

When we use story-telling to interpret artworks

Stephanie James

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In this presentation we intend to discuss work in progress and two recent projects as case studies providing a summary of research already undertaken. As always many questions seem to come out of research rather than absolute answers.

Both projects we will be discussing encompassed a strand that invited contemporary gallery visitors to 'think aloud.' Many of these visitors used story-telling to interpret the artworks, yet students of art and design are asked to discuss their artwork from a different perspective; they are expected to provide a critical and self-reflective analysis. We propose that there is a disjuncture between the communication of the meaning in artworks that takes in the mind of the audience, and in the education of the art student. Through new approaches to teaching, students can be encouraged to develop ways in which 'story-telling' can enhance their learning experience and prepare them for audience engagement.

The main questions that continue to provoke thought for us are:

1. What happens to people when they go to the contemporary gallery? In support of this question: How are artworks used by galleries to construct meaning, and how can the gallery audiences relate to these artworks? What does the contemporary art gallery offer and what is its role in society?
2. What is the best methodology for a contemporary art gallery to identify 'public value'? How can the story-telling of audiences inform contemporary artists and galleries in identifying "public value"?
3. In critiques of art practice 'story-telling' has often been frowned upon as an inappropriate method to describe artwork, yet the public use 'story-telling' to interpret meaning. How can students of art and design use story-telling to share the meaning in their artworks appropriately and how can teaching staff develop curriculum to best utilise the benefits of story-telling?

With an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Knowledge Catalyst award, we sought to bring the academic expertise of the Arts Institute at Bournemouth, in this case, *text+work*, to the business enterprise of ArtSway, a contemporary art space in a remote place in the New Forest. We set out to support the management of critical, promotional and contextual writing for ArtSway in the production of New Forest Pavilion, ArtSway and the Venice Biennale, and through public seminars, exploring the relationship between written and spoken interpretations of art.

During the study 'audience' responses were collated and evaluated in order to generate information for ArtSway towards a more effective understanding of its audiences. The project sought to evaluate the procedures for mediating to public collaborative projects entailing the intertwining of verbal and visual art forms and to self-assess the effectiveness of the evaluation methodology.

The research focused on the visitors' interpretative methods of contemporary art: the repertoires and the words they used to make sense of the exhibitions on display, as well as their behaviour in an art gallery context, and how they used the support material provided by the gallery to enrich their experience. The audiences visiting the art exhibitions were asked to 'think aloud.' These thoughts were recorded and analysed. The findings revealed that most audiences relate to artworks through story-telling. Generally the most creative of these

interpretive narratives came from double female visitors, each providing feedback and ideas for the other enabling the thought-processes to expand further than if alone.

Females visiting with a female companion engaged in a creative interpretation of the artworks, informing their experience and each other by reading aloud from sections of the support material. Female doubles made the most use of subjective words. Single males were less inclined to rely on texts as an aid to interpretation and were confident in their approach to the experience. Almost all of the single males referred to aspects of their occupations when describing and interpreting the artworks.

As part of this collaborative project, two seminars entitled Word Matters were held at the Venice Biennale in 2007. These seminars invited guest speakers and the Biennale visitors to discuss the role of words in interpretation of artworks. Reaching no definitive conclusions, Word Matters was a discussion, an exploration, into text as label and as access; text as catalogue and as critique; text as interpretation and as an accompaniment; text as description and as narrative; and text as gossip and performance. It was a debate about the limitations and the possibilities of words, and an observation of the contemporary art world and its ongoing conversations. Transcripts of the seminars have been published in book form with an accompanying CD.

In a separate project, 'Meeting Place', involving an exhibition of artworks by artists and designers responding to the unique collection at the Russell-Cotes Gallery and Museum, the public toured the exhibits guided by school pupils aged between 15 and 17 who had not previously seen the exhibition and deliberately had not been briefed on its concept. The pupils were self-selecting and were again asked to 'think aloud' and this in turn stimulated the visitors to tell their stories. BA Fine Art, Illustration and Photography students were given the task of recording the stories that were told during these tours revealing once again that an aspect of many of the exhibits triggered individual personal memories.

Four broad themes emerged in the process of interpretation; Visual Response (including Techniques, Materials, Processes and Sensory Response), Represented/Representing (including Reminding, Looking Like) Recognised; saw, seen, spotted, noticed, and Link and/or Contrast to Museum Context. Often the artwork represented something other than what was 'seen', indicating a deeper response to the artwork. Some visitors developed their own meanings from the work and often referred to social-cultural, emotional and personal and more widely focused global issues.

Discussing the way in which artworks were made was a popular starting point for many visitors. For many the materials and processes were important aspects in the making of any artwork and this kind of discussion often led to a deeper understanding of the artwork. When an artwork reminded a visitor of another object in the world or when the artwork looked like something else that was similar to the artwork, the visitor was able to begin to make sense of what they were seeing. This kind of associative response was very popular and often preceded deeper connections to the artwork. The visitors responded to all of the artworks in relation to the context that they were placed in. There were several comments discussing the ideology of the museum in a contemporary society and understood that the artworks were a comment on the nature of the museum collection. Other responses discussed the methods of display and how they were reflected in the traditional museum methods of display, and in turn, gaining further meaning from the artworks.

Generally speaking, the visitors to all of the exhibitions in the projects looked for 'clues' or 'hooks' which preceded making references to deeper meanings in the artworks. Many of the visitors used identification and/or description as a first step to help them story-tell when interpreting what the underlying messages were in the artworks. This often led the visitors to create personal stories punctuated with their own memories.

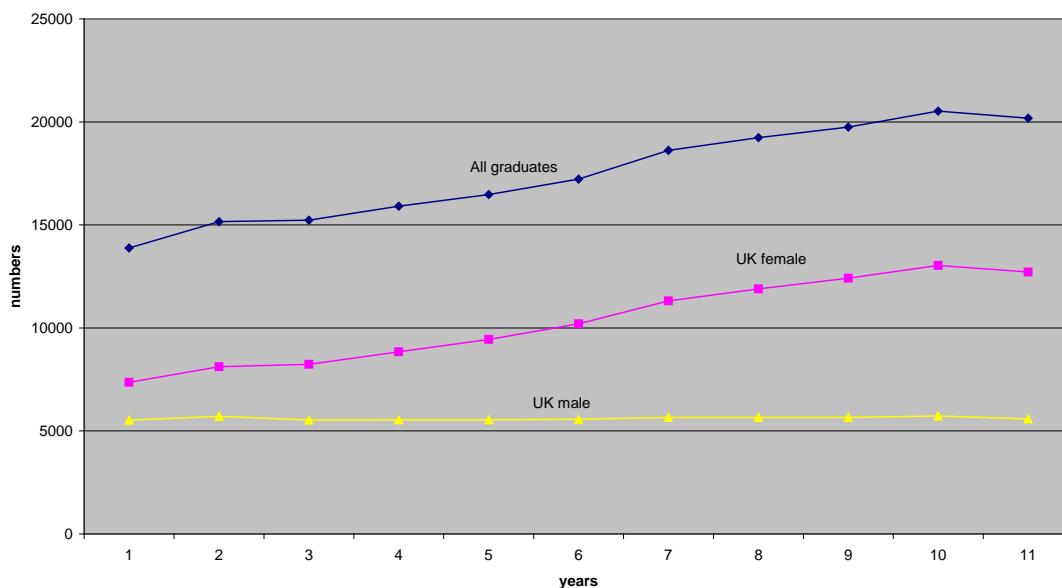
Because telling one's own story has been an unpopular strategy for interpreting artwork within the Higher Education art school communities in the UK (mostly during the 80's and 90's) but popular with students and the public, we have developed an interest in it and want to promote story-telling as a useful interpretive tool for the future.

Critics and lecturers in Universities and arts schools have often been quoted ‘who cares about your personal story, let’s look at the formal qualities in your work.’

Years	Numbers	Fem/UK	Male/UK	Fem/EU	Male/EU	Fem/INT	Male/INT
1997	13883	7358	5522	294	142	399	168
2008	20185	12715	5590	615	260	695	310

The demographic characteristics in Art Schools especially in Fine Art have changed astonishingly over the last 10-11 years. As you can see the increase in graduates in Fine Art over the last decade is entirely female, we consider this to be a dramatic change and we are interested in looking carefully at what has changed in the way students learn together and how we as lecturers teach.

Fine Art Graduates 1996/2007



What kind of impact has this significant increase in females had on the HE Fine Art student experience? Potentially it has given us the permission to gossip. Gossip is an effective form of communication and traditionally mostly used by females in informal conversation or writing about recent and often personal events. Gossip has also been labelled malicious rumour. This is changing: gossip has been upgraded by certain writers and theorists claiming that it is a useful form of communication that brings a validated level of sentimentalism to the discussion of artworks.

Students in Fine Art are telling stories at critiques with varying degrees of success. They are interested in how fabrication (and by this we mean – making it up) informs critical understanding. Critical understanding can be influenced through mood, encounters and interactions – all contributing to unpicking the integration between making and meaning. More emphasis is placed on the learning of making meaning through the manipulation of materials and process towards the realisation of the artwork than on learning how to tell the accompanying stories effectively.

Clowns don't live in houses - Steph Hands, 2009



I have recently interviewed a current MA Photography student Steph Hands who uses story-telling in her practice. The way in which she does this and has developed is worth noting. The image and the title are all that is given to the audience and from this they are invited to fill in the story for themselves. She describes this as 'making narrative and composing image.' In previous work Steph has told stories that are fictitious, far-fetched but believable and narratives that do not explicitly tell about the picture. Now, the title is all that remains of the story with much of the narrative contained in the image. Steph is carefully juggling access for all on the one hand and building in layers of complexity on the other. Like the artist Ansell Krut – Steph is concerned about the degree to which story can 'close' down the picture and relegate it to a mere illustration.

Heartless Roach
Ink and Acrylic
24 x 29cm



'I made several versions of this drawing but this one surprised me when I made it, as if I'd dropped a handful of rubber bands and they had fallen haphazardly to form the outline of the drawing in the way rubber bands do, twisting a little and making semi turgid shapes. The expressions of the two figures are rubbery too, elastic, and they stretch the story-line - cannibalism is seldom straightforward.'

The most difficult kind of story to tell and to hear is the personal story – the one that mostly female artists tell and when the metaphors are few and the subject explicit. 'Baggage' is opened and flung at the gallery walls and audiences retreat.

The research from these projects has initiated plans for a series of events in which willing visitors to the contemporary art exhibitions are invited to speak to other visitors and narrate their personal stories stimulated by the artworks. The intention is to provide a 'high quality experience' for gallery visitors, and this includes artists and students, and to increase visitor participation.

Where are the projects with clearly defined learning outcomes incorporated into curriculum design in HE art schools encouraging students to learn story-telling?

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Where are the projects with clearly defined learning outcomes incorporated into curriculum design in HE art schools encouraging students to learn story-telling? Is there an easy to see framework that can be devised to develop effective teaching and learning of the telling stories?

Robert Storr, Director of the 52nd Venice Biennale invited the participating artists to provide writings that were collated into a book called 'pages in the wind – a reader.' The intention was provide visitors with more insight into the minds of the artists, helping them to build the bigger picture.

Farm - Tatiana Trouvé

