

# **The Effects of Cognitive Consonance and Dissonance on Meaning-Making in a Fine Arts Museum: A Comparison of Visitors Viewing Historical Art and Contemporary Art**

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## **Context of the Research**

### **Introduction**

Museums today are broadening their mandates, recognizing that there is a public dimension to their existence as well as their well-established mandate of conservation. Museum professionals (educator, curators, public relations personnel) are beginning to see much broader possibilities for communicating with the public and enriching their visitors' aesthetic understanding than they have recognized in the past.

Exhibitions in museums do not need to address only the initiated few. A museum can become a center that facilitates and nurtures flexibility, creativity and rich emotional responses. Toward that end, it is important to provide the public with the means to explore works of art with the aim of deepening their aesthetic understanding.

Museums can become centers of education with varied and flexible educational approaches. Educational programs and exhibitions do take visitors' needs into consideration to some extent, but only so far as their needs are understood. This is why it is important to study the nature of viewers' attempts to understand works of art.

The nature of aesthetic understanding in a museum environment is crucial, from my perspective, because of the relations it engages. I have observed that much research has been carried out in the form of clinical studies conducted in controlled environments outside of museums (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). These studies overlook the importance of the social and physical context in which visitors develop their aesthetic understanding:

Similarly, everything that the visitor experiences contributes to the educational role of the museum. The architecture of the museum, the arrangement of the galleries, the style of the signage welcoming visitors (or the lack of orienting devices!), the composition of the staff, all contribute to communicating a museum's educational policy (Hein, 1998, p. 15).

But if museum environment and aesthetic understanding are interdependent, how do they interact? How do visitors construct meaning?

Viewers express their emotions: sometimes they feel pleasure or surprise while viewing works of art; sometimes they express displeasure or even repulsion toward works of art. A study of all of the aspects of the multifaceted relation of viewer to work of art in the museum setting goes beyond the scope of the research proposed here. It will be more effective to isolate one specific aspect and study it in detail.

The proposed research stems from my personal experience as a museum art educator at the National Gallery of Canada. In this qualitative study, I will concentrate on adults who visit the art museum frequently - at least twice a year - in order to gain insight into how they construct an understanding of works of art. I will do this by comparing the processes they use in viewing historical art and in viewing contemporary art. In this study, I am interested in finding how visitors understand works of art while being in a state of consonance or dissonance and how they proceed to make meaning. The focus of the research will be to identify the meaning-making categories derived from a state of consonance or dissonance which is expressed in the interaction between viewer and artwork. More specifically, I will explore the viewer's experience of pleasure or conflict within the meaning-making process, while viewing historical art and contemporary art.

### **Theoretical Justification**

#### **The Influence of Consonance and Dissonance on the Processes of Meaning-Making Involved in the Viewing of Historical Art and Contemporary Art**

In this study, the consonance and dissonance state is investigated within the framework of meaning-making strategies. In that perspective I identify the consonances and dissonances as a factor influencing how visitors make meaning from their encounter. The viewers' experiences of pleasure or conflict yields meaning-making as a process from which types, modes, styles can be discerned. Experiences will be monitored in order to identify varying strategies from each viewers' state of consonance or dissonance towards historical art and contemporary art:

I believe that our institutions can learn a great deal from the so-called "idiosyncratic" responses of visitors. When people engage their own subconscious, a process of personal creativity begins. Within museums, this process can extend the meanings offered up by the experts in very exciting ways. Perhaps museums need to acknowledge that a major dimension of meaning-making, one that is complementary to the institutional perspective, can be found within the public's own creative responses to the art. And there is a missing complement to our perspective on art - the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made that painfully clear. One need only spend some time in the contemporary galleries of any art museum to experience this reality (Worts, 1994, p. 10).

When we study adult visitors looking at historical art (Weltzl-Fairchild, 1997, 1998, 1999) we often see the viewer in a state of pleasure. The works viewed resonate with the viewer's expectations. We rarely observe conflict when a visitor looks at historical or figurative art. When we study adult visitors looking at contemporary art (Émond, 1998), we often observe a conflict arise between the viewer and the art object. Adults often feel strong dislike vis-à-vis contemporary art; they are repulsed by its materiality. Works are judged harshly and little aesthetic value is found in them.

On many occasions I have witnessed such reactions. For example, while conducting a guided tour of a contemporary art exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada, where I work, I experienced the wrath of an adult group toward a contemporary art exhibition. They lost no time in expressing their frustrations: "We cannot look at these objects any more!... This is not art. . . . This is a mockery. . . . How can you talk about these objects for more than five minutes; it's impossible!" These comments were expressed violently and the group moved toward me in a body, as if holding me responsible for the offence to their sensibilities. There is no doubt that this group felt repulsion at the sight of these contemporary artworks.

This experience brought home to me how deeply entrenched is the "popular myth" portraying contemporary art as an art form with the hidden agenda of heaping ridicule on the public. Clearly artists have always wished their work to be accessible, and this requires the participation of the viewer in a space that involves human aspirations and emotions.

Why choose to make a comparison between historical art and contemporary art? In studying the meaning-making processes of viewers, I expect to find the use of different strategies in dealing with historical art and contemporary art.

It appears to me that irritants in contemporary art have less to do with subject matter than they do with conflict embedded in the definition of contemporary art. Rejection by the viewer is understandable because the first impression he or she receives from contemporary art is its ambivalence in dealing with the complex reactions it sets in motion. This ambivalence or uncertain stance involved in the artwork's act of manipulating meaning may be disconcerting for the viewer, who is confronted by a proposition that simultaneously undermines established attitudes in visual appreciation and questions the legitimacy of the artist as speaking authority.

Whereas in historical forms of art the viewer works toward a resolving of conflict, in contemporary art resolution of conflict is not expected. Rather it is ambivalence that dictates the essence of the work and the quality of its reception. Thus, in contemporary art, the notions of dissonance or negativity have acquired a fundamental status (Rochlitz, 1994, p. 120). I concur with the view that the dissonance elicited by contemporary art entails "...an assertion that any work remains an unfinished project" (Lacroix, 1995, p. 51).

## Purposes and Goals of the Proposed Research

I propose in my doctoral project to shed some light on the processes of meaning-making of a group of visitors who will look at historical (1700 - 1890) and contemporary (1960 - ) art. By studying each visitor looking at these two categories of art, I hope to compare the differences and similarities in their processes of understanding or meaning-making, focusing my attention on the viewers' expressed consonances and dissonances. Are there differences or similarities in the viewers' attempts to construct meaning while looking at historical art and contemporary art? What is the role of consonances and dissonances in the understanding or meaning-making of historical and contemporary art? What types of consonances and dissonances are expressed by viewers looking at historical art? What types of consonances and dissonances are expressed by viewers looking at contemporary art? Are the same strategies of meaning-making used while viewing historical art and contemporary art? Are the same strategies of meaning-making used while experiencing a specific type of consonance or dissonance? Therefore the question to be studied in this research is: How do visitors develop meaning-making strategies when they are in a state of consonance or dissonance?

## Definition of Terms

### Aesthetic Understanding

When studying ways of understanding works of art what is often evoked is the notion of aesthetics. So much so that in order to grasp the meaning-making process I have to situate aesthetic understanding as an umbrella figure covering the whole of a museum experience (Housen, 1979). In aesthetic understanding the museum context comes into play, influencing how viewers make meaning.

In the context of the proposed research I agree with Richard Lachapelle's view on aesthetic understanding:

*Aesthetic understanding...*is the comprehension of the work of art, and of the psychological processes used to discover it, that the viewer is able or willing to communicate to the researcher (Lachapelle, 1994, p. 13-14).

As part of aesthetic understanding I will be looking at *meaning-making* which relates closely to a viewer's personal knowledge, personal experience, to his understanding of works of art (Hein 1998, Roberts 1997).

### Meaning-Making

Using the term "meaning-making" in the context of this study emphasizes the relevance of the personal connections viewers make in the process of making meaning. My intent is to show the importance of meaning-making, that is, a visitor looking at works of art and using his or her life experiences or previous

knowledge to make sense of the work (Abbott and Black, 1986, Silverman, 1995).

### **Historical Art**

Works of art from the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada in the period 1700 to 1890.

### **Contemporary Art**

Works of art from the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada beginning in 1960.

### **Cognitive Dissonances**

A visitor will often experience dissonance as a result of being confronted by a museum object, museum practice, or information that does not agree with previously held ideas. Conflict arising between the viewer and the work of art is called cognitive dissonance, which is "an emotional state...set up when two simultaneously held attitudes or cognition are inconsistent or when there is a conflict between belief and overt behavior" (Government of Canada, Linguistic Data Bank, 1996). The theory of cognitive dissonance was initially hypothesized and researched by Festinger (1957), and more recently by Wicklund and Brehm (1976) and Wetzl-Fairchild (1998).

### **Cognitive Consonances**

A visitor will often experience consonances as a result of being in complete harmony with the museum situation. Cognitive consonance is the antonym of cognitive dissonance. When a viewer is in a state of consonance, he or she often feels pleasure:

Cognitive consonance does not begin in conflict or a state of need or deficiency. It therefore does not lead to goal-seeking behavior to re-enter the previously experienced state of cognitive equilibrium. It is a condition of equilibrium. It is all positive. It is enjoyed for its own sake (Zusne, 1986, p. 537).

## **Design of the Research**

### **Research Methodology**

My research method could be described as a qualitative approach using phenomenography as its base:

...phenomenography is a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and

phenomena in, the world around them....An effort is made to uncover all the understandings people have of specific phenomena and to sort them into conceptual categories....(Marton, 1988, p. 144-145).

Originating from the thrust of educational research, the aim of phenomenography is to construct a path whereby understanding can be described in terms of purpose or actual results. The skills employed in the understanding process are seen as a function of experience. Data will be collected so as to establish a standpoint of experience from which I will analyze the discourse-based data. In the categorizing of the visitors' descriptions and using phenomenography as a type of qualitative research I will not only be sorting the data but looking for "the most distinctive characteristics that appear in those data; that is,...looking for structurally significant differences that clarify how people define some specific portion of the world" (Marton, 1988, p. 146).

### **Location**

This study will take place at the National Gallery of Canada, in a section of the Canadian galleries and a section of the contemporary galleries of the permanent collection. The gallery spaces will be delimited so as to avoid dispersal: too much space and too many works for the study time frame would dilute the significance of the data. Random exploration of the collection in the limited spaces will be encouraged; thus, viewers' varying remarks will tend to revolve around the same works, giving a more concentrated basis for comparison.

### **Subjects**

Twelve adult participants will be recruited for the study. Subjects will be selected with regard to their age, gender, educational backgrounds and frequency of art museum attendance. The 12 adults recruited for this research will be non-expert art viewers, meaning that they have no formal training in studio practices or in art history. Potential participants will be recruited through my observations and daily dealings with the museum public. Once I have approached potential participants, I will initiate further contacts, and we will discuss the project in relation to their level of comfort. Short biographical histories will be completed for each participant, and these will include questions seeking information on previous museum attendance, previous art and art history training, their field of work, and their educational backgrounds. Each participant will be asked to sign a consent form before the research procedure is initiated, authorizing me to tape their comments while accompanying them in their gallery visit. The participants will choose either English or French, as the subject will be compared only with himself or herself in the study. I do not foresee any problems in letting the participants choose the language that they will use. In this I follow the study conducted by Richard Lachapelle for his thesis *Aesthetic understanding as informed experience: Ten informant-made videographic accounts about the process of aesthetic learning* (1994), which was conducted in the National Capital Region:

In choosing to conduct this study at the National Gallery of Canada, I had to consider very carefully the issue of language. Since I am fluently bilingual, I would have erected an unnecessary and artificial barrier between myself as a researcher and numerous potential informants by selecting English over French, or French over English, as the language of the study.... Furthermore, given the present political climate in Canada, citizens of the capital Region expect, as a matter of principle, that they will be addressed in the language of their choice. Therefore, the only practical answer to this problem was to allow informants to use whatever language they preferred (Lachapelle, 1994, p. 49).

By working with those whom I describe as frequent art museum visitors, I hope to explore their process of meaning-making in viewing works of art. It is my assumption that using frequent visitors that are not specialists in art or art history will provide information on how non-experts construct meaning and on the ways of understanding they have developed that lead us to believe that their experience is both functional and rewarding.

### **Instrument for Collecting the Data**

The procedure for collecting the data required for this study will be the same for each subject. I will be using the talk-aloud protocol, accompanying each participant through his or her visit as a silent observer. The procedure entails collecting subjects' audiotaped responses to works of art. By using the talk-aloud protocol I hope to gain access to what goes on in the viewer's mind while looking at art. Having the participant talk aloud is the closest I can come to having the viewer "think aloud" while working through the specific task at hand, that is, looking at art (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). This type of protocol has been discussed and validated by Dufresne-Tassé *et al.* (1998).

Before entering the galleries, each participant will be given instructions on how to deliver their remarks. Specifically, they will be asked to say out loud what they think and feel while visiting the galleries, and told not to be concerned with justifying their comments. Subjects will be instructed to stay within a predetermined space in the permanent collection of the Canadian galleries and the contemporary galleries. Of the 12 participants, 3 men and 3 women will start their visit in the Canadian (historical) permanent collection, while the other 3 men and 3 women will begin in the contemporary permanent collection. Each group will be allowed a maximum of 30 minutes in each collection. After each visit I will write comments, observations that I feel might be useful in the analysis of the data.

The research protocol will generate the audio recording of the subjects' verbal responses made during their visits of the two permanent collections. As a first step in the analysis, the audio recordings will be transcribed using the following guidelines: "...toutes les 'fautes' langagières qui peuvent se glisser dans la conservation courante sont restituées comme telles, et même les propos

mal organisés, du discours oral spontané, sont fidèlement recopiés" (Sauvé, 1996, p. 184).

### **Instrument of Data Collection Analysis**

A significant amount of text will be generated from the audiotape transcriptions, which will be analyzed using the categories identified by Weltzl-Fairchild (1997, 1998, 1999) in her study of the typologies of consonance and dissonance allowing a closer scrutiny of the participants' discourses. As each viewer may operate differently in a state of consonance or dissonance, the instrument permits the emergence of individualized approaches and thus creating categories of analysis in an inductive fashion, after data has been collected. Weltzl-Fairchild's instrument will identify the content with descriptions such as: *the viewer is referring to his or her knowledge; the viewer is referring to himself or herself; the viewer is referring to the work of art; the viewer is referring to the artist.*

In this research I hope to sort and code the data in a way that allows identification of the different strategies that the viewer uses in the process of meaning-making; that is, while experiencing consonances or dissonances in viewing historical art and contemporary art. From the collection of these different strategies I will develop categories that will facilitate the identification of one or several processes in the viewers' meaning-making in understanding of works of art. I will identify the strategies by focusing on the content of the viewers' comments while looking at one work of art or linking his ideas from work to work. It is thus important that I accompany the visitors during their visit, so that I can easily note the work of art they are talking about. Then I will sort the information visitors are using to understand the artwork.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for museum educators to understand the needs of the public; however, we have very little knowledge about how the viewer relates to works of art. This research is my attempt to understand how visitors make meaning in an art museum.

This study will verify whether there is a significant impact on cognitive consonances and dissonances from the kind of art that museum-goers view, specifically whether there is a difference in impact between historical and contemporary art. What is the role of dissonance and consonance in the understanding of historical and contemporary art? If we can decipher the viewers' processes of meaning-making while viewing historical and contemporary art, we will be able to devise educational approaches that will go a long way in making today's art a site for meaningful investigation by the public.

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