

Art Dialogue in the Classroom

This article is the second in a series of articles giving suggestions for guiding group interpretation of current artwork. In each article, I will briefly discuss purposes, format, and classroom atmosphere for guided conversations. I will then provide some background information on a specific artist and/or artwork. Finally, I will offer questions. The questions are not necessarily intended to be used directly in your teaching, but instead are a means for a facilitator to find his or her own questions and lead students into finding theirs. I welcome comments and suggestions at connie.stewart@unco.edu, 970 351-2426.

Teaching Tips for Guided Conversations

Review of Previous Ideas

The previous article set a basic framework for formatting questions and leading discussions about an art image. The ideas included:

Questions can be formatted using the categories of Literal questions, Inferential Questions, and Evaluative Questions.

Good questions are truly questionable. For most questions, the questioner does not have a preferred answer in mind.

Participants are encouraged to respectfully respond to another's idea by saying "I agree because..." or "I disagree because..." Disagreement is seen as a tribute to the idea previously discussed.

Creating a Classroom Atmosphere that Supports Group Discussion

Past studies show that in a typical classroom two-thirds of the classroom talk is done by the teacher (Zander, 2004). Classroom questioning often follows a pattern of Teacher-Initiated Question, Student Response and a Teacher Evaluation such as "Good," "Not quite. Someone else?" etc. This interaction is followed by another Teacher-Initiated Question (Cazden, 1988, Zander 2004, Stewart, 2005).

A successful art dialogue depends on creating a safe environment that encourages the expression of opinion and ideas. An art dialogue can be encouraged with the assumption that some questions will not have a "right" answer; a "wrong" interpretation is still an interpretation and we all can

learn from another's viewpoint. The teacher's role initially is to raise provocative questions, provide some affirmation for respondents when needed, and then direct the questions back to the group. My experience leading discussions with both children and adults has been that, at some point, the group will be comfortable expressing ideas without teacher support and will begin to direct questions to each other. The facilitator's role is then to listen, to form questions from the opinions expressed, and to occasionally provide additional ideas and questions based on research about the artwork.

Background Information about the Work of Janine Antoni

Antoni is known for performance and installation art that manipulates a variety of materials to explore concepts of body image, function, and place. Her work is meant to direct the viewer not only to the finished product but to the materials and processes used in its making. The concept of index used in semiotics, the study of language and symbols, may assist the interpretation of Antoni's work. The visual arts can portray a physical object in many ways. Art can mimetically reproduce a likeness; it can abstract to emphasize certain formal characteristics. When the artist chooses an index to portray the object, he or she leaves a physical trace of the object's presence. An example is using the white ring on a piece of fine furniture to portray a glass of ice water. (See the work of Gabriel Orozco). The index portrays its subject because it is caused by it. Antoni's works "Gnaw," "Lick and Lather," and "To Draw the Line" all depict the index of the human body as it was used in the art-



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making.

Antoni's willingness to leave an index of her own body is conducive to leading a group into a discussion of personal story. Antoni is aware that she is using her body but "the viewer has a body too" (Art:21). For example, one image I like to discuss is the 1993 performance in which Antoni soaked her hair in dye and painted the floor with it. Sometimes I begin by asking about the "craziness" of doing such an act. I then invite personal stories about hair. I have found that humorous stories are first told – stories of children cutting hair inappropriately or hair cuts gone wrong. In a safe environment, more intimate stories are told – stories of a parent forcing an embarrassing hair style; stories of hair loss because of cancer or other causes; or stories of the difficulty of finding someone who can cut non-Caucasian hair. Hair embodies the physical remnants (index) of our experience. Making art with or about hair helps us share those experiences. I have had meaningful times of art dialogue with children and adults, beginning with a time of sharing stories about our hair. When the discussion returns to an image created by Antoni, it is with a fuller, more informed appreciation of the layers of meaning embedded within it.

Questions for Guiding Discussions about the Work of Janine Antoni

Questions about the work of Janine Antoni can be very personal because her work is personal. Some of the questions presented here are intended for quiet reflection. Some are intended for group discussions. I have included questions I would use with young children and questions intended for adults. All of the questions are intended to stimulate new questions.

Questions about "Gnaw" and "Lick and Lather"

"Gnaw" is made from chewing upon a 600 lb cube of chocolate and a 600 lb cube of lard. From the chewed, but not swallowed lard, she then made 130 lipstick replicas. From the chocolate she made 27 heart-shaped packages. "Lick and Lather" are made from self-portrait busts cast in chocolate and soap. Antoni then licked the chocolate bust and bathed the soap bust to create the finished piece.

Is she crazy? (This is a good question to get a conversation started about many contemporary artworks.)

A critic has called Antoni's portraits "dull." Do you think they are?

Examples of Janine Antoni's Work

Two of Antoni's self-portrait busts can currently be seen in the Radar exhibit in the Denver Art Museum.

Antoni's work "Moor" (2001), a carefully twisted rope made from materials given to her by family members and friends, was the inspiration for an installation completed at the 2006 ART-SOURCE Institute.

Janine Antoni's art is featured in Art:21, Season 2 on PBS.

Images of Antoni's work can be found at:

<http://www.artnet.com/awc/janine-antoni.html>

http://www.luhringaugustine.com/index.php?mode=artists&object_id=64 (all cited images can be viewed here)

Information and discussions of Antoni's work can be read at:

http://www.iniva.org/season/site/project_10

<http://www.artandculture.com/cgibin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/artist?wosid=NO&id=902>

Reviews of the performance "To Draw a Line" (which was in progress at the time of the production of the Art:21 interview) can be found at:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_11_91/ai_110963140

<http://www.artcritical.com/DavidCohen/SUN17.htm>.

Do you need to know Antoni's process to appreciate them?

Is art finished if the process is intriguing but the image is not?

By using lipstick and chocolate, is she portraying conflict with feminine image and identity? If so, is she successful?

Do you ever feel embarrassed by how you look?

Some critics think that Antoni is portraying bulimia. Do you think she is portraying an eating disorder?

Does she just like to be gross and spit out her food?

We shouldn't lick things in public. Why is it okay for Antoni to do it?

Would she have made so many self-portraits if she wasn't attractive?

How did she decide to stop licking or washing the portrait?

Why didn't she erase herself completely?

Is the licking or the washing a loving act?

Are there other ways we erase ourselves? Is it caring for ourselves to do so?

Is she too self-absorbed?

Questions about "Moor," "Touch," and "To Draw a Line"

What associations can you make with the following words: Rope, cord, tie, moor, balance, fall, horizon? What memories come to mind with these words?

Is it good to be tied to someone? Do you need to have a rope to be "tied" to another person?

What makes a rope strong?

Have you ever taken a rope apart? What does it look like?

When is a rope harmful? When does it keep you safe?

Would the rope be as beautiful if Antoni had used materials that she bought?

Would the rope be as beautiful if she had tied the materials and strands differently?

Was she thinking most about art form when she put the materials together or did she primarily think about the stories?

Can you make a bad rope?

If you were going to make something from personal

materials, would you want it to be functional or something to lay on the floor?

Does the final piece need to be a rope to convey the meaning?

When is balance important in art?

Antoni says that learning to be in balance came from being comfortable with being out of balance? Do you agree?

Can you think of a time in your life when you felt in balance or were comfortable being out of balance? [

References

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