

Being Affected by Art: A Gadamerian Perspective

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Museums that prioritize dialogue about social justice may be less educative than they purport, Ann Chinnery argues. The curricula of so-called “dialogue” museums typically reinforce and supplement classroom-based learning. Consequently, questions that students bring to museums are “pre-asked,” formulated in contexts outside of museums for the purpose of gaining information. While this type of instrumental education may promote mastery of subject matter, it does not invite students to wonder: “What might I learn from museums that I don’t already know?” Chinnery concludes that “dialogue” museums ultimately do not enable students “to confront their most closely-held assumptions and assume responsibility for change.”¹ Instead these museums foreclose opportunities for personal engagement and mitigate genuine questioning of beliefs.

Chinnery wants museums to be places that challenge students’ pre-conceptions and pique their curiosity about different perspectives. Toward this end, Chinnery proposes “object-centered museum education.” Unlike the orchestrations of “dialogue” museums, “object” museums offer students opportunities to contemplate art “before moving to judgment and discussion.” Following Jeanette Winterson, Chinnery encourages students to encounter art unencumbered by distractions such as school questionnaires and explanations from museum staff. Sit with art objects, Chinnery counsels. How do they make you feel? Let art “do” things to you: don’t do things to the art.

The “direct experience of looking at an object” is key to Chinnery’s view of museum education. Encountering art unmediated by the interpretations of others permits art to personally affect us, Chinnery says. Chinnery cites Winterson, who explains: “When the thick curtain of protection is taken away; protection of prejudice, protection of authority, protection of trivia, even the most familiar of paintings can begin to work its power.”

Being affected by art is important, because this experience exposes us to that which is unfamiliar. Directly experiencing the unfamiliar can interrupt our tendency to see the world exclusively through familiar categories and to project understandings that simply repeat what we already know and assume is correct. When we permit art to do things to us, we might be “taken aback by something *we thought* we knew, but, upon reflection, realize we never really knew at all,” Chinnery writes. Learning *from* objects, not *about* them, can foster “modesty, humility, and respect for the other *as other*.”

Modesty, humility, and respect for the other-as-other are important, because these dispositions can counter arrogant tendencies to impose (however unwittingly) our own understandings on those who may not share our views. Of course, there is no guarantee that “object” museums will awaken these dispositions. We cannot

“predict or direct” what students will take from their encounters with art, Chinnery notes. But insofar as “object” museums provide spaces for art to affect students personally, they make it possible for at least some students to question their assumptions and to develop the dispositions that genuine learning and working for social justice require.

I am deeply sympathetic to Chinnery’s goals for museum education. I heartily agree that cultivating modesty, humility, and respect for others is a central purpose for education. This absorbing and beautifully written essay helps me see how museum education might develop these dispositions. It also helps me appreciate the pedagogic complexities that education for social justice entails.

Agreeing with Chinnery regarding the goal of museum education, I nonetheless want to problematize the strategy she offers for achieving it. Specifically, I want to question her assumption that unmediated experience enables us to respect unfamiliar others and fosters the propensity to humbly question what we think we know. I submit that Chinnery’s emphasis on direct experience unnecessarily narrows her pedagogic vision. I also think it occludes an important pedagogic question, which her essay clearly suggests but does not explicitly articulate.

On one level, Chinnery worries that explanations provided by museum staff will buffer and perhaps derail students’ personal responses to art and may confirm, not challenge, students’ pre-conceptions. I do not share this concern. For example, a recent exhibit of Alexander Calder’s work at the Seattle Art Museum included numerous explanations of Calder’s art. Before I read the museum staff’s materials, I focused on Calder’s mobiles. After reading the signs, I came to see that Calder’s art does not consist of mobiles, as I had thought. Calder’s art rather consists of the *space* in which his mobiles hang. Slicing through space at strategic angles, Calder’s mobiles foreground air, and make its geometric beauty visible in ways I had not previously perceived or imagined. Without the interpretations of Calder’s art provided by the museum staff, I never would have seen the air I breathe.

Unmediated experience thus does not necessarily facilitate personal responses to art or help us see the familiar in unexpected ways. Seeing differently instead can be enhanced by explanations, which experts provide. Acknowledging that objects sometimes “need help” can stimulate learning, not foreclose it as Chinnery fears.

On a deeper level, I question whether we ever observe the world without interpreting it. Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us that our experience of the world always is mediated. We human beings cannot help but project some understanding or other. Without projection, we have no world at all. The fact that we continually project pre-understandings does not condemn us to repeat what we already know, however. Our fore-conceptions can be exposed and replaced. For Gadamer, encountering art is a prime example of how our understanding of the world can be transformed. He writes: “... the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it.”²²

Art affects us, Gadamer explains, not because we refrain from judging its meaning or because we try to tone down the interpretive noises in our heads. Rather,

art affects us because it *engages* our prejudices. If art did not take up our prejudices, it would be a dead abstract object, not something we find personally meaningful. The encounter with art is dynamic and involved, not contemplative and unencumbered.

The fact that art engages our pre-understandings does not imply that the meaning of art is subjective. On the contrary, the meaning of art always differs from a viewer's expectations. Art illuminates aspects of the world we would not otherwise see. We might think that these illuminations are contained in the art and that their existence does not depend on or change with the condition of being interpreted. But art is not an object that "is filled subjectively with meaning like an empty mold,"³ Gadamer explains. The illuminations of art are embodied in the work yet become manifest only insofar as they are viewed and interpreted.

Gadamer likens viewing art to playing games, performing music, watching dramas, and participating in religious festivals. In each case, the "same" meaningful object can be recognized. At the same time, this "object" does not come into being unless it is "played," experienced and enacted by particular people in different situations. In Gadamer's words:

Play is structure — this means that despite its dependence on being played it is a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly presented as such and the significance of which can be understood. But structure is also play, because — despite its theoretical unity — it achieves its full being only each time it is played. That both sides of the question belong together is what we have to emphasize against the abstraction of aesthetic differentiation.⁴

For Gadamer, in sum, art does things to us, because it takes up our pre-understandings and transforms them in an experience that sheds new light on our world. But for art to affect and transform us personally, we must risk the prejudices that make it possible for art to engage us in the first place. We must be open to being opened up by art. Such openness, Gadamer says, cannot arise unless we are humble and are willing to respect the other as other.⁵

How can we educate the predisposition to be humble and open? Gadamer does not adequately address this question. The question is challenging not only because it presents a psychological difficulty. It also raises a logical conundrum. Specifically, openness both results from experiencing art and also must already be operating for the experience of art to transpire.

The question of how art can educate the predisposition to be humble and open is the central issue in Chinnery's analysis of museum education. Rather than emphasize unmediated experience as the answer to this question, I encourage Chinnery to highlight its profundity and to continue exploring how museum education might help us address it.

1. The Museum of Tolerance, "Our Vision and History," http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tml6KfNVLtH/b.4866027/k.88E8/Our_History_and_Vision.htm. Cited by Ann Chinnery in primary essay.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev., eds. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 103.

3. *Ibid.*, 115.

4. Ibid., 116.

5. See, for example, Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 233.