

THE SCUTREA PEER REVIEWED E-JOURNAL

This space is to be given over to the new SCUTREA electronic peer reviewed journal. Discussions are still taking place about how this journal will be edited, but in the meantime we are opening the pages with a selection of papers from the Eighth International Conference on Adult Education and the Arts which took place at the National Gallery in London from 6th to 9th July, 2003. The title of the conference was *The Interpretative Palindrome*.

The conference theme addressed the idea of *interpretation*. It seemed to us that this idea works in two directions, hence the title. Firstly, there is the interpretation of works of art for those wishing to understand and appreciate the arts. This has long been seen as part of the role of the adult educator, but there are questions about whether or not the educator-as-interpreter somehow interferes with the direct experience of the work. As teachers, should we be putting ourselves between the work and the viewer? Are we interpreting or are we interposing ourselves? Are we trying to promote a particular view of the arts, a particular set of values? Should we be interpreting at all? Or is the role of the interpreter essential to achieving a proper appreciation and valuing of the arts?

Secondly we can address the ways in which the creative artist - student, amateur or professional - interprets their lived experience, their values and their cultural identity in the creation of a work of art. How important is it to develop a personal signature in the work? What role does the cultural context play in this interpretative exercise? What is the role of the teacher in this situation?

Thus, we have the teacher-as-interpreter standing somewhere between the work of art and its audience and the artist-as-interpreter standing somewhere between lived experience and the work of art; this is what we mean by the interpretative palindrome. Is it useful or redundant?

Papers were submitted by established academics as well as by research students. Those included here represent both the spread of research topics and the different ways in which presenters addressed the topic.

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Interpretation in Visual Art: Empirically Constructing Viewers' Aesthetic Responses.

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Introduction

The premise of this paper is about exploring the connection between interpretive practices and the aesthetic encounter, and how these two areas might interact in the learning environment of a university or museum. My understanding of the aesthetic encounter comes, in part, from the work of Csikszentmihalyi and his collaborative research with artists and museum professionals (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). Their research defined four dimensions of aesthetic experience—cognitive, communicative, perceptual and emotional—all of which are also components of the interpretive process.

Seeking something, as we do when we view art, whether physical, emotional, spiritual or intellectual, inspires us to search and find it. This is possibly the touchstone for both the aesthetic encounter and the interpretive process. In order to better grasp the essence of the word “interpretation” I applied Freud’s *free association technique* (Freud, 1925/1989: 24), to a dictionary’s definition of interpretation (Merriam-Webster, 1998). Deconstructing these definitions provides a structure and function for the interpretive process as an activity that provides explanation, clarity, is understandable, and is worthy of our trust.

Interpretation- explanation; an instance of artistic interpretation in performance or artistic adaptation

Explanation- to make level (lit); to make clear; to give the reason for

Clear- easily heard, seen or understood; to certify as trustworthy

Trustworthy- worthy of confidence; dependable

In the call for papers for the Eighth International Conference on Lifelong Learning and the Arts (Camic, 2003), on which this article is based, the conveners posed several motivating and challenging questions. These are important and quite difficult questions to answer. In some ways they challenge the foundation of arts education, art history education as well as the psychology of aesthetics. They also raise the issue of explanation, clarity, and trust as components of the interpretive process.

Conveners Questions

- As teachers should we be putting ourselves between the work and the audience?
- Are we interpreting or imposing ourselves?
- Are we trying to promote a particular view of the arts?
- Are we promoting a particular set of values?
- Should we be interpreting at all?
- Is the role of the interpreter essential to achieving a proper appreciation?
- What role does the cultural context play in this interpretive exercise?

These questions are particularly interesting to me because as an educator, working in a school of arts, media and communication, I assess and interpret the quality of students’ community arts

projects as well as their written papers. As a clinical psychologist I also struggle with what to interpret—or to interpret at all—in my work with student interns and patients.

Within this paper I will examine the interpretive process interdisciplinarily and experientially, using the work of Joseph Cornell, a non-representational artist, and a maker of *non-coalescent art* (Stafford, 2001). Looking at Joseph Cornell's three-dimensional box constructions or *assemblage* requires viewers to take mental journeys, involving the present and the past, both which pass through the domains of the unconscious and consciousness. His work cognitively and emotionally challenges the audience to construct a story about what they see. It is in the construction of each story (or interpretation) that we begin to appreciate the importance of non-representational art as an aesthetic tool to help us better understand the interpretive palindrome.

Unifying the image

Cornell's work is not linear, nor obvious, and requires the viewer to scan and scrutinize in order to make seemingly disparate parts become whole. There is a good deal of interplay between the symbolic and subsymbolic images seen in Cornell's work. This back-and-forth analogical interaction comes to affect the viewer's interpretation of the piece as he/she struggles to cognitively synthesize percepts, emotions, historical understanding, and vision into a unified image (Stafford, 2001:142).

The conveners' questions stimulated additional questions for me that relate to the structure of aesthetic experience—for both the student-artist in creating art—and for how the educator-as-audience interprets and responds to that work, as well as how the development of a personal aesthetic corresponds to interpretive practice.

Some additional questions

- What informs our interpretations?
- How do we construct an interpretation?
- Who holds privilege during the interpretive process?
- What are the conscious and unconscious motivations of the interpreter?
- Are there such a thing as 'interpretive validity' and 'interpretive reliability'?
- Is interpretation about textural closure?
- What happens to the student, audience, artist, and interpreter during the interpretive process?

When interpreting a student's work—or any artist for that matter—technical knowledge about the medium is certainly helpful, if not necessary. Interpretation however, is obviously not limited to the structure of the medium but is a culturally constructed process that is also a signifying practice (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000:263; Hall, 1980). According to Ruddock (2001:123), "The connection between signifier (artwork) and signified (viewer) is arbitrary, since it is a matter of cultural convention." The reality of the art is produced through the interaction with the viewer-interpreter. Its meaning depends on the position of the observer. To believe that visual art has only one possible interpretation is to say that there is a discernable truth to each work of art.

Yet very often, the key to believability and power of the interpreter lies in the ability to make the contestable signifier-signified relations seem limited to one truth. Interpretation then, involves conditioning the subjective side of human experience. The reality of an interpretation is produced through the interaction of the artwork (signifier) and the meaning associated with the work

(signified) by the educator-as-interpreter. The interpreter makes meaning from historical and aesthetic knowledge, personal preferences, and status of the artist.

I would argue, though, that both aesthetic knowledge, which can be highly subjective and is certainly culturally determined, and the personal preferences of the interpreter, could be quite different from those of the student. Finding a way to help a student articulate their aesthetic knowledge and think about their personal preferences—as part of the interpretive process—changes the role of the educator-interpreter from that of a positivist, stating a discernable artistic truth, to one of a constructivist that allows students to integrate their own personal truths and personal aesthetic into their work, and into understanding the work of other artists. What we see in any piece of visual art—its effects on us as viewers—depends on our position in history before the viewing begins.

In order to help empirically illustrate this process, readers are invited to access the Artchive web site, which has a vast collection of Cornell's work. Kindly go to the Artchive site at: http://www.artchive.com/artchive/ftptoc/cornell_ext.html and scroll to the three designated Cornell pieces cited below (The Hôtel Eden, Roses des Vents, and Grand Hôtel Semiramis). You may want to download and print these images now (there is no user fee for accessing this site). Printing them in advance will allow you to more easily participate in the following exercises, which empirically examines some of the issues raised above.

Untitled (The Hôtel Eden), 1945

First, have a look at this artwork located on the above-mentioned web page. Spend a few minutes looking at the piece. What do you see? What do you find yourself paying attention to? What thoughts are provoked and emotions stirred? How are the different elements in this piece related? What brings them together in a visually unifying way? Is this piece simply a construction of discarded objects that one might find in someone's garbage or in a second-hand shop, or is it something else?

Now imagine what the hypothetical "Interpretation Police" (made up by Sister Wendy, Sigmund Freud and Vladimir Lenin) might say? How might Sister Wendy's response be different than Freud or Lenin? How does one response gain privilege over another? Is one interpretation more correct than another? Now imagine a student-artist or a group of museum visitors struggling to understand this piece. What might they say about this work? If there is, arguably, no objectivity and final truth, all these interpretations become part of reality and, taken together, contain reliable, contextually constructed truths.

In order to expand our understanding of interpretive validity, we must place ourselves (the interpreters), the art (the object viewed and experienced) and, the viewer (art student or museum visitor) within a context. That context, or system, includes interpretative practices, all of which have boundaries limiting one's viewpoint. An interpretive system allows us to see some things and not others as we develop ideas, formulations and hunches about the art of our students as well as the art encountered by museum visitors.

It is more accurate, perhaps, to consider an interpretation to be a theory, made up of a progression of hypotheses, about a work of art. Constructing the interpretive process as theory building could allow university faculty and museum educators to invite students and visitors respectively, to

collaborate in forming hypotheses about the artwork they are either making or viewing. The act of interpretation could become more like an interactive and socially constructive pedagogical process, rather than the more prevalent interpretive positivism seen in many museum catalogues and galleries and university classrooms. The result also need not be continuous relativism, awash in constant possibilities, all seemingly of equal value. Creating a collaborative interpretive atmosphere also challenges privilege and power relationships, which are often overlooked in the interpretive process, and yet, need to be examined. A harsh and highly critical interpreter can do emotional and artistic damage, intentionally or not, to vulnerable students. Thinking about interpretive practice as a hypothesis generating activity, rather than the generation of truth, would likely change the role of the interpreter-as-expert to one of interpreter-as-facilitator.

A brief background on Joseph Cornell

Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) is an American artist most celebrated for his three-dimensional box constructions (Hartigan, Vine & Lehrman, 2003). While Cornell is likely better known in North America, he is also well represented in European collections. Although Cornell was certainly not the first artist to create three-dimensional collage or *assemblage*, he was the first artist to work nearly exclusively in this method. He personally rejected the labels of Surrealist artist and preferred to think of himself as a designer of images or a found-object sculptor, citing Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* as an influence when he reflected upon his work.

Making use of objects found in New York alleys and bought in secondhand shops, as well as printed material from newspapers, magazines, books and letters, Cornell created *dossiers* crammed with materials in preparation for creating box constructions. By presenting disparate images and objects simultaneously, his three-dimensional constructions challenge the viewer to actively link conscious and unconscious, known and unknown, obvious and uncertain in the explicit environment of a box. The box and its contents become an analogy for many of the structures, functions and concerns of psychoanalytic theory and clinical work. Viewing a Cornell box as a gestalt supplies material equivalence to match the qualitative felt-sense of an inner state, thus acting as a kind of Rorschach experience providing both psychoanalytic and neuronal aesthetic information ("neuronal" in this sense corresponds to sensory cells not merely copying external physical reality but reacting to a specific stimulus by slightly altering its physiological constitution).

In order to more fully appreciate the interpretive palindrome, it is important to consider what may occur socially and psychologically when we view, interpret and create art, and particularly when we critique the creative process of students. In looking at this next Cornell piece consider the following questions: What informs our understanding of the work? What are we drawing upon to construct this interpretation? If this were a student's work from your class, what would you want to ask the student about their work?

Object (Roses des Vênt), 1953

The Interpretation Police are quite vocal about this piece, and as with any interpretive loudmouths, it is a bit difficult not to be influenced by their comments:

Sister Wendy: "That looks like a well composed, balanced conceptual piece."

Lenin: “No! It is capitalist materialism!”

Freud: “It is a representation of the superego lacunae of a man suppressing his aggressive urges”.

On Viewing Art

Information Processing and Cognitive Perspectives

According to Stafford (2001) there is likely to be a counterbalancing of emotional responses and cognitive meanings associated with the art. This seems true for both the educator and lifelong learner. The viewer might empathize with aspects of the artwork, but the viewer is also responding to his or her own personal experiences related to the present content. We both identify experientially with the various stages and aspects of suggested action, but we also react to what we perceive with joy, anger, boredom, disgust, amusement and so on. Yet inhibition, perhaps more than any other response, seems to be an integral aspect of experiencing art, at least in Western societies. According to Kreitler & Kreitler (1972:16-22), apparent detachment, when viewing art, is a side effect of “an intense multileveled personal involvement.”

The intensification of internal (cognitive and emotional) experience, and an ability to concentrate on the work of art as an end in and of itself, is claimed to be a complementary positive effect of distance. The inhibitory response to art may have neuronal correlates within the brain but it is most certainly culturally learned. Students in our classrooms, as well as museum goers, have been conditioned not to get giddy over art. It is almost like church. No smiles, talking only in hushed tones and no rushing about with enthusiasm. What would happen, do you think, if upon a visit to the Tate or Louvre one came across a Titian and gasped with aesthetic ecstasy? Or a lively debate broke out over the merits of Jackson Pollock’s use of texture? Or, if in the studio or classroom, students actively challenged the educator’s interpretation? Frowns of disapproval? Removal from the premises? The impossibility of an honours degree?

According to evolutionary theory, human organisms actively shape their environment by correlating an exterior to an interior architecture over time. Stated another way, the inside and outside “fit” is the result of a selective evolution that weeds out those things that do not mesh with an individual neuronal landscape. Visual arts, it can be argued, produce concrete images exhibiting how the visual system in the brain individually maps the changing internal and external scene. Fireworks, in the way of neuronal firings, are set off across the brain when it is excited by a stimulus. These neuronal firings are physiologically and culturally mediated and may provide us with some insights into the enormous array of human aesthetic responses to visual stimuli—and by association—to the interpretive process.

Using evolutionary and information processing theories as guides, one may wonder what neuronal balancing act occurred for Cornell in creating the following piece, as well as our own neuronal firings as we try to understand it. What is your response to a white wire grid, contained in a box, partially framing a parrot’s perch? What does the white marble mean to you?

Grand Hôtel Semiramis, 1950

Once again, the Interpretation Police do not fail in giving their sharp and succinct viewpoints:

Freud: “Domesticity is seen as a repressive experience.”

Lenin: “It is a monument to the proletariat!”

Sister Wendy: “This is nonrepresentational art.”

Information processing theory however, is not compelling when it comes to explaining the evaluation, or meaning-making, that occurs from such input. There is a complex interplay between knowledge, intuition, will, discrimination, and memory in humans—all of which is part of the interpretive process (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). When we interpret visual art—particularly in an educational venue—I would urge that we should actively engage students in linking all of these factors. The action of linking also has an emotional component, which fits our individual desires to an ever-expanding universe of events in which self and others are transformed. Yet rarely, I suspect, are emotions taken into consideration when explaining the linkages present in the interpretive process.

Psychoanalytic perspectives

Sigmund Freud, as many of us know, was interested in examining the emotional life of artists. He looked at artistic creativity as a sublimation of a drive, specifically that of the libido. He became famous, or infamous if you prefer, for his interpretive monographs of Michelangelo and Da Vinci among others. He used art to gain entry into the unconscious of the artist and saw art, not as a creative endeavor springing from health, but as a tool for controlling and harnessing unconscious urges and desires into socially acceptable means (Freud, 1925/1958). A classical Freudian interpretation might look at all art as a way for the return of repressed memories to be camouflaged through projections, seen here as an act of interpretation. According to this theory, art is made morally palatable through various socially acceptable “art devices” which promote sublimation of unconscious drives emanating from the Id. It is not only making art, but also interpreting art, that are acts of sublimation. The interpreter is allowed to remain a good boy or a good girl as the case may be, while enjoying hidden pleasures. There is generally no social disapproval or guilt.

Carl Jung, while interested in the unconscious like Freud, was also curious to discover the cognitive function of unconscious themes. According to Jung unconscious contents are terrifying only when they burst into consciousness from an internal “quasi-primordial state”. In art he postulated, these themes occur in a translated form elaborated into symbols. These symbols fit the unconscious values and experiential needs of a specific culture or society. For Jung, without significant knowledge of or engagement with a particular culture, interpreting its art was impossible. Perhaps this can help us encourage students to consider the historical context in which art is interpreted, as well as when it was created.

Concluding Comments

This brief paper, using Joseph Cornell’s non-representational art as a conduit, seeks to consider how university and museum educators might use social constructivism as a way to engage art students and museum-goers to think about their aesthetic responses during the interpretive process. Seen from this perspective, thinking about art becomes a form of hypothesis generation that leads to theory(ies) about the artwork, rather than a sole interpretive truth. To perceive the possibility of linking parts to form a whole, when viewing disparate elements, is to realize one aspect underlying a visually-based social constructionism. The artist, in making visual art, produces concrete images exhibiting how the visual system in the brain maps the changing internal and external environment (Stafford, 2001). Likewise, the viewer or spectator of visual art also makes use of complex cognitive, emotional, neuronal, and historical information to bring clarity and understanding to the artwork. When the brain is excited by a stimulus, as it is when viewing assemblage, a complex and nonlinear array of neuronal activity occurs. This neuronal

activity, which is both historically and socially influenced, is triggered by an intricate interplay of knowledge, intuition, discrimination, memory and familiarity.

Students in art history, studio and museum studies courses, as well as museum visitors, may benefit from a collaborative approach to interpretation when attempting to understand either their own creative process or those of an artist. One approach in understanding this complex interplay is to examine the spectators' interpretation of assemblage art. Assemblage, as an art form, often requires the spectator to link several forms of representation, and subsequently provide information about the complexity of cooperation between what is conscious and what is unconscious. This coupling or linking of the visual (external) with the internal has emotional and cognitive, as well as aesthetic components.

The aesthetic experience is not a single, universal reaction (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990) such as sneezing after sniffing spicy curry powder. There are no pure aesthetic experiences when considering different spectators' responses to art. All responses to art are historically grounded, inseparable from ideologies and social values. Most events in consciousness, including our response to visual art, are built from culturally defined contents as well as from personal meanings developed throughout an individual's life. Better appreciating and understanding these factors can lead university and museum educators to think about the interpretive process as a socially constructed and contextually determined experience. Thought of this way, the possibility of enhancing a student's appreciation and knowledge of art increases.

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Reading Digital Technologies, the Arts and Lifelong Learning

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Summary

Digital technologies are challenging the ways in which we read, write and interpret the world. This paper explores the student experience of working creatively with digital technology as part of their undergraduate degree programme, and draws out some of the pedagogical and theoretical issues involved.

The Interpretative Palindrome

New art forms demand new interpretative practices. As the pen was superseded by the printing press so new theories of interpretation arose in response to the arrival of the printed word and mass distribution. (Jay David Bolter, 1991 and 2001), (George P. Landow, 1997). If the arrival of cinema challenged our understanding of the arts of theatre, so television made us re-assess cinema and how we interpreted the then 'new media' transmitted directly into our homes. (Martin Lister, 2003). Similarly, the painted image has been driven by the changes in technology leading to a remediation of texts. (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 2002). If literature and the arts are ways of perceiving and commenting on the human experience of living in the 'real' world, then we need to take account of significant changes in technology that encourage artists to engage with the new art forms. These too need interpretation. It seems to me that for some time now digital technology has been driving change in artistic form and in interpretative practices in literature and the arts. Drawing on my own research and my experience of teaching mature students to work creatively with the new technologies this paper examines the ways in which digital technology challenges the interpretative palindrome.

Context and educational philosophy

Literature, the Arts and the World Wide Web is a level two 20 credit core module, of the English Studies and Performing Arts degree track (ESPA) of a BA/BSC Combined Studies degree programme offered by The Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of Sheffield. Designed in 1998, the degree explores the relationship between English Literature and the performing arts of theatre, cinema, music and the new media. It is one of two core modules at the centre of the ESPA track (the other being critical theory) because it seemed to me essential that a new degree should engage critically, creatively and theoretically with the structures of the new media. If critical theory was the *enfant terrible* of the 1980's, then digitisation and the prolific growth of the new technologies in the 1990's is destined to be the next phenomenon that will require the attention of the Academy. Given the relationship of the new technologies to employability for graduates, it was appropriate certainly for the module to become part of the Combined Studies ethos. However, the inclusion of this module at level two, plus its successor module at level three, *Postmodernism, Policy and Practice*, is more than a nod to the skills-based directions of current Government education aspirations. (White Paper, January 2003). Rather, it is a recognition that what is happening in literature for the reading public and in the performing arts in music, cinema and theatre is happening now, and it is time for the Academy to wake up and come to terms with the phenomenon. Digitisation - the new media - the interactive form of the Web are challenging the traditional structures of hierarchy and perceived norms of reality and are already integrated into the arts. Artists such as the Wooster Group in America and the theatre of Guy Cassiers in the Netherlands are very creative in their use of the new media within live performances, and they are producing a new kind of theatrical space and synthesis between the art forms. In digital format, music no longer needs the 'original' musical instrument or musical notation: it exists in a computer programme. Television, with its

increasingly digital format allows a level of interactivity between the viewers and the viewed that blur the boundaries between what were previously clear and separate activities. To borrow a term 'the live and the mediated' (Auslander, 1991) are impacting on each other.

Literature, the Arts and the WWW examines how the new technologies might be producing change in the processes of reading and writing, and a cursory glance on the web reveals that literature now exists outside the covers of the book. On the web literature becomes a scroll text once more, but unlike its historical antecedent we view the scroll through a screen and have incorporated sounds and images in the new form. Literature in cyberspace is a synthesis of many art forms and therefore it needs new interdisciplinary interpretative strategies. As the ESPA degree is an interdisciplinary investigation into the relationship between the art forms so it seemed appropriate to include an analysis of the interdisciplinary nature of the new media as core to the degree track. Innovative it may or may not be, but it is in one small way a challenge to the traditions of the English Academy, which retains largely its separation of the disciplines in its HE provision. Those of us familiar with the traditions of education in the Lifelong Learning sector know that we have often been in the forefront of educational change in modes of learning. I hope that the ESPA degree and this module in particular will play a small part in leading the way into new pathways of academic study, through a combination of practice and theory and interdisciplinary study.

Module aims and learning outcomes

The module aims to:

- explore the uses of the new technology in literature and the arts;
- to examine changes in the processes involved in reading and writing texts arising from the use of ICT;
- to examine the new technologies within the critical and theoretical framework of the degree.

By the end of the course students will be able to:

- apply knowledge of the new technology to more than one artistic area;
- to demonstrate their understanding of reading and writing in an interactive format;
- discuss critically the new technology within the theoretical framework of the degree.

The module has three central areas for investigation.

Analysis of literature and the arts on the www

Working creatively with the media: student multimedia project

Critical discussion of theoretical issues

Analysis of Literature and the arts on the www

The students were given guided explorations of what the web had to offer generally and, in particular, in *Hyperfiction*. Reading hyperfiction on the www raised the question of whether the web tells stories in a different way and how to interpret hyperfiction. The students learned very quickly to transfer their skills in semiotics to the I.C.T. screen and added to their own critical vocabulary the language of the web. They learned that one notable difference in the narrative construction of hyperfiction is the addition of sound and image to the written text and that hyperfiction: reveals itself a screen at a time, with hidden texts behind. They learned to make choices as to which way to go and, through the click of the mouse, which pathway of the story to explore. Typically, a hyperfiction text offers many routes and many stories and the choice initially appears to be at the command of the user. Their investigation appeared to reveal that the author was indeed dead and that they had control over the interpretation the narrative. However, more detailed analysis revealed that they were often confined by the technical construction of the site and that the hyperfiction author constructed the site in such a way that semiotic indicators tended to trigger specific cultural responses from the reader. Thus, the students learned that their control over the text was less free

that it initially appeared. They discovered that many of the texts are open ended and resisted closure, and that hyperfiction tended towards the poetic through the inclusion of image and music/sounds to the words.

I suggest that it is through reader-recognition of the technical and the poetic working together in hypertext that forms a fascinating new kind of fiction. It is the meeting of the human mind with the technology that leads to a new appreciation of the word / image / sound relationship, and thus to a new kind of reading. Most of the students were very able and happy to interpret hyperfiction on the web and their first assignment demonstrated that they could and did interpret the new form of writing extremely well.

The Multimedia Project: 50% (Project 30%. Evaluation of project 20%)

The atmosphere of the course changed radically once the workshops for the multimedia project began. The multimedia project was to assess the student's ability to use the software *Dreamweaver* and to demonstrate their creativity. They were to write an 'off-line' story; use appropriate illustration; use appropriate sounds; record the whole on to a compact disc. For the evaluation of the project students were asked to reflect on the process of the multimedia project; on their perceived strengths and weaknesses; the creative and editorial decisions they made and the reasons for those decisions. It was notable that almost all the multimedia projects drew on the student's own life experience which then became active in the new media format. In the process of doing the project they interacted with the technology to interpret their lives as a new narrative. They created a piece of hyperfiction to which the reader had to interact in order to interpret. As our interpretation joined with their hyperfiction we created a new narrative.



Digital image by kind permission of Jo Goodison

Theoretical issues. 30% (Formal Examination)

The final section of the course discussed the theoretical issues that the course raised and engaged with some of the theorists writing in the field. The examination was in two sections: prepared questions that related to the theoretical issues discussed on the course; and an unseen extract from a theoretical piece of writing, which was analysed by the student in the light of the work done on the course. Despite the looming formal examination process this was a most enjoyable part of the course:

Jo I think it was good to actually have some time to think about it - I mean that was the thing
Adrian The course work was handed in we could actually sit and talk and think...

The student interpretation of the learning experience

After the end of the course a group of students (7 from a class of 11) came to talk about their experiences. This meeting served as a research vehicle and was also an opportunity for the students to express openly any dissatisfaction. A questionnaire completed before the general discussion began revealed that the

software package *Dreamweaver* was unfamiliar to the majority of the students before the course and most of them found it very difficult to use. However, interestingly, 4 of the 7 would, in varying degrees, recommend a friend to use it to design a project. *Photoshop*, the second software package was seen as more user friendly. The questionnaire revealed that the multimedia project did lead to changes in student interpretation of their perspectives about reading on the web, and to how they thought about the relationship of words, to images and sounds. However, in the discussion the students immediately focussed on the problems that they had experienced with working with *Dreamweaver*:

Jackie I feel almost as though I was a technophobe. It became problematic in that barriers were built up and I think that was because it just wasn't 'hands-on' enough in the early stages. That created a big problem later on when we were actually doing the project, and I hadn't the confidence, if I am honest, to come in extra during the day... With other courses that I have done I had the confidence to come in during my own time and practice, but there was no way that I could have done that here because I wouldn't have known what to do without a member of staff there. So I couldn't come in and practice.

Lisa Even the basics were hard to grasp, and that was just finding the web site that you had already started and things like that - it was just - we got so far behind.

Interviewer Didn't you get any practical input at all in the second half of that first semester?

PAUSE

Jo Not that I can remember, so that's how memorable it was.

Interviewer Right... But Tutor B did do sessions with you on *Dreamweaver*?

Jo But if he did then I can't remember them.

Jackie They were more like lectures, if we are really, really blunt. It was like a lecture, and you can't learn a practical subject in that way, frantically taking notes and barely any time to play and have a go. You can take notes but you can't see the screen.

Ann So you need printouts for everything you have gone through. He'll say to you "Go away and practice what we've just done", and you can't because you've just forgotten it - haven't you? - He didn't give us a print out each session, but I think that we needed that.

The pedagogic issues this reveals are not just the possibility that the tutor may have been using an inappropriate teaching method. The student's perception of their lack of expertise with the software led to frustration as a gap appeared between what they wanted to do creatively and the actuality of working with the new media. What we can see is the underlying panic of students who felt out of their depth and at odds with the learning environment. 'Doing the Project' became an enormous mountain to climb. Another important issue was the placing of the project within a degree course. The students did not see the project as an opportunity to explore their creativity, but rather, some of them thought of the impact on their degree classifications:

Jackie You do what you know - what you are familiar with - yes, it's nice to explore new ground - but when you want good grades you do what you are comfortable with ...

Andy Exactly

Adrian Play to your strengths, yes

Jackie Where you know where you are going to succeed at, and do well at, and so you - well I do

Jo Once you've got the formula that gets you the grades you try and stick with that.

Students did not realise fully that the written evaluation of the project was the opportunity to reflect on the problems of working creatively in the new media. Although they felt justified in thinking that they had been let down by Tutor B in his teaching, they worried also that criticism of tutor B in their evaluation might lead to a negative impact on their grades.

Interviewer Did you feel that the evaluation of the problems was useful?

Jackie It was quite difficult. I tried to be very frank and honest in my evaluation of the work that I had done, how successful I thought bits were - what I wanted to do - that I didn't really achieve as much - but the problem was how to do that and not 'moan and groan'? and how to say I didn't think it worked out as well as it could have perhaps - without being a 'moaning minny' in a piece of my work - to be marked - so I tried very hard to steer clear of that and focus on what I had done - these are the facts and that worked and that didn't - rather than say what I really thought.

Interviewer And you felt that you couldn't say that in your evaluation?

Jackie I didn't want that person that I was slating ... you know... this was a task that I had been given to do - get on with it - but - I can now, in this situation.

We see here the sharp divide between intrinsic and extrinsic learning and this is regrettable but perhaps an inevitable part of the process of integrating the mature part-time learner into a degree structure. Some students did see the evaluation of the project as part and parcel of the creative process and they linked their self-evaluation to other parts of their degree work. However, what emerges also is that underlying the concern for a good grade is the student desire to be told what to do. There is an assumption by the student that if they present for assessment what they think the tutor wants then they will achieve the desired grade. Implicit within this is a desire to return to the 'teacher as interpreter' model. It seems that the creative nature of the multimedia project became a freedom that was unfamiliar and therefore frightening. Freedom to be creative in interpretation and in working creatively may become a problem because freedom forces us back on ourselves. However, I would argue that this one of the strengths of the module because it encourages not only creativity but also a key graduate skill.

The solo experience of working creatively in the new media.

What was not anticipated and which the students did not immediately recognise was that working with the technology became a very lonely experience. This, linked to the open structure of the project created an alien learning experience. It transpired that their problems were not just their inexperience with the software but the actual experience of the human mind meeting hard technology. To a greater or lesser degree all students experienced it. To some it was liberating and to others it was frightening, but to all it was essentially different from the 'norm' of the informal seminar style lesson they are used to in the Institute for Lifelong Learning.

Adrian It's been an unusual course for me because I went off and did my own thing. When you are doing something like building a web site, unless you are doing it as a team effort, it is always going to be a solo thing - it's your creativity, your ideas, your implementation, your coding - from start to finish - you have 100% control over that - and that is what we all had. It's interesting because a lot of the technology-based modules do have that solo impetus. The music module was the same - the creative writing on the web was the same - you are on your own - you do your own thing.

Interviewer So, are we saying that the technology is, in some way, re-enforcing the idea of the solo artist - the artist in the garret writing his own novel - driven by what he wants to say - in his or her own way. At the end of the day you took your decisions

Adrian mmm yes, that was nice.

Interviewer But isn't this quite revolutionary in terms of teaching in our department?

Andy It can be quite disempowering as well. I think that many people learn in a collective experience, through exchanging ideas and I think that it was quite disempowering to think that you may have total power / autonomy, but its just you

Lisa It's a lonely experience isn't it?

Andy It is yes.

Lisa We never got a chance to talk to one another

Jo It was a very selfish course

Andy And as you said that's the potential of the web to do that - you and the screen - the world might be out there but it's just you and the screen - I think that it's very difficult to just to stop and talk to someone

Interviewer So for something that's meant to have been designed as the great communicator

Lisa It's the opposite.

New Media: alienating, disempowering, lonely, selfish?

These last comments bring us to the theoretical issues that the module poses. A common strand in the student's discussion was a feeling of alienation and fascination as they worked with the technology. It was as if the new media had become part of their minds, or to use the famous phrase of Marshall McLuhan 'an extension of the mind' (McLuhan, 1967). Although some of them had actively disliked the module it had forced them to question how the new media was impacting on them, and by extension on everyone else in society. McLuhan - a key theorist on the course analysed analogue culture, but his ideas about media manipulation in the 1960's are being applied to digital media today. His ideas are often contested but as (Lister p79) points out:

McLuhan's absolute insistence on the irrelevance of content to understanding media needs to be seen as a strategy. He adopts it order to focus his readers upon:

1. The power of media technologies to structure social arrangements and relationships
2. The mediating aesthetic properties of a media technology. They mediate our relations to one another and to the world. (electronic broadcasting as against one-to-one oral communication or point-to-point telegraphic communication for instance). Aesthetically, because they claim our senses in different ways, the multidirectional simultaneity of sound as against the exclusively focussed attention of a 'line' of sight, the fixed, segmenting linearity of printed language, the high resolution of film, the low resolution of television.

Clearly this is only a small group of students and the research has to be seen for what it is. However, the student experience does point to their awareness that working with the new technology had impacted on the structure of their social arrangements within the classroom. They also give both positive and negative indications that working with the technology gave them a different sense awareness of time and space that could be quite significant. The general question that is has raised is whether their experiences are part of a wider trend. Has the rapid increase of digitisation meant a very real shift in the structure of our social arrangements and our ways of perceiving the world? If this is the case then what are the critical tools that we can use to begin to come to some theoretical understanding of the shift? This small project was not designed to find the answer to such large questions but I will conclude with the suggestion that the answers cannot lie in the province of one academic discipline alone. The phenomenon is not local but global. It underpins all academic disciplines and all areas of our lives from the commercial (computer banking) the medical (digital implants) to the social (data banks controls over our identity) and the arts (new representations of reality). Therefore, perhaps we should look to the arts to interpret the phenomenon through the metaphor of the stage. In her latest piece of music theatre Pina Bausch put the human figure on a stage and surrounded it with giant screens full of manipulated moving images, thus foregrounding the scale of the problem. According to Bausch we remain, like the bits and bites, separated and very small elements connected to a giant network where no one person knows how to interpret the whole yet fragmented picture. Should this worry us?

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Interpretation Impossible: Some problems in interpreting in the arts.

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Introduction

This paper begins with an exploration of what we mean by the term interpret in the context of the arts and asks whether such an exercise is possible. It suggests that there are problems with trying to interpret works of art and goes on to suggest what curators and teachers could do to help adults to appreciate and enjoy works of art more fully.

Problems of Interpretation

When, at school, I learned to interpret texts in a foreign language. I learned the vocabulary and the grammar and applied this knowledge to the text in question to arrive at an English equivalent.

Nowadays, when I speak to professional interpreters, they tell me that they are not really concerned with words and grammar but with conveying meaning. They don't try to find an exact equivalent for the words but rather paraphrase to convey the meaning of the original text. This is why professionals usually only translate into their first language. Note how easily I slide into using the word *translate* instead of *interpret*.

Interpretation then, is something more than translation. It involves conveying meaning rather than finding a verbal equivalent of the original text. In terms of semiotics (Barthes: 1972) we are not so concerned with the signifier as with the signified. Interpretation involves not only conveying meaning, but also trying to convey all the culturally loaded nuances of language as well as the style of the original author.

How, then, can we apply this process to other art forms. In Drama, it's a question of representing the words and action of the original to convey the meanings intended by the author. There is no single way to produce a play. Any dramatic text will be interpreted differently by different directors.

In a sense, the national language in which the original play was written becomes less important when a play is staged. Meaning is conveyed as much by action as by words. It is the visual aspects of the production which first engage the audience. In producing a play, the director is translating the text into a visual medium. The director is interpreting the author's meaning into a different medium of expression. The same thing happens the other way round when a curator or a teacher tries to interpret a painting. It is an attempt to convey the meaning of a painting in a different medium.

So far we have looked at two different usages of the term, *interpret*. We have talked about interpreting a text from one national language into another and of interpreting a text from one medium into another.

I use the term *national* language here because it strikes me that it is also possible to interpret one type of language into another; to interpret the language of poetry into the language of prose. We can attempt to interpret the meaning of a poem in ordinary everyday language. This is what the teacher of English Literature does. This is a third type of interpretation.

For me, the most problematic area in all this is the second form of interpretation; that which involves translating from one medium to another. Interpreting from one national language to another, or interpreting poetry, both deal in the same currency, the currency of words. Interpreting from one medium into another brings with it a whole set of new problems. Indeed, it is worth exploring just what we mean when we talk about interpreting paintings for example.

It is possible to argue, for example, that the experience of a painting, like the experience of music, cannot be replicated in an alternative medium like language. Words, quite simply, do not have the capacity to evoke the same responses in us. We are moving into the affective area here. We are concerned with the ability of a work of art, in any medium, to engage with our emotions, and whether it is possible to translate that artwork into another medium, say, the medium of language, so that it evokes the same emotional response.

In his 2003 Reith Lecture, 'Phantoms in the Brain', V. S. Ramachandran (2003a) describes the processes involved in the act of seeing.

.....you have to first realise that vision is not a simple process. When you open your eyes in the morning, it's all out there in front of you. It's easy to assume that it's effortless and instantaneous but in fact you have this distorted upside down image in your retina exciting the photoreceptors and the messages then go through the optic nerve to the brain and then they are analysed in thirty different visual areas, in the back of your brain. And then you finally after analysing all the individual features, you identify what you're looking at.

Language operates differently, is processed in different areas of the brain and relates to our emotions differently.

So once the image is recognised, then the message goes to a structure called the amygdala which is sometimes called the gateway to the limbic system which is the emotional core of your brain, which allows you to gauge the emotional significance of what you are looking at.

It appears that it is not physiologically possible to evoke the same responses, to convey meaning in the same way using a different medium. Ramachandran explains further the complexities of vision

We primates are highly visual creatures and it turns out that we have not just one visual area, the visual cortex, but thirty areas in the back of our brains which enable us to see, perceive the world. It's not clear why we need so many, why do you need thirty areas, not just one area? But perhaps each of these areas is specialised for a different aspect of vision. For example, one area called V4 seems to be concerned with processing colour information, seeing colours, whereas another area in the parietal lobe called MT or the middle temporal area is concerned mainly with seeing motion.

When one responds to a visual stimulus one is using different neural pathways from those used in responding to language. This, in itself, presents problems but in addition to these difficulties there are also problems concerned with cultural context.

There is evidence that perception is culturally determined (Jones: 1988). The way in which we perceive the world is determined by the physical and cultural context in which we learned to perceive. It cannot be assumed that all our students perceive a work of art in the same way we do. Indeed, it is sometimes the case that a teacher becomes aware that students are simply not seeing the visual phenomena which are being pointed out; they do not see the composition or the subtleties of the colour relationships.

The ways in which we define the arts are also culturally determined. What is included in the concept of the arts in one country can be different from what is included in another country. What is included in our concept of the arts in one historical period is different from what is included in another period.

Values in the arts are also culturally determined. What is considered good at one time in a particular cultural context will differ from what is considered to be good at another time or in another cultural context.

All these factors inhibit or hinder our ability to interpret works of art. We cannot assume that students will share our definitions, our perceptions or our value base. It is possible for them to hold to an equally valid but different definition of the arts, to have a different way of perceiving, and hold to a different value system. So how is it possible to convey the experience of a work of art to a person from a different cultural background and using a different medium of expression? The difficulties in this enterprise are becoming clear.

What are we doing then when we discuss works of art with our students or interested visitors to a gallery? I often undertake a short exercise with my students. I present them with three works of art from three different cultural contexts and ask them to write about them. They are unfamiliar works. They are not allowed to confer. We then categorise the statements they have made.

Some of what is written is pure speculation. They speculate on the country of origin, the artist, the subject matter and the date of the painting. They speculate about the subject matter. There is little or no supporting evidence so these statements remain at the level of speculation. Of course, if they do know the work, they may be able to offer verifiable contextual information. They may genuinely know who painted it and when, which country it came from and even its title.

Other comments are descriptive. They write about what they see. They might describe the subject matter, the colour, the composition, the treatment of the paint or some other aspect of the work. But one has to remember that what they perceive in the work is conditioned by the nature their culturally determined perceptual processes.

They also offer value laden opinions about the quality of the work. These are extremely subjective views about its worth. They may be expressed objectively, 'this is a good painting' but, when pressed to justify the statement, it becomes clear that they simply mean 'I like it'.

They also, sometimes talk about their own emotion response to the work. 'This makes me feel sad' or 'this is a happy painting', or 'calm' or 'angry'. They are telling us how *they* react to the painting, though it is sometimes expressed as a quality of the painting.

So the sort of things we say about works of art concern contextual information, speculation, description, personal reactions and the making of value judgements. This is not interpretation. I want to go on to discuss what we can do to make the arts more accessible to people.

An Educational Approach

So what can we do to help students and gallery visitors to better appreciate a work of art, to see the work and respond to it? Well, we could adopt a classic pedagogical approach and ask what learning outcomes are we hoping to achieve?

It seems to me that there are three areas where one might help a student to develop.

- The development of an enquiring and open attitude.
- The development of perception.
- The acquisition of relevant knowledge.

Attitude

It is usually agreed by people involved in the arts that one of the greatest difficulties in helping students or gallery visitors to understand a work of art is their presuppositions and prejudices. They do not give the work a chance. If it does not conform to their preconceptions about what constitutes 'ART', they dismiss it. As teachers, one of the things we can do is to try to develop that innocent eye; try to get them to look at the work in an open accepting way. This is no mean task. It often involves persuading them to dump a lifetime's cultural indoctrination. It means persuading them to accept that art is dynamic, it changes and that it is important not to reject the strange or the new, simply because it is strange and new. In classic pedagogical terms this is a learning outcome in the affective domain.

Perception

The next way in which we can help students is by teaching them to see what is there. In everyday life we perceive minimally; we see as little as we need to see in order to survive. We make sense of the image on the retina in ways which are determined by the context in which we learned to perceive. In order to fully appreciate a work of art we need to move beyond these culturally determined ways of seeing. The audience for the arts must become more visually aware; they must operate on a higher level of perceptual acuity.

Perception is a learned skill – well, about 90% learned according to Ramachandran (2003c) – and is therefore susceptible to further training to improve it. It is possible to learn to perceive the world better, to be more perceptive, and part of the teacher's role is to encourage this. Classically drawing and colour exercises are used to make people look harder but other methods may be developed. In terms of classic pedagogy, this learning outcome might be considered as a psychomotor skill, but I am not happy putting it in the same category as learning how to ride a bicycle. It does not fit easily into any of the three pedagogic categories.

Knowledge

The last learning outcome fits classically into the cognitive domain. It is about the acquisition of relevant knowledge. Usually, when we see a work of art, our first response is emotional. It somehow speaks to us, it connects. If it doesn't touch our emotions, we walk past it. After this

first engagement, we may want to find out about it; to find out who painted it, when, why. We may also want to see other paintings by the same artist to find out if they evoke the same response in us. This knowledge can enrich the experience of the work. It has to be said also that, for some people, it might be a boring distraction from enjoying the work. We need to tread carefully here and be responsive to students when they want to find out more, but not intrude when they are simply savouring and enjoying the work.

Conclusion

It seems to me, then, that this is what we can do for students and visitors to an art event, to an exhibition, to a performance, to a novel or poem. We are not interpreting in any sense in which the word is usually used. What we are doing is engaging in a normal adult education activity which demands the skills of the teacher of adults. Interpretation is impossible, but teaching and learning are well within the reach of arts providers, teachers and audiences for the arts.

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Buy One Get One Free: Shopping for Meaning in the 'Malls' of the Museum

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Unlike many other areas of production, the interpretation business is growing fast.

Gone are the days when visiting a museum or gallery of art meant 'buying in' to one particular dominant interpretation or canonical story.

Today, here within the Museum Shopping Mall, just as in any other Palace of consumerism, the choice is wide and each member of the public is made to feel that there is a personal interpretation 'just for them'

But how 'real' is this choice? Is the new fad of increasingly 'layering meaning' simply another way of dodging the issue of what it means to have a museum? Is it *possible* to offer different meanings for all? Is it more, or less, confusing to make our museum walls the home of 'a range' of interpretative strategy rather than to present one explanation, which can then be adopted or discarded?

This paper will address these issues. It will look at the roll of increasingly diverse interpretation as an expression of what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'liquid modernity', as a fluid, transient, unstructured, impermanent system of describing cultural objects, not designed to last but expected to be discarded when its 'sell by' date has expired.

What do we mean when we speak of interpretation in Museums?

Leaving aside, for the moment, the use of the term to describe museum *departments* involved in the production of labels, wall texts, audio, visual and multi media activities, 'interpretation' in its purest form means 'to elucidate or to explain the meaning of'.

The question of how this objective is achieved and whether or not the provision of a range of explanatory 'aids', actually helps or merely increases the magnitude of the problem, is something I intend to question in my paper today.

Modern art museums in their continuous attempts to democratise their collections by offering any number of interpretations and explanations for public consumption, have undoubtedly entered the market of consumerism.

Having decided to abandon the 'single' story so perfectly characterised in Alfred Barr's paradigmatic chart of the development of modern art, and its physical manifestation in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the new museum has been quick to embrace a 'liquid' method of display using carefully chosen themes as a post modern 'frame' within which to position the works in their collections.

Thematic hangs have been chosen to emphasise links and visualise new ideas. Displays, which were traditionally monographic, geographic or iconographic have been discarded as examples of master narratives, 'subjective, contingent and Western in their perspective'¹. New improved categories have been introduced, perceived to be more suitable, for transcending movements and periods and facilitating continuities across time and practice as well as standing symbolically for liberation and freethinking.

¹ Tate Handbook

At best, these newly devised thematic displays are surprising, illuminating and fresh.

But at worst, the flexibility and liquidity of these curatorially contrived categories expose them as vacuous in their seamless thematic and film like in their continuous display of interlocking and interchangeable artefacts.

The role of the curator has been expanded from one, previously concerned with scholarship and research, to one which must create new ways of 'consuming' the collection, new paths, new ideologies and new life style choices.

Curators must now explain not only the meaning of works on display but also justify the thinking behind display and thematic considerations.

More akin to choreographer than academic, the modern art curator has become a kind of modern visual disc jockey who, in the newly devised patterns of theme and contrast, 'splices and dices art works into a kind of visual MTV'¹

The idealistic aims and objectives of the thematic approach is built on notions of liberation and democracy. By releasing the public from the shackles of elitism associated with the traditional one line story of art, a new more 'people-centred', transparent and pluralistic understanding will be achieved, or so the thinking goes. Having ditched chronology, the thematic display strategy is 'confident that it is fully transparent and has succeeded in liberating art from the canon of art history and the museum's relation to it'²

But unfortunately, the reality is somewhat different and any resulting 'transparency' of meaning is privileged information available only to those who have been responsible for devising them.

Displaying art as part of a fluid and flowing uninterrupted continuum of museum art, rather than an uninterrupted continuum of the history of Abstract Art, also demands a more fluid architectural environment.

Markus Lupertz recipe for a classical museum, 'four walls, light coming on from above, two doors, one for coming in, the other for going out'³, has long since been assigned to the 'archive'.

Variety, surprise and distraction are now perceived as essential requirements for the modern viewing experience, 'a constant decentring through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea market'.⁴ (Quote from Rosalind Krauss, *Museum without Walls*).

The museum becomes a perfect environment for a cultural experience, which is fluid, active, moving and fragmented, one entirely compatible with the 'playground for wanderers, flaneurs, those who dip in and out of a cultural maelstrom', which the masterminds of Tate Modern's display strategy, Iwona Blazwick and Frances Morris sought so hard to achieve.

Seeing art in this, 'incredible architectural vocabulary of spaces, ranging from the autonomous purity of the white cube to rooms which suddenly admit exhilarating views across London with a complexity of floor plan and sheer size of each suite demanding a new approach'⁵. (Quote from *Tate Modern handbook*), may lead you to

² Tate Modern Handbook, 32

³ Cited in Crimp, D, 1997, *On the Museum's Ruins*, USA, MIT press, 290

⁴ Kraus, R, *Postmodernism's Museum Without Walls*

⁵ Blazwick and Morris, London, 2000, *Tate Modern Handbook*, 33

question whether Lupertz concerns that architecture would ‘drive away the art that is within it, by its own claim to be art or that ‘even worse – art {might] be exploited by architecture as ‘decoration’”⁶, may have some justification.

So what is it that makes this less static, more fluid, liquid form of display and interpretation so appealing as a 21st Century lifestyle? Larry said, fad is not fact and fashion is not fallible)

Having melted all that was solid and profaned all that was sacred, it was firmly a part of modernity’s project to break the mould, to reject tired ideologies, dethrone the past and banish tradition. A programme of destruction rapidly followed by a desire to reinstate, to clear away the old and construct something new, something of substance, built to last, to search out and find ‘solids’ more lasting, more reliable, more predictable and more manageable than what went before.

Now in a time of post or liquid modernity, we are forced to accept that there are no fixed ideas or missions. There is no predictable future, no agenda for renovation.

Jobs or relationships are no longer for life, in fact, all ‘patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’, we have moved from ‘system’ to society and global powers are bent on dismantling any territorially based network for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity’⁷. Here, now, in this type of world, only liquidity, you might say, has any relevance.

We have more money, but less time; increasingly expanding banks of knowledge and information but not enough experience of how to use them; we have closer access to one another with mobile phones and text messaging and yet we are even less confident of ourselves and secure in our ability to make relationships: we have more opportunities for entertainment and leisure and yet increasingly we choose anti-social activities from which to derive pleasure.

Our modern lifestyle offers us everything and nothing. Time is short and we can only take full advantage of all there is on offer if we become masters of multi-skilling.

Multi skilling and multi tasking have become the focus of our admiration and the qualities we most admire. Concentration and contemplation, on the other hand are seen as rather outmoded, old fashioned and passé.

We feel more comfortable in situations where we are not being asked to adopt rigid categories or identify clear-cut boundaries.

And museums and galleries have been drawn to this non-fixedness in their own way and display, like any other commodity is required to show that it can ‘move with the times’.

Museum displays have taken it upon themselves to be prophets of a new modernity, and there is a growing awareness that success in the cultural market can only be achieved by quenching the seemingly insatiable appetites of the 21st century consumer with abundant choice, diversity and variety in the market of meaning and interpretation. In fact gaining more knowledge and finding more meaning has become an important aspect of our ‘cultural wealth portfolio’

Just as changing our rooms, our gardens, our clothes and even our bodies is presented as a ‘short-cut’, sure fire way to achieve happiness and contentment, so museums now assume that with enough choice and variety, each one of our visitors can come away with an explanation which will transform their experience and enrich their lives, a philosophy which reinforces the capitalist dream and whets the

⁶ Cited in Crimp, D 290

⁷ Bauman, Z (2000) Liquid Modernity, Polity Press, 14

consumers appetite with a tantalising ‘promise that a cure for all troubles you may suffer is waiting somewhere in some shop (or museum) and can be found if you search earnestly enough.’⁸

In fact, the museum experience has become uncannily like our weekly supermarket shop with art works and meanings jostling for attention and then discarded as we march relentlessly on hoping all the time to find the ultimate product, which will satisfy our needs.

Shopping for meaning takes its place alongside shopping for ‘food, shoes, cars or furniture items’, and becomes just another example of the ‘avid never ending search for new and improved examples and recipes for life.’⁹

The museum space becomes a consumer’s paradise. We are invited to choose which theme or story we fancy in which type of space and all importantly which interpretation from the wide range on offer

However much we have, however easy our lives become we feel increasingly insecure, and undirected. We want to find something, but we don’t quite know what.

Not surprisingly, interpretation takes a key role in this continuous search for a perfect recipe for life, to find meaning for everyone and everything, an explanation *of* all, *for* all.

But whereas interpretation used to imply, one voice, one view, one vision, its purpose now is to ‘provide a multi-layered key to understanding works of art through a variety of media ranging from wall texts to catalogues, audio visual to virtual which cover a wide spectrum of visitor expectations and are not confined to the physical confines of the galleries. (Tate document, Why Interpret?)

The fluidity of the museum environment presents itself to the visitor as a step into a world of equal access, equal emphasis and continuity. We are encouraged to see museums displays and exhibitions as a stream of like images, each one with its own text and its own explanation.

But many *still* means ‘some’, museums still enforce their editing powers, and still we are left asking, whose story (or stories) are we telling?

Increasingly, the activity of looking at art is a mobile one.

A museum visit is a moving experience. Not I should add, in a spiritual way, but as a physical journey.

We wander through collections and displays, occasionally halting our path for a moment or two to glance at a work of art and then reading whatever information accompanies it. Frequently the act of looking is a sideways glance rather than a head on, face to face confrontation.

The diversion of our attention by any number of explanations devised apparently to help us ‘see’ better have (I suggest) the opposite effect, making our experience fragmentary and superficial.

Rather than encourage direct and sustained looking which might be aided by more seating for example, or talks in front of specific works, the modern museum seems hell bent on counting its visitors rather than making visitors count, by playing the numbers games and by assessing its success in the number of people it can manage to cram into its displays rather than concentrating on the quality of each visitors experience.

⁸ Bauman, Z Tester K, (2001) Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman, 114

⁹ Bauman, Z, (2000), Liquid Modernity, Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers, .76

In an attempt to address all audiences and offer a full range of interpretative strategies, accompanying text begins to assume a dominant role occupying at least as much space as the art works they are there to elucidate.

Wall texts, says critic Peter Schjeldahl, are a bane of late twentieth century museology, turning art shows into walk-in brochures. We can't help reading them...and are thus jerked from silent reverie into nattering pedagogy. Art and education are terrible bedfellows. They don't even like each other. Their congress makes for bad sex in the head. The unwary viewer of a label-larded exhibition incurs the grimmest of mental states: edification'¹⁰

So is there an alternative to this fragmented experience of art?

When the confrontation is direct, when it does involve 'us' and 'it', then the experience is quite different.

Michael Levin reminds us of Heidegger's thoughts about this kind of face-to-face epistemological vision,

The visible deeply objects to our habitual objectification: it will not fully give itself; will not wholly yield itself, to our desire. The most extreme evidence in which this is visible appears when we engage in an exercise in intensive staring: 'a fixed staring at something.' In German the word which we translate as 're-presentation' is *Vorstellung*, a word which signifies a gesture of setting down (*stellen*) in front of (*vor*). The concealed essence of 're-presentation' begins to appear through this interpretation, and that is, in a word, staring.'¹¹

The idea that revelation and understanding come through sustained looking is not surprising. We only need to consider the French word for know (*savoir*) to begin a journey of thinking about how we make sense of what we see. Do we for instance need more words to explain visual forms or would we, with enough time and concentration begin to 'see' anew.

We are all familiar with the experience of reading a sentence or paragraph of difficult prose or philosophy and thinking that we have understood nothing.

Sometimes this means that we have not given it our full attention, so we try again. This time we begin to measure each word, but still the meaning eludes us.

But then sometimes, miraculously after a number of readings, difficult, painful reading, we suddenly think we have understood.

What has happened during this time of concentration? Have those words previously impenetrable, decided to unveil themselves to us? Has the tune of the sentence uncovered some meaning? Have we been able to link some of the concepts we did understand with those we did not and been able therefore to come to some generic understanding?

Well I believe it is all three and more of these things.

And similar revelations can take place when we look at paintings.

It is not uncommon for our first encounter with a painting or a work of art to result in 'nothing', no understanding, and no sense of having grasped what we have seen. But then, given time things begin to reveal themselves to us, we start to see more and to make links and identify rhythm and patterns.

¹⁰ Rosenthal, M, 2002, *Telling Stories Museum Style*' cited in *Two Art Histories*, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

¹¹ Jay, Martin, (1994), *Downcast Eyes*, University of California Press, p.274

After a visit to the clinic at Salpetriere, Freud described the man Charcot as a 'visuel', a man who sees. 'He used to look again and again at things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them by day, till suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him. In his mind's eye the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order. He might be heard to say that the greatest satisfaction a man could have was to see something new – that is, to recognise it as new: and he remarked again and again upon the difficulty and value of this kind of seeing'¹²

This reference to 'staring', to continued and concentrated looking is not something which we see mentioned very often in museum 'interpretative strategy papers.

More frequently we are proudly told of the dazzling array of audio, visual and virtual on offer, which encourage, not concentrate, but rather a scanning of related material.

Any hard won investigation is discarded for a quick and easy revelation.

But how really revealing can this revelation really be?

If looking at art is always accompanied by a variety of other media, how can any revelation ever take place?

Our search for truth becomes transformed by gluttony, 'Life organised around consumption is guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes'¹³

And our search for understanding, for enlightenment becomes a 'right' something to which we are entitled and for which we demand satisfaction, if not our money back.

Faced with such a wide choice of meaning and interpretation, how do we decide which one is best for us?

Our choice of appropriate meaning is similar to any other choice we make about our lifestyle. We choose what best suits us and how we see ourselves and how this choice aligns us to a specific cultural group and establishes our identity.

'Stylistic choices are cultural gossip about what's fitting and what's not and that gossip becomes the new vocabulary of our lives – the language within which we frame our decisions about how we prefer to live, what we value and what we don't.'¹⁴

So choosing meaning becomes another step towards choosing identity.

'In a consumer society, sharing in consumer dependency – in the universal dependency on shopping – is the sine qua non of all individual freedom: above all, of the freedom to be different, to 'have identity'¹⁵

So shopping for meaning assumes a dual role, one of aligning ourselves with those we admire or with whom we aspire while also establishing our individual identity and freedom.

And interpretation like display is influenced by fashion and directed by government policy and cultural diversity has a prominent and establishment role to play.

'Those behind the flourishing cultural diversity initiatives credit themselves as coming from the fringes. The reality, though, is that cultural diversity polices have

¹² Baxandall, M, (1986), *Pattern of Intention*, Yale University Press, p.4

¹³ Bauman, Z, 2000, *Liquid Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, p.76

¹⁴ Eno, B, *Getting the Picture*, W Magazine

¹⁵ Bauman, Z, 2000, *Liquid Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, p.84

become thoroughly mainstream, and are endorsed by all the major figures in arts institutions.’¹⁶

Interpretation then, has its work cut out for it. It must provide both universal and individual interpretations for a diverse audience with diverse expectations. And further more it must also work with many collections, which have a narrow cultural focus.

It must both present, and *represent* in ever new and excitingly diverse ways.

Diversity gets coupled with identity. If we offer enough explanation and interpretation, with enough ‘diversity’ and attention to ‘other voices’, it necessarily follows (so the thinking goes) that the uncovering of an ‘identity’ which both relates to the work of art and to the viewer must be possible.

I am not in any way advocating a return to the punishing, alienating, isolating days of the white cube and its assumed arrogance. I am not suggesting that we dismiss as rubbish all the important steps we have taken to understand that many of our visitors leave the museum untouched and unaffected.

What I am pleading for is an understanding that the museum space is different: that it should not be yet another form of our everyday experience of consuming, of shopping of the acquisition of possessions, physical and intellectual.

I would like to see us allow our visitors time and space to look, to see and to reveal. In short to experience rather than to consume.

The comparison with Barr’s dream and the intense, bare, challenging spaces of the Museum of Modern Art is stark.

Then, art was displayed in isolation, bereft of interpretation, no wall texts, extended wall panels, audio or visual accompaniment.

Modernity had a hard edge and looking at art was also hard.

In contrast, in mid 20th century America, in Barr’s world, ‘‘art was involved in the general crisis of Western enlightenment and of compensation for the hygienically destructive effects of enlightenment, and isolation became the natural condition.’’

Isolation came to stand for the natural condition of high art in America, and isolation was also reflected in museum display and attitude.

In this way ‘looking’ is approached very like any other consumer activity. We demand choice, variety and value for money. Looking at art is part of the great socialist project, ‘ *the dream of handing over power to the people – is being realised in front of our eyes. It is being realised, not by the disciples of Communism, but by the preachers of free enterprise and market capitalism...for us as individuals, all this implies more freedom = more opportunities – more power = more responsibility*’

Furthermore, it was a direct reaction to an intense fear of totalitarian ideologies,’ and the bankruptcy of American political and economic system which had produced over thirteen million unemployed and a climate of shock, disorder and destruction which triggered a rise in consumerism.

¹⁶ Tiffany Jenkins. Spiked On Line, [13-Jun-2003]

Eros – an unconventional museum experience

Gabriele Stöger, T.E.A.m (Team EigenArt/museum)

Interpretation or communication

As “Eros” does not really fit for a sound palindrome, and you may not be happy with the only German one I ever came across (“Ein Neger mit Gazelle zagt im Regen nie”, literally translated this means: “A black man with an antelope never hesitates in the rain”), I would rather start with an aphorism, that was used by two artists (Hubbard & Birchler) with their installation at the O.K-Centrum für Gegenwartskunst in Linz in 1993¹: “*Objects have no authority. People do.*”

I mused for some time upon the definition of the interpretative palindrome addressed in the call for papers:

Thus, we have the teacher-as-interpreter standing somewhere between the work of art and its audience and the artist-as-interpreter standing somewhere between lived experience and the work of art ...

Art provides the rare opportunity to get an idea how another person experiences the world or did so long ago. If I stated, that you can only see what you know, would this proof the importance of the interpretation? Art on the other hand has the unique quality to make you see something, that you hadn't been aware to know (some even claim, the work of art *sees you*), would this proof the contrary? However, experience is not transformed into expression without the help of human beings. Language does not speak itself. Quite certainly, works of art need individuals, but do they need an interpreter?

Interpretation in the sense of *translation* as well as *explanation* is based on the same assumption: there is someone who knows and others who do not (yet). For a change, I suggest to replace the term *interpretation* by the term *communication* in the definition of to share, to act jointly, to participate. Communication only happens if at least two individuals are involved addressing each other.² Proceeding further in this direction we will also find useful the concept of symbolic interaction by G.H. Mead. Individuals enter a relationship with their (symbolic) environment by the *creation of meaning*.

1. People deal with objects on the basis of the meanings that these objects have for them.
2. The meaning/significance of objects has its origin in social interaction between fellow-beings
3. Meaning can be used, interpreted or even changed in the interaction process between the objects and beings.³

I will talk about the requirements to create an atmosphere for *dialogue* and *communication* in an art gallery following the above definition: *social interaction* for the purpose of creation or negotiation of meanings.

Two examples

Rolf Viva's exhibition “De profundis” was shown in a city gallery in Austria. The German artist had put golden coal buckets, heaps of black coal and equipment from coal mining into the gallery space. I asked the lady sitting at the entrance selling tickets and brochures, what she thought of the exhibition. She replied “I have nothing to say about it”, but almost immediately continued, that the coal was valuable like gold for those who spent their lives underground and for the regions depending on mining industries, the buckets reminded her of the time when she had a coal heating and had to carry the heavy load upstairs etc. In fact she had a lot to tell, but according to her own judgement - or what she regarded as the art experts judgement - it was “nothing”.

I once went on a guided tour at the Museo Pecci in Prato (near Florence) with a young art historian. As the interest of the group faded quickly and one after the other left the tour, I felt pity for her and her efforts. So I asked her which of the paintings she liked best. She somehow seemed bewildered by this

question and answered, that she liked the paintings all the same, since it was her duty to interpret them to the public and not to judge or to follow her personal taste. She had not even thought of it.

The incidents inspired T.E.A.m to develop a programme, able to encourage people to speak about their perceptions beyond the usual frame of a guided tour or an instruction about the right way of looking at art objects. We were interested to hear how people talk about art, if you let them.

Eros in the late afternoon

"Eros" is a thematic mediation programme for adults at selected Federal museums in Vienna. It was developed by T.E.A.m⁴ in cooperation with the Büro für Kulturvermittlung⁵ in order to make museums more accessible to new sections of the public. "Eros", "Power and Weakness" and "Violence" were chosen as themes of our programmes, since everyone has something to say about them. Visitors unaccustomed to museums should be enabled by this approach to make active enquiries and discoveries.

The environment, some suppositions

The audience: People who do not go to museums (about 70-75% of the population in Austria) usually have a reason for not doing so. They probably never felt that they had anything in common with the objects displayed there, and museums do little to disabuse them. In order to reach "non-visitors", some effort is required to gain their interest. Compared to school classes, adult visitors are an even more inhomogeneous assembly. A (working) group is yet to be formed.

The first adults, who followed our invitation to work on the subject of "Eros", were trade union officials from the Austrian Federal Railway. So far T.E.A.m has been working on different subjects with apprentices, students, in courses of adult education centres with a diverse audience, women, older people, teachers, unemployed and participants of courses on art therapy.

The number of participants in our programmes is restricted to 9 per group, in order to allow real dialogue. You may say, pure luxury, but if you take the task seriously, this is highly recommended.

Programmes take place at **Austrian Federal Museums** in Vienna. Their purpose has not been educational for long, their intention not to be inclusive in the first place. Nevertheless, the Federal museums are publicly funded and it is for this reason and because we regard museums as storehouses of social experience and cultural achievements that they should be available to everybody. Since the participants are people who usually work during weekdays, one very important supposition is, that the museum is open after six o'clock in the evening.

Team EigenArt/museum (T.E.A.m) is a group of four cultural mediators, who work as art teachers, freelancers, and adult educators, none of them inside a museum. Museums accept that we work there, but feel little responsibility, nor do **adult education centres**. Although the courses are advertised in the programme, the institution does little to promote it, one reason being, that we never meet in its premises, but in the museum.

One major problem is the **financial aspect**. Neither the museum, nor the participants would cover our expenses and freelance work time. Without the support of institutions (trade unions, municipality, Ministry for Education etc.) we would not have succeeded.

The invitation: (translated from German)

Eros – sure enough, we all have had some kind of affair with him (with pleasure, painful, exciting ...) but, what can museums add on the subject?

At the museum we can find objects that were made to give delight, to look at oneself and to get hold of thoughts that tend to escape fleetingly. We want to trace the origins of our imaginations and our pictures by following the eye: man's look at women, man's look at himself, woman's look on ...?

We want to enter into a discourse, get new experience, exchange our memories, our dreams, our ideas, play with the stream of consciousness. With luck, we may make objects talk, or rather objects us?

Come nearer, but don't get too close: Eros thrives with a touch of secret ...

Part 1: *Thursday, 14th march 1996, 6 – 9 p.m. Kunsthistorisches Museum;*

Part 2: *Saturday, 16th march 1996, 10 a.m. - 1 p.m. Museum of Military History*

Please note the limited number of participants!

(Announcement in the programme of the adult education centre in Vienna Polycollege
Stöbergasse)

As T.E.A.m does not work within the museum administration, we had to announce each group, ask for allowance to work and for free access (which was conceded, since the participants came for educational purposes), and we had to tell the warders, that we would use objects for our seminar and that we would bring them along in a suitcase.

Entering the museum with a suitcase

Working like this is still not common in museums in Vienna. Once successfully arranged the first appointments with a group of adults at the **Kunsthistorisches Museum**, some obstacles still had to be faced. Once our suitcase had suddenly disappeared from where we had left it in the gallery. The warder's answer to our request was: It had to be put in safe keeping for, what, if there had been a bomb inside?

All obstacles successfully passed and once settled in the picture gallery (showing Italian art of the 16th and 17th century) it is time to set people "looking" for things among the exhibits. After a short introduction to the theme and to each other there is time and space for individual encounters with artworks. Each participant is asked to say a few words about himself or herself, and what he or she expects from the evening. This introduction helps to enter a communication between the participants and the mediator; without an atmosphere of trust non-verbal interaction and discussion of very personal matters are hardly possible.

Next, the senses of the participants are awakened. With their eyes blindfolded, we let them touch small objects (soft, rough or smooth), we brought along. There are different aromas to smell, strange sounds of instruments to hear and fruits to taste: flowers, silk, money, stones, mussels, fur, net gloves, a string of pearls, rattles, bells, and so on. Participants should not try to recognize and name the objects, but rather to find out about the personal sensation they experience. (This exercise was carried out with the conference group).

The curtain is then lifted, participants can look at what they touched, heard, smelt and tasted before and they are invited to find an object or painting that most closely fits with the strongest impression they gained from the senses exercise. Everybody has a few minutes for individual search and should stay at her or his own during that time.

Participants look at the object with different eyes than before the exercise. Instead of providing information of the kind

... Parmigianino, Bow-carving Amor, Wood, painted 1533/34, ... Parmigianino had hit exactly upon the tastes of an elite public of connoisseurs ...⁶,

We invite them to present the works of art that have become meaningful for them having been driven by their experience, their memories, their sensations when touching the objects. The group comes together again and now moves around in the gallery looking at the pictures one by one, discussing how the relationship with their chosen artwork came about: was it by association, a painting technique, a general effect? Suddenly even for first-time-visitors walking around in the gallery and talking about thoughts and feelings becomes the most natural thing. They discover, there is something for them in this art. I can find aspects that are important not only for me but also for others. There are longer and shorter discussions in front of the paintings, the mediator's role in this phase is to initiate and encourage debate, and avoid dominating the discourse.

After a short break, participants look at a work of art that we have selected as interesting examples: Either Tintoretto's "Susanna at her bath", Correggio's "Jupiter and Io", Parmigianino's "Amor cutting a

bow" or Titian's "Nymph and shepherd". This gives the opportunity to add some information, if there is a demand and to relate personal views and experts statements.

Afterwards the group is divided into a men's and women's section for one task connected with the way the sexes view each other. Women look for a painting which they think will have an erotic effect on men, and men look for a picture they think will have an erotic effect on women. The pictures are then discussed. It often appears that women have to be naked to get into an art gallery. Erotic men, on the other hand, are hard to find. Devotion and nakedness are found at most in Saint Sebastian or Christ on the cross. And it seems as though nakedness first of all means weakness.

This aspect is taken up again at the second meeting in the **Museum of Military History**. The opening questions are: What makes a man strong? And what makes him vulnerable? Participants are once more sent looking for things, this time in a museum that illustrates the history of the Austrian monarchy and sets out to demonstrate strength and success. While the Kunsthistorische Museum Vienna rather shows men's view on women, this museum gives an idea of men's view on themselves.

Each participant is given a strip of paper with half a man's figure on it (half of Saint Sebastian or half of a knight in armament (see illustration). They are invited to find words that are associated with army, strength and weakness. Out of their findings each participant should chose the word, she/he wants to deal with. They form pairs and walk around in the section where the Turkish Siege of 1683 is presented.

Their observations, associations and findings exchanged and discussed the whole groups comes together to celebrate with a vodka and figs in the museums hall of fame. Again, the participants are invited to do something very natural (eat and drink), which is usually not permitted inside a museum.

Now, what's it all for?

The example shows, that T.E.A.m regard art as a statement and an invitation to enter a communication process, with ourselves, with each other and, though very unlikely, with the artist herself or himself.

Visiting a museum with a group is a social process, remember *Objects have no authority, people do*. Cultural mediation means finding relationships between individuals, relating the subject (the viewer) to the object, and subject to subject. The methods, which are sometimes provocative, help in various ways to establish contacts, with art works that one might not have noticed, with ways of looking at them which one would not have arrived at on one's own, with the impressions and associations of the other participants, and not least with oneself. The museum is thus no longer a place where visitors have nothing to say about a picture just because they do not know when the painter was born.

Works of art have a special aesthetic quality, they allow an emotional approach, they address all senses, they contain a key to my perception and the ability to develop and to shape the world around me. The art work therefore opens a process and inspires us to think and feel, if we can get access to our own feelings and are not lead by the opinion of experts in the first place.

Thus, the position of the mediator is important. She/he should rather open a process instead of closing the dialogue with a definite answer. It is substantial for a successful communication process, that all participants have the same chance to get a hearing. The mediator must not put herself/himself into the centre to get the most attention. Her/his task is to arrange the flow of communication and give the space needed to *all* participants. The mediator should rather listen to the stories of others, encourage participants and enable discussion among them.

Some key principles of T.E.A.m in cultural mediation

Communicate

a work of art is an invitation to communicate, it is not finished, it is open to the spectators, who complete it. Each recipient is an individual with a live experience.

The mediator is part of the group, she/he does not give instructions, but arranges space.

Associate

Material, objects, texts are used to give an impulse to the stream of consciousness and to call up the spectators memories and ideas

Subjectivity

The view of the subjects is put in the foreground, there is neither right nor wrong in their perception and memory, the spectators exchange their associations and find new meanings by listening to each other. Using the objects, the individuals can find out something about themselves.

Search

The search for the object is an important part of the process. People should be encouraged to make and to give reasons for their own choice.

Objectivity

People exchange personal thoughts and memories. There can be a variety of meanings that help to look more carefully at the object and to find out, why it evokes this or that feeling. This is a bridge to the investigation of the objects aesthetic quality.

Information

On the art-objects, context and the artist is given, when required.

Time

The process takes time, people need to warm up before they speak about private thoughts and to warm up, they deserve time to speak and be listened to.

Personal conclusions from the debate during the conference

- You will not manage interpretation, unless you know the language in which to speak (translation)
- But: you can enjoy eating with others without being able to cook (communication).
- Much has been said about the appreciation and understanding of art, little about the appreciation and understanding of visitors needs and expectations
- Museum educators should focus on the visitors and be ready to learn from others (Why should people not be interested in museums, when they are welcomed with attention and interest from their staff?)

The palindrome has proved to be an inadequate metaphor for the process of interpretation. It has rather turned into an **anagram**:

INTERPRETATION

NO TREE AT I-PRINT

TO ENTER IN TAPIR

PIRAT O(N) INTERNET.

¹ O.K - Centre for contemporary art

² see: Maletzke, Gerhard (1963) *Psychologie der Massenkommunikation*. Hamburg

³ Blumer, Herbert (1973) *Zum handlungstheoretischen Verständnis des Symbolischen Interaktionismus*

⁴ Susanna Gruber, Anna Petschinka, Walter Stach, Gabriele Stöger

⁵ Büro für Kulturvermittlung is an independent non-profit association for service and innovation in the field of professional cultural mediation, funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs.

⁶ see ⁴

The Abstracted Spiritual: What adults appear to gain from learning about abstract art.

Victoria Watson, University of Nottingham.

This paper is based on an unanticipated finding from the empirical work of my Ph.D. This paper is not definitive; in fact it is my first opportunity to expand on what I have discovered both from my empirical work and also the literature I have read for my Ph.D. thesis. I hope that it will provide people with something to contemplate.

My Ph.D. has been undertaken to discover what it is that adults gain, on a personal and psychological level from learning about the visual arts? I started my research with the idea that there must be something that adults gain on a personal level from learning about art, or they would not do it. I felt sure that the usual motivations, such as friendship and social interaction, which are applicable to learning, were in place but there was also something more and less tangible which was occurring.

During the first stage interviews for my research, one of the students said:

‘I think that art is a religious experience in the capacity to be in the world, to look at the world, to understand through the expression that you, the marks that you have made on the paper, it is a kind of wrestling with reality, not necessarily visual reality, internal reality, and for that it is religious I think of that as religious experience’.

This made me think, perhaps this religious / spiritual aspect is the extra attribute which art education has. I explored this further with the other interviewees, and found that they tended to share this opinion. However, it was not the iconic art which inspired these feelings, it was the more modern, the impressionist and the abstract. With this in mind I continued my research by surveying the literature.

The literature I read to help me understand this aspect of the results was on psychology and symbolism. From a psychological perspective I found the theories of Carl Jung’s Analytical psychology influential, particularly his concept of the collective unconscious. Which contains all the universal archetypes, such as hero, virgin and similar mythic figures as well as the symbolic forms like the mandala and cross. I felt sure that this was an aspect of art which required further exploration. I also found the work of James Hillman’s Archetypal psychology very interesting . Hillman is a contemporary psychologist whose theories have developed on from Jung’s. Hillman tells us that what we lack, in modern society is a connection with soul. Both of these theorists seem to add conceptually to our understanding of what adults may gain from learning about art on this spiritual / religious level. I also explored symbolism, and it is here that I feel most can be learned.

Symbolism plays a strong part in the arts and our understanding of pictures. Learning more about symbolism may aid us in understanding what people gain through education in the arts. Symbols, metaphors and archetypal images have

become the threads of our lives; They mediate between the conscious and the unconscious, bridging what is hidden and that which is visible.
(Bartal, L and Ne'eman, N. 1993:9).

As the this quotation suggests, the importance of symbolism is that it has the potency to connect to the unconscious and this is one of the main reasons that it has such a strong role to play in understanding what may be gained by the viewer of art. Symbols, are by their nature mutable and although there are some universal symbols, most are dynamic in association with 'their' culture.

A symbol maybe simply defined as an element, animate or inanimate, that stands for something else. The meaning of certain symbols, however, differs according to the context in which they appear.
(Carr-Gomm 2001:6).

Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained.
(Jung C. G 1964:4).

The two above quotations exemplify the fact that to some extent interpretation and representation of symbols is flexible. Carr-Gomm (2001), explores symbolism in Western art. She looks specifically at examples in western art, but also considers the broader application of symbolism. The overall discussion shows how symbolism in the visual arts pulls on many of the most ancient 'teachers' of mankind to inspire art, such elements as mythology, religion, the natural world and the temperaments of man. Jung (1964), on the other hand looks deeper into symbolism. He expresses the psychological significance of symbols as providing a route to the unconscious. The unconscious, is according to Jung, highly influential in the lives of humans.

Perhaps one reason why symbolism is so potent and inspirational is because, according to Rees (1992), 'symbols always point to the transcendent; they link what is human to the cosmos' (Rees 1992:11). Elizabeth Rees (1992) explores the connection between Christian symbols and their ancient roots. Her work implies that the fact that the Christian church employed ancient symbolism is what gave / gives it such potency. Mythology and spiritual / religious subjects have long since been the concern of artists. Art has been used specifically to teach religious doctrine to those who are illiterate (Carr-Gomm 2001, Rees 1992, Woodford 1992). This connectivity between the ancient and the modern symbols is most probably one of the elements, which is attractive in art. We, the viewer do not have to identify the element of a picture that is compelling, but we can most probably accept that it may be a symbolic aspect.

And yet, we do not all react the same, or experience the same reaction to a work of art. This is because symbols take on personal meaning as well as common meaning (Brun 1993, Robertson 1963). As with most things, how we interpret symbols and what stands for a symbol will be influenced by our education, culture, society and family etc. We 'give' the meaning to something and make it symbolic.

A symbol is “meaningless” only because we do not know how to interpret it, just as the dream was “meaningless” until Freud gave us clues to its interpretation. And perhaps it is the ambiguity of symbols which makes them so useful in human society. Ambiguity is a kind of bridge that allows us to run back and forth from one kind of meaning to another, until we take firm resolve to cross the bridge into new, and fixed meanings.
(Duncan 1968:7-8).

This bridge referred to by Duncan (1968), may be instrumental in our understanding of what individuals gain through the arts. The meaning we attach to art, the symbols we acknowledge are linking us back to the ancient roots of mankind and thereby to religious and spiritual sensibilities. And we learn about these links through myths and fairy tales
(Hardy 1987).

So a symbol is both itself and a personal or collective representation of some other meaning on a different plane of reality. Some symbols are so universal that Jung referred to them as archetypes – the mother, the cross. These carry enormous universal symbolic meanings.
(Hardy, J. 1987:70).

In ancient times people believed in a myriad of gods and myths which had impact upon their lives (Jung 1938). This absence of the spiritual aspects of life maybe one of the contributors to our current state of mental health or illness. Education can be beneficial to the adult student because it provides them with a space to ‘learn’ to understand and therefore in Lauzon’s eye’s connect with soul. Maxine Greene (1995), suggests that one way art informs us is that it allows us to view our lives from ‘unexpected angles’ (Greene 1995:63), and this in turn opens us up to explore the less obvious aspects of life such as the religious and spiritual beliefs. From the history of mankind comes the idea of ‘beings’ outside our own which are to be worshipped and feared. These ‘bodies’ are according to Jung, psychic agencies:

Not very long ago even highly civilized people believed that psychic agencies could influence our mind and feeling. There were ghosts, wizards and witches, demons and angels, and even gods, that could produce certain psychological alterations in man.
(Jung. C. G 1938:12-13).

But what does this have to do with art and education? Religion has always held a connection with art and education. The paintings on the church walls, the architecture of the cathedrals and all the regalia have been built to pass on the messages of religion. In a time when most people could not read, pictures were used as a teaching tool to spread the word of the holy book. Art has been employed in education for millennia, and is still used today to decorate places of worship. Cave paintings dating back some 15,000 years were most probably used as a form of education – a message about the skills of the people and the animals of the land (Woodford. S 1992). The symbolic element of the art is part of the learning experience (Rees. E 1992). Becoming educated about works of art then, helps us to understand the many images which we come across in our lives.

Therapeutically art can be very beneficial in healing mental health problems, because, according to Burn (1993), of its symbolic / mythic content, which is central to human

experience and can at times in our lives be pushed aside by the preferred 'scientific' logical approach.

Frances Vaughan (2002), in her article 'What is spiritual intelligence?' explores what significance the spiritual dimension has in our lives. She makes the observation that great leaders have come about through their spiritual intelligence. The sense of peace they exude is in direct connection with their sense of self- of understanding.

Spiritual intelligence emerges as consciousness evolves into an ever – deepening awareness of matter, life, body, mind soul, and spirit. Spiritual intelligence, then, is more than individual mentalability. It appears to connect the personal to the transpersonal and the self to the spirit.
(Vaughan. 2002:19).

We reach this 'dependent-awareness' through our experiences in life, a large part of which is education. Vaughan identifies aesthetic development as a component in such things as art appreciation. David Best (1985), conveys in 'Feeling and reason in the arts', the idea that it is important not to negate intuition when rational understanding is being taught. Without intuition the art would become dry. Best says that 'there is a great deal to be learned from the arts during the whole of one's life' (1985:13).

Art has, it seems, always been considered an important element in the holistic development of the self. A sense of self and balance in mind can be achieved in part through arts education. Artists themselves, as Wassily Kandinsky (1947) noted in his book 'Concerning the spiritual in art', have a kind of duty to connect with the spirit, the intuition and present it in their art.

In each expression is the seed of an effort toward the non-representational, abstract and internal structure. Consciously or unconsciously they are obeying Socrates advice "know thyself". Consciously or unconsciously, artists are studying and investigating their material, weighing the spiritual value of those elements with which it is their privilege to work.
(Kandinsky. W 1947:39).

Kandinsky emphasizes what has been said in the discussion so far. Which is that art has a spiritual aspect, conscious or unconscious it has the capacity to enlighten the viewer. The sense of a collective spirituality 'seen' through art education has implications for psychological health. Health and wholeness require balance, this balance can be achieved in part through art education (Greenhalgh, P.1994).

The psychological theories of Carl Jung and James Hillman add an alternative perspective to our understanding of what people gain from their experience of the arts in adult education. The inevitable mutability of culture requires that we do not stay static in our understanding and appreciation of art. As society changes, art too changes and as we grow so does our ability to see beyond the obvious, allowing us to consider the possibility to reconnect to the collective unconscious, to meet with our soul and commune with the less well known and less understood side of human nature which runs beneath and through the everyday stuff of existence.

In conclusion then, it seems that one thing which adults gain through learning about art is to experience some kind of religious / spiritual connection. I would suggest that this is due in large

part to the symbolic content of the art and this in turn has potentially beneficial psychological ramifications.

I realize that this paper has only skimmed the surface of the spiritual / religious aspect of adult arts education, however I hope that it will inspire contemplation and deep consideration.

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FASHIONING HISTORY

The Power of the Publisher in Interpreting Culture

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When we use the word “fashion,” one of the first things that comes to mind is women’s clothing. When we think of the mid-Victorian era, it’s the extravagant hoop skirt. In the 1890s, it’s the Gibson Girl look. The 1920s had the short skirt and short hair of the flapper, the 1950s had Dior, Schiaparelli, and Chanel, the 1960s segued from Jackie Kennedy’s pillbox hats to the beads and fringes of the psychedelic era. The 1970s brought in the pants suit, and the 1980s the color called “Nancy Reagan Red.” The important thing to remember is that we are able to assign a look to its proper year--and, conversely, a year to its proper look.

So let’s try the same thing with another industry, such as travel. Think of posters from the 20s and 30s, showing the sleek Art Deco steamships that carried passengers between Europe and New York. Think of PanAm posters in the 1950s, and the glamour of the China Clipper. How did the airlines promote vacation destinations in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, and how are they advertising them today?

Let’s consider architecture. How quickly can we recognize the appropriate time period of a home’s construction? Think Greek, Tudor, Georgian, Victorian, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Classic Revival, Modern--what visual clues are we using to identify a particular cultural era? What colors, structural elements, or proportions separate Inigo Jones from Frank Gehry?

Does Western culture have a common set of visual clues by which we identify particular eras? Think of colors, line, style, typography, what’s included, what’s left out, what’s spoken aloud, what’s silently understood. How are these indicators determined? Is it a continually evolving unconscious cultural consensus? Is it a vast secret marketing conspiracy? Both? Neither?

Here’s a quick exercise. I’d like everyone to close their eyes for a moment and remember the year that you turned twenty-one. Get that year fixed in your mind. Try to remember what kind of clothes you were wearing, what kind of vehicle you were driving, what kind of food you were eating, what kind of books you were reading, what kind of music you were listening to.

And now try to answer these questions without analyzing them too much---in your memory, does that year have a color? A sound? A taste? A smell?

Were you able, however imperfectly, to reduce your twenty-first year to a few particular sensations? Do you think they would evoke that year for anyone else? If you were to be asked to create a piece of art inspired by that year, could you use those sensory perceptions as a place to begin? If you think you could, **why** would you be able to? Surely there’s more to any given year of the 20th century than a handful of sensory clues?

Here’s an expansion of the idea of color identifying an era for us. Think of your favorite outfit, your favorite tie, your favorite sweater. If, at dinner tonight, a drop of some indelible sauce falls upon the lapel, and your cleaner is unable to remove the stain--would you be able to replace the outfit? Perhaps, and perhaps not. There’s a consulting firm, the Pantone Color Institute that has

been around since the 1950s. It advises the garment industry as to appropriate color palettes for a given year. They work two years ahead of time, so that fabric manufacturers have the time to produce and stockpile cloth in the approved range of colors, and garment manufacturers have time to produce and market their garments---this last spring, the color palette for 2005 was approved and announced. Few consumers hear about the Pantone Color Institute's contribution to fashion and style, but think about the lifespan of a popular color. Chartreuse, for example. First it was seen only in the haute couture shops, then in ready-to-wear, and then you saw it everywhere, from t-shirts to winter scarves. Ten years ago in the US it was teal blue. This week it's--what? Fad or fashion, or planned obsolescence, call it what you like, but when we analyze it, it's really a two-way street, a cultural palindrome: we buy it because it's what there is to buy, but if we didn't buy it, the manufacturers would not bother to produce it. It's a complex relationship, one that involves market research, business experience, and a certain knack for correctly predicting which way the wind is going to blow tomorrow. Those manufacturers that embody these talents are the ones that stay in business.

Let's apply some of the same thinking to school textbooks. Try to remember the cover of a history book that you used when you were fifteen or sixteen years old. If you can't remember what textbook you were using, think of the dustjacket of a novel that you loved as a teenager. Compare it in your mind to the cover of something your own children, if you have them, might be presently using, or to the cover of a novel that you've read this year.

What is your snap judgment, your "gut reaction" to these book covers? What do you think about the colors? The typefaces? The images? Which one would you most like to open and read?

Over the last few decades, there has been a great deal of change in the textbook publishing industry in the United States: what's included, what's left out, the manner in which it is presented, what is considered essential, what has become peripheral. The cultural climate has become more and more crucial to the creation of the textbook---there are particular needs that are central to a particular grade, school, state, or country, which must be considered: Is this book intended for students that will going on to university, or those who are struggling with basic skills? Is the focus on passing a test for graduation, or on reading comprehension? Are there changes or idiosyncrasies in the cultural norm, which must be incorporated in order to avoid offending or boring the intended consumer?

I'd like to read some textual examples of the coverage of the same event from the three different textbooks we just looked at. Here's what was written about a certain little misunderstanding between the soldiers of King George III and the colonial citizens of Boston, Massachusetts, an event that became known on our side of the pond as the Boston Massacre.

The Americans, 1982: British redcoats lived in Boston for eighteen months before a serious incident occurred. The cause of friction was competition for jobs between local laborers and the poorly paid redcoats who were looking for work in off-duty hours. On the afternoon of March 4, 1770, a fistfight broke out over this issue. That evening a mob gathered in front of the customshouse, which armed British soldiers were guarding. At first the crowd taunted the soldiers with cries of "Bloody Backs" and "Lobster Backs," referring to their red uniforms. Then the crowd began hurling firewood, stones, snowballs, and oyster shells at the soldiers. Among the colonials was a tall man named Crispus Attucks, well-known in the Boston dock area. Some said he was a runaway slave. Others said he came from the West Indies. A friend said of him that "his very looks were enough to terrify any person."

The frustrated soldiers stood their ground until, as an eyewitness later said, Attucks had the courage to grab a soldier's bayonet and throw the man down. The soldiers fired their muskets. Five men, including Attucks, were killed and three wounded. The bodies of the dead were carried to lie in state in Faneuil Hall, the site of Boston's town meetings.

To head off further clashes, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson ordered the British troops to Castle William and to other islands in Boston Harbor. There they remained for the next four years. Samuel Adams eagerly used this incident as propaganda against the British. The deaths of the men were tragic. But to most people, the affair was a brawl, and not a "massacre" as Adams called it.

The Americans, 1991: Rumors about the possible arrival of British troops ran through Boston during that summer of 1768. Samuel Adams and other Sons of Liberty talked up the idea of active resistance. Two British regiments did actually arrive in late September. As they marched up the wharves, the townspeople watched with apprehension and resentment. There was no violence, however.

The British troops lived in Boston for eighteen months before a serious incident occurred. The cause of friction was competition for jobs between local laborers and the poorly paid British soldiers who were looking for work during off-duty hours. On the afternoon of March 4, 1770, a fistfight broke out over this issue. That evening a mob gathered in front of the customhouse, which armed British soldiers were guarding.

At first the crowd taunted the soldiers with cries of "Lobster Backs," referring to their red uniforms, and "Bloody Backs," referring to the British custom of flogging soldiers for even minor offenses. Then the crowd began hurling firewood, stones, snowballs, and oyster shells. Among the colonials was a tall black man named Crispus Attucks, well known in the Boston dock area and probably a runaway slave.

The frustrated soldiers stood their ground until, as an eyewitness later said, Attucks grabbed a soldier's bayonet and threw the man down. The soldiers thereupon fired their muskets. Five men, including Attucks, were killed and three were wounded.

To head off further clashes, Governor Thomas Hutchinson ordered the British troops to islands in Boston Harbor. Samuel Adams eagerly used what he called the Boston Massacre as propaganda against the British. Although the deaths of the men were tragic, to most people the affair was a brawl, not the "massacre" that Adams called it.

The Americans, 2003: One American's Story. On the clear, cold night of March 5, 1770, a mob gathered outside the Customs House in Boston. They heckled the British sentry on guard, calling him a "lobster-back" to mock his red uniform. More soldiers arrived, and the mob began hurling stones and snowballs at them. At that moment, Crispus Attucks, a sailor of African and Native American ancestry, arrived with a group of angry laborers.

A Personal Voice: John Adams, quoted in *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*. "This Attucks...appears to have undertaken to be the hero of the night; and to lead this army with banners...up King Street with their clubs...[T]his man with his party cried, 'Do not be afraid of them...' He had hardiness enough to fall in upon them, and with one hand took hold of a bayonet, and with the other knocked the man down."

Attucks's action ignited the troops. Ignoring orders not to shoot, one soldier and then others fired upon the crowd. Five people were killed; several were wounded. Crispus Attucks was, according to a newspaper account, the first to die.

All of these accounts are true---or, at least, true in context of the times in which they were written---1982, 1991, and 2003. What's different about them? What's included and what's left out? How has the depiction of Crispus Attucks evolved? Can we get a sense from the changes to the coverage of this incident how the cultural climate in the United States has changed over the course of two decades?

And, more importantly to the theme of the cultural palindrome, has it changed because academic administrators have demanded greater inclusion of the minority experience, or has the increase in inclusion of the minority experience caused the administrators, teachers, students, and parents to expect it and to experience it as normal, true, and accurate? How do we describe and discuss the cultural palindrome of both predicting, and reacting to, market trends and consumer needs? How does a textbook editorial team's interpretation of historical events influence the ways that educators teach, and, in turn, how is the student's world-view influenced by the integration of commercially-produced textbooks into a curriculum?

This question of anticipating and addressing community norms requires us to examine the concept of community---is the community the country? the state? the county? the district? the individual school? In the United States, the state of California tends to be in the forefront of new trends in issues such as multicultural viewpoints, inclusion of the experiences of women and minorities, a respect for the environment, and emphasis on bilingual education---and as California has traditionally had a great deal of money budgeted towards improving assessment scores and enhancing learning, the major US publishers have written entire textbooks with the needs and wants of California in mind. Progressive states and school districts elsewhere in the country tend to follow the California model, sometimes a year or two afterwards. At the other extreme, the state of Texas, which also has a great deal of money to spend and which also has mandated improvement in student scores on standardized tests, remains, as a rule, far more conservative in what is considered appropriate as far as inclusion and multiculturalism. The pendulum of curriculum trends seems to swing back and forth between these two powerhouse states, both of which actually have the same noble end in mind: the fair and thorough education of their young people.

As an illustrative of the power of local cultural norms, I'd like you to think of an image that is rather famous in the United States, that of George Washington crossing the Delaware River during the Revolutionary War. Washington is depicted in noble profile, his right foot up on the gunwales, staunchly upright in what must have been a small and unstable boat, cloak wrapped about his torso, his faithful troops around him rowing for all they're worth. This year, the state of Texas demanded that this image be removed from any textbooks being bought for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students---and every one of the four major textbook publishers complied. Why? Because the painting shows George Washington's---how can this be put delicately?---his crotch. And the educational administrators of the great state of Texas were convinced that this would make 11, 12, and 13-year-old boys snicker. I don't know if you have any personal experience with children of this age, but if we were to remove everything from every textbook that might make prepubescent boys giggle, then we'd have an empty book...at which point they'd probably draw rude pictures on the blank pages.

But this editorial adjustment to consumer demand does begin to illustrate a point, that editorial decisions are, of necessity, based upon both the realities of the marketplace and as well as upon

interpreting the facts of history in light of community norms. Textbook editors tend to be intelligent and hard-working scholars, dedicated to producing the best book they possibly can---but textbook companies exist to make a profit, and so at some level, distasteful though it may sound, the company will bow to the needs and demands of the consumer. As the needs and demand of the consumer have changed, so does the product. If the pendulum swings too far in one direction, the cry goes out from politicians and textbook committees of “Back to basics!” or “We need to incorporate the latest pedagogy!”

Here’s another factor which needs to be taken into account ---the influence of cultural critics, who have turning their scholarly searchlights onto textbook content in ever-increasing numbers. These critics may be writing from anywhere across the political range, from conservative to moderate to liberal---one might lambaste a history textbook for having a perceived bias against dead white European males (for example, an influential textbook reviewer in Texas implied that the story of Crispus Attucks had been manufactured out of whole cloth, solely in order to satisfy multiculturalists), while Jonathan Zimmerman, in *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*, maintains that publishers have moved all too slowly to chronicle the struggles of ethnic minorities. Diane Ravitch, in *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, argues that textbook publishers are guilty of giving in to pressure from both ends of the political spectrum---the right objecting to depictions of disobedience, family conflict, sexuality, evolution, and the supernatural, and the left trying to correct for the racism and sexism of older textbooks by urging stringent controls on language and images to weed out any possibly-offensive stereotypes. Yasemin Soysal, in her paper “Rethinking Nation-State Identities in the New Europe,” examines school curricula and textbooks in four EU countries and Turkey, and concludes that students are being taught a sanitized version of European history as part of a drive towards political correctness, in an effort to show that the EU has a common identity and background---a typical example being the change in the depiction of the Vikings, as skillful traders and farmers, rather than pillaging, marauding invaders---and that this effort shortchanges students’ appreciation of world events and European reactions to them.

Textbooks publishers, who, it must be remembered, are not in the business out of altruism, must strike some balance between these continually evolving perspectives, in order to produce a product that will sell. I know from my professional experience with one of the major US publishers that there is a sincere and honest commitment to a fair, accurate, unbiased retelling of history, but---**the books have to sell**. If this means removing George Washington’s picture from a history book, then that’s what’s going to happen.

Another question before us this: are publishers going to be interested in producing quality texts for a potential sale of twenty pounds per student, which is the average amount spent in the UK? A US textbook costs perhaps twice as much--the equivalent of approximately forty pounds--and costs perhaps four pounds to produce. The remaining thirty-six pounds is eaten up by research, development, editorial staff, profit margin, and a vast array of what are ironically called “free materials.”

This is an interesting sidebar aspect of the educational publishing business, the model, seemingly unique to the United States, of giving away vast amounts of “free materials” to teachers to accompany a purchase of student textbooks. These lists of ancillary support material might include an annotated teacher’s edition, sets of workbooks, books of quizzes and tests, overhead transparency sets for geography, humanities, and assessment, materials for below-average learners and for gifted and talented students, chapter summaries, reading study guides, plus all of the above in Spanish, plus all of the above on CD-ROM, plus all of the above on the Internet, plus a set of accompanying historical videos, plus a set of atlases, plus posters and maps for the

classroom wall. These materials are, of course, not “free” at all. Their cost is figured into the price of the textbooks. This is not the model in Canada and the UK, where free materials, if any, might include only a simple instructor’s guide with chapter overviews and suggested answers to textbook questions. It might appear, in the US, to be a goal of making things easier for the classroom teacher, and easier for the administrators to prove to superintendents and funding agencies that these extra materials help to assure that learning is taking place, that test scores are improving, that they are getting their money’s worth. But the reality of these massive give-aways is more mercenary---they started as a way of enticing customers to buy one publisher’s product rather than another’s, and in the last twenty years have become an ingrained component of the total process. It’s a publishing industry joke that schools have selected one program over another simply on the weight of the free materials, not on their usefulness or applicability to the local curriculum, and therefore it would be to the publisher’s advantage to print everything on extra-thick paper and to use heavy-weight ink.

Another relationship to bring into this discussion, in addition to that of producer and consumer, is that of teacher and student. Are current textbooks, and the current tidal wave of support materials, helping the teachers to teach? Are they helping the students to learn? In the United States, the current academic model has moved away from a tracked system, where students are slotted at an early age into advanced, average, and below-average curricula, to one of the inclusionary classroom, where a single teacher is expected to provide instruction for gifted and talented students, low-level readers, students for whom English is a second language, students who learn better kinetically or visually, and everything in-between. US textbook publishers have reacted to this model, and part of that massive list of free materials includes instruction for all levels of students, designed to be taught simultaneously in one classroom. As I understand the UK, Canadian, and French models, students are for the most part tracked from an early age, and the textbook publishers, again for the most part, provide books that cover the same core material at three very different levels of ability. In the United States, the pendulum is beginning to swing back on this issue, especially in the key subjects of math and reading, where publishers have begun to produce lower-level textbooks, designed to help students achieve a minimum standard of competence in order to pass mandated standardized tests. As success on standardized assessment becomes more and more important in the US, I feel certain that textbooks for disciplines such as history and science will follow suit. Unfortunately, in my view, the US gives little importance to the study of foreign languages, so these textbooks remain challenging, although Spanish is being encouraged at earlier grades than in previous decades.

If this paper asks more questions that it answers, it is because that, as an artist and an educator, I feel the need and the obligation to ask the kinds of questions that fuel interesting and important discussions, and, in addition, to turn those questions on their heads, to evoke the interpretive palindrome---to bring into the discussion both the antecedents and possible outcomes, the spoken premises and unspoken biases. It is easy for students, and teachers, to accept textbooks at face value, without serious critique of the process and without examining the editorial or consumer assumptions. It’s easy to dismiss a textbook as inappropriate to an area’s cultural norm. It’s easy to look back at the textbooks of previous decades and perceive distinct differences---whether these are seen as limitations or superiorities is always open to debate---and readers in 2023 may look back at current textbooks and react the same way. I hope to encourage all of us here today to do something that is **not** easy---to examine the textbooks in use today and to perceive them for what they are: the product of a particular culture at a particular period in time. Fad is not fact. Fashion is fallible. Today’s hot style is tomorrow’s vintage collectible. If we examine the cultural clues carefully, we can perceive our students’ textbooks for what they are---and more importantly, **why** they are.

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