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Rethinking Critical Thinking and Its Role in Art Museum Education

OLGA HUBARD

Meaningful interactions with works of art are often absent from education. Across the country, art museums are intent on changing this situation. But to incorporate art viewing¹ into an educational milieu that does not value art, art museum educators are constantly forced to justify the educational value of their programs. One common argument to substantiate the worth of art viewing is that it promotes critical thinking. In fact, several museums across the United States assert that the goal of their education programs is precisely to foster critical thinking in students.²

These assertions are aligned with a growing body of research that proves that encounters with works of art can help develop skills associated with critical thinking.³ According to Willingham, critical thinking consists of “seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, [and] deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts.” In sync with this definition,⁴ the research shows that guided dialogues about art can promote skills, including observation, questioning, association, inference, evidential reasoning, and openness to multiple perspectives.

The link between certain art viewing programs and the development of particular critical thinking skills is thus unquestionable. This said, it is one thing to recognize this link and quite another to say that art viewing *matters because* it fosters critical thinking skills. In this essay I will critique the notion that the purpose and contribution of art museum education is to develop discrete critical thinking skills in students. I will articulate several problems inherent to this idea and conclude by inviting museum educators to embrace a broader vision of their work.

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Problem 1

The research that links art viewing to critical thinking skills focuses on programs that engage students with artworks through inquiry methods. According to Audet and Jordan, inquiry in education is generally associated with science. The National Science Education Standards echo this, stating that “inquiry into authentic questions generated from student experiences is the central strategy of teaching science.”⁵

In inquiry learning, students construct and discover knowledge for themselves. To this purpose, teachers invite them to observe their surroundings, detect peculiarities, ask questions, infer meaning, probe for alternative explanations, form conclusions, offer evidence, and continually reflect on their understanding.⁶ The close relationship of science education and inquiry is to be expected; the belief that knowledge is the result of observation and rigorous evidential reasoning is at the heart of the scientific method. Nonetheless, inquiry is also used in subjects such as social studies, language arts, math, and philosophy, and students are encouraged to think critically across the curriculum.⁷

In inquiry-based art viewing programs, students spend extended periods of time with a particular artwork. A facilitator—usually a school teacher or museum educator—encourages them to observe the work, to make connections, to interpret, to consider alternative readings, and to ground their assertions on what they see.⁸ Through this process, students naturally practice and hone observation, association, interpretation, and the other skills that the research highlights.

But as mentioned earlier, observation, association, interpretation, and so on are skills germane to the process of inquiry—a process that occurs in science and other subjects when good teaching is in place. So, while it is valid to assert that students develop critical thinking skills through inquiry-based art viewing programs, one can hardly argue that this is the contribution of art viewing: observation, association, and the other skills are practiced whenever a rigorous inquiry into an object (or situation) with visual features is conducted—whether the object is an artwork or not. And if one positions critical thinking as the contribution of art museum education, informed decision makers will realize that critical thinking will happen in a school regardless of whether students engage with art, as long as solid inquiry is conducted in other subjects.⁹

An alternative advocacy strategy, then, is to focus on the overlap across disciplines and to argue that the purpose of art viewing is to promote skills that are useful in other subjects. As art education scholars such as Eisner, Hetland, and Winner¹⁰ have pointed out, this, too, is a weak argument. Its flaw becomes evident if one reverses the contention to assert that the purpose of science, or social studies, or language arts is to foster critical thinking skills that will help students in their encounters with art. That this can

happen is feasible: skills utilized across subjects can be developed in one field and applied in others. Thoughtful teachers know how to make the best of such interdisciplinary interrelationships. Nevertheless, the purpose of a subject is never merely to support the next one. In spite of tremendous overlap, each discipline, at its core, underscores distinct aspects of the human experience and provides unique lenses for understanding—lenses that together give students a broader, deeper vision of their worlds. To stress what Eisner and others have argued, to establish the worth of art education based on its support to other subjects is to devalue the unique perspective of art from the start.

Problem 2

With the focus outside art education, we fail to consider what critical thinking skills might afford students within the realm of art viewing. In effect, the assertion that the purpose of art viewing is to develop critical thinking skills implies that there is no motive for someone to engage with art once he or she has mastered these valuable skills.

Museum educators often refer to the emphasis on skills as an antidote to the traditional top-down lecture. In a typical lecture, the educator defines the content that is worth knowing and passes it on to students, shutting out any questions, observations, and impressions students may have. By contrast, a skills-based program empowers students to make meaning from artworks for themselves, veering away from predetermined content. The value of equipping students with critical thinking skills that facilitate meaning making is unquestionable. The problem is that the discourse about the purpose of art viewing ends up only focusing on the development of skills and disregards that skills are valuable, not for themselves, but because of the meanings, understandings, and experiences they afford. From a disciplinary perspective, saying that the purpose of art viewing is to foster critical thinking skills is akin to saying that the purpose of learning to play an instrument is to promote finger speed, strength, and precision. Speed, strength, and precision: Yes, but to what end? And observation, interpretation, and evidential reasoning: Yes, but for what purpose? What might students adept at these skills gain through their encounters with art—beyond practicing these skills? What kinds of understandings, or meanings, or experiences will they have access to? How might these meanings matter?

It seems that in their efforts to avoid the predetermined contents of the traditional lecture, some art museum educators have come to neglect the significance of *all* contents—including those that students shape through their encounters with art. And if we don't consider the kinds of meanings, experiences, and understandings that emerge when students think critically about an artwork, our contentions about the purpose and contribution of art museum education remain superficial at best.

Problem 3

The sort of logical reasoning that inquiry affords is one important way to make meaning from artworks. But unlike the contents of written texts, artworks present themselves as physical (or virtual) entities that exist in the same space as we do. Works of visual art are embodied in images that the eyes perceive and in things that can potentially be touched.¹¹ Therefore, there is a sense of immediacy in the way viewers begin to apprehend an artwork: a physical, sensorial, and often emotional engagement that precedes, and sometimes overrides, the conceptual.¹²

This is not to say that art always speaks exclusively to people's bodies and emotions. As was implied earlier, artworks can provoke viewers to form compelling interpretations through rational thought processes.¹³ Thus, experiences with works of art can be simultaneously conceptual and embodied; they can set in motion at once a person's reason, senses, emotions, and motor channels of response.¹⁴

For many education professionals, the idea of embodied ways of knowing is suspect. A long-standing Cartesian mindset underlies this reticence. The Cartesian schema, inherited from the Enlightenment and prevailing in today's educational milieu, splits intellect from body and considers logical reasoning as the one path to true knowledge. Art programs that focus chiefly on measurable, rational skills epitomize this approach. From the twentieth century on, however, humanists, scientists, and educators have reconsidered the status of the body and emotions in the construction of knowledge.¹⁵ As Lakoff and Johnson assert, "the mind is not merely corporeal but also passionate, desiring, social";¹⁶ hence, "our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies."¹⁷

Stating that the purpose of encounters with works of art is to develop rational thinking skills is to neglect the complex, multidimensional processes through which humans come to know the world. That this assertion is made in the context of art education is paradoxical, as artworks are uniquely positioned to engage and integrate multiple ways of knowing.¹⁸ From a practical standpoint, art viewing programs whose chief goal is to promote discrete measurable skills risk depriving students of important aspects of what it is to learn from art. Can one say that a language-based rational inquiry into an artwork is of necessity more educational than an encounter that eludes logical reasoning and perhaps even words? On what basis? To address this question one needs to go beyond thinking about art and ponder what kinds of experiences are worthy of a growing mind.¹⁹

Final Thought

To return to the issue of advocacy: One common claim is that, given the current educational climate, highlighting measurable reasoning skills is the

best way to secure the place of art museum education programs in schools.²⁰ Maybe so—especially if decision makers are ill informed. But if we choose this argument for marketing purposes, we must at least distinguish our selling line from the philosophy that guides our programs. This way, one argument will get our feet through the door while a richer one shapes multidimensional art experiences for students.

There is an alternative to this potentially effective, though somewhat schizophrenic, approach. It involves joining forces to promote a broader vision of education—one that is hospitable to the richness of art and that has room for more than the easily measurable. People reluctant to take this path will comment on the implausibility of changing an overwhelming, increasingly restricted approach to education. These skeptics may or may not be right. But if we stop short of trying, then we know for certain that the troubling status quo will ultimately continue to control what students learn—and what they do not.

NOTES

1. When I use the term *art viewing*, I am referring to the active, meaningful interactions between viewers and artworks that quality art museum education programs promote, and not to the passive, disengaged, or distanced art viewing associated with top-down lectures or forced museum visits.
2. Rebecca Shulman Herz, "From the Guest Editor," *Journal of Museum Education* 32, no. 2 (2007).
3. Marianna Adams et al., *Thinking through Art: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum School Partnership Program Year 3 Results* (Edgewater, NJ: Institute for Learning Innovation, 2007); Fely Curva et al., *Artful Citizen Project: Three Year Project Report* (Tallahassee, FL: Wolfsonian, 2005); Herz, "From the Guest Editor"; Abigail Hosen, "Aesthetic Thought, Critical Thinking and Transfer," *Arts and Learning Journal* 18, no. 1 (2002); Randi Korn, *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: Teaching Literacy through Art. Final Report: Synthesis of 2004-05 and 2005-06 Studies* (Alexandria, VA: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2007); S. Tishman, "MoMA's Visual Thinking Curriculum: Investigating the Educational Impact and Potential of the Museum of Modern Art's Visual Thinking Curriculum," Harvard University, <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/Research/MoMA.htm> (accessed March 3, 2003).
4. The concept of critical thinking can be troubling in education "because there are competing definitions and practices." Ian Wright, "Challenging Students with the Tools of Critical Thinking," *The Social Studies* 93, no. 6 (2002): 257; see also Herz, "From the Guest Editor." For the purposes of this essay, I will adopt Willingham's definition (in Daniel T. Willingham, "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" *Arts Education Policy Review* 109, no. 4 [2008]: 21), as it is particularly well aligned with the notion of critical thinking implicit in art museum education research.
5. Richard H. Audet and Linda K. Jordan, eds., *Integrating Inquiry across the Curriculum* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2005); National Science Education Standards, as cited in Linda K. Jordan, "Science Inquiry: Is There Any Other Way?," in *Integrating Inquiry across the Curriculum*, ed. Richard H. Audet and Linda K. Jordan (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2005), 43. An academic search with the keywords *inquiry-based* and *education* yields an overwhelming majority of articles about science education, confirming the connection between inquiry and science further.

6. Audet and Jordan, *Integrating Inquiry across the Curriculum*, x.
7. For examples of inquiry-based teaching in other subjects, see Tariq T. Akmal and Bonnie Ayre-Svingen, "Integrated Biographical Inquiry: A Student-Centered Approach to Learning," *The Social Studies* 93, no. 6 (2002); Ann P. Bishop, "Using the Web to Support Inquiry-Based Literacy Development," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 45, no. 8 (2002); Heather Brown, "Walking into the Unknown: Inquiry-Based Learning Transforms the English Classroom," *English Journal* 94, no. 2 (2004); Mary Klein, "The Premise and Promise of Inquiry Based Mathematics in Pre-Service Teacher Education: A Poststructuralist Analysis," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 32, no. 1 (2004); David M. Memory et al., "Creating Thinking and Inquiry Tasks That Reflect the Concerns and Interests of Adolescents," *The Social Studies* 95, no. 4 (2004); Peter Meyerson and Teresa Secules, "Inquiry Cycles Can Make Social Studies Meaningful: Learning about the Controversy in Kosovo," *The Social Studies* 92, no. 6 (2001); Martha D. Rekrut, "Inquiry-Based English Instruction: Engaging Students in Life and Literature," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46, no. 4 (2002); Jerry K. Stonewater, "Inquiry Teaching and Learning: The Best Math Class Study," *School Science and Mathematics* 105, no. 1 (2005); William W. Wilen and Patrick McKenrick, "Individualized Inquiry: Encouraging Able Students to Investigate," *The Social Studies* 80, no. 2 (1989). For examples of critical thinking in other subjects, see Cathryn Bailey, "The Tools of Women's Studies and Philosophy: Critical Thinking in Writing Courses," *Feminist Teacher* 18, no. 2 (2008); Donna Kay Buck, Francis Hildebrand, and Mary Beth Marden, "Etcetera—Math-O-Graphs: Critical Thinking through Graphing," *The Arithmetic Teacher* 38, no. 9 (1991); Patricia J. Cianciolo, "Encouraging Critical Thinking in the Language Arts: Critical Thinking in the Study of Children's Literature in the Elementary Grades," *Language Arts* 67, no. 7 (1990); Deborah Court, "Teaching Critical Thinking: What Do We Know?," *The Social Studies* 82, no. 3 (1991); "Critical Thinking," *Language Arts* 69, no. 3 (1992); "Critical Thinking During the December Holidays," *The Arithmetic Teacher* 41, no. 4 (1993); J. Patrick John, "Critical Thinking in the Social Studies," *Emergency Librarian* 14, no. 3 (1987); Sharon L. Knopp, "Critical Thinking and Columbus," *Secondary Social Studies* 8, no. 1 (1997); Megan Laverty and Maughn Gregory, "Evaluating Classroom Dialogue: Reconciling Internal and External Accountability," *Theory and Research in Education* 5, no. 3 (2007); James S. Leming, "Some Critical Thoughts about the Teaching of Critical Thinking," *The Social Studies* 89, no. 2 (1998); Leisa A. Martin, "The Monroe Doctrine: Critical Thinking through the Use of a Commemorative Coin," *The Social Studies* 98, no. 3 (2007); Mary Morgan, "Encouraging Critical Thinking in the Language Arts—Critical Thinking: Promoting It in the Classroom," *Language Arts* 67, no. 7 (1990); Nadine Priest, "10-Minute Critical Thinking Activities for Math Classes," *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School* 5, no. 7 (2000); Wright, "Challenging Students with the Tools of Critical Thinking."
8. "Guides for Educators," Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org/modernteachers/guides.html?> (accessed April 24, 2008); "Inquiry with Art," Guggenheim Museum, http://www.learningthroughart.org/inquiry_art.php (accessed January 11, 2007); Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen, "Basic VTS at a Glance, 2001," Visual Thinking Strategies, http://www.vtshome.org/system/resources/0000/0018/basic_vts_at_a_glance.pdf (accessed March 20, 2010).
9. All too often, an art-viewing program is the first initiative to introduce inquiry methods into a school. Still, the skills that students may begin to develop through a new art-viewing program cannot be claimed as the contribution of the subject—art—but of the teaching method—inquiry.
10. Elliot Eisner, "Research Invited Guest Lecture," presented at the National Art Education Association Annual Meeting, Minneapolis, MN, 2003; Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner, "Cognitive Transfer from Arts Education," in *Cognitive Transfer from Arts Education to Non-Arts Outcomes: Research Evidence and Policy Implications*, ed. Elliot W. Eisner and Michael D. Day (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2004).

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
12. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Objects and Interpretive Processes," in *The Educational Role of the Museum*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (London: Routledge, 1999); Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1982).
13. Terry Barrett, *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003); Hooper-Greenhill, "Objects and Interpretive Processes"; Housen, "Aesthetic Thought"; Sara Wilson McKay and Susana R. Monteverde, "Dialogic Looking: Beyond the Mediated Experience," *Art Education* 56, no. 1 (2003).
14. Olga M. Hubbard, "Complete Engagement: Embodied Response in Art Museum Education," *Art Education* 60, no. 6 (2007).
15. Eeva Anttila, "Thoughtful Motion: Towards Embodied Knowing and Bodily Consciousness," <http://dramaiskolen.no/sider/tekst.asp?side=127&submeny=Tidsskriftet%20DRAMA&niv2=Artikkelarkiv> (accessed July 28, 2006); Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Liora Bresler, *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds: Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning* (London: Kluwer, 2004); Linda Brodkey and Michelle Fine, "Presence of Mind in the Absence of Body," *Journal of Education* (1988); Gloria Dall'Alba and Robyn Barnacle, "Embodied Knowing in Online Environments," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 37, no. 5 (2005); A. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11, no. 5 (2007), <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arthistory/faculty/Freedberg/Motion-Emotion-Empathy.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2011). T. Hanna, *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking* (Novato: Freeperson Press, 1985); David Johnson, *Body* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Sandra Kerka, "Somatic/Embodied Learning and Adult Education," ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education, <http://www.calpro-online.org/eric/docs/tia00100.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2006); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Peter McLaren, "Schooling the Modern Body: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Enfleshment," in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, ed. Henry A. Giroux (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Susan W. Stinson, "Body of Knowledge," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 1 (1995); H. Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Francisco Varela, Evan T. Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
16. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 565. For more on a broad view of cognition, see Elliot Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).
17. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 17.
18. M. Csikszentmihalyi and R. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Malibu, CA: J. P. Getty Museum and Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1990).
19. Christopher Higgins, "Instrumentalism and the Clichés of Aesthetic Education: A Deweyan Corrective," *Education and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2008).
20. Peggy Burchenal et al., "Why Do We Teach Arts in the Schools? The Dialogue Continues. A Response to Winner/Hetland," *NAEA News* 50, no. 2 (2008). For more on critical thinking and art museum education marketing, see Herz, "From the Guest Editor."