

Lending One's Life to Art: What to Say?

Dr. Burton, speaker at Richmond Docent Exchange – May 6, 2007

Artists are trying to make sense of their culture and lives. We are in the art we look at; the viewer is part of it. Ideas about beauty and value have varied over time. Imagination, investigation and reflection connect the viewers' lives with objects of culture. This helps kids position themselves in time and space and develop a personal point of view.

Developmental capacities and interests

Age 3-6 – sensory-motor action, fantasy

Age 4-8 – people, their actions, lives and places

Age 6-10 – actions/activities of world – what makes world tick

Age 8-12 – social world, conventions, expectations, interest in details

Age 11-15 – identity, new layerings of self, other ways of seeing/experiencing

Age 14-20 – beyond surfaces, making new worlds, explaining possibilities

What would you like to tell me about this?

What do you think this is?

What kind of special place is this?

What kind of question would you like to ask of this?

Who has a different idea?

What makes you say that?

How come you all have different ideas?

What would this picture tell you?

What could you ask this picture?

All truths are important. You must balance dialogue/conversation with information. Listen to answers, show respect for kids' ideas and interpretations.

What questions might kids naturally ask about art?

What would you feel like in this painting?

Acknowledge the ownership of learning; appraise and take account of variety of ideas, responses, interpretations and perspectives.

Useful Questions for Public Tours

When examining and discussing a work of art, museum visitors might be asked to:

Describe it:

Look at this artwork for a moment. What initial observations can you make about it?

How would you describe this artwork to a person who could not see it?

How would you describe (the scene depicted, the colors, the lines, shapes, texture, space, etc.) in this artwork?

Relate it:

How is this artwork like the one we just saw? Are there any obvious differences?

What do these two paintings have in common?

What interests you most about this work of art?

Analyze it:

Which objects (shapes, lines, etc.) seem closer to you? Further away?

What do you think is the most important part of this work of art?

How do you think the artist made this object?

What questions would you ask the artist about this work if she/he were here?

Interpret it:

What title would you give to this artwork? What made you decide on that title? What is your response to the title given by the artist?

Can you associate any (sounds, smells, tastes) with this art object?

Imagine being inside this art object. What does it feel like?

What do you think is going on in this picture? How did you arrive at that idea?

Evaluate it:

What are some possible responses to this work or art? Why do you think that?

What do you think is worth remembering about this object?

What could a person learn from examining this artwork?