberglass, as a new and unusual material, is one reason that the artist is important, and she *connects* this to an earlier discussion ('artists before that only used wood and metal and clay and all those things you said'). The other reason that the artist is important, she explains, is because Hesse was the first artist to make a sculpture consisting of many similar pieces. The first piece of information, then, is that the artist is important because, in art history, she was one of the first to work with fiberglass and the first to make a sculpture consisting of many similar pieces. In other words, specific narratives in art history about the 'new' and the 'genius artist' explain the artist's importance. The educator then (3: 10) asked the students to *give an opinion* about whether the contextual information made them *feel* differently about the piece, and the students respond (by not responding or shaking their heads) that this piece of information did not make them feel differently.

In the next sequence, the educator provides biographical information about the artist Eva Hesse and tells the students about Hesse being born Jewish in Germany during World War II, escaping to Amsterdam when she was a child, and losing many family members in the Holocaust. The following sequence begins with the educator then *requesting explanation*.

*Sequence 4*

11. E: OK, now take a look at the piece. So, now we have a piece of information about the Holocaust and her early history of it. What are you thinking?
12. A: Well, it looks like dead bodies. (*interpretation*)
13. E: You're thinking what?
14. A: Like it's dead bodies.
15. E: Dead bodies.
16. A: Like, it's a little more depressing. (*interpretation*)
17. E: You're seeing it slightly more depressing. Does anybody else feel like that? Yeah, what were you going to say?
- [...]
18. E: Speak up just so I can hear you and the camera can pick you up.
19. K: [...] like it's not happy colors. (*interpretation*)
20. E: Not happy colors. Yeah. ((leans towards the student))
21. J: It looks like sort of like an opening wound. (*interpretation*)
22. E: An opening wound, there's something about that slit. Well, he was already saying paper-cut, but maybe it's the seriousness of the wound that is now changing it a bit.
23. V: Somebody put something inside that, you know, like...why is everybody, it's, it could be...
24. E: Uh-huh?
25. V: shells or...I don't know, it could be anything. (*interpretation*)
26. E: Ahh.
27. V: It doesn't have to be dead bodies, or dead people's fingers, or—
28. E: Oh, OK, so you're moving in a more positive direction, are you?
29. V: Yeah.
30. E: Ah-huh, interesting. Yes?
31. A: Well I definitely don't think it is positive, I don't feel like they are like pasta or like they are fingernails anymore. I think it's, like, depressing.
32. E: OK, my telling you that piece of information about the Holocaust kind of made the other stuff about pasta and fingernails seem a little trivial? ((A nods))

33. A: Yes.
34. E: And the piece seems more serious to you now? ((Anods)) Uh-huh, interesting.

### **Analysis of Contextualist Sequences**

After hearing about the Holocaust and tragic details of the artist's life, the students immediately respond with a myriad of appropriately gloomy associations ('dead bodies', 'bones', 'wounds', and 'depressing'). As discussed, this is a specific narrative in art theory that links an artist's biographical details to the meaning of a work of art. However, a student (4: 23) contests the grim nature of these interpretations in the utterance 'why is everybody, it's, it could be ( . . . ) anything.' I propose that this break in a pattern of consensus may be understood as resistance to the educator's somewhat leading use of narrative as 'mediational means.' At the same time, the dialogic function of narrative is also apparent in its contestation by the student.

The educator reformulates this utterance by attaching a value to the student's position and then requesting confirmation (4: 28: 'So you're moving in a more positive direction, are you?'). This follow-up move reifies interpretations of the work as 'serious' or 'not serious' and creates a polarizing effect, as another student argues against a meaning of the work as not serious (4: 31) with the following quick and bold response: 'Well I definitely don't think it is positive. . . . I think it's, like, depressing.' In the utterances that follow (4: 33–34), the student confirms her opinion that the information makes the work seem more serious.

## **DISCUSSION OF SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS**

### **Talk as a Tool**

In the formalist data, different interpretations emerge through a specific dialogical structure (IRF), and new meanings are constructed through the 'interanimation of voices' (Bakhtin, 1986). Narratives, in the sense of cohesive but seemingly inexhaustible explanations, develop in joint collaborative activity through associations, descriptions, analyses, and the process of clarifying and extending previous utterances. In this sense, the excerpts support Leinhardt and Knutson's (2004: 159) studies of museum conversations in which 'talking is a tool for socially constructed thought, not just evidence of it.' This corresponds with the aims of VTS, in which the development of critical thinking skills is valued more highly than art

historical information in student encounters with art. As an art museum education theory, this means that there is no correct meaning, and the interpretation of Hesse's work is thus owned as much by the students as it is by art history.

However, just as the educator does not provide students with art history information neither is there any mention of art historical knowledge by the students. In the quite controlled discursive structure that is VTS, the educator poses the question 'What do you see?' and not 'What do you know?' This sets the frame of the discourse as a multimodal composition. Without discursive space to take up the disciplinary domain of art history, students draw on everyday concepts and knowledge to construct meaningful narratives. In other words, although meanings emerge from students' responses rather than from information provided by the educator, there is nonetheless a narrative that is guiding meaning in the VTS approach—namely, a learning narrative that emphasizes critical thinking skills over disciplinary knowledge. In the same way, then, that narratives in art theory may discursively narrow the field of interpretive possibilities, so too may perspectives on unguided learning direct and frame interpretations through specific discursive structures.

In contrast to the formalist emphasis on supporting the students' own interpretations, guiding meaning is an explicit aim in the contextualist narrative, and Rice maintains that meaning should be directed based on 'interesting and worthwhile' information (Yeanwine & Rice, 1999). This presupposes a normative distinction between good associations, that is, meaning constructed through contextual information, and those made based on students' previous knowledge and what they see. Although the latter may be valued for contributing to 'a sense of confidence in their abilities to look carefully at an object', the former are valued more highly for 'also engaging in the external discourse of art history scholarship', as Rice explains in the CP video (Yenawine & Rice, 1999).

What does art history scholarship consider important about Eva Hesse and, in particular, her artwork *Tori* (1969)? Several books have been written about Hesse (Lippard, 1992; Sussman, 2002), in which we can read an art historical analysis of the artist and her work, Hesse's reception at the time in relation to her more 'successful' male artist colleagues, her contribution to the new trend of 'anti-form', and her overall production. In addition to her groundbreaking work with the fiberglass, Hesse's artistic interests are described as

repetition, forms in isolation, similar forms repeated, fixed and unfixed, hard and soft, her variations on formal themes, her desire to make sculptural elements absurd in themselves and in their multiplicity. . . . (Lippard, 1992: 132)

In the contextualist data, then, arguably the most worthwhile art historical information that the educator provides concerns Hesse's use of fiberglass—a new and 'undignified' material for sculpture and her use of multiples or serial forms (3: 10). In terms of Hesse's significance within art history, it is this contrast between explorations of geometrical order and forms using new and seemingly dissolving, 'anti-form' materials that has earned her a prominent place in minimalist art. Yet this piece of valuable disciplinary information, key to mastering the art historical narrative about Hesse's contribution to modern art's development, was not appropriated as particularly interesting or meaningful in the students' opinion. Moreover, it did not make them feel differently, another narrative in aesthetics to which the educator (intentionally or not) refers when linking affective response to meaning making.

The disturbing narrative about the artist's personal history that the educator chooses to tell the students as the next piece of information is fundamentally different in character. As mentioned, a significant part of any explanation by art historians will tend to focus on the artist as maker (Mansfield, 2002), and the biographical model that links artist to the structural and formal characteristics of a work is quite prevalent. In Lippard's (1992: 156) interpretation of *Tori*, for example, the artist's early and tragic death by brain cancer is featured: 'It is impossible not to read into these broken and barren forms-like seed-pods past their prime—the downward plunge of Hesse's life at this time.' In this sense, the use of biographical information in the data demonstrates not only the dialogic use of art history as a narrative but also the rhetorical character of art history as a discipline.

Finally, I note that students make striking similar *interpretations* in the two groups despite being 'guided' by contrasting practices. Specifically, several students in both groups associate the artwork with death (1:7 'body bags' and 3: 13: 'dead bodies'). Descriptions based on the work (the shapes resemble body bags) elicit interpretations akin to those based on contextual information (the artist escaped the Holocaust), and on the whole, rather gloomy interpretations prevail. Yet analysis of meaning as it unfolds reveals that, in the formalist sequence, a student argues for a serious interpretation of the artwork (aftermath) in dialogue with other student responses. In the contextualist data, a student argues against a serious meaning (dead bodies, depressing) in response to the educator's initiative. In this sense, it is possible to say that meaning as it unfolds in dialogue is quite different in the respective settings, although the content of the interpretations appears similar. By analyzing discourse in sequence, we see that the similarity lies not in interpretations of the work as serious but in the wish to be taken seriously as meaning makers. In analyzing meaning making as an unfolding

process in discourse and social interaction, it is possible to discern ‘Who owns the meaning’? In contemporary art theory, there is perhaps no more fundamental question.

## CONCLUSION

### On the Two Methods

As described in the introduction, a basic tenet in contemporary and modern art museums is that works are open to multiple interpretations. In this chapter, I have used two approaches to demonstrate how such interpretive processes are enacted, as compositions. In the coding analysis, *interpreting* activity was identified empirically in both the formalist and contextualist tours. In the second approach, using sequential analysis, *interpretation* was explored in terms of content and meaning making, that is, on the inside of composition.

The first method of coding and analyzing guided tour compositions provided me with information about ‘who is doing the cognitive work’, ‘which activities are favored as meaning making’, and ‘how these activities are supported’ in each of the tours. In addition to allowing comparisons across data sets, coding discourse structure called attention to certain phenomena, or *potential meaning*, for closer analysis. That the ‘formalist’ educator provides no disciplinary information, for example, suggests that students focus mainly on keeping the dialogic process going, relying on perceptions of the art object and everyday concepts to make meaning. Similarly, that the ‘contextualist’ educator does provide information suggests that student interpretations are rooted in art history. This is one way that coding discursive structure makes it possible to identify how philosophies of art enter into and become perpetuated in museum discourses and educational practices, as compositions.

In the sequential analysis, moving inside the compositions, I found that *multiple interpretations* of the artwork’s meaning were indeed made by students in both formalist and contextualist tours, and that some of these interpretations were in fact quite similar in content. Yet the sequential analysis also revealed an important aspect of the interpretation process that is not apparent in the coding analysis: the meaning making that happens in the negotiations, agreements, and disagreements inside interpreting activity. In the formalist tour, for example, students demonstrate a sense of ownership, or appropriation, toward interpretations that developed over many moves in a joint, collaborative process that links identity and knowledge construction.

Such exchanges were not as apparent in the contextualist tour data, where educators guided more forcefully the content of the interpretations. In fact, a student protests against the interpretations that emerge precisely because of a lack of ownership. Yet I would argue that such ‘disappropriation’ may *also* be understood as museum learning, as the student critically argues the conditions for her disagreement. In contemporary art, an important part of engaging critically with works is calling into question the conditions under which they may be considered ‘art.’ In this sense, these two approaches demonstrate a need to articulate, differentiate, and broaden the conditions under which meaning making in museums may be understood as learning.

### **Guiding and Making Meaning in Museums**

In this study, I aimed to identify the characteristics of what I have termed ‘formalist’ and ‘contextualist’ narratives in art museum guided tours and to explore how these enter into meaning-making processes. In the two ‘formalist’ guided tours, I found that the educators are mainly engaged in discourse that supports ongoing dialogue among the students about the artworks before them. Requesting explanation—and *requesting further explanation*—while continuously summarizing and reformulating student responses mediate this process. This approach means that students concentrate on clarifying and extending their own responses and that analyzing and describing artworks based on these responses is the foundation for the meaning-making process.

In the two ‘contextualist’ guided tours, there are similarities but also some important differences. The strategy of providing information clearly supports *interpreting* activity on the part of the students, by which I mean that students propose meanings that are guided by the educator. Accordingly, meaning making here is an interpretive process grounded in art historical information. The other contextualist educator also provides information, including many art terms, but uses more object-related talk, frequently requests students to explain, and reformulates and summarizes their responses. As in the formalist data, these moves engage students in more kinds of discursive activities.

Providing information while requesting that students explain and clarify their responses creates some striking contrasts. The finding is that formalist and contextualist education ideologies may actually be working at cross-purposes. First, in contrast to the aims of formalist approaches that emphasize object-related talk and perception, it appears that critical thinking skills may be better supported when disciplinary knowledge is

introduced. In the formalist approach, the educator consciously uses a specific discourse structure for the purpose of mediating students' critical thinking and supporting students' interpretations based directly on *object-related experience*. However, in examining the meaning-making process as it unfolds in sequence, I conclude that, although the students have a sense of owning the everyday or spontaneous (Vygotsky, 1986) meanings that emerge, these are in fact strictly guided by the discourse structure that effectively inhibits potential utterances containing disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, the introduction of disciplinary 'scientific' concepts through instruction is, in a Vygotskian perspective, considered essential to the development of meta-cognition, a characteristic of critical thinking. An alternative view on the significance of a formalist approach, then, is that this guided discourse supports the appropriation of the meaning as it is produced by the students and empowers them to form identities as meaning makers in museum institutions.

In the sequential analysis of contextualist discourse, I show that, although students make interpretations based on art historical information, the meanings that emerge are not necessarily considered their own. Although students may master norms of what counts as knowledge in art museums, meanings may be countered—or disappropriated—because of this lack of ownership. In this sense, although aiming to support the mastery of art historical narratives, contextualist approaches may work at cross-purposes when the student is not participating as a meaning maker. According to their respective normative educational aims, then, there is a sense in which each approach fails. At the same time, by moving inside compositions of museum discourse from a sociocultural perspective, we see how narratives of art and learning guide meaning in certain directions and also allow for and support other forms of knowing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank InterMedia, University of Oslo for supporting this research. I am grateful to Andrew Morrison and Sten Ludvigsen for their participation in the video analysis sessions and for their constructive comments on numerous drafts of this chapter. Dagny Stuedahl and Ingvill Rasmussen also provided useful comments in their review of an earlier draft of this chapter. Particular thanks are extended to the museum guides, teachers, and students who participated in this study, and to Victoria Lichtendorf, Curator, and Deborah Schwartz, Deputy Director of Education at Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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