

Touring Strategies for Challenging Art

“Stop thinking about art works as objects, and start thinking about them as triggers for experiences.”

Brian Eno, Artist & Musician

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Reaching New Heights

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Strategies for Engaging Visitors with Non-Representational Art

Painting: *Bullfight*, Elaine de Kooning, 1959 - 77 5/8 in x 130 1/4 in, Oil on canvas

- To illustrate for the Visitor what non-representational art is rather than what it is not; that it represents the elements of art; that the elements of art are the object or subject of the work of art; to encourage a personal relationship with the work of art
 - Art Sleuth: Elements of Art
 - line
 - shape
 - size
 - space
 - texture
 - color

Suggested Questions for 6th Grade through Adults

- Before we begin, what do you see? Do you like it? Why or why not?
 - Find a line in the painting. Describe its location. Is it wide or narrow; thick or thin; slow or fast? Do you like it? Tell me more.
 - Find a shape in the painting and describe it. Where is it located? What color(s) is it? Is it organic (from nature) or free-form (non-recognizable)? What impact does it have on you?
 - Now look at the size of the painting? What effect does the size have on you?

Does the paint go clear up to the edge or is it framed by unpainted canvas? How does this affect your experience of the piece?
 - Is there a foreground and a background? Do the lines recede into the distance? Are the shapes and lines sized to create the illusion of depth? What is the impact the lack of perspective has on you?
 - Is the paint thick or thin; bumpy or smooth? How do you respond to the quality of the paint?
 - Consider the colors. Are they warm or cool? Do they shout or whisper? What response do you have to these colors? Do the colors suggest movement? If so, how? Which color most leads the eye around the canvas?
 - Now that you've spent some time with this piece, how has your first reaction changed? If you could take it home, where would you hang it? Why?

- Alternate Suggestions for “*How does this make you feel?*” - How does this affect you? What Impact does this have on you? Describe your response to this.

Suggested Activity for 3rd through 5th Grade

Give each child an Art Sleuth card that names the art element and gives an image of the element. Tell the child to find the best example of that element in the gallery or the work of art. Ask him why he thinks this is the best example. Once through all the cards, ask the children to pass their card to the person on their left and repeat the exercises.

Painting - *Dune*, Joan Mitchell, 1970 - 98 in x 78 5/8 in, oil on canvas

- To illustrate for the Visitor who might dismiss abstraction as incomprehensible how they possess the innate skills to make a personal evaluation of an abstract work of art; to encourage a personal relationship with the work of art
 - Narrative: Meeting a Stranger
 - Gender
 - Age
 - Clothing
 - Personality
 - Voice

Suggested Questions for 6th Grade through Adult

- Before we begin, what is your reaction to this work of art? Tell me more.
 - Pretend this is a person you are meeting for the first time. Is it male or female? What in the painting suggests this?
 - How old is this person? What suggests this?
 - How is this person dressed? Casually/Formally? Summer/Fall/Winter/Spring? What kinds of fabric are used in the clothing? Is the fabric closely woven or gauzy? Heavy or light weight? Is the clothing fashionable or functional? What suggests this?
 - How does this person present herself? Is she outgoing/shy; happy/sad; energetic/calm? What suggests this?
 - If this person could talk, what would she say? What makes you think so?
 - Now that you’ve spent some time with this work of art, how has your first reaction changed? If you could take it home, where would you hang it? Why?

Strategies for Engaging Adults with Controversial Art

Strategy Cluster 1: Assisting visitors to find meaning and personal connection in a controversial work of art through close looking

Painting: *School Days*, Robert Colescott, 1988

- **Visual Inventory**
 - **Name anything you see in this painting.** What do you notice first – it can be objects, colors, repeating patterns, figures – no wrong answers!
 - **Build on visitors' answers to establish relationships between things/people** – What emotions are portrayed/elicited? What might the interaction between figures in the painting tell us about the artist's intent? How does color add to the impact of the painting?
 - **How would your experience of this painting change if we altered one thing about it?** (Changing the race of figures in the painting, changing scale of painting, muting colors or changing to black/white painting?) Since the artist chose to make the painting the way he did, what might this tell us about his meaning or message?
 - **Reveal name of artist and the name of the painting.** Does this give us further clues about the artist's intent?
- **I see. I think. I wonder.** – **Strategy from Harvard University's Project Zero (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/>) Artful Thinking strategies.** This is a variation of the Visual Inventory strategy, but allows visitors to focus on their own questions and uncertainties, rather than trying to "figure out" the artist's message. With a reticent group of visitors, docent can lead the discussion with something he/she is puzzled or wondering about, then ask visitors if looking carefully leads them to wonder about anything in the art work.
- **Close Looking using binary/opposite word pairings.** Docent prepares strips of paper with pairs of opposing words that relate to elements of the art work. Ask visitors to look closely at the work of art to determine if either or both of their words are expressed by the painting. Does looking for opposing content help open your eyes to wider interpretative possibilities for the meaning of the work of art?

Strategy Cluster 2: Assisting visitors to be open to close looking at works of art they may find offensive or off-putting, thereby increasing the likelihood they will find a meaningful connection with a work of art they may have avoided.

Painting: *History is Painted by the Victors* – Kent Monkman, 2013

- **Framing -- the process of defining the context or issues that surround a problem or event in a way that serves to influence how the context or issues are seen and evaluated.**
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 - **Offering a photograph and a quote by artist talking about the work or about him/herself before looking at the work of art, perhaps as a part of a transition from the previous stop**
 - **Showing related images from art history or current publications that may highlight an artist's technical skill or involvement with current issues prior to looking at work of art**
 - **Standing in front of work of art, ask visitors what they notice that is related to the framing you have done.** What else do you notice about this painting? What might the information shared through framing suggest as the narrative that the artist wants to present? Did knowing something about the artist in advance help you engage with the painting?
- **Offering Content Nuggets –** Pass out slips of paper to visitors containing quotes from or information about the artist or the work of art. **Standing directly in front of the work, ask each visitor to consider the information they have on their content nugget as they look closely at the work of art.** Begin discussion with basic questions – What do you first notice about this work of art? What one word could you come up with to describe this painting? What is your first emotional reaction when looking at it? **Then ask visitors if they wish to share their content nugget and how it relates to the painting.**
- **Offering visitors an opportunity to express how they feel when they look at a controversial work of art. Distribute colored slips of paper with colors tied to a key which expresses different reactions (hopeless, angry, empathetic, optimistic, empowered, confused).** **Have visitors give you slip that most closely reflects their initial reaction to the work of art, and see if there is consensus.** What emotions predominate? Are you surprised at the emotions selected by others in the group? Does seeing how others responded lead you to reconsider the work of art as you try to understand the reactions of others? Does seeing how others respond to the painting alter your perspective on it as you look more closely?

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING VISITORS WITH ELECTRONIC MEDIA

- Respect the work of art!
- Take your time!
- Ask, “*What do you notice?*” rather than, “*What do you think?*”
- Imagine who the work is for if it’s not for you...
- Trust your impressions!

EXAMPLES:

***Chamber*, Charles Sandison, 2009**

Video Installation

Charles Sandison’s video installation *Chamber* uses computer-generated projections of light in dazzling fashion. In an otherwise dark room, multi-colored projections form words and symbols as abstract imagery dance across the raw surfaces of the walls. The artist’s work employs 21st-century technology to evoke primal feelings of wonder and awe.

***Zero*, Tony Oursler, 1996**

Projector, DVD player, video tape, trunk, and doll

Tony Oursler manipulates the intended function of everyday objects to create works that literally imitate the human form. These sculptural works, often made from electronics that are fast becoming obsolete, speak to us as much about the past as they do about the present.

QUESTIONS TO INITIATE A BROAD-BASED DIALOGUE ABOUT ELECTRONIC MEDIA

- What IS art? If this is art, what does it mean to ME? OR what role does art play in our society?
- What can I see just by looking at this art work?
- Is art defined by particular boundaries? If so, what are they? Have the boundaries changed over the course of history?
- Where do contemporary artists find inspiration? Personal experience or emotions? Current times?
- What are the subjects, issues, and themes important to artists working today?
- When was it made, and what was happening in art and broader history at that time?
- How can the passage of time affect the meaning of an artwork? Or change the way it can be shared?

- How was this art work actually made?
- What materials and tools do artists use to create art today? Have the tools changed over time?
- What possibilities could we imagine for the future of electronic art?
- What role does beauty play in contemporary art? Does an artwork need to be beautiful? Why or why not? Who decides what is beautiful?
- How does the work relate to other ideas or events in the world and/or in your personal life?
- What is disruptive, uncertain or familiar about the the work of art in front of you?
- What would you find if you climbed into the video and chose an object to be/or interact with?
- How does the location of a work of art affect its meaning?

TEENS & CONTEMPORARY ART

Often docents (and other museum educators) have some anxiety about working with teenagers. Why?

A Unique Audience

Period of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development - with a wide range of maturity levels.

- They may ask questions you don't have answers to.
- They may have alternate agendas.
- Their behavior may be disrespectful, they may get bored.
- Being on a tour not necessarily their decision.

Let Them Know

- Tell them what you're going to see and do.

Hooking Them

- If they aren't hooked on the first work, change artworks immediately or it will set a tone of boredom for the rest of the tour. Docents can minimize tour restlessness by moving through or around the group while talking.

Finding your Approach

- The tour should be fun, informative, selfless, and honest. Teen audiences don't need you to be trendy and hip, they want you to be genuine and sincere.

Framework for Choosing Contemporary Art Objects:

- **Choose objects that relate to students' lives.** Relevancy is extremely important!
- **Remember the WOW factor.** If it blinks, speaks, glows, makes noise or speaks... it will be conversational!
- **Explore ideas that resonate with teens.** Teens are passionate and inquisitive!
- **Be creative in how you engage students with objects and ideas.** Teen visitors are open to multiple perspectives and appreciate that there are many ways to look at the same thing!

Ideas for Engagement

Tell them it's special -

- Encourage teens to consider how contemporary artists get ideas, and where their inspiration comes from.
- You can easily get teens focused and talking by beginning with a statement or question about something from the current pop culture landscape. What value is placed on artists and their art today? In addition to museums and galleries, where else can art be shown? How does location of a work affect its meaning?

Give them insider knowledge -

- Contemporary artists and teens have an immediate connection because they are both actively engaged in asking questions about life and culture and in overturning the status quo.
- How does this work tell us something about the world we live in?

Pay attention to current events/cultural touchstones -

- Inviting teens to think about ideas or concepts will always work better if you can connect the subject to how it will affect or impact them.
- What visual, literary and/or historical references do they see in the work?

Give them choice -

- Ask them to consider the concept - the ideas, choices or decisions the artist made to create the work (such as selection of materials, installation decisions, color or image choices).
- Why do they think the artist made those choices?
- If you were going to create a work of art, what would you do? How would you best express the the idea/theme represented here?

Gallery Activity: Art & Descriptive Words

The docent introduces a contemporary work of art and asks the students to take the time to look at the object and boil their reaction, thought, feeling, etc. to one word. When all have had a chance to look for a time, the docent asks for “popcorn” responses (meaning, students can just call out their word and don’t need to raise hands.) The docent then notes the variety of words used to describe the work and how descriptive words can really help connect to works of art.

Descriptive Word List:

Extraordinary, Wondering, Profound, Permanent, Hope, Heavy, Authentic, Weak, Practical, Rare, Symbolic, Quiet, Powerful, Loud, Pure, Plain, Heroic, Commanding, Organic, Subtle, Mythological, Graceful, Ordinary, Calm, Spectacular, Clever, Ornate, Vast, Complicated, Fierce, Epic, Voiceless, Real, Thundering, Common

Gallery Activity: Love Letter:

Docents give each student a piece of paper and pencil and asks them to write a letter about the contemporary work of art and how it connects to their life. The letter can include:

- It is addressed Dear (Artwork, Artist, Character in the work)
- What the students see?
- The connection they perceive between the art and their own lives.
- What 2-3 questions they want to know about the Art Object?

Afterwards, the docent regroups students and students share the most important question they would ask the art work; OR spotlight a sentence from their letter; OR read their letter to the group.

Gallery Activity: Two-Minute Twitter

The docent gives each student a piece of paper and pencil and asks students to create a Twitter posting (“Tweet”), using only 140 characters or less, evaluating the work of art they see. The Tweet must have pass-along information and present the students opinion of the work's success or failure:

- What qualities of the work make you feel it is a success or failure?
- Compare it with similar works that you think are good or bad.
- What criteria can you list to help others judge this work?
- How original is the work? Why do you feel this work is original or not original?

The docent asks students to share their responses with the group and looks for connections or themes to build a deeper conversation upon.

Gallery Activity: Devil's Advocate

The docent breaks the students up into 2-4 small groups and asks them to take time to look at the object and compose both an argument for why a piece is successful and why it is not successful. By having to explain opinions opposite of their own, students must think even more deeply about what they see and how they interpret the artist's work.

Gallery Activity: Why/ What If/ How

The docent introduces a contemporary work of art and asks the students to take the time to look at the object and formulate a question they have using the “Why/ What If/ How” sequence of questioning.

- Come up with a theme for kids to tackle (e.g., Words in Art)
- Challenge the students to start using Why questions to explore reasons behind the theme (“Why did the artist incorporate words into the work of art?”)
- Use What If questions to try to come up with imaginative ideas for alternative solutions (“What if the work of art held all the secrets of the universe in some kind of code?”)
- Identify How questions to try to make those “What If” ideas more realistic and actionable (“How would we identify the code?” How would we benefit from knowing the code?”; “How was the art work actually made?”)

This can be imaginative and fun and there are no incorrect answers. If you're stuck asking expansive “why” or “what if” questions for too long—it may be time to push on to the next stage of inquiry. The point, after all, is not to question endlessly—but to use questions as a means of steadily advancing toward an answer.