Beyond Art History
Adult Questioning Strategies
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The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Today’s Goal

To provide you with tools and concepts that are useful in facilitating robust conversations about art
How We’ll Get There

- Provide context
- Demonstrate
- Discuss strategies
- Provide tools
A Question For You

Is our mission to create art historians or . . . inspire art lovers?
How many of you . . . .

• Have been challenged when engaging with adults?
• Struggled to get them to talk?
• Had a group who wanted to focus on one element of a piece?
• Had someone dominating the conversations once it gets going?
• Found yourselves focusing on history and ‘information’?
Adult Tour Basics

• Visitors bring their own experiences to the museum
• They make meaning out of what they see
• Visitors want to learn something about the art
Adult Tours at the Nelson-Atkins Museum

• Interactive

• Learn from and with our visitors

• We base the discussion on what we hear

• Comes from the Constructivism theory of education
“Give the [learners] something to do, not something to learn; and if the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.”

John Dewey
Demo
The Croquet Party
Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883)
1871
Let’s Break Down This Experience
What did you notice about our discussion on this piece of art?
Strategies for Enhancing Adult Tours

- Tour Introductions
- Visual Thinking Strategies
- Art Experience Wheel
- Directed Looking Questions
Tour Introductions
Tour Introductions

• Give visitors a clear understanding of what’s coming

• Emphasize that it’s interactive - you want their opinions and questions

• All perspectives are welcome; you’re genuinely interested in what they have to say

• Set a friendly, inviting tone – be the host!

• Have FUN!
Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)
Visual Thinking Strategies

• What's going on in this picture?

• What do you see that makes you say that?

• What more can we find?
The Art Experience Wheel
The Art Experience Wheel

- Viewer Experience
- Formal Elements
- Design Principles
- Medium
- Technique
- Subject Depicted
- Function
- Artist Biography
- Context
- Critical Discourse
- Meaning(s)

Work of Art
• Art Experience Wheel - created by Jan Schall, retired Curator of Contemporary Art

• Multiple entry points to pave way for a robust conversation

• Bases most of the focus on visitors’ thoughts/observations

• Promotes a 3-dimensional conversation
2-Dimensional Conversation

Docent → Visitors

Visitors ← Docent
Uses For The Art Experience Wheel

- Prepares you to engage with visitors from any entry point
- Helps you develop deep knowledge of an artwork
- Useful in engaging with visitors about artwork unfamiliar to you
Directed Looking Questions
• Use open-ended questions
• Use questions to “move around” the Art Experience Wheel
• Steer away from unproductive rabbit holes
• Help manage a person who wants to control the conversation
• Can lead to dropping ‘pearls’ of information that are MORE memorable for visitors when related to their comments
Let’s Try This Again!
Heineken

Idelle Weber (1932 - 2020)

1976
Let’s Debrief!
What do you see?
Who are these people?
What's this about?
Purpose?
Themes artist wanted to explore (i.e., human condition, cultural issues)
Who made it?
What do we know about the artist?
History, politics, sociology, economics, philosophy, science, art, music, dance, theater and literature
What happened during this time?
Speculation - avoid if you can. Try not to debate theory. Avoid discussing what we don’t know.
What does it mean?
Message? Symbols? What is the story?
Emotional, intellectual, kinesthetic response
How were you meant to experience it?
How do you experience it now?
What can alter/affect/change that experience?
Work of Art

Formal Elements

Meaning(s)

Viewer Experience

Design Principles

Color, line, shape/form, space, texture

Harmony, variety, balance, movement, proportion, repetition

Medium

Oil, acrylic, watercolor, pencil, charcoal, stone, metal, wood, glass, etc.

Sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, print, film, video, etc.

Technique

Context

History, politics, sociology, economics, philosophy, science, art, music, dance, theater and literature

What happened during this time?

Artist Biography

Who made it?
What do we know about the artist?

Subject Depicted

Function

Purpose?

Work of Art

Conceptual

Perceptual
In the 1970s, Weber moved away from Pop art and became a leading member of the Photorealistic movement, painting close-up shots of trash and litter that simultaneously captured the beauty and decay of urban life.

This was created in the ’70s. Is this a scene that we could see now? Why or why not?

The artist was influenced by the beauty of urban decay. How do you see that represented in the art?

Was one of the few women involved in the Pop movement of the 1950s and ’60s.

Her work “expanded the notion of what ‘Pop’ could be,”

In the early 1970’s became interested in studying and depicting the piles of cast-off objects lying along city gutters and sidewalks.

Unusual for a Pop artist, Weber embraced the political turbulence of the era in her work, addressing broader themes such as consumerism.

Her mother would take her the the Chicago art Institute as a child.

Her new parents gave her the name adoption after her mother died in childbirth.

Was born Tessie Pasternack on March 12, 1932. Her father put her up for

1932

Significant role for federal government in waste management (1976)

The Universal Product Code is introduced (1973)

Oregon offers cash for recycling. Other states follow (1971)

First recycling logo created (1970)

The assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963)

The United States participation in the Vietnam war (1955)

New York Sanitation Workers walkout (1968)

Context

Meaning(s)

Viewing Experience

Formal Elements

Design Principles

Medium

Technique

Subject Depicted

Function

Artist Biography

Context

Conceptual

• But Idelle Weber was also influenced by events of her time
• The United States participation in the Vietnam war (1955-1973)
• The assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963)
• New Your Sanitation Workers walkout (1968)
• 1st Earth Day - first recycling logo created (1970)
• Oregon offers cash for recycling. Other states follow (1971)
• The Universal Product Code is introduced (1973)
• The passage of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act creates the first significant role for federal government in waste management (1976)

• 1932-2020 (age of 88)
• Was born Tessie Pasternack on March 12, 1932. Her father put her up for adoption after her mother died in childbirth.
• Her new parents gave her the name Idelle Lois Feinberg.
• Her mother would take her the the Chicago art Institute as a child.
• When she was 8, the family relocated to California where she received her Master’s degree in art.
• In 1956, one of her pieces was accepted in an open-sit exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Traveling to see the exhibit, she wound up staying in New York for the rest of her life.
• She achieved success despite the hurdles she faced as a woman in a largely male milieu. In 1957, Robert Motherwell wouldn’t let her audit a class if she were planning to marry and have children (she did both)
• Met her future husband, Julian Weber, a lawyer who went on to be president of the humor magazine National Lampoon – married in 1957. Had two children.
• If you could ask the artist a question, what would it be?

• Why trash?
• Does the large size change the experience? How?
• Does it change anything to know what was happening at this time?
• Were you surprised the artist was a woman? Why or why not?
• How would it smell if you were “inside” this work of art?
• We’ve talked a lot about the ugliness of the subject matter. Does anyone see anything beautiful in this painting?

• Color is clear, bright, and realistic
• Use of complementary colors – red/green
• Texture – can almost feen the realistic textures of the trash
• Would this piece feel different is it was in B&W?

• Rhythm as red color is used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement.
• Proportion is realistic
• Repetition of the word/logo Heineken the repetition creates unity within the work of art.
• The balance – distribution of color and shapes – is asymmetrical and feels stable

Perceptual

• Oil on Linen
• Dimensions: 47 1/2 x 72 1/2 inches
• Were you surprised to find out this is a painting and not a photograph?

• Associated with the Photorealists
• Used photographs as a preliminary step to the finished painting
• Searched city streets for accidental arrangements of litter that she found evocative in terms of color, shape, and texture.
• She photographed the arrangement using 35mm color slide film and used these images as memory aids in creating the final painting.
• Why might the artist have used this realistic technique with this subject matter?
• How does the technique affect the way you look at the work of art?

Overhead view of curbside trash

• In the early 1970’s became interested in studying and depicting the piles of cast-off objects lying along city gutters and sidewalks.
• We have talked a lot about the subject matter...why does this surprise you?
• Many of you have talked about the activity or the story you see. If this is part of a story, what happened before? After?
Summary of Strategies

- Tour Introductions
- Visual Thinking Strategies
- Art Experience Wheel
- Directed Looking Questions
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Available Materials

• The Art Experience Wheel
• An Art Experience Wheel template
• Ideas for good open-ended questions
• Tour Introduction Basics
• PowerPoint presentation
• “Homework” slide copies
Thank you!