

Works of Art, Duration and the Beholder

Andrea Fairchild

Copyright © 1983 Working Papers in Art Education.

Recommended Citation

Fairchild, Andrea. "Works of Art, Duration and the Beholder." *Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education* 2 (1983): 14-17.

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

WORKS OF ART, DURATION AND THE BEHOLDER

Andrea Fairchild

An art object exists in Space and Time. It is easy to understand its existence in Space as every object has length, breadth and mass. Until fairly recently, it was thought that Space and Time were philosophically opposing ideas. But in the 20th century, with the work of Einstein and other mathematicians, as well as the new concepts in psychology, philosophy and art, these ideas were no longer seen as irreconcilable.

Time affects the creation of an art object in two ways. Firstly, the artist shares with the others of that culture a specific Time in history. This we can call group or collective Time. The artist also has spent a certain period making the work--looking, adjusting, evaluating, and judging in other words the lived Time of the creative process. This we can call inner or subjective Time which operates quite independently of Time in the outside world. This was called "La duree", or Duration by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson.

But a work of Art is also an object that transcends the specific historical time in which it was created. It exists in a stream of time from the moment of its inception to the moment in which it is being looked at by another person--the Beholder.

Beholders also bring to the act of looking their inner experiences, their knowledge and desires, their Duration, as well as the collective Time of their specific culture. Thus, the art object is the focus of these two kinds of Time (collective and subjective) from two different directions (the artist's and the Beholder's).

The area of collective time concerning the art object's creation is properly the study of Art History. To understand the multidimensionality of a work of art is the realm of Philosophy and Psychology. To develop guidelines and methods on how to enrich and extend this interchange is the province of Education.

Henri Bergson was a late 19th century philosopher who was the first since the ancient Greeks to deal extensively with the notion of Time. He postulated two kinds of Time: a chronological, homogeneous time which is used in the physical world of scientists and a subjective, inner time which he called Duration. Duration "is qualitative reality. It is not open to measurement." (Meissner, 1967, p. 135).

Bergson maintained that for us to understand any of the important questions about Life, Art and Philosophy, was only possible by an effort of intellectual sympathy or Intuition. This statement has made him pre-eminently the philosopher of artists who have always held that a work of art was more than the sum of its parts. For example, to

enumerate the various parts of Picasso's Guernica does not begin to explain the impact of the whole.

A fully formed concept of Duration, for Bergson, is:

identical with spiritual existence. It is the stuff of life. It is the continuous progress of the past, gnawing away at the future and increasing in bulk as it advances...(Stewart, 1911, p. 213)

But how does a person viewing an art object recapture this "stuff of life"? Can anyone do it, even children?

When studying the works of Piaget, we find that children before the age of 7 - 8 years have a poorly developed notion of Time. They grasp Time in a spatial way; they cannot arrange objects in correct chronological series. They are frozen in the present, as Time for them is discontinuous and tied to growth. So, it would be impossible for children to make that leap in understanding another's inner life experiences as they scarcely can remember their own inner experiences. Their notion of both kinds of Time will be long in developing.

But for an adult, the ability to apprehend and to share in the experiences of the creation of a work is definitely possible. For according to Dewey, the Beholder has an active role to play as well. The Beholder perceives the work in its entirety. There is a fusion of the Beholder's perceptions, and inner life experiences with the work of art which is a summation of a creative process. This is the aesthetic experience. A work of art does not by itself have aesthetic quality, it needs interaction with a viewer who will share in the experience. After the initial encounter, the Beholder can initiate a process of analysis, evaluation and judgement which will enrich the experience.

The whole of the History of Western Art is a tracing of the development of different artists' skills in using illusion to depict reality. What we must also understand is that these skills were matched by an equal development in the perceptual skills of the viewers. The creation of a work of art and its deciphering developed more or less in a parallel fashion.

As we get closer to our own era, Gombrich (1960) points out that:

The artist gives the Beholder increasingly more to do, he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of making which had once been the privilege of the artist.
(p. 165)

There is a tendency to move away from the sensuous art object towards installations and performances...all of which require greater participation and effort of intellectual sympathy from the Beholder.

As an art educator involved with museum education, I am concerned in fostering this intellectual sympathy in viewers. There are many different educational strategies which currently are used in museums to encourage participation in the aesthetic experience. Do these, in fact, help people to understand better some of the issues and concerns of an artist? Are some more effective than others? How can a museum develop programmes which engage the Beholder in meaningful sharing of the aesthetics of an art work?

I decided to document what several museums were doing in their education programmes. To focus more specifically on the public's reaction to games and other hands-on activities. As a pilot project, I observed a series of 2 and 3-dimensional games which had been developed by university students in conjunction with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It had been decided that gaming, as a means of simulating an experience which an artist might have had, was a valuable tool.

The artworks used were 20th Century Canadian landscapes from the Group of Seven. The objectives of these games were firstly to understand how an artist changes a three-dimensional scene to a two-dimensional surface; secondly, to learn what are the main components of a landscape and how the artist uses these in a plastic language. A covert objective in all cases is to extend viewing time.

Being in the midst of this project, it is very difficult to come to many conclusions. Certainly, it can be noted that the objectives of the games are met quite easily. People will spend a long time looking intently at paintings to reconstruct them in a game. While doing this, they enter in a dialogue with the guides about the problems they have encountered. This will lead into more general issues about the artists' intentions and the manner in which these intentions were carried out.

Above all, what is quite clear is that perception and empathy for an art work and an understanding of the creative process, require real effort from the Beholder. Meaningful interactions are not easily come by. People have to learn how to look and how to trust their feelings when they are engaged in active looking. Then it might be possible to have a shared aesthetic experience. From these observations in museums, I hope to discover whether it is indeed possible for the Beholder to live in a simultaneity of shared experience with the artist.

REFERENCES

- Gombrich, E. H. Art and illusion. London: Phaidon Press, 1960.
Meissener, W. W. The temporal dimension in the understanding of human experience. Harvard medical school, Boston - Journal of existentialism, 1966-67.
Stewart, J. M. K. A critical exposition of Bergson's philosophy. McMillan & Co., Ltd. London, 1911.

Mentor's Introduction

ROBERT PARKER
Concordia University

In Canada, the determination of educational policy is provincially based; that is, an individual province ascertains the specific needs of its population and implements educational structures which hope to address those needs. Rarely does the federal government encroach upon this historical procedure. Thus, the lack of any centralization of educational policy making has given rise to a great deal of diversity as to the manner in which education is carried out across Canada's ten provinces.

Given such diversity in general educational milieu, it is not surprising to discover a similar occurrence in the practices of art education as well. Throughout the early years of the introduction of teaching art as part of provincial education, whether it be in the public or private sector, individuals, by means of experimentation rather than by government fiat have influenced the manner in which art is to be taught. Arthur Lismer was such an individual.

A. Grigor's research concentrates upon the given that Arthur Lismer had a tremendous impact upon the practices of art education in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, and sets out to explain the pedagogical antecedents of his particular method of teaching art.

One of the more interesting facets of this type of historical research is that Lismer's immediate influence ended relatively recently, in 1967. His secondary influence however, continues to this day through the work of his students and here is where the historical researcher plays an invaluable role, for it is through the primary sources that an understanding of Lismer's pedagogy is achieved.

Angela Grigor, using techniques employed by the oral history researcher as well as those of the Archivist, explains the difficulty of an individual who attempts to wed theory and practice and who, in this process of experimentation, changed the manner in which art education evolved in Quebec.