

Virginia Docent Exchange
The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk

Panel on Bias in Art
Monday, March 16, 1992, 2 - 3 p.m.

From a curator's point of view, every installation of objects makes a statement - or presents a bias, if you wish. Placing objects on display in museum galleries is an act of interpretation. What hangs next to something or is grouped with it carries meaning in itself. The viewer usually expects words to tell him/her how to interpret these juxtapositions. We could say that the skill of a curator can be measured by how well the objects speak for themselves through their installation, minimizing the need for justifying text. That implies an audience trained to "read" visually. A few comments on viewer expectation: the viewer expects that what he/she finds in the galleries is "the truth." "This is all good art because it is in the museum and if I don't think it is good, then the fault lies with me." Edges are being pushed by the approaches of art historians whose revisionist views tell the viewer in text that what the viewer thought was correct from what he/she saw is not correct. In the recent Museum Education Roundtable seminar on *How Labels Interpret Art Exhibitions* (12/11/91), the point was made that an atmosphere of dialogue is desirable where the viewer is given a point of view (the curator's not the museum's) so that the viewer with an open mind can agree or disagree. Exhibitions should be more like editorials in the newspaper: "this is what I have come up with; it is not the last word, but the best that I can make of this at the present time." In other words, bias needs to be spelled out and enthusiastically supported.

Suzanne Foley, Curator
Bayly Art Museum
University of Virginia

The word bias suggests prejudice, partiality or a slanted view. There are many sources for bias, and these may be physiological, linguistic and cultural. Virtually everyone who looks at art is looking through these kinds of filters. The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project by Melora McDermott-Lewis is an excellent source of information about the kinds of expectations, biases, and needs that characterize both novice and experienced art museum visitors. These insights tell us what behaviors and concerns of visitors can be anticipated and planned for, and we can also learn about our own prejudices. Bias can then be looked at as an exciting challenge that docents can meet when planning tours or examining their own ideas about art.

Almost all art museum visitors, no matter how inexperienced, use four ways of looking at art. Emotion is especially important, and many viewers consider a gallery visit to be a failure if unpleasant emotions are generated. Most visitors also look at art in terms of memory. "That looks just like a picture in grandma's house!" Even novice viewers have some awareness of the facts associated with art and may respond to art historical facts, facts about the artist, or observable facts such as the use of color or very realistic drawing. Imagination is another skill most gallery visitors bring with them, and this may take the form of speculating about artists' lives and motivations, the deeper significance of certain artworks, or speculations about how they would create art themselves. Docents can build tours around the skills which visitors already possess and help even the most inexperienced visitor to expand these skills beyond personal bias.

Ellen J. Henry
Peninsula Fine Arts Center

VIRGINIA DOCENT EXCHANGE
The Chrysler Museum
March 15 & 16, 1992

Sunday, March 15

4:00 to 5:30 p.m. Pre-registration
4:30 to 4:45 Mini-tours of the Museum (optional)
5:45 to 7:00 Cocktail Buffet
7:00 to 8:00 Speaker, Dr. Peggy Ruth Cole

Monday, March 16

8:00 to 8:45 a.m. Registration and Coffee
8:45 to 9:00 Welcome and Announcements
9:00 to 9:50 Keynote Speaker, Marla Shoemaker, Auditorium
10:00 to 10:50 Workshops
11:00 to 11:50 Workshops
12:00 to 1:00 p.m. Luncheon
1:00 to 1:50 Workshops
2:00 to 3:00 Panel, Bias in Looking at Art, Auditorium
3:00 to 3:30 Closing Announcements & Humorist, Steve Kissell

You will be assigned to a workshop in each time slot. Please indicate first and second choice for each workshop. You will receive a schedule at the Docent Exchange registration desk.

10:00 to 10:50 Workshop

25-30

_____ Touring Teens, Maier, G Gallery
1 Touring Teens, Chrysler, A Gallery
_____ Innovative Touring, K-6, Chrysler & VFMA, J Gallery
2 Innovative Touring, Adults, VMFA, D Gallery
_____ Touring Contemporary Art, K-6, Chrysler, L Gallery
_____ Hands-on Activity, Muscarelle, B Gallery

11:00 to 11:50 Workshop

2 Hands-on Activity, Chrysler, C Gallery
1 Touring Contemporary Art, Adults, Chrysler, L Gallery
_____ Innovative Touring, K-6, Bayly, E Gallery
_____ Innovative Touring, K-8, Maier, K Gallery
_____ Hands-on Activity, K-5, Bayly, G Gallery
_____ Reading the Audience, Seniors, Chrysler & Va. Beach Center of the Arts, A Gallery

1:00 to 1:50 Workshop

_____ Touring Teens, VMFA & Bayly, I Gallery *16th + 17th*
_____ Touring Teens, VMFA, Auditorium *Ball.*
_____ Innovative Touring, High School, Chrysler, G Gallery
_____ Touring Contemporary Art, Adults, VMFA, L Gallery
_____ ~~Reading the Audience, Adults, Bayly, A Gallery~~ *JAY*
_____ Reading the Audience, Disabled, VMFA, D Gallery

Name: _____

Museum: _____

PANEL ON BIAS IN ART

S. Foley: I will speak to the bias offered by the curator or institution in the presentation of art or of objects/artifacts.

1. From a curator's point of view every installation of objects makes a statement - or presents a bias, if you wish.
 - What hangs next to something or is grouped with it carries meaning in itself.
 - Placing objects on display in museum galleries is an act of interpretation
 - That is one element in our basic job description
 - and in fact is grounded in the museum's mission statement. Your mission ~~gives~~ ^{defines} your bias: if you are [the Corps of Engineers' Museum you are going to present environmental issues differently from the Natural History Museum]

= This is a given; Let's see how this affects a viewer

2. The viewer usually expects some guidance to tell him how to interpret these juxtapositions -
 - we employ signage and maps and so on/ but the
 - viewer usually expects words to convey the ideas or to orient him to what we have in mind.
 - by definition a museum viewer is an active participant - he makes the effort to come ~ to find out something.

≡ Shall I be audacious enough to say that the skill of the curator can be measured by how well the objects speak for themselves through their installation (minimizing need for justifying text)

= This implies an audience trained to read "visually."
This is the point we come back to again and again
? How can we "train" people to have better visual reading skills?

3. The normal, comfortable ~~state~~ ^{made} for discussing points of view is words - people feel comfortable with arguments via the written word.
 - when they come to museums they expect that what they see (or read) is the ultimate truth -
 - that this is the best to be had, the ultimate statement. (we have created this atmosphere)

3- contd.

"This is all good art because it is in the museum and if I don't think it is good, then the fault lies with me."

we have seen this most blatantly in some of the revisionist art history presentations, like THE WEST AS AMERICA where the viewer was told by the label copy (in essence) that if he thought what he saw in the picture represented positive good values - he was wrong. That was not correct.
 • Rightly so, the viewer was angry

4. Suggested at Museum Education Roundtable seminar on How Labels Interpret Art Exhibitions that we should work toward labels in dialogue with the viewer. Let it be known that this represents one point of view ~ the curator's not the museum's. [like a sighed editorial.] Then the viewer can agree or disagree ~ and leave w/ an open mind

- Some demystifying the process of ① presenting, ② studying and ③ making art is engaging.
 - eg ② St. Anne Altarpiece > coming from Conservation Lab
 - ① the Corcoran Songs of My People - spells out its bias "an exhib. about blacks from a black point of view"
 - ③ ^{Hirshhorn} Martin Puryear exhibition / ^{Alfredo} Jaar / ^{Francisco Torres} ("impact is in intro label talked about artist - facts; few "why he is great" - installation
- More interaction w/ artist Emmet Gowin - difficult - how done?
- Use simple language on walls; more contextual in handout

5. My argument is that bias needs to be identified, spelled out, so that everyone can participate and feel positive about it

Cultural expectations

well-crafted, accurate,

Novice - limited perceptual interests

want facts ~ help in looking (not art historical signif.)
look for objects ability to hold attn.

- confess emotions with judgement.

Interaction rather than reaction.

Emotion - what do you like; facts of art - design, color

memory - associations; Imagination - Put your Mother on the ceiling

Docents ~ represent the artists point of view as best you can.
as well as being a fellow traveller

Who picks this art? [need more women / blacks / Hispanics]

When you come to a museum you have been