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The Role of Dialogue in Facilitating Gallery Visitors to Interpret Artworks

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how dialogue, guided by an educator, helped gallery visitors to formulate and express their own views, integrate the viewpoints of others and recognize their own role in determining the meanings of artworks. Engaging in naturalistic, qualitative research, the researcher designed a gallery visit, based on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, that was delivered on two separate occasions to two small groups of adults with very little experience visiting art galleries. The participants' verbal responses were recorded and transcribed to create a record of the dialogue in which they engaged. The transcripts were subsequently analysed. Some of the findings were that, as a result of the dialogue in which they engaged, research participants heard and attended to their own thoughts, emotions and questions; as well, research participants spent a significant amount of time responding to the works of art on display and sharing their reactions and viewpoints with each other; sharing through dialogue enabled research participants to fund each other with information from their lived experience which helped group members to construct thoughtful interpretations of the artworks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

During the 1999/2000 academic year, I was involved with developing and implementing educational programming at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery. Over the course of that year, a fundamental shift occurred in my understanding of what knowledge and learning are, and how viewers interpret artworks. Essentially, I moved away from an expository, didactic approach to one that was constructivist. I discovered that encouraging gallery visitors to enter into a dialogue with each other about their personal responses to artworks was a more successful approach to conducting gallery visits than simply funding visitors with information through traditional tours and lectures. When following a docent and passively listening to his or her monologue, visitors often became bored and did not engage with the works. In contrast, when offered the opportunity to look at works of art more closely, to reflect on and share their personal responses to the works of art, and to discuss and compare their varying opinions and points of view, gallery visitors became more interested in the exhibitions.

After witnessing the success of a dialogue-based approach to delivering gallery visits, I modified my understanding of the educator's role in the museum. I became less concerned with faithfully communicating the curator's message and more interested in the meanings which viewers constructed for themselves. However, I still wanted to know if visitors, with little experience looking at or thinking about art, could construct meaningful interpretations for artworks based mainly on their own lived experience. I wanted to know how far visitors could take their own process of interpretation without being given the interpretations of others (the curator or the artist, for example). I asked

myself if visitors could share, through dialogue, their own reactions to the artworks, rather than relying on information offered to them about the artists or the works of art. In essence, would this exchange of perspectives and ideas help the visitors to formulate insightful interpretations of the artworks? I wanted to know how visitors could take more ownership of their interpretations. Therefore, the question I explore in this thesis is: How does dialogue, guided by an educator, help gallery visitors formulate and express their own views, integrate the viewpoints of others and recognize their own role in determining the meanings of artworks?

I equated dialogue with the open exchange of ideas and impressions among participants and predicted that having participants engage in such an exchange during a gallery visit would help to create an atmosphere fostering trust, initiating a process in which further dialogue might continue. I expected participants to have diverse reactions to the artworks, revealing a multitude of interpretations that were often contradictory. I also expected that participants would recognize their own role in determining the meaning of the artworks they saw and that many of the themes and issues identified by the exhibition's curator would likely emerge in the group's discussion.

My expectations about the ways in which dialogue might affect the outcome of a gallery visit were based on my previous experiences at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery. To explain why I formed my expectations and how my research question became significant to me, I must briefly describe the pilot project at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery.

Pilot Project

In an experimental project at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, I helped plan, prepare and deliver educational programs in 1999/2000. I was involved in this project along with another student pursuing her masters degree in art education and two student teachers in the art education department's diploma program. As a team, we worked with the docents at the gallery—most of whom were art history students—to design tours and workshop activities for various groups from the community. Despite our different backgrounds and responsibilities, I refer to any person involved in developing and delivering this educational programming as an "educator."

Those of us involved in planning and implementing gallery visits quickly learned that our visitors' beliefs and attitudes delimited the boundaries of our discussions and determined what our visitors were willing to accept as truth or fact. Involving the visitors in dialogues with each other, and with the educators delivering the tours, helped make the educational programming more successful because visitors were given the freedom to interact with each other as well as to engage directly with the works of art on display. For example, visitors of all ages and backgrounds came to visit the exhibition entitled *Through An-Other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists—Black Female Subjects.* The exhibition was curated by Charmaine Nelson in connection with Black History Month. During the gallery visits, visitors gave educators permission to talk about issues of race and gender by raising those issues themselves when discussing their personal responses and opinions with the educators.

In contrast, when gallery visitors were not given an opportunity to share their

viewpoints or to question the educator, they sometimes rejected the message the educator was attempting to communicate. For example, in March 2000, a group of graduate-level art education students came to the gallery to take part in a program comprising a response activity, a tour of the exhibition, and a workshop. The gallery visit was conducted by two educators: one conducted a response activity, the other provided art historical information during a traditional lecture-based tour. The response activity involved having participants spend a few minutes looking at a portrait of a slave woman and discussing their impressions of the work. Participants were asked questions such as: "Who is this person? Where is she? Can you describe what it would feel like to be in the painting?" (Goodacre, transcript of recorded gallery visit, March 1, 2000). The aim was to get viewers responding to the actual artwork from the beginning and to make them comfortable with sharing their ideas and impressions. Most program participants were responsive and seemed to like this approach.

Then the group looked at some photographs of wealthy black women. In contrast to the paintings the group had just seen, the women in the photographs were finely dressed, looked out directly from the picture to meet the viewer's gaze and they appeared confident, educated and well-to-do. Their names were provided in the titles. The program participants were asked how the women in these photographs were different from the ones in the paintings. Participants recognised that the women in the photographs seemed wealthy and powerful and the issue of who had commissioned these images came up early in the conversation. However, one student thought that the women's surroundings and costumes might not be authentic:

Educator: "...and what do you think about their surroundings, they look quite different."

Program participant: "They are studios where people actually can wear these costumes."

Educator: "I think it's really period clothes..."

Second educator: "It's interesting that he doubts that these are their real clothes..." (Goodacre, transcript of recorded gallery visit, March 1, 2000)

At this point, one of the educators delivering the tour began providing historical information and tried to prove that the photographs portrayed the women as they actually were. The women in the photographs seemed unusual, he explained, because people were not used to seeing black women of this period in positions of power. These types of images were censored while paintings depicting black women placed in exotic settings were commonly presented (Goodacre, transcript of recorded gallery visit, March 1, 2000).

This argument was central to the exhibition's thesis and the educator was intent on convincing the program participants of its validity. If they were to understand and agree with the curator's point of view, participants had to believe that the photographs portrayed their sitters accurately and truthfully. Most people did believe this, but the one visitor had his doubts. In an attempt to convince the visitor, the educator tried to explain his beliefs about how the photographs were produced, but in doing so he did not leave much room for dialogue or debate. Program participants had a hard time taking part in the conversation because the educator would not pause for very long and he even

interrupted program participants when they spoke. In response to the participants' questions, the educator often repeated the points he was trying to make without addressing the issues the program participants were wanting to discuss. It appeared to me that the educator was not listening to the participants' questions very carefully. For example:

> Participant: "excuse me...but so you are sure that these women wore these garments? They're not..."
>
> Educator: "That's exactly the point I'm trying to make. All the other women we saw [in the paintings] never wore the garments we saw because it's there for fantasy purposes for white people. You know, white people commissioned them, their clients are not black people...it's like having flowers or stripes as a pattern on your wall..."
>
> Participant: "You're not answering my question..." (Goodacre, transcript of recorded gallery visit, March 1, 2000)

The educator might have eased the participant's doubts by simply responding directly to his question and confirming that he was sure that the clothing worn by the women was authentic—while allowing the viewer to disagree. Furthermore, the educator could have acknowledged his source of information, which in this case was the curator who had conducted extensive research on the photographs.

Nevertheless, the discussion carried on for a few minutes, and many people in the group lost interest and moved on to other paintings. Some of the program participants also tried to convince the sceptical participant that the women's clothing was authentic.

By this point, there didn't seem to be any room for disagreement with that idea. The participant left the tour a few minutes later. Another program participant told me why she believed he had chosen to leave: "Do you know why? It's because the guy [the educator] has this vision and he doesn't listen..." (Goodacre, transcript of recorded gallery visit, March 1, 2000).

Upon interviewing the participant who left the tour, I learned from him that he left because he did not believe what the educator was saying, nor did he think the educator was listening to his questions. Although he did not know what the artists' intended messages were, he speculated that the artists' personal intentions were being ignored and he viewed the information provided by the educator with suspicion. Deprived of an opportunity to share his ideas and to question what the educator was saying, this particular visitor became suspicious of the educator's intentions and perceived the information the educator was providing as biassed and inaccurate (personal communication, March 1, 2000).

This incident made an impression on me because I realised that trying to convince visitors of the validity of the exhibition's message was not an effective approach. In this case, by trying to persuade a viewer to adopt a certain point of view, the educator had actually caused the visitor to stop engaging with the exhibition altogether. This incident underlines a point made by Dr. John Falk and Dr. Lynn Dierking on the *Institute for Learning Innovation* website (2002): "Interactions with museum explainers, docents, guides and performers can either enhance or *inhibit* visitor learning experiences [italics added]."

So far in our research project, educators delivering the programs were using the tour mainly as a way of transmitting information: the educators were performing monologues rather than participating in dialogues. Often, gallery visitors did not accept the information provided to them by the educators without being offered an opportunity to ask questions and express their own views. When denied the chance to do so, the visitors' level of trust in the educator declined or visitors simply lost interest in what the educator was saying.

Up to this time, I believed that my task as an educator was to explain the curator's message. Furthermore, I assumed that if I made that message clear to the viewer then he or she would accept the message. I thought that if the viewer did not agree with the message, they had misunderstood it or I had not communicated it clearly. My understanding of the role of the educator and of the student was based on a didactic, expository approach to learning and a transmission model of communication. I viewed the teacher as the artist's advocate rather than as a facilitator of the viewer's process of interpreting the artwork. Clearly, this incident gave me a reason to question my assumptions about the aim of the gallery visits and the ways in which students learn.

A more successful approach was to have two educators conduct the gallery visit in the form of a casual discussion involving program participants. At the beginning of each visit a response activity, based largely on a sequence of questions developed by Stanley Horner (1988, pp.9-14), was used to help visitors engage directly with the works on display. The component of the gallery visit that had previously been a lecture-based tour took the form of an extended response activity where viewers did most of the

talking. When information surrounding the production of the works was provided, it was mostly information the viewers had asked for, arising out of discussions based on direct observation of the works of art. During these gallery visits, the visitors seemed comfortable expressing their views and the educators seemed genuinely interested in hearing what visitors had to say. The educators' timing and pacing improved because they were continuously responding to the visitors' needs and interests.

A fundamental shift occurred in my thinking at this point. I stoped believing that an exhibition had only one valid message (the curator's intended message) that must be communicated clearly to gallery visitors. I no longer viewed the educator's role to be to find ways to best communicate that message to learners and to convince them of that message's validity. Instead, I thought of visitors as active participants in their own learning and as co-authors of the exhibition's message. I became more concerned with enhancing a viewer's ability to engage directly with artworks and to construct meaning. I realised that the learner should be where I focus my energies: "in any discussion of teaching and learning the focus needs to be on the learner, not the subject to be learned. For museums this translates into the dictum that we need to focus on the visitor, not the content of the museum" (Hein, 1999, p. 78).

Justification for the Research

I believe, from my personal experience working in museums, that connecting the museum's collections to visitors' varied and diverse lived experiences continues to be a major challenge. Many museum workers remain pre-occupied with communicating fixed messages about their collections without really considering visitors' needs and

interests. However, this is a position that becomes more and more difficult to maintain as museums, like many other institutions, come under continuing pressure to change, to appeal to wider audiences and to justify their existence (Hein, 1998, pp. 2-3). I believe that studying how gallery visitors use dialogue to exchange their ideas, opinions, and perspectives in order to construct interpretations for works of art can help researchers and museum educators deepen and broaden their understanding of the roles both learners and educators can and should play when learning in the museum. Exploring how visitors in galleries and museums use dialogue to share their lived experiences and help each other to construct meaning may help educators to find better ways for guiding and enhancing visitors' learning in museums.

In comparing museums to schools, George Hein, a professor at Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a leading authority on museum education, asserts that many museums have ignored the needs and interests of their visitors:

> Museums, although equally public institutions in most countries... assumed that people would learn, be enlightened, and be entertained by their visits to museums without any reference to the study of visitors' experiences. The attitude that the response of the museum's audience is irrelevant still exists in many museums. (1998, p. 5)

Museums often lecture to their audiences instead of engaging their visitors in the process of actively interpreting the collections on display. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, director of museum studies at the University of Leicester and author of several books exploring the relationship between museums and their visitors, points out that often in museums and

art galleries "interpretation is done for you, or to you" (1999, p. 12). Information flows mostly in one direction. The problem is that communication may not actually take place if information can only flow in one direction, because visitors may be disinterested, or may become bored and stop listening. Even those visitors who listen may not have much of a chance to involve their own experiences and viewpoints in the process of engaging with the objects on display and, consequently, their experience at the museum might remain incomplete.

I agree with the view that interpretation should be thought of as an act of meaning-making that viewers negotiate for themselves. Based on my personal experience, I believe that this process can be facilitated by educators. However, I also believe that trying to transmit information, without allowing listeners to respond, can actually inhibit learning. In my opinion, engaging gallery visitors in dialogue can help make exhibitions more relevant to wider audiences. Educators who employ approaches to educational activities encouraging dialogue give visitors an opportunity to express and subsequently question and analyse their own viewpoints, as well as the viewpoints of others.

Many educators and museum professionals acknowledge that viewers' ideas and beliefs, drawn from their lived experience, are valid starting points for constructing meaning (for example, Hein, 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1999, Horner 1988, Yenawine, 1998). Visitors' experiences in galleries are more likely to connect with their own lived experiences outside of galleries if their perspectives and world views are incorporated into a method of interpreting works of art. As I see it, educators should facilitate

discussions among visitors which lead them to examine, question and ultimately validate or challenge their experiences and world views. This process can assist visitors in finding points of entry into the often complex and multilayered meanings which artworks offer. Using dialogue as a tool to help viewers share and formulate their own questions about artworks can help both educators and learners to recognize their lived experience as the context within which understanding develops and evolves. However, this is not always the case in current museum education, where educators concern themselves with communicating fixed messages during guided tours without really engaging visitors and offering their audiences opportunities to express their own ideas and opinions.

Even if someone argued that museums should communicate fixed messages to visitors, that same person would probably agree that the ultimate purpose of an art gallery is to bring the public into direct contact with works of art. However, tours based on a traditional lecture approach often place participants in the role of the listener rather than in the role of the viewer. Such tours facilitate interaction between listeners and a speaker (the docent) rather than interaction between viewers and the artworks on display. Valuable and interesting information may be provided, but visitors may fail to engage directly with the works of art. Based on the "transmission model" of communication and a concept of learning that places content, rather than learner needs and expectations, at the centre of the educational experience, this approach fails to provide viewers with a method for bringing their own knowledge and perspectives into play while negotiating the meaning of the works they see. In this approach, gallery visitors are intended to receive meaning rather than to negotiate it.

I agree with George Hein when he states that "focussing on visitors, the meanings they attribute to their experiences, and their understandings, is the most useful way to develop exhibitions and programs that will allow visitors to have satisfying museum experiences..." (1998, pp 12-13). Hooper-Greenhill (1999) identifies making museums and art galleries more accessible as a primary goal (p. 4) and notes that visitor studies indicate that, while people feel that both museums and art galleries are important, they often feel less inclined to visit art galleries because they are "perceived as even more distant and elitist [than other types of museums]" (p. 7). I believe that strategies that encourage viewers to enter into a dialogue with each other, to engage directly with works of art, and to recognize their own role in making meaning can help foster a more inclusive atmosphere in the museum and lead to more fulfilling experiences for visitors. Ultimately, this could lead to an increase in the number of museum visits. As Hein points out, placing the learner at the centre of the gallery experience is an essential strategy for museums:

> For a variety of reasons, ranging from changing definitions of learning and pressures on museums to justify their existence to expanding socio-political roles of museums in increasingly self-conscious societies, museum education is increasing in significance. What is learned in museums and how learning takes place is more than a matter of intellectual curiosity. Learning in the museum and understanding visitors' learning has become a matter of survival for museums. (1998, p. 12)

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Placing the learner, rather than the object, at the centre of the educational experience is an old idea in the history of museums and education. In the nineteenth century, many museums were viewed as educational institutions although in the 1920s a "new generation of curators [became] less interested in the public use of museums, and more interested in the accumulation of collections" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, p. 25). Nevertheless, in the early forties, Fiske Kimball, Director of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, recognized that learning in museums could be fun, informal and that it encompasses a social aspect (Zeller, 1989, p. 43). The Toledo Museum of Art fostered a visitor-centred and experimental philosophy of education (Zeller, 1989, p. 67).

Melinda M. Mayer, a lecturer in art education at the University of North Texas, argues that while there is still debate about how the educational role of museums is best performed, many art educators and art historians agree that visitors actively construct the meaning of the art objects they encounter (1998, p. 19). John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, authors of several scholarly articles and books on learning in the museum and both recognized for their extensive research on the subject, remind us that:

> Museum visitors do not catalogue visual memories of objects and labels in academic, conceptual schemes, but assimilate events and observations in mental categories of personal significance and character, determined by events in their lives before and after the museum visit. (1992, p. 123)

Museum workers cannot ignore the personal context of the learner and simply transmit specific factual information about artworks to visitors and expect this information to be

received by the visitors in an uncomplicated manner. When discussing the notion of interpretive communities, Constance Perin (1992) points out that the:

> relationship between exhibitions and what audiences carry away is not linear, but rather is complexly mediated by myriad factors, not least of which are audiences' repertoires of prior knowledge, semantic systems, and interpretive frames. (p. 184)

Museum audiences are not unified entities ready to received fixed messages, she argues. Instead, we should view audiences as collaborators who coauthor messages presented by museums through the medium of exhibitions: "Audiences are as creative and constructivist in receiving exhibitions' messages as curators and designers are in composing them" (Perin, 1992, p. 189). If audiences actively construct their interpretations of the exhibitions they see, then exhibitions should be viewed as "dynamic products of a communicative circle, not as static objects with unvarying significances" (Perin, 1992, p. 187). Therefore, a more effective role for educators is to facilitate the viewer's own inquiry into the work's significance, rather than to simply impart knowledge about specific works of art or to convey fixed messages. Indeed, as active interpreters of exhibitions, audiences may sometimes disagree with the messages and points of view put forward by the museum professionals who design and present the exhibitions: "Understanding does not necessarily entail agreement: it may lead not only to audience ratification and appropriation of the exhibition makers' perspectives, but also to audience resistance and reinterpretation as well" (Perin, 1992, p. 183).

Falk and Dierking assert that many learning theories have "neglected the

important roles that personal, social, and physical contexts play in learning" (1992, p. 98). They claim that the atmosphere in the museum and the social aspect of the visit affect learning and argue that "museums need to develop programming that encourages socializing, for there is strong evidence that this creates a personal comfort zone that enables visitors to learn" (1992, p 157). Falk and Dierking shift the focus back onto the learner and her environment, rather than on the subject to be learned. They argue that museum educators need to account for visitors' learning styles, attitudes, interests and beliefs when designing educational experiences:

> Learning is learning. It is strongly influenced by physical settings, social interactions, and personal beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes. Learning can occur in classrooms, museums, homes and shopping malls....We need to develop a comprehensive museum-centred model that embraces certain elements of mainstream-learning theory, but that prescribes a much stronger role for the variables of motivation, beliefs, and attitudes of the personal context and for influences of social and physical contexts. (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p. 99)

In discussing museums as learning environments, Falk and Dierking (1992) note that "social forms of education can be highly effective in teaching everything from concepts and facts to skills and attitudes" (p. 109) and they assert that in museums "social types of learning are extremely important, and evidence suggests that they are also long term....Social groups...are the primary learning environment for humans" (p. 110). More recently, in discussing their Contextual Model of Learning, Falk and Dierking have proposed "that the most fundamental aspects of learning...are socioculturally constructed.

Thus the study of learning should not only focus on the individual but also incorporate the investigation of the group..." (2000, pp. 42 - 43).

Theories of communication, learning and knowledge provide a framework which can help educators and researchers better understand how dialogue and open-ended questioning strategies facilitate viewers' engagement with works of art. Hooper-Greenhill (1999) points out that mass communication systems, such as exhibitions, are unnatural in the sense that "they operate at a distance and often in the absence of one of the two parties necessary before communication can take place" (p. 28). Unlike the natural communication that might occur between two individuals engaged in a casual conversation, where "communication has the potential to be direct, responsive and equal" mass communication is "one-way (indirect), is impossible to modify (unresponsive) and takes place in the absence of one of the partners (unequal)" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 29). Two communication models are compared: the transmission approach and the cultural approach, which set up very different relationships between the learner, the educator and the subject matter:

> The transmission model sees communication as a process of imparting information and sending messages, transmitting ideas across space from a knowledgeable information source to a passive receiver....The cultural approach understands communication as a society-wide series of processes and symbols through which reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed....In the cultural approach, meaning is achieved by mutual active processes. All parties work together to produce a shared interpretation; beliefs and values are shared.

(Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, pp. 16-17)

In the transmission model, the communicator possesses the knowledge and the message has a fixed meaning. The listener simply receives the message. The communicator controls the meaning of the message. The receiver of the message is expected to interpret that message exactly as the sender intended for his or her message to be interpreted: "Where the understandings of the communicator and receiver are at variance, it is assumed that the message has been incorrectly received" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 18). One problem with the transmission model of communication is that "any linear process of communication cannot be certain of speaking the language of the receiver, or even of having anything to say that is of interest to the receiver" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 35) and, consequently, communication may not even occur: the listener may stop listening.

If we think of a typical exhibition in terms of the transmission model of communication, we can see how confusion and debate may arise over what messages are being transmitted and by whom they are being transmitted. Individual artists have created individual works of art, each communicating its creator's message. Yet a curator has arranged all of the works around a central theme—the curator has her or his own message to communicate. A visitor to the exhibition is presented with a layering of messages which can be rather confounding. Whose message is the visitor supposed to receive?

The cultural approach to communication seems to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding how communication actually works. It more closely

resembles the interpersonal communications in which we all engage on a daily basis: "In natural communication...we find the following features: interpretation through shared experience, modification or development of the message in the light of response, and many supporting methods of communicating" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 29). In this model, the individual constructs his or her understanding through various interpretive frameworks and strategies that both limit understanding while also allowing it to take place (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 16). In the cultural approach, communication is understood as an interpretive act where the listener actively constructs the message she receives from the sender using her lived experience, including her attitudes, assumptions and biases, as the framework to build her understanding. In this model, power is shared and the listener co-authors the message.

A parallel exists between the cultural approach to communication and constructivist educational theory, while the transmission approach to communication resembles what George E. Hein calls "the transmission-absorption notion of learning: people learn by absorbing information that has been transmitted to them" (1998, p. 21). Hein places theories of knowledge and learning on an axis in which a didactic, expository approach (founded on the notions that objective knowledge exists outside of the learner and that learning is incremental) stands in opposition to a constructivist approach. Constructivism is founded on the notion that the learner actively constructs knowledge and produces learning (Hein, 1998, p. 25), allowing for multiple interpretations and conclusions depending on the learner's previous knowledge, experiences, and the information he or she has at hand when negotiating meaning (Hein,

1998, p. 34). Exhibitions or educational programming based on a didactic, expository approach "make some claim that the story they are reporting is "true"; it is the way things really are" (Hein, 1998, pp. 27-29). Visitors are expected to believe the messages they receive. The learner's role is essentially passive. Conversely, constructivist educational theory "postulates that learning requires active participation of the learner in both the way that the mind is employed and in the product of the activity, the knowledge that is acquired" (Hein, 1998, p. 34). Furthermore, learners may reach a variety of "valid" conclusions:

> ...constructivist education requires that the conclusions reached by the learner are *not* validated by whether or not they conform to some external standard of truth, but whether they "make sense" within the constructed reality of the learner.... validity arises from the value of the concepts in leading to action...and in the consistency of the ideas one with another...."mistake" and "error" are terms reserved for conclusions that don't correspond to the evidence at hand, that differ from what a learner might reasonably conclude from all the information available to her at the time she reaches that conclusion. This is different from judging an answer with reference to an external standard of truth based on the structure of a subject. (Hein, 1998, p. 34)

The role dialogue plays in helping students learn has also been studied. Although much of the research deals specifically with young learners, it has implications for adults who are beginning viewers.

The author of several books and articles on the subject of teaching art, Philip

Yenawine (1998) has studied open-ended discussion as a learning tool and describes a teaching program that he designed with cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, called the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). VTS is a teaching method in which open-ended questions are used to promote individual expression, group discussion and cooperative problem-solving:

> The VTS focuses on structured but open group discussions about diverse art objects. It has two congruent purposes, the first of which is to help beginning viewers develop a rapport with art and increase their aesthetic understanding...the second is to expand participants' ability to solve problems cooperatively. (Yenawine, 1998, p. 314)

Yenawine uses two of Vygotsky's basic notions to formulate his own understanding of how open-ended discussion functions as a learning tool. These two tenets are that learners must verbalize their thoughts and that their ability to solve problems increases when they are assisted by peers who are not necessarily "experts" (Yenawine, 1998, p. 317). Yenawine describes a lesson, given in a museum setting, in which students are asked to look at a work of art and then asked specific open-ended questions about what they see. These questions are followed by more specific and directed questions. Students have to provide reasons to support their interpretations and they are encouraged to find answers to their own questions through group discussion and debate. The teacher models an active listening process and functions as a facilitator of the inquiry rather than as an 'expert' on the subject-matter (Yenawine, 1998, pp. 318 - 320). Yenawine asserts that the VTS "supports the development of individual rapport

with art," moves away from "an authoritarian teaching mode" and emphasizes "a variety of possible interpretations of an object's meanings" (1998, p. 320).

The VTS instructional method follows previous research done on the benefits of verbal interaction in group learning situations. For example, Noreen M. Webb (1985) states that "when [small group instructional] methods are compared to conventional instructional methods...they are often, but not always, found to produce greater learning..." (p. 32). She argues that the benefits of group interaction for learning depend on such variables as group composition, the teacher's role as a facilitator and monitor of group discussion, and, consequently, the quality of the verbal interactions that take place in small group learning situations (Webb, 1985, p. 32).

Earlier, in his study of the relationships between learning and development, Vygotsky, a social psychologist who studied the effect of social interactions on learning, identified a student's interactions with his or her peers as an important part of the learning process: "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 88). He identified the knowledge a student develops through social interaction with his or her peers (which he or she could not have developed independently) as existing within the zone of proximal development:

> The zone of proximal development...is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

George E. Hein also makes the point that social interaction "allows learners to go beyond their individual experience, to extend their own knowledge and even their ability to learn" (1998, p. 172). Furthermore, Hein asserts that educators who teach adults acknowledge the advantages of having learners share experiences and participate in a "learning community" (1998, p. 173).

Similarly, Falk and Dierking recognise that peers play an active role in an individual's learning process. They argue that one individual's current knowledge and skills will affect the ways in which all the other individuals within the group interact with each other to solve problems and learn new concepts: "Knowledgeable group members support the learning of less knowledgeable members by providing "scaffolding," or support in the learning process" (1992, pp. 109-110). Furthermore, they identify the museum as a setting in which learning through verbal interaction with peers will occur:

> ...social interaction happens constantly...during visits to museums....As people interact, they also talk about what they know from previous experiences, discussing what they see, hear, and read in terms of these experiences and memories. As researchers have observed, these discussions provide opportunities for people to reinforce past experiences and...to develop a shared understanding among the members of the group. It is during many of these conversations that one also observes people's efforts to negotiate personal and cultural meaning, actively making sense of the interpretation presented and attempting to relate it to their own experience and worldview. (Falk & Dierking, 2000, pp. 45 - 46)

Constructivist learning theory, the cultural approach to communication and Falk

and Dierking's Contextual Model of Learning all underscore the important role dialogue with others can play in the museum visitor's process of interpreting the meaning of artworks. This has lead me to base my research project on how gallery visitors can use dialogue to help each other interpret artworks. This project will be described in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Design of the Research

For this thesis I engaged in qualitative research to answer the question: How does dialogue, guided by an educator, help gallery visitors formulate and express their own views, integrate the viewpoints of others and recognize their own role in determining the meaning of artworks? Naturalistic rather than experimental in nature, my research consisted of (a) selecting an exhibition to visit, (b) selecting six research participants, (c) designing a gallery visit and delivering it on two separate occasions to a different group each time, (d) recording the questions I asked participants and the resulting dialogue in which we engaged, and (e) faithfully recounting and interpreting the events that took place in order to provide a rich description of both gallery visits.

Naturalistic research, conducted on a small scale and in a natural setting (a gallery) offered me an opportunity to be directly involved in the research so that I could develop insights into how visitors use dialogue to share their lived experience in order to facilitate their own process of interpreting artworks. While I facilitated the group discussion in both gallery visits and recorded and interpreted the data, I also participated in the dialogues. I acted in the role of a participant and in the role of an observer. I described events as faithfully as I could and interpreted their significance within the framework of my own lived experience, assumptions and biases. For example, I adopted the position, based on a constructivist view of knowledge and learning, that an educator should facilitate the learner's direct engagement with artworks and her active process of meaning-making. This perspective determined how the gallery visits were conducted and invariably influenced my interpretation of events.

George Hein describes naturalistic research as qualitative, subjective, real-world based, exploratory and contextual as opposed to experimental research which is quantitative, objective, and based in laboratory settings (1998, p. 69). He explains that proponents "of the naturalistic model argue that not only is it impossible to remove the researcher from the research, but it is better to acknowledge the inevitable presence of the self and capitalize on the researcher's own perspectives and biases" (Hein, 1998, p.69). Qualitative researchers acknowledge that their:

> research is ideologically driven...The qualitative researcher early on identifies his or her biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study. By identifying one's biases, one can see easily where the questions that guide the study are crafted. (Janesick, 1994, p. 212)

Methods used in naturalistic research emerge from the researcher's direct involvement in his or her research. These methods include participant observation, clinical interviews, and document analysis (Hein, 1998, p. 69). Researchers develop categories that emerge from their data and they also summarize events in narrative descriptions (Hein, 1998, p. 69). While the collected data is subjective, it is still useful:

> Our ability to talk and think about what we have done is one of the great advantages of any research....Using this information can provide insight into our understanding of the meaning behind people's behaviour. It is "subjective" in the sense that it comes from a single subject, but not in the pejorative sense of being particularly unreliable or invalid. (Hein, 1998, p. 71)

The main goal of experimental research is to produce a "structure of knowledge" and to

develop "laws of behavior with broad applicability" while naturalistic research aims "to provide "rich" descriptions of specific situations" whose validity lies in " being believable on their own terms" (Hein, 1998, p. 73). Unlike experimental research, naturalistic research is not used to support or refute hypotheses, but rather to "provide insight into possible meanings or explanations; it does not confirm or refute since it describes" (Hein, p. 74).

Terminology

In this thesis, I use the term 'dialogue' along with similar terms, such as 'group discussion' and 'conversation.' I use the term 'dialogue' to mean an exchange of information between two or more research participants, or between research participants and myself, within the context of a structured but open group discussion (or conversation) among group members. As I understand it, active listening (i.e. hearing and paying careful attention to what your partners in dialogue are saying) is an essential component of dialogue. It should be noted that research participants in this project were aware that their statements were being tape-recorded. Nevertheless, my impression of both gallery visits was that participants felt comfortable and that the dialogue in which they engaged, although directed by my questions, was natural and sincere.

I use the term 'gallery visit' in order to underline the difference between the format I used and the format used in more traditional tours. The format I used consisted mainly of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to respond directly to the works of art and to share and discuss their responses. The format used in more traditional tours involves having a knowledgeable source of information (the docent)

deliver information to an audience of mainly passive listeners who are intended to simply receive the information provided over the course of the guided tour.

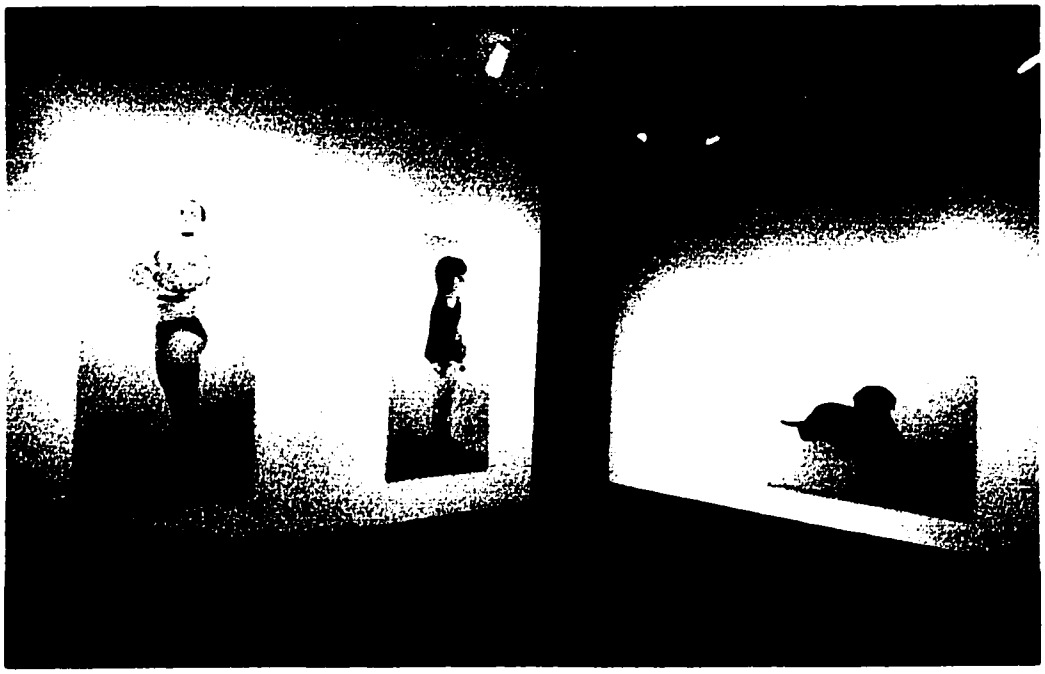
The Exhibition

The Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) is a municipal art gallery which offers a dynamic exhibition programme featuring mainly contemporary art produced by artists of local, national and international stature. The Ottawa Art Gallery also houses its own "growing contemporary collection of works by artists associated with the region" (OAG Brochure, 2002).

The exhibition I visited with my research participants was entitled *Localities*. Curated by Sylvie Fortin and exhibited from 27 September 2001 to 6 January 2002, *Localities* brought together the work of six artists from the Ottawa-Hull region. They were: Chantal Dahan, Nichola Feldman-Kiss, Caroline Langill, Marie-Jeanne Musiol, Ramona Ramlochand and Trâm Vo. Each artist contributed one artwork to the exhibition.

Feldman-Kiss presented an installation entitled *Plastic Utopia: the ideal family portrait* comprising six large chromogenic prints. These photographs depicted a man dressed in a red bathing suit, a woman wearing a portable computer, a girl in a tutu, a boy in a basketball uniform, and two mirror images of a dog. Each subject's gaze was directed at the viewer. In addition to these six portraits, which were hung facing each other in one half of the main gallery, Feldman-Kiss' installation included a uterus-shaped glass, aluminum and latex construction entitled *Ectogenerative Organ III* mounted on the opposite side of the wall on which were hung the photographs of the man and the

woman. Text was mounted on the wall using white vinyl lettering. This text could be detected by the light's reflection on its shiny surface.



View of Nichola Feldman-Kiss' photo-installation entitled *Plastic Utopia: the ideal family portrait.* Courtesy of the Ottawa Art Gallery.

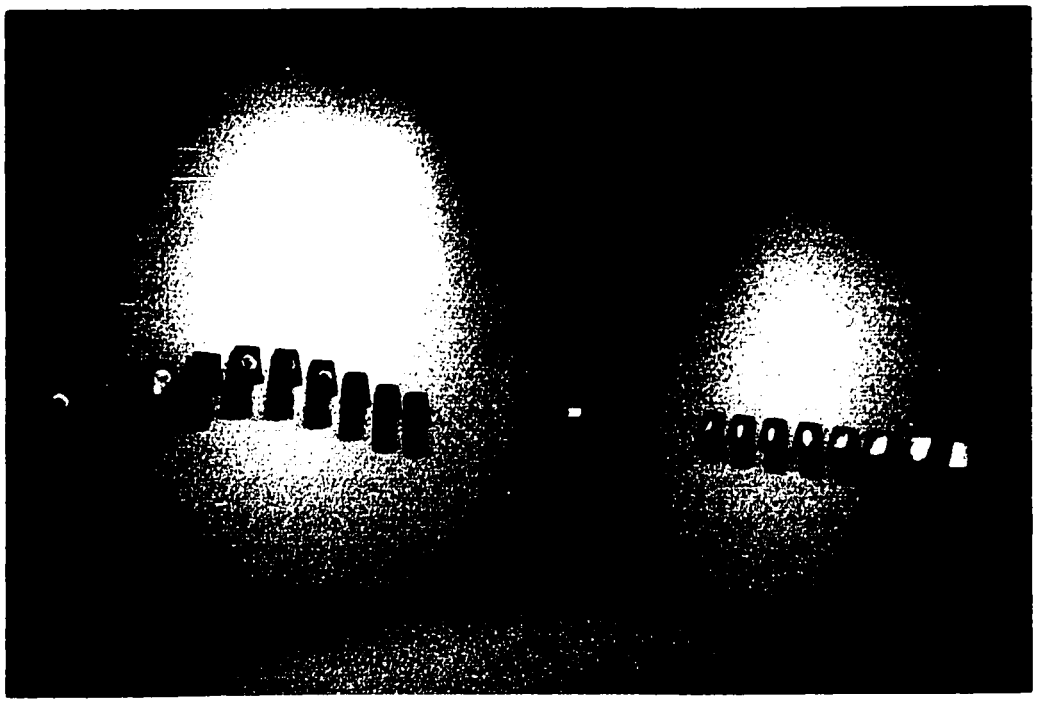
Chantal Dahan included a video entitled *Terra incognita - Terra terra - Terra magica* while Caroline Langill exhibited a multimedia installation called *Chimera* comprising still and moving video imagery projected onto the gallery floor and presented on a small video monitor mounted near the ceiling in one corner of the room.

Ramona Ramlochand included a large photograph mounted in a light-box entitled *In Conversation*, depicting an east-Asian billboard advertisement being projected onto

the wall in someone's bedroom. Trâm Vo exhibited *Viet-tech Workers*, a wooden folding screen, based on a traditional Vietnamese design, on which he pasted images of Laboratory workers from the hi-tech industry.

View of Ramona Ramlochand's *In Conversation* (on the left) and Trâm Vo's *Viet-tech Workers* (on the right). Courtesy of the Ottawa Art Gallery.

Marie-Jeanne Musiol's installation was entitled *Pas d'espace privé. No Private Space* and comprised several small gelatin silver prints mounted in black wooden frames. These were arranged in different configurations in a small gallery space where the walls had been painted a dark ochre colour. The images depicted the electromagnetic fields of leaves.



View of Marie-Jeanne Musiol's installation entitled *Pas d'espace privée. No Private Space*. Courtesy of the Ottawa Art Gallery.

According to the media release issued by the Ottawa Art Gallery, the exhibition was about:

> the shuffling of borders and boundaries...*Localities* brings together the recent works of artists who enlist a wide range of media (photography, sculpture, installation and video) to explore the contemporary redefinition of society by focussing on such key notions as the family, identity, science and technology....Informed by the subtleties of place and space of a shared location...the exhibition and the works will act as experiments toward a greater

understanding of the implications of technologically empowered globalization. (Fortin, 28 September 2001)

In a text panel adjacent to the exhibition space, the curator identified and discussed a number themes. In her view, the work of Chantal Dahan and Nichola Feldman-Kiss examined ideologies underlying the power structures supporting traditional notions of the family. The installations made by Marie-Jeanne Musiol and Caroline Langill dealt with the restructuring of nature through technology. The curator saw a similarity in how Trâm Vo and Ramona Ramlochand used their own images in an "intercontinental context" altered through the influence of technology and mass media (Fortin, text panel, 2001). When discussing Ramlochand's photographic work, in which the artist's shadow appears on a bedroom wall along with a projection of a billboard depicting an Asian female star, Fortin asserts that: "Through this play of projections, the separation of private and public space is shown as an ideological construct, a construction of self as inseparable from popular culture" (Fortin, text panel, 2001).

The Participants

After selecting the exhibition we would visit, I recruited six research participants with little or no experience visiting art galleries. I selected inexperienced gallery visitors because I wanted to explore how I could use an approach to conducting gallery visits, based on dialogue, with people who were not used to looking at art and who might be representative of new types of audiences museums are often eager to develop. I found potential research participants through my friend who worked with the civil service and who provided me with contact information for some of his colleagues. All prospective

research participants were contacted by me, via e-mail. I informed them about my research project and the exhibition at the Ottawa Art Gallery. As each individual replied to my e-mail and agreed to participate in my research, I contacted him or her via e-mail once again to set a time for the gallery visit.

All participants were adults between the ages of twenty-five and forty years. Two were women and four were men. They had each attended university but none had received any formal training in studio arts or art history. Although one participant had visited museums and galleries in Paris years earlier, none of the participants considered themselves regular gallery or museum visitors. None of the participants had any previous interest in contemporary art and five out of the six had never visited the Ottawa Art Gallery.

Prior to the gallery visit, each participant was informed that his or her identity would remain confidential and that he or she could withdraw from my research project at any time without negative consequences. In order to protect the identities of my research participants, I have changed their names when reporting on the events that took place. Each participant signed a consent form prior to his or her gallery visit.

In order to prepare myself to conduct the gallery visits, I visited the exhibition twice and went through the process of responding to the works, asking myself the same series of questions I intended to ask the research participants. I also recorded, in writing, my personal responses to many of the works on view. As well, I read the text panels and media releases produced by the curator and thought about the statements she made. Combining the information I read in the text panels with my own responses to the

artworks, I constructed interpretations of specific artworks that were based, in part, on information funded by the curator and interpreted through the lense of my own biases and past experiences. My intention was to rehearse my own process of responding to these particular artworks so that I could then model this process for the research participants during my gallery visits with them. In essence, I was attempting to produce content which I could offer to participants during the gallery visits. Although I wanted to conduct the gallery visits in the role of a facilitator of group discussion rather than simply as an authoritative source of information, I still wanted to possess a sufficient amount of information about the artists and their work, along with my own reactions to the works, to answer questions that the research participants might ask during the course of their own inquiries. I attempted to find a balance between my roles as a source of information, a facilitator of group discussion, and an observer and participant in my own research.

My Role as a Facilitator of Group Discussion

Please note that the names of participants described in this section have been changed to protect their identities.

My role during the gallery visits was mainly to guide the participants' dialogue by asking questions that prompted them to share their responses, opinions, ideas and experiences. I also modelled active listening, often repeating what participants said to demonstrate that I had heard and understood their verbal statements. When greeting the research participants at the beginning of both gallery visits, I reminded participants that the title of the exhibition was *Localities* and expressed my desire to act as a fellow

gallery visitor rather than as an authoritative source of information. Clearly, by expressing my expectations at the beginning of each visit, I influenced the direction our discussions would take.

Occasionally, I offered my own responses to the artworks, sometimes with the intention of engaging participants in debate. For example, in response to Belinda's statement, offered during the first gallery visit, that she liked a glass sculpture entitled *Ectogenerative Organ III,* I said: "...to me...on an aesthetic level...it really didn't appeal to me. I think it looks cold" (Goodacre, Transcript of recorded gallery visit, November 29, 2001, p. 16). My statement prompted another participant in that visit, Oliver, to share his negative response to the work and to share his theory that the artist was making a pretentious and uninformed comment on modern technology (Goodacre, Transcript of recorded gallery visit, November 29, 2001, p. 16). Hearing our negative reactions did indeed prompt Belinda to both examine and defend her opinion: "You know...maybe it's because I'm a math geek. The clean beaker lines...these appeal to me," Belinda reasoned (Goodacre, Transcript of recorded gallery visit, November 29, 2001, p. 16).

I also offered encouragement to the participants and tried to make visible to them the processes in which they were engaging. For example, after Oliver had given a somewhat facetious title to Feldman-Kiss' glass sculpture, and explained his reasons for choosing that title, I said:

> That's interesting because...for someone who's maybe having a negative response you're really...picking up on a lot of stuff that the artist is probably thinking about and...you've...thought not just about what the work means but also...the context

within which it was produced and...so you've had...a sophisticated response to a work that you absolutely despise... (Goodacre, Transcript of recorded gallery visit, November 29, 2001, p. 18)

I was trying to reinforce the idea that even a negative response was a valid response, if it was thoughtful, and I wanted to point out that Oliver had indeed formed an interpretation of the work's meaning and the artist's intentions.

Although I guided the dialogue with my questions, the research participants also directed our dialogues through their own questions and the observations they shared. Through dialogue, the research participants shared the memories the artworks evoked for them and offered me glimpses into their lived experiences. I felt that, together, the research participants and I were able to formulate perceptive interpretations of the artworks, although I sometimes felt uncomfortable with my lack of background knowledge on some of the artists and their work. I felt this way because I wanted to be able to offer participants information that could help answer their questions and I was concerned that a participant might ask me a question that I would not be able to answer. Nevertheless, it was reassuring for me to learn that, in many cases, the participants' responses to artworks were similar to mine.

My role during the second gallery visit was the same as in the previous gallery visit: I continued to ask questions and tried to engage participants in dialogue. I shared my own impressions, responses and experiences as a partner in dialogue. Again, I modelled active listening, often repeating what other participants said in order to demonstrate that I was listening carefully. I emphasized the importance of the

participants' own thoughts and reactions to the exhibition. I tried to make it obvious to the participants that they were not expected to figure out the artists' intended messages. Using basically the same questions as in the previous visit, I acted in the role of a facilitator of group discussion and as a fellow interpreter. I rarely acted in the role of an authoritative source of information, providing participants with factual information about the artists or artworks in only a very limited way.

In fact, I was occasionally placed in the role of the learner during the second gallery visit, as is demonstrated in the following portion of dialogue, where Bill and James explained to me that Feldman-Kiss was wearing a portable computer in her self-portrait:

Bill: ...it's a wearable computer...

Gary: Oh, is that what it is?

James: Well, that's, like, her monitor and that's her keyboard.

Bill: That's the processor itself.

Gary: But that's the actual computer? Ok, see I didn't know that.

(Goodacre, Transcript of recorded gallery visit, December 9, 2001, p. 6)

My role was certainly not that of the knowledgeable source of information, nor was I the sole leader of the discussion. In fact, I often redirected questions asked of me to other members in the group. Overall, my impression was that we were all equal participants in dialogues where one person would make a comment or share an observation which would prompt another participant, who either agreed or disagreed

with the initial observation, to share his or her point of view or to ask a question. These exchanges then lead to a deeper examination of the subject matter, a layering of perspectives and ideas, and often the funding of information from another participant's own lived experience and personal body of knowledge.

Procedures to Collect Data

Each research participant's portion of the group discussion was tape-recorded and then transcribed for subsequent analysis. Each participant wore a tape-recorder and a microphone for the duration of their gallery visit. The verbal responses of each participant were recorded very clearly.

The volunteers were divided into two small groups. However, in order to accommodate participants' schedules, the groups were divided somewhat unevenly. The first group comprised two participants: one man and one woman. The second group comprised four people: three men and one woman. The first group visited the exhibition with me on November 29, 2001 and the second group visited the exhibition with me on December 9, 2001. Each visit lasted approximately an hour.

Although the conversations that took place during each separate gallery visit were different, participants in both groups were asked the same set of questions. For example, some of the questions I asked participants during both gallery visits were: "Imagine that you can actually enter into the artwork. What is it like in there? What happens when you are in the artwork? What features or qualities of this artwork do you find interesting? Why? What emotions does it evoke? What questions do you ask yourself as you look at this work of art? How does the title of this work relate to what you see in it? What title

would you give it? Why? Keeping in mind the title of the show, how does this work of art fit in with the other works on display?" (See appendix I for a complete list of questions).

Both gallery visits included a response activity and open-ended questions designed to have participants engage directly with the works of art on view and to share their responses with the rest of the group. My questions were based on questions developed by Stanley Horner (1988, pp 9-14) and Booth, Krockover & Woods (1982, pp. 35-40). As a response activity during each gallery visit, I asked participants to imagine that they could enter into the works they were viewing. Then participants were asked to describe what their imaginary experiences inside the works were like. Once a participant had shared his or her initial response to a work of art, I encouraged others to share their responses and to discuss and compare their responses with the other group members. Towards the end of each gallery visit, I asked participants to articulate what they thought was the overall message of the show. I also asked participants to explain how they thought specific works in the exhibition related to the general meaning of the exhibition.

Treatment of Data

I transcribed the tape recordings and combined them into complete transcripts of the group discussions that occurred during each separate gallery visit. Once I completed the final transcripts for each visit, I reviewed them. I looked specifically for examples of (a) viewers drawing from their lived experience to make sense of what they were seeing and then sharing these experiences with the group, (b) viewers expressing diverse and perhaps conflicting interpretations of specific artworks and debating the validity of each

other's interpretations, (c) viewers integrating each other's ideas and viewpoints and sometimes agreeing on meanings for some artworks, (d) viewers acknowledging that they determined, at least in part, the meanings of the artworks they encountered, and (e) viewers expressing the belief that, during their group discussions, their colleagues brought up issues and ideas that they would not have thought of on their own and which helped them to produce more comprehensive interpretations of specific works of art and/or the exhibition as a whole.

Chapter 4: Dialogue in Gallery Visit I

Please note that the names of participants described in this chapter have been changed to protect their identities. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations and page numbers cited in this chapter refer to the transcript of the gallery visit I conducted on Thursday, November 29, 2001.

My general impression of this gallery visit was that the participants' discussions centred on themes that were connected to their lived experience and that these themes sometimes corresponded to the themes identified by the curator in the text panel accompanying the show. The visit offered Belinda and Oliver an opportunity to express, compare and examine their attitudes towards art (contemporary art, in particular) and to discover that they could develop their own interpretations for the artworks in the exhibition. While analysing the transcript for this gallery visit, I found examples where, through their involvement in dialogue, the research participants expressed diverse attitudes and points of view, drew upon their lived experience and used their imagination to make sense of the artworks. I also found examples where participants assisted their peers to interpret artworks by sharing information from their lived experience. Furthermore, participants integrated each others' viewpoints, and acknowledged their own role in the meaning-making process.

Attitudes, Assumptions and Viewpoints Revealed Through Dialogue

Much of the dialogue in which Oliver and Belinda engaged revealed some of their general attitudes towards contemporary art. For example, Oliver and Belinda engaged in a dialogue where they compared their differing reactions to Ramona

Ramlochand's work, entitled *In Conversation*, and Nichola Feldman-Kiss' sculpture entitled *Ectogenerative Organ III*. In discussing her negative reaction to *In Conversation*, Belinda revealed a more general attitude, drawn from her lived experience, toward the role art sometimes plays in our lives:

> I guess it's the same way that when I was in university everyone had a Monet poster on the wall...It becomes generic....I see [*In Conversation*] as being somewhat trying not to be generic but basically being generic anyway. (p. 14)

It appeared to me that Belinda was expressing the view that although art is supposed to be special and unique, it sometimes becomes common, expressing conformity rather than originality.

Furthermore, in comparing her response to *In Conversation* with her response to *Ectogenerative Organ III*, Belinda acknowledge that she responded more to the aesthetic qualities of *Ectogenerative Organ III* than to any of the ideas embodied in that work of art: "I'm not looking for meaning....To be honest with you, on a purely aesthetic thing, I like the shadow play on the wall" (p. 15). Unlike Belinda, Oliver had found Ramlochand's piece visually appealing while the piece by Feldman-Kiss simply bothered him because it seemed to have no purpose: "like with that test tube contraption I was just plain annoyed because there seemed to be no purpose to it....With [Ramlochand's photograph] I was never annoyed by it because there's a lot that's visually interesting going on" (p. 13). As the following portion of dialogue reveals, Oliver's contrasting view and strong opinions, shared through dialogue, caused Belinda to examine and explain her own response to Feldman-Kiss' artwork:

Belinda: But...As I said...I just think on a purely aesthetic level that by far—so far of all the things we've seen—that's my favourite.

Gary: Oh seriously, would you say that?

Belinda: The appeal to me is for sure the glass...

Gary: Because to me...on an aesthetic level...it really didn't appeal to me...I think it looks cold.

Oliver: I want to break it so other people won't have to endure it...

Belinda: [laughs] I'm sorry, it's...of all...from up close I like it much less. I like it further away and I like it against the shadow but I like the shadow of the glass.

Gary: Ok, I do like this part hear because you can kind of enjoy it [aesthetically].

Oliver: You know, I think the artist—the type of person who would create something like this—is probably the type of person who does "the robot" and thinks they're really inventive [chuckles]. That's my take on this monstrosity.

Gary: So if I'm reading...

Belinda: You know...maybe it's because I'm a math geek. The clean beaker lines...these appeal to me...

Gary: Ok. Isn't that interesting?

Oliver: Yeah, well I'm really curious to read the little description that goes with it that tells us what it's really about because I don't think it's

about anything. And I...maybe it's some sort of pretentious comment on science or modern technology by someone who really knows nothing about them.

Gary: Oh! (p. 16)

Oliver saw no meaning in the glass sculpture and did not believe that there was a clearly defined purpose behind its production. He speculated that Feldman-Kiss had little knowledge of science and was simply making an uninformed comment on modern technology. Interestingly, Oliver did comment that he would like more information on the work to help confirm or refute his theory that the artist had little knowledge about science and technology. Like Belinda, Oliver seemed to value the aesthetic qualities of an artwork, yet he seemed to value more highly the work's intended meaning: "I couldn't care less about aesthetic without meaning" (p. 17).

Oliver revealed his general disdain for unconventional artwork following this portion of dialogue:

> It's just like those...arty films where people...talk in this mysterious way instead of just making comments by talking, by having a simple story with people talking as they normally would and having insight built into it, but try to sound...to create something with a lot of pretense and fancy talk. (p. 17)

Oliver clearly felt comfortable expressing his thoughts and opinions and seemed to believe that a lot of contemporary art is pretentious and intentionally made to be difficult to understand. It appeared to me that being able to air his grievances and listen to his own questions about the artworks he did not like helped Oliver to identify his own

expectations about art—expectations he had probably never before examined. Certainly, I was made aware of his expectations and assumptions about contemporary art. Dialogue was the tool that enabled both Oliver and I to ascertain his expectations and assumptions about contemporary art.

What followed was a discussion about the type of information both participants thought would help them to engage with artworks to which they were having difficulty responding. Oliver decided that he would want additional information about the artist's choices and intentions in cases where he was having difficulty understanding the artist's message. Belinda felt that additional information would probably take away from her initial aesthetic response to an artwork but, like Oliver, she felt that if a work "doesn't appeal to me I like knowing more about it" (p. 17). Through dialogue, both participants revealed and acknowledged a desire for additional information which demonstrates that they were aware of the interpretive process within which they were engaged.

As a result of having engaged in dialogue about the importance of the message and aesthetic quality of an art object, Oliver and Belinda revealed and clarified some of their general attitudes towards art. I believe that this was a significant achievement in light of the fact that neither person had demonstrated much previous interest in art. Although their positions may not have been thoroughly developed, Belinda and Oliver used the opportunity afforded by their engagement in dialogue to express, explain and defend their ideas. In deciding whether I agreed or disagreed with their viewpoints, I was also offered the opportunity to examine my own biases and pre-conceptions about contemporary art. Upon reflection, I believe that occasionally providing Oliver and

Belinda with additional information about the artists or their artworks would have assisted them in constructing interpretations for the artworks, seeing as both participants expressed a desire for such information.

Sharing Information and Lived Experiences Through Dialogue

Sometimes, information drawn from one participant's lived experience assisted the other participants to formulate interpretations for artworks. Oliver, Belinda and I often drew from our personal experiences (in the form of memories) when expressing our responses to the exhibition. For example, almost immediately upon entering the gallery, Oliver recognised the adult male figure portrayed as the father-figure in Feldman-Kiss' installation, *Plastic Utopia*, as someone he knew from the local YMCA. "Hey that's the guy I was going to hire as a personal trainer!" Oliver exclaimed as soon as he recognised the man in the photograph (p. 1). Amazingly, an element from Oliver's lived experience was present in the work. At this early point in our discussion, I commented that I also knew a person who was represented in *Plastic Utopia*—the adult female figure was the artist, and I knew her during our days together in the Fine Arts programme at the University of Ottawa. I also commented that the man in the photograph had not been her husband when I had known her at school: "...it's funny you say you know him because I know her. I went to school with her...and that wasn't her husband then" (p. 1).

Oliver asked me if he was her husband now, which lead me to notice an assumption influencing my reading of the work. I replied: "I don't know. I assumed he was. I assumed this was all one family when I saw it. Its, uh, her family, but that may not be true" (p. 1). Although I had assumed that the man and the woman were a couple and

believed that the installation represented a family unit, others may not necessarily see it that way. My reading of *Plastic Utopia* was influenced by my lived experience (in this case, my knowledge of the artist's life). As well, my interpretation was influenced by the information I read previously in the text panel, where the curator identified the installation as a representation of a family unit. Similarly, Oliver's reading of the work was influenced by his lived experience which, in this instance, was his pre-existing impression of the man in the portrait. For example, Oliver could not help comparing the real person he knew from the YMCA to the large-scale photograph representing him. In the photograph, the man is wearing a red bathing suit and stares out at the viewer with a serious expression, his arms folded across his chest. Oliver said: "He's almost that big in real life too...it certainly looks like him. He really, really looks like that" (pp. 1-2). Through dialogue, Oliver and I were able to fund each other with information from our lived experience which we could never otherwise have accessed.

As a response activity, I asked the participants to imagine that they could enter into the photographs comprising *Plastic Utopia* and interact with the sitters. Secondly, I asked them to describe what this imaginary experience was like for them. For example, some of my questions were: "Just imagine that you could actually go through the frame and meet the people....or you could be inside the picture....What would that be like?" (p. 3). My intention was to encourage Oliver and Belinda to react to the works on an emotional level and perhaps express and explore the ideas, attitudes and beliefs underlying their responses. Oliver commented that he would not really be interested in meeting the man portrayed in the photograph: "I don't really see there being any reason

why you would want to meet him. He's just a guy...kind of a show-off too, you know?" (p. 3). This statement interested me since Oliver already knew the man in the photograph, but from a very different context.

I asked Oliver why he thought the man might be a show-off and he replied: "Well...anybody who's like, you know, playing it up like that in public...I don't know. It's just a bit much for me" (p. 3). Oliver imagined some of the sitter's attributes and personality traits and then compared them with his experience of the man in real life: "And it's funny. The picture really doesn't do him justice. He's actually much more...not intimidating...but physically impressive in person. He's *really* big" (p. 6). Oliver's opinion about the photograph and how it represented its subject had changed from "he really, really looks like that" (p. 2) to "the picture really doesn't do him justice" (p. 6). The dialogue in which Oliver and I engaged about this particular photograph lead us both to examine its subject more closely. Oliver had the opportunity to think aloud and compare the representation of the subject to his personal knowledge of the subject. The result was that he changed his mind about how the photograph represented the man. Oliver's perspective on this particular sitter, informed by his knowledge of the sitter outside of the context of Feldman-Kiss' installation, and shared with me and Belinda through dialogue, helped us all to understand that the image we were looking at was a constructed representation rather than a straightforward duplication of reality. Otherwise inaccessible to us, Oliver's lived experience helped Belinda and I to produce our own individual readings of the image and determine its message.

Belinda's reaction to the man's portrait was similar to Oliver's. Her response to

my question about entering the works was that she would not want to enter into any of the portraits because she would not want to meet any of the sitters: "...would I want to step in and meet any of these people? *No*" (p. 4). The body-builder seemed too artificial to her: "...I find they're...especially the body-builder...I'm sorry—he looks like he's posing for an underwear add to me...it looks very fake. And I'm assuming it's meant to look fake with these...shadow-less grey backgrounds" (p. 6). While describing and analysing some of the formal elements of the work, Belinda was also thinking about the artist's intentions and she shared her reading of those intentions with us.

Within this small portion of dialogue, the participants and I shared, compared and contrasted our reactions to the work. For example, Belinda and Oliver expressed similar reactions to the work which lead to further discussion about what they were seeing and how they were reacting to it. Through our dialogue, we offered each other information from our lived experience. For example, both Oliver and I knew people who were portrayed in *Plastic Utopia*. By engaging in dialogue with each other, we were able to share our personal knowledge of the sitters and to compare our reactions to the ways in which they were represented in the work. Consequently, we began to imagine and discuss the artist's reasons for representing the sitters in the way she did, which led us to reflect on her intended message. We were lead to question our assumptions about the work as well. For example, I had assumed that everyone would think that the man and woman represented in the photographs were husband and wife until Oliver questioned whether or not they were really married.

Sharing Alternate Interpretations Through Dialogue

The following portion of dialogue illustrates an instance where one participant revealed an interpretation of an artwork causing one of her peers to re-evaluate his initial interpretation. The conversation took place between Belinda and myself while we examined *In Conversation*, by Ramona Ramlochand:

Belinda: ....What I'm curious about is what the shadow is.

Gary: ....Oh, well I think it's the camera taking the picture.

Belinda: The camera taking the picture?

Gary: I think it's the shadow of the camera that's actually taking the picture. Uh, because this is...to me I see this as, like, the tripod and this is the handle, and then this would be the camera. It looks to me like she's here and she's probably holding uh, the trigger to...you know, to turn on the shutter.

Belinda: See, I'm thinking it would be the movie camera sort of putting the light on the back of it. It's projecting the image. (p. 12)

On a basic level, Belinda and I had used dialogue to help each other determine the elements of the image, sometimes agreeing and other times disagreeing on our final interpretations of what those elements were. If we agreed that one part of the shadow was most likely that of the artist, we disagreed on whether or not the other part of the shadow was cast by a camera or a projector. I was intrigued by Belinda's interpretation that the shadow was cast by a projector rather than a camera and honestly thought that her interpretation was as plausible as my own. Our disagreement was over a small detail

perhaps, but in being able to disagree we demonstrated that there was room for varying interpretations and understandings of even the most basic elements comprising the image. Certainly in this case, I was not acting in the role of an authoritative provider of information, but as a fellow interpreter. I believe that this contributed to an atmosphere of trust where the open exchange of ideas between participants was supported and encouraged. Through our participation in dialogue, we all practised active listening, co-operative problem-solving and the process of integrating the views of others.

Viewers Acknowledge Their Role in the Meaning-Making Process

Both research participants in this visit did indeed acknowledge their role as producers of meaning. In the following portion of dialogue, Belinda acknowledged the role her own imagination could play in helping to interpret the meaning of *In Conversation,* even if she was not very keen on imagining that she could enter the picture. She also drew on her past experiences to relate her current knowledge to the image she saw before her:

Gary: ...[The artist's] name is Ramona Ramlochand. She's also a local artist and this work is called *In Conversation*. It's a light box...The first question I'll ask you again is imagine you can actually travel into that image as though it were real space. What kind of journey through there do you make? What would it be like in there? What would you do, where would you go? Or would you avoid some places?

Oliver: [After a pause] I think....To me it's a fairly inviting picture. It

looks like it would be kind of fun to be there. It's like you're in some place in the Far East....Maybe you're...in somebody's apartment and then there's this window and there's this big billboard for some movie overlooking it.

Gary: They look East Indian.

Oliver: ...I'd probably just sit...you know, stand by the window and look outside or sit on the desk by the *Lubriderm*.

Gary: [laughs]

Belinda: I love the *Lubriderm* actually...

Gary: Oh really?

Belinda: Uhm, I guess I'm not buying into the entering pictures. I don't tend to want to enter pictures ever much.

Gary: Ok.

Belinda: So, but we'll pretend anyway. Uhm, well...

Gary: You can say why you wouldn't enter a picture...

Belinda: But anyway I...I tend...anyway, as I said...I don't get the impression of a window at all from that.

Gary: Oh really?

Belinda: I get, I mean, I really, again, it feels, it looks like...there's a mirror in the middle of it. So therefore, it's a projection on a wall in someone's bedroom. She has her clock radio set for two...no...I think the alarm is set for tomorrow morning?

Gary: ....Yeah. For some reason I kind of imagine it being really early in the morning.

Belinda: So it's 2 a.m...the alarm is set. Now, I assume it's a bedroom because of the *Lubriderm*. The *Lubriderm* with the clock radio to me sort of screams bedroom...which is interesting I guess but would I want to go in it? Uhh, I'm obviously taking this at face value in terms of...it seems very nineteen.

Gary: Very nineteen?

Belinda: Yeah, in terms of you decorate your house because you wanted it to look very East Indian. I don't know...you went to Pier 1 Imports and you bought a bunch of stuff...(pp. 10-11)

Belinda and Oliver shared their different reactions to Ramona Ramlochand's photograph. Through dialogue, Belinda was able to compare her response to *In Conversation* with Oliver's response to the same work and to listen to Oliver's description of his own imaginative process for responding to the work, which in this case took the form of an imagined journey through the picture space. Belinda resisted engaging in the type of imaginary journey that Oliver made into the work. Nevertheless, by saying "I don't tend to want to enter pictures ever much...but we'll pretend anyway," Belinda acknowledged that her ability to pretend, or use her imagination, was a key factor in whether or not she would respond to the work and interpret it's meaning. Perhaps without realising it, she nevertheless used her imagination and drew from her lived experience when she speculated about how the room's inhabitant went about the

task of decorating the room by shopping at Pier 1 Imports.

Significantly, as our discussion continued, Belinda concluded that her initial reaction to *In Conversation* upon entering the gallery, which had been negative, affected her attitude towards the work and, consequently, the way she was interpreting it: "I guess my issue is that when I first came into this room, my first reaction was I glanced at the picture and I just didn't want to spend any time with it at all" (p. 14). In her opinion, the imagery seemed derivative and it reminded her of past experiences where university students used cheap furniture and generic decorative items to furnish their apartments: "I guess it's the same way that when I was in university everyone had a Monet poster on their wall..." (p. 14). Belinda recognized and acknowledged the fact that her willingness to interpret the work was affected by her initial reaction to it and that her process of interpreting *In Conversation* was influenced by her attitudes and past experiences. In other words, Belinda's attitudes and intentions affected her interpretation of the work as much as the artist's own intentions.

At this point in our visit, I still wanted participants to examine, clarify and articulate some of the ideas and emotions underlying their negative responses to certain works, so I asked both Belinda and Oliver to think of a title for the work they most disliked. In response, Oliver asked me an interesting question: "Do I have to give it a serious title that the artist might have given to it?" (p. 18). I told him to give the work his own title. However, Oliver's question indicates that he understood that the maker of an artwork might offer one interpretation of the work while a viewer could offer a different yet valid interpretation. Depending on how they read the work and what kind of

meaning they assigned to it, the artist and the viewer might think of different titles for the same piece. By asking if he had to guess the artist's intended message (rather than create his own title for the work), Oliver seemed to recognize his own role in determining the meaning of the artwork. Moreover, at the end of the gallery visit, Oliver also acknowledged that preoccupations in his daily life inevitably influenced his interpretation of the exhibition: "everything that I've seen [in the exhibition] is a commentary on modern life....Or...that's my obsession so that's my interpretation" (p. 22).

Instances When Engaging in Dialogue Did Not Help Viewers to Interpret Artworks

Occasionally, the participants' previous experiences and knowledge did not correspond with what they saw in the exhibition and they were unable, even after having engaged in dialogue with each other, and shared information and lived experience, to negotiate meanings that satisfied them. For example, despite Belinda's initially positive reaction to Musiol's photo-based installation, she was unable to reconcile the subject matter of the photographs with her lived experience and seemed to remain unconvinced by the arguments and opinions offered by me and Oliver.

Initially, Belinda, Oliver and I shared our positive responses to Musiol's installation entitled *No Private Space. Pas d'espace privée* as we entered the room in which it was installed. Like me, Oliver and Belinda were basically responding to the colour of the walls and the manner in which the black framed photographs were hung in various compositions around the room. Our initial responses to this installation were aesthetic in nature:

Gary: This is Marie-Jeanne Musiol. She's a photographer, basically.

Oliver: Hmmm. I *love* this sort of series. I love the affect that it gives.

Gary: I like it too...I like this...

Belinda: I guess my first reaction: I love the paint colour, Hmmm I'm sorry I'm going ooohhh...

Gary: Yes, [the colour] on the wall! That was my reaction too. (p. 20)

Oliver commented that he liked the work because it was easy to understand and that its subject matter was drawn from nature. He found that he could relate to the work easily (p. 21).

However, Belinda paid greater attention to the titles of the individual pictures and called our attention to one title in particular: *Energy Death of a Leaf.* Oliver was somewhat startled by the title but thought it was interesting that the leaves in the photographs were viewed as spiritual beings by the artist: "Oh that's neat. That's a really neat thing to...to make you think that [the installation] has a real religious and spiritual overtone to it. Everything is living and you should respect everything. I like that a lot" (p. 21). In the course of sharing his thoughts with us, Oliver seemed to have a personally significant response to the installation, one which connected with his own value system:

> You know I'm a big leaf puller. Like if I'm walking along I love to pull leaves off and I love to slowly dissect the leaf because I think the structure of them is really beautiful. But this [photograph] makes me think that maybe I shouldn't do that. Just because I'm killing this living thing. I should leave it be...appreciate it

without harming it. (p. 22)

His response also touched on a theme that the curator argued the artist was exploring, which was that all life forms, big and small, should be thought of as living energy rather than simply as discreet physical entities (Fortin, text panel, 2001).

Oliver recognised the type of photographs the artist was displaying—Kirlian photographs—and was able to offer Belinda and I some background information. In this instance, Oliver acted as a knowledgeable source of information. He informed us that Kirlian photography is used to capture the auras of living beings. Although he expressed scepticism about this type of photograph's ability to actually capture auras, he interpreted the use of this photographic technique not as a legitimate scientific tool but rather as a creative way for the artist to remind viewers that leaves are alive and perhaps have some form of feeling or spiritual state and therefore deserve the same respect we give to conscious beings:

> ...I know that the whole Kirlian thing, it's been you know, there's a lot of sceptics including myself, people who think that you shouldn't read too much into it....But, again...my take on it is that it's just, you know, a little reminder...of how these things are alive and that maybe they have feelings...or some sort of spiritual state that we cannot perceive and so you should respect them for that reason alone. (p. 22)

For Oliver, the installation could still have meaning even if he questioned the scientific validity of the technology used to produce its elements. Oliver could reconcile the installation's message with information he already possessed and this message did not

seem to contradict his values or beliefs in any significant way.

Conversely, Belinda's response to the work changed dramatically once she began reading the accompanying labels describing how direct thought could restore a leaf's ability to emit an electro-magnetic aura. The artwork's message seemed so far-fetched to Belinda that she rejected its value, even though, initially, she had found the installation aesthetically pleasing. The following portion of dialogue began when I asked Belinda about her reaction to the installation:

Gary: Belinda, what kind of a reaction did you have?

Belinda: Well my reaction to this work, I must admit, has changed since we first came in. I really liked it–I've been reading the blurb...

Gary: Oh, ok...

Belinda: ...and, you know, [the artist] lost me—and I think Oliver might like this one more than I do–here it is the...

Oliver: What does it say?

Belinda: This one is "a Croton leaf which has been lacerated in several places signified by black areas." And the right one...

Gary: Ok, this one here?

Belinda: Ah, no it would be the second from the left I think...

Gary: This one here?

Belinda: Yeah. Twenty One.

Oliver: I like the one...

Belinda: But twenty three...well this is where you lost me with this next one.

Ok, this is the "Croton leaf whose capacity to give out light is partially restored by direct thought only. Ten minutes instead of magnetisation."

Gary: Oh, ok [chuckling]

Belinda: ....You have lost me in this exhibit right here.

Gary: Oh really?

Belinda: So I think this one is magnetised and this one she...thought about it for ten minutes and look at the difference!

Oliver: Since when can organic material...

Belinda: And this, this, I'm sorry to say, this whole exhibit has taken a whole new thing as I start reading the text going "Ok, well, is there anything else?"

Oliver: Since when can organic material be magnetized? I thought something had to be a metal. (p. 23)

Belinda's tone of voice when she read the text panels aloud was mocking, and she certainly drew Oliver's attention to information to which he had not previously paid attention. Nevertheless, Oliver continued to argue that he liked the installation, even though he felt the quasi-scientific photographs of the leaf auras were "goofy" (p. 24). In the following portion of dialogue, Oliver argues that the work is still valid for him. While his comments seem to influence Belinda, she still seems uncertain about the validity of the artwork's message:

Belinda: And this where I'm going Oookkk...and I'm sorry, as I said....I'm

sort of still coping with that little nugget of information before I can *move* on.

Gary: That's interesting.

Oliver: ....You know people claim that they've done experiments —scientific experiments with prayer—that showed that prayer worked. This is basically prayer for a leaf.

Gary: Yeah?

Oliver: And that's fine, and even if it's kind of silly she still makes her point. Like the point I was talking about earlier [we should value all forms of life] for me–it's still valid.

Belinda: Yeah...I don't know...As I said...I say the point is still valid....I just got distracted. (p. 24)

It is difficult to know if Belinda really changed her mind and now felt that the artist's statement might be valid or if she was simply agreeing with Oliver to avoid further discussion or argument. Although I am not convinced that she agreed with Oliver, Belinda seemed to take his point of view into consideration when examining her response to the work. It appeared to me that, through dialogue with Oliver, Belinda recognized that, at least for some viewers, the work might operate through metaphorical, symbolic or associative meanings rather than function purely as a literal statement of the artist's beliefs. She certainly articulated how encountering the information in the text panels "distracted" her and interfered with her process of formulating an interpretation of the installation's meaning. However, by the end of this discussion, Belinda had not

really changed her mind about the installation and was not able to articulate what its message, in her opinion, might be.

I asked Belinda if encountering information that contradicted her beliefs invalidated her initial response to the work of art, which had been positive. She said no. In fact, she claimed that she would probably spend more time with the installation, rather than less, because of the strange information she read on the text panels:

> I'd say it piques my curiosity....I probably would have spent more time in this room having read that and thought of this work much more having read that because my first reaction is "Ok, Oh come on!" Let me read them all and is this...is this, like, the only [leaf] that has thought? Are all these like this? (p. 25)

It appeared to me that the message of this particular installation remained difficult for Belinda to accept or to understand. Apparently, the work's message did not correspond with her previous knowledge. The information Belinda encountered in the installation also seemed to contradict her values. Furthermore, I did not possess additional information about the artist, or the context in which her work was produced, which I could have offered to Belinda and which might have assisted her in assessing the validity of the artwork's message. Indeed, even after hearing Oliver's reading of the work, Belinda remained unconvinced.

Nevertheless, I would argue that as a participant in a lecture-based group tour, Belinda may not have felt comfortable expressing her scepticism and possibly undermining the authority of the person delivering the information. Likewise, had I assumed that Belinda was misunderstanding the work, or had I attempted to convince

Belinda that the installation's message was valid without letting her disagree, I might have inhibited her process of responding to the work (such had been the case when the educator at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery attempted to convince the viewer of the photographs' authenticity without allowing that viewer to disagree with the educator's interpretation). It is significant that, through her dialogue with Oliver, Belinda at least explored the work for an extended period of time and considered Oliver's view that the artist's overall message might be convincing. Offering Belinda the opportunity to disagree with Oliver made it easier for her to listen to his interpretation of *No Private Space* and to consider her own estimation of its value.

Chapter 5—Dialogue in Gallery Visit II

Please note that the names of participants described in this chapter have been changed to protect their identities. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations and page numbers cited in this chapter refer to the transcript of the gallery visit I conducted on Sunday, December 9, 2001.

The second gallery visit took place on Sunday, December 9, 2001. This time there were four participants: James, Doug, Bill and Laura. This gallery visit represented the first time any of these participants had come to the Ottawa Art Gallery. As with the previous gallery visit, I found examples in the second gallery visit where, through their involvement in dialogue, research participants expressed diverse opinions and integrated each others' viewpoints. Participants in the second gallery visit also drew upon their lived experience and used their imaginations to make sense of the artworks. Participants assisted their peers to interpret artworks by sharing information and they acknowledged their own role in the meaning-making process.

The research participants in this gallery visit knew each other, as was the case in the previous gallery visit. However, perhaps because there was a larger number of participants for the second gallery visit, the dialogue seemed more fluid and was directed to me less often than in the previous visit. For example, Doug asked Bill what he thought about the manner in which the figures in Feldman-Kiss' photographs were represented. "What did you get from your sociological perspective?" (p. 6), Doug asked. This had not happened in the previous visit where the participants' questions had been directed to me rather than to each other. In comparison to the first visit, participants in the second

gallery visit spoke to each other more often. The participants in the second gallery visit seemed more eager to look at and interpret the artworks than Belinda had been. For example, James, Laura and Bill began describing their responses and debating possible interpretations immediately upon entering the galleries. James said "This looks like a family" (p. 1) moments after we entered the gallery space, even before I gave him any information about the work or asked him to engage in any kind of response activity.

As in the previous visit, many of the themes identified by the curator were discussed by the research participants over the course of their gallery visit, without the participants having been made aware of the curator's statements. For example, Bill and Doug engaged in a discussion centred on the theme of Western versus non-Western identities and globalization when comparing their reactions to *In Conversation*, by Ramona Ramlochand (p. 24). Bill was also able to offer us a non-Western perspective along with information about traditional Vietnamese culture.

My view that dialogue had played a very constructive role during this gallery visit was affirmed when, after the visit, I spoke informally with the research participants and they confirmed that they had learned from each other's responses and had produced more in-depth understandings of the artworks than would have been possible had they simply visited on their own. The research participants said that they felt comfortable expressing their views, had genuinely enjoyed their visit, and, in their opinion, their experience at the gallery had been positive (personal communication, December 9, 2001).

Attitudes, Assumptions and Viewpoints Revealed Through Dialogue

Early on in the gallery visit, James touched on the theme of the family and the

underlying roles and relationships that give it structure. Upon seeing the installation entitled *Plastic Utopia: the ideal family portrait*, he commented: "Well it looks like it's, it's an archetypal family like, well, you know, with the daughter doing her ballet lessons, the son here doing his, uh....something or other..." (p. 2). James said that the woman seemed the most curious because of the computer equipment she was wearing. Her role seemed atypical. Doug, Laura and Bill jumped into the discussion at this point and began debating the various roles and identities of the figures represented in the photographs. Doug speculated that the woman represented an older sister to the two other children while Laura questioned whether or not the figure was actually a woman (p. 2). Bill and James were sure it was a woman and I was surprised that there was even debate surrounding the issue.

Each participant argued his or her point, in the process revealing some of his or her attitudes and assumptions:

Doug: Well, to me that's not a mother. That's like an older teenage sister or something.

Laura: Yeah, but they're...one of the group.

James: Well...the father's...fathers are usually not considered to be like, you know...

Gary: sexy?

James: Beefcake! And the mother here is like totally not what you'd expect. Because you think of the person who'd be least likely to be like internet person or be, like, the mom.

Laura: But it doesn't necessarily have to be the mother. Like, I thought it was a guy. It could be two... like, uh, you can't really tell what...

Doug: Yeah, her face is covered.

James: ...I see a little bit of a breast, like, shaped here...

Laura: That's because of the way the shirt goes. Like, the shirt goes out...

James: It better be a woman.

Laura: It doesn't have to be a woman. (p. 2)

Just as Belinda and I had disagreed, in the previous gallery visit, about whether the shadow depicted in Ramona Ramlochand's photograph was cast by a camera or a projector, participants in this gallery visit disagreed about the gender of one of the figures represented in an image. This reminded me, once again, that viewers will interpret what they see in very different and sometimes surprising ways.

Debate about the gender of the person in the photograph prompted Laura to ask "Why would [the installation] necessarily have to be a family?" (p. 3). This question was designed to challenge other viewers' assumptions. Since the question was directed to the group in general, I waited for someone else to answer. James responded by sharing his analysis of the installation's structure: "Well, I think [the installation] kind of makes a circle...so, you know, you have your family circle...I mean it's kind of like a circle, like unity, so it becomes like a family. So I think this is supposed to be a family with pets and parents and a few children" (p. 3).

So far, through their dialogue and debate, and without having read the text panel written by the curator, the participants began debating a major theme of the exhibition

which was the "contemporary redefinition of society by focussing on such key notions as the family" (Fortin, 28 September, 2001). The artist seemed to intend for her audiences to compare the characters she depicted in her photographs with their own assumptions about the roles played by various family members, and in this case that is what happened. The participants had described what they saw and shared their initial reactions to the images. Some participants revealed fairly traditional assumptions about the roles played by the various people comprising a family unit while others challenged those assumptions. Through dialogue, participants questioned each other's assumptions and points of view while formulating alternate interpretations to propose to the group.

Sharing Information and Lived Experiences Through Dialogue

Participants often provided each other with information that helped other group members to interpret the artworks. For instance, Bill and James identified the keyboard and electronic equipment worn by the female figure depicted in *Plastic Utopia* as a personal computer (p. 6), which helped me to better understand that image.

Furthermore, Bill was able to act as a source of information about some of the cultural references in two of the works in the exhibition. For example, he confirmed that the projected image shown in Ramona Ramlochand's photograph, entitled *In Conversation*, originated from somewhere in Thailand because he recognised the lotus as a symbol originating from Thailand, along with the text:

James: ...they're projecting an image—it's almost like...an Indian movie poster or something...

Bill: It's actually from Thailand.

James: Oh, it's Thailand?

Bill: ....Yeah, because of the lotus. Uh, it's part of the Buddhist thing. And these are, like, Thai text. (p. 19)

Bill also informed group members that the piece entitled *Viet-tech Workers*, by Trâm Vo, was based on a traditional Vietnamese design for decorative screens (p. 28). Upon viewing the piece, both James and Bill made associations with objects they had seen in the past and communicated this information to the group. Bill explained that this type of folding screen was based on a traditional screen, found in Vietnam, on which images of farmers would traditionally be painted. He explained that, initially, he thought that the images on this work depicted farmers and, after a closer look, he realised that they were hi-tech workers (p. 29). James said that *Viet-tech Workers* reminded him of communist propaganda posters he had seen (p. 29). Later, James informed us that he had found confirmation, within the artwork, of his theory that the manner in which the high-tech workers were depicted was inspired by communist propaganda posters:

> It's interesting...[the text on the artwork] says: "All artworks generated after 1975," which is the fall of Saigon, "must comply with revolutionary criteria approved by the censorship agencies" so this all, like, you know, confirms my thing that it was, like, a communist propaganda poster with these industrious workers working for the state. (p. 29)

Both James and Bill funded the rest of us with information derived from their previous knowledge of Vietnam's history and culture. The information they provided to us certainly influenced my subsequent readings of the works. Furthermore, James and

Bill helped other group members to interpret the overall message of the exhibition by sharing the connections they saw between various works. For example, James noted that Trâm Vo's screen was linked to Ramlochand's photograph because both artworks depicted various types of interfaces between countries and they both juxtaposed cultures (p. 30). Doug asked Bill if he thought Vo's work fit in with the theme of the show. Bill replied that he did think it was connected to themes such as the relationship between cultures because it juxtaposed a traditional Vietnamese art form with modern, western subject-matter (p. 30).

I was pleased that Bill, in particular, had been able to fund the rest of us with some information about the cultural clues presented in *Viet-tech Workers* and *In Conversation*. During our gallery visit, Bill sometimes acted in the role of a content expert, not unlike a curator or art historian who can offer information about the symbolism and iconography in a work of art. In my opinion, this kind of information helped all participants in the second gallery visit to interpret the meaning of several artworks. Through dialogue, Bill offered group members information that allowed us to continue the interpretive process at times when we might have otherwise reached the limit of our abilities to interpret the work, simply because we lacked the information necessary to continue.

This example seems to support the theory that individuals can learn more through their discussions with peers than they could on their own (for example, Vygostsky, 1978). The knowledge and experience Bill contributed through dialogue was an element missing in the gallery visit I conducted with Belinda and Oliver. The information Bill

gave us enabled group members in the second gallery visit to construct more in-depth interpretations for certain artworks than was possible in the previous visit where participants lacked that information.

I believe this example also supports Hooper-Greenhill's argument that the "process of attributing meaning depends on prior knowledge; how far it goes depends on how much is known, and how well we are able to interrogate and use what is known" (1999, p. 46). Through dialogue with one another, viewers can enhance their knowledge and the ways in which it is used. Hooper-Greenhill describes the viewer's processes of interpreting artworks. The stages of interpreting include basic recognition of features, scanning the image as a whole, attempting to recognize features in more detail and trying to make connections with prior knowledge (1999. p. 45). If the viewer makes a connection with his or her prior knowledge, than the interpretive process may continue. However, if he or she does not make such a connection, than the process will end at that point (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 46). Additional information, Hooper Greenhill argues, can assist the viewer to continue the process at this stage: "Sometimes, in discussing the painting, a prompt is helpful....a little art-historical knowledge is needed to know both that and how symbols can be used in paintings" (1999, p. 46). Relevant information can be obtained through dialogue with educators and art historians, or it can be obtained through dialogue with a knowledgeable peer such as Bill, who was able, in this case, to offer insights and opinions based on his relevant knowledge and experience.

Sharing Alternate Interpretations Through Dialogue

Throughout the second gallery visit, participants shared their responses,

sometimes agreeing and other times disagreeing with interpretations put forward by other members of the group. Occasionally, one participant's interpretation might influence another participant and cause the second participant to modify his or her existing interpretation.

The following exchange took place between participants who were debating the possible meaning of mirror images of a dog included in *Plastic Utopia: the ideal family portrait*. It demonstrates how peer interaction, through dialogue, can assist group members to access the observations and interpretations of their fellow gallery visitors in order to formulate and perhaps confirm or refute their personal interpretations of a work of art.

Laura: Now the pictures of the dog, like, they're identical, they're obviously just mirrored. Is that because there was extra wall space...?

Gary: ...I'm assuming that no, that it's probably intentional...

James: It looks like it gives kind of a balance, you know, almost like book ends.

Gary: Yeah, it's true.

Bill: The way that I see it is that...You know how a family, if they have more than one pet, they usually have different type of pet. But this family has exact same dogs for two. So that's the way I see it. They like a certain thing so much that they keep the things...

Laura: Almost like cookie cutters?

Gary: But they're so...generic...

James: Even their pets are plastic [laughs]

Gary: [Laughs] Yeah, cloned...

Bill: Yeah, or if they like the same thing, they go for the same thing.

Laura: That's an odd choice for a dog though, like it's a...

Gary: That's a mastiff isn't it?

Laura: Yeah, it's a...bull mastiff, but usually families don't...like that one looks mean—usually families have more fluffy... a golden retriever or...

Gary: Oh...

Bill: But this is an unusual family.

Gary: [Laughs] It's not a typical family.

James: It looks like it's almost rabid. It's like foaming at the mouth kind of...

Doug: It's got red eyes.

Gary: Oh really?

James: It's definitely not a friendly dog.

Laura: No that's right. It's more like a dangerous dog.

James: Like, none of these people are very friendly. (p. 8)

In response to Laura's question, I shared my assumption about the artist's intentions (I assumed the that artist had a better reason for including two photographs of the dog than simply filling up wall space). James engaged in a bit of formal analysis in order to

answer her question, commenting that the photographs of the dogs gave the installation balance. Bill offered an interpretation of the work, explaining that both dogs might be symbols of materialism and commodification (the family liked the dog so much that they bought two of the same). Laura drew from her experience of dogs and commented that the dogs were an unusual breed for a family pet. In turn, Bill concluded that this family was unusual so it made sense for them to have an unusual type of dog. James compared the subjects and remarked that like the dog, the human subjects also looked unfriendly (p. 8).

The tone of the participants' conversation was casual and inquisitive, participants openly offered opinions based on their previous experiences, and they discussed possible interpretations of the artist's message. When one person raised a question or made a comment, another participant pointed to an element in the work relating to that comment and which helped to answer the question. Furthermore, it appeared to me that participants were confirming each other's interpretations and working towards reaching a consensus about what they believed were the messages being conveyed by the artist's inclusion of the dog portraits.

At this point, I asked if anyone had a different response to the dogs because my own initial response to the dogs had been much different. To me the dogs appeared to be afraid and seemed rather docile.

Gary: Well, does anyone have a different response? Anyone find anyone friendly in these photographs?

Doug: Uh no, but as far as the dog, I felt the dog was only there because if

you didn't have the dog it would just be the four people and it doesn't seem like a family necessarily, with the dog it makes it...

Laura: So you're saying a family is not a family without animals?

Doug: No, not at all. But if you're coming to look at a piece of art and you just see four people you don't necessarily think "family." I think with the dog...you bring that in a little more.

Bill: Without the dog it looks like the portrayal of four people...but with the dog it's an inclusion of a family unit.

James: It just...yeah....reinforces that it's a family. (pp. 8-9)

Doug thought that the dogs made it clear, on a formal level, that this was a family because they provided a visual connection between the portraits of the adults and the portraits of the children. Laura disagreed, but Bill jumped in to support Doug's point of view. Laura responded by explaining that her doubts about whether or not the installation represented a family stemmed, in part, from the blank expression of the sitters and the lack of interaction between them: "....but no one looks happy. Like, [the boy] just looks kind of blank. The child looks like he's gonna beat someone up and the little girl, like, is wearing this pink tutu–she looks like she's being forced to wear it" (p. 9). This representation did not seem to match her concept of what a family is like or how it should look.

In this example, through dialogue, participants asked questions and responded to the questions of their peers. They shared their ideas, theories and points of view regarding the artist's intentions, sometimes agreeing and other times disagreeing with

each other. They challenged the interpretations of others and defended their own positions. Participants also defended the ideas of others when they were in agreement with them. In general terms, participants debated the validity of their interpretations based on the evidence at hand, but viewed through the framework of their own lived experience. They tended to seek agreement or consensus without necessarily achieving it. Occasionally, participants were convinced by the arguments of their peers and modified their interpretations. Through an exchange of ideas and viewpoints, participants were exposed to a variety of attitudes, beliefs and impressions which lead them to investigate possible interpretations for the works they were exploring.

We moved into the next part of the room where *Ectogenerative Organ III* was installed on the other side of the wall, behind the photographs of the man and the woman. James asked if the glass sculpture was part of the installation and I confirmed that it was. Doug remarked that it looked like the female reproductive system. Laura and James agreed (p. 14). I offered my interpretation which was that, since the artist was actually the woman in the photograph on the other side of the wall, and since she was the maker of the work itself, perhaps the glass uterus represented the artist as creator of the artwork (p. 14). Bill offered another interpretation, tied more closely to the ways in which the mother, father, son and daughter were represented as archetypes and which also emerged from his own knowledge of chemistry. He said:

> Well, I actually see the whole thing, including [*Ectogenerative Organ III*] as one piece...Because what I see is this whole thing is holding the room as...the mechanisms that, you know, hold the family together...this is something we see as

mechanical, like chemistry, like not a lot of people understand, that's why we didn't understand how the family worked either. That's why we were, you know, discussing. Same thing now. We come to the back, we see the mechanism that's holding the family but yet we still don't know how it works exactly. (p. 15)

Bill's interpretation echoed the curator's statement about the artist's examination of the power structures underlying the traditional family. His interpretation seemed plausible to me and influenced my own evolving interpretation of the artist's message. After hearing Bill's theory about the glass sculpture representing the forces that bind families together, I altered my own interpretation and decided that *Ectogenerative Organ III* might simultaneously represent both the artist's creative force and society's underlying power to structure the family unit. I believe that my participation in a dialogue with Bill, leading to the exchange of our interpretations, helped me to construct a deeper understanding of the installation. The dialogue in which I engaged with Bill compelled me to attend to *Ectogenerative Organ III* for a longer period of time than I had chosen to on past occasions.

At a different point in the gallery visit, the group discussed Ramona Ramlochand's work, *In Conversation*. When asked what links existed between this work and the others in the exhibition, Bill offered an interesting response, revealing his unique perspective. This prompted Doug to share his own differing yet equally plausible interpretation of Ramlochand's artwork. Referring to *In Conversation*, Bill said:

The way I see *Localities* is everything just centred in the western society...like this picture here we see *Lubriderm* and...that kind of clock...which is not very popular

in Asia, so you, it tells us that, you know, you are still in western society...you see the aspects of other countries, other cultures...You know, she...visited some places. She brought [the image] back here and projected it...in her room, and just to, you know...show the contrast between here and there...while you're constantly looking at this Thailand image, you also know that you're looking at this projection. You also know that your reality is still in this western room...The projection is unreal. (p. 24)

Doug responded to Bill's interpretation of *In Conversation*:

> So I get the opposite of that because in this one the image in the projection is a poster or slide of something that was taken elsewhere...sort of to me represents the world—the larger world—...it doesn't fit in this small room...so this room is so much smaller than the rest of the world. The real world is so much bigger. There's more to it than just that. (p. 24)

Bill seemed to be saying that the combination of eastern and western imagery and spaces in Ramlochand's piece communicated the idea that westerners view "the other" through stereotypes. For him, Ramlochand's photograph depicted how other cultures are dominated and subsumed by the West. Doug, on the other hand, seemed to think that the combination of eastern and western symbols in Ramlochand's photograph emphasized the limitations of a western perspective. For him, the artwork showed how western society is isolated from other cultures. Obviously, Bill and Doug came from different cultural backgrounds which, in this case, made them view the same artwork from opposite perspectives.

In this instance, by participating in dialogue, participants lead each other to acknowledge and examine the limitations of one's own experiences and world views. Bill, born in east-Asia, was uniquely positioned to view western culture from the outside. Consequently, Bill was able to offer the other participants, including myself, a perspective we could not otherwise access. Doug offered an alternate reading of the work from his own standpoint and cultural background. Bill and Doug were examining the same theme, but from different vantage points, so necessarily their interpretations differed. As an bystander, I may not have participated directly in this portion of dialogue, but I was able to broaden my own perspective. By simply listening to Bill and Doug's discussion, I was able to imagine perspectives outside of my own, increasing the number of ways in which I might view and interpret the work. In realizing that others do not necessarily view things in the same manner as oneself—that others may hold different assumptions arising out of their own unique set of experiences, values and beliefs—the research participants and I were better positioned to understand that perceiving, inferring, judging and interpreting are essentially creative actions.

Viewers Acknowledge Their Role in the Meaning-Making Process

Bill was the only participant in the second gallery visit who openly acknowledged the influence his colleagues' ideas and impressions could have on his process of negotiating the meaning of artworks. For example, early on in the gallery visit, I called the group's attention to some white vinyl lettering on the wall that formed part of the installation entitled *Plastic Utopia*. Doug and James expressed their opinion that the artist should have made the text more visible so that visitors could notice it while Laura

and Bill expressed their view that the artist's approach was unique and original and made visitors take notice because of the letters' unusual appearance. Bill made the following comments in response to the statements made by Doug and James:

Bill: So, you know, if it's not interesting we wouldn't be standing here and looking at this.

Doug: But if Gary hadn't pointed it out we might not have seen it...

Gary: You would not even have seen it...

James: I wouldn't have noticed it.

Bill: Same thing in, like, a lot of art pieces. You know...people see different things. Some don't notice different parts of the arts, some do and, you know, you need to hear from other people to find out, 'Oh I never thought of that perspective!' You know, the same thing, I think. (p. 4)

Significantly, Bill acknowledged the important role other viewers can play in helping an individual interpret an artwork's meaning and how dialogue can help viewers share responses and consequently enrich their own, personal responses.

In the previous gallery visit, Belinda identified her imagination as a way of creating an interpretation for an artwork. In the second gallery visit, Bill was the only participant to comment on a viewer's role in the meaning-making process. Ironically, Belinda spoke about using her imagination because she was critiquing the response activity where I asked her to imagine actually entering into Ramona Ramlochand's photograph. In the second gallery visit, however, participants seemed more amenable to

the idea of engaging in response activities and discussing their imaginary trips into the artworks. None of the participants critiqued my questions or the response activities in which I asked them to engage. Perhaps their were fewer comments by participants acknowledging their own active role in the process of interpreting artworks because there were fewer critiques of the methods used to engage participants in responding and actively interpreting the artworks.

Instances When Engaging in Dialogue Did Not Help Viewers to Interpret Artworks

The following portion of dialogue occurred early in the second gallery visit. Participants were discussing the roles played by the various characters represented in *Plastic Utopia: the ideal family portrait*:

James: Well it's interesting what you say about the roles because they all seem to fit the roles except for the mother. The mother's really not archetypal at all.

Gary: Yeah, it's true...

Bill: Well...I disagree. Because a lot of the time men are the ones outside working and women now days they have computers as their companion. They sit at home and chat all the time, uh, you know, browse on the internet...

James: But that's a new phenomenon.

Laura: But a lot of women work as well. There's a lot of two-income families. Women are working nowadays–they aren't always at home....(p. 11)

The conversation continued for a minute or so, with Bill arguing that the installation represented a time-line exemplifying stereotypical roles past and present. While all participants listened to Bill's comments, the ideas he expressed seemed strange to me. The other participants also disagreed with Bill statements:

Gary: Oh, so you see this as a time-line?

Bill: Yeah.

Laura: But the time line doesn't flow because you went from here and then you went all the way across the room. Like, you know what I mean? Like, shouldn't a time line go in a...

Doug: I don't see it as a time line.

James: I don't subscribe to the time-line theory, myself.

Doug: No.

James: I think it's supposed to be all contemporary.

Doug: But you did say, you know, that's a recent phenomenon—that the woman would be out working—and in the title it says, there's a date, and I don't know if that means when it was made or is that part of the title?

James: ...But, I mean, you know, how many women do you see wearing, like, computers as accessories?

Laura: Yeah, but I don't think it's meant to be [literal]...

Doug: No, but I mean...they could of had her at a desk...

Bill: But I don't see many dads who look like that either. (p. 12)

Although this particular portion of dialogue continued for a few more minutes, the group reached no conclusions or consensus about why the female figure was represented in the manner chosen by the artist. In this instance, we were not able, even through dialogue and debate, to settle on a reading of the portrait's message. The image of technology and motherhood combined with each other seemed more foreign to our lived experience than the other images in the installation and presented us with questions we could not answer. Through participation in dialogue, participants at least were able to vocalise and listen to their own questions about the portrait. However, without additional information about the portrait, we were unable to create a satisfactory interpretation for this work.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Reflection on Gallery Visits I & II

Generally, the group discussion that occurred during both gallery visits was fruitful. Through dialogue, viewers focussed on the artworks and shared their responses to them. These shared responses often revealed more general opinions or viewpoints about issues such as whether or not it is important to consider the artists' intentions when interpreting artworks and the role art plays in portraying modern life. The sharing of perspectives often lead to agreement, reinforcing the participants' responses to certain artworks. At other times, dialogue lead to debate and discussion about the participants' ideas, opinions and viewpoints. Participants sometimes shared specific knowledge that helped other participants continue the process of interpretation in order to construct more complete understandings of specific artworks. Usually, but not always, research participants were able to go a long way in terms of constructing interpretations for the artworks they encountered. This was possible in large part because they felt comfortable sharing their ideas and memories. Participants also felt comfortable changing their minds and did not seem to fear being judged by their peers or the educator.

I do believe, however, that viewers could have benefited from more access to information about the artists and their work. Although some information about the artists and their work was available to gallery visitors in the form of labels and text panels, this information sometimes seemed insufficient. Additional information might have helped participants to answer some of the questions they asked themselves but which they could not answer even after hearing the ideas and opinions of their peers. I

relied almost exclusively on the lived experience and responses of the participants (as well as my own interpretations, which I had developed when preparing for the gallery visits) as "information" to offer participants at times when they were unable to relate to what they were seeing. On certain occasions, information from the curator or artist might have been more helpful to continuing the process of interpreting the artworks. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that no reading or interpretation need be thought of as final or complete. Furthermore, the research participants did something that happens all too rarely during guided gallery tours: they responded directly to the artworks they encountered and spent a considerable amount of time and effort sharing, examining and refining their responses.

While an atmosphere of trust and respect was established during both gallery visits, and I genuinely believe that all participants felt comfortable expressing their views, the discussion during the first gallery visit was not as dynamic and spontaneous as that which occurred with the next group. The different sizes of both groups probably influenced the character of the dialogue. My impression was that the second gallery visit was more dynamic because there were more participants. In the first gallery visit there were fewer viewpoints to express, less possibility for debate, fewer opportunities to draw information from participants' lived experience and less energy in the group. The different dynamics and interpersonal interactions of each group probably lead to different types of comments from participants. This raises questions such as: Is there an optimal group size favouring productive dialogue? If so, what is the ideal group size?

Nevertheless, I believe both gallery visits were successful because participants in

both cases engaged directly with the works of art on view and formed opinions about the works based on their own knowledge and values. In many ways, this is much more than happens during many guided tours in galleries and museums where visitors simply receive information without engaging directly with artworks. For example, Oliver and Belinda engaged with works of art in more depth and detail than they would have had they been visiting the exhibition on their own. Indeed, both research participants agreed that they would not have spent so much time responding to the works had they not been engaged in a dialogue about their reactions to the exhibition (personal communication, November 29, 2001). Participants in the second gallery visit felt the same way. In a casual conversation after the second visit of the Ottawa Art Gallery, participants commented that, on their own, they would have gone through the exhibition in a much more superficial manner. They said that they would not have undertaken very detailed examinations of the works, nor would they have thought very deeply about their responses to the exhibition. As well, James said that it was unfortunate that museums do not implement the type of gallery visit we did that day because in the past, on the rare occasions when he visited museums or followed tours, he did not feel like he could share his responses. Instead, he felt like he should be quiet and reverent (personal communication, December 9, 2001).

I was pleased by these comments because I believed that I had changed the participants' attitudes towards visiting art galleries and helped them to gain a sense that their personal responses were valid and worth exploring. From my perspective, it was rewarding to participate in a gallery visit where I placed the emphasis on facilitating the

viewers' process of responding to the artworks rather than on explaining the curator's message and convincing viewers of that message's validity. Whether or not my research participants understood or accepted the curator's message, I am convinced that they all left the gallery with a more positive attitude towards art galleries and contemporary art. In my opinion, this in itself was a significant educational outcome.

The Role of Dialogue

How did dialogue, guided by an educator, help gallery visitors to formulate and express their own views, integrate the viewpoints of their colleagues and recognize their own role in determining the meanings of artworks? In both gallery visits, participants were given a platform from which they could express their ideas and opinions when they engaged in dialogue. Through dialogue, viewers took on a more active role and heard their own thoughts and answered many of their own questions when they spoke about their reactions to the artworks. Consequently, the participants' own perceptions and ideas became more tangible and clear to them. Through dialogue, participants were able to examine and explore their own thoughts, emotions and assumptions while they worked through the process of interpreting the artworks and relating what they saw with what they already knew.

Likewise, through their involvement in dialogue with one another, participants were encouraged to attend to and evaluate the beliefs and opinions of their peers, who acted as co-authors of the exhibition's message. Research participants challenged the assumptions of others and defended their own ideas when engaged in dialogue with each other. Sometimes, after listening to the thoughts and arguments presented by their peers,

research participants modified their interpretations of artworks because they heard someone else's ideas and agreed with them. On other occasions, participants rejected the ideas proposed by their fellow gallery visitors and chose instead to promote and defend their own interpretations. As a result of their participation in dialogue, all participants examined their own lived experiences and reflected on the influences these experiences had upon their attitudes and beliefs. By the end of each gallery visit, research participants understood that their lived experience was the primary context within which their understanding of artworks was constructed. I also witnessed a change in most participants' attitudes towards contemporary art and towards their own abilities to interpret such work. The research participants were genuinely pleased that they had been able to interpret many of the artworks and share their ideas with one another.

Engaging in dialogue also helped viewers to feel more comfortable in the gallery space because they were part of a social learning experience rather than a solitary one. This was especially helpful because the gallery was a new learning environment for most participants. Research participants were more inclined to spend time with the artworks, and to work at interpreting them, partly because the gallery visit encompassed a social aspect. Sharing their thoughts and feelings (both positive and negative) about the experience of visiting the gallery helped research participants to feel comfortable expressing their views about the artworks. Participants felt that they were among a group of peers—each with his or her own strengths and insecurities. Consequently, the research participants worried less about being judged by their colleagues or by the educator. As participants expressed and modified their interpretations, without feeling

that they were being judged, their level of trust in the group increased. Accordingly, the sharing of ideas and lived experiences increased. When participants engaged in dialogue, listening to their own ideas as well as those of their colleagues, they began to realize that they were capable of interpreting artworks even though they were not experts.

Possibilities for Further Research

While I have answered my research question and demonstrated that dialogue proved to be an effective tool enabling participants in both gallery visits to share their lived experience and knowledge, and consequently to construct interpretations for various works of art, new questions have been raised. For example, I came to realize that the viewers' shared experiences, viewpoints, and opinions—while extremely important—were not a substitute for information about the artists, their working methods or the contexts within which the works were produced. Providing information to viewers when they ask for it, so that they can continue their own process of interpreting the artworks, is not the same as providing information to viewers before they have been given the opportunity to respond to the artwork and to express their own questions and ideas. I believe questions for further study are: How can an educator provide art historical information to learners, when guiding the learners' dialogue, to facilitate and enhance their process of interpreting artworks? What type of information is helpful and at what stage in the viewer's own interpretive process should this information be offered? What effect does group size and composition have on the quality of dialogue in which participants engage? Research to answer these questions may yield interesting results for educators working both within and outside of the museum context.

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Appendix I:

Questions Asked During Gallery Visits

1) Introduction:

"Welcome to the Ottawa Art Gallery. Today we are going to be looking at works of art that have been brought together in a show called *Localities.* I'd like you to keep the title of the show in mind as we look at some of these works and we'll talk about what it means later on."

-Give participants a few minutes to visit the exhibition on their own, then call them over to the first painting.

2) Response Activity:

-"Take three or four minutes to look at this painting/photograph/object. I would like you to imagine that you can actually enter into the artwork. What is it like in the painting/photograph/object? What happens when you are in there?"

-Wait two to three minutes and ask someone to describe their imaginary trip through the work of art, then get others to share their imaginary journeys.

Move on to the analysis of the painting:

-"What is your response to this painting/photograph/object? How do you react to it? What features or qualities of this artwork do you find interesting? Why? What emotions does it evoke? What questions do you ask yourself as you look at this work of art?"

-"How does the title of this painting/photograph/object relate to what you see in it? What title would you give it? Why? Keeping in mind the title of the show, how does this work of art fit in with the other works on display?"

3) Repeat these questions with three other works.

4) Thank participants for sharing their responses. Point out any text panels listing, describing or explaining some of the major themes the curator was thinking about when selecting the artworks for the exhibition.