

# Looking Outside

# the Frame:

**H**ow often do you find yourself accomplishing a daily task in the exact same way because “that’s how it’s always been done”? Have you ever limited the possibility of solving a problem, making a change, or innovating a new practice because either the voice inside your head or one from without reminded you that the old way is “the way things are”? You do not change what is and what works; these are the truths of everyday life, which become institutionalized as common, even best practice. Yet, are they really truths or myths that have become accepted as such through repetition over time?

Barthes (1957) defines *myth* as a system of speaking, as language. Myths are not only established or storied explanations regarding the nature of life, such as creation stories or hero quests, but also can be concepts and practices arising in the present, shaping what we say, do, and accept as norms. Myths emerge as we negotiate our world. As such, mythmaking is a generative process. Duncan (1995) embraces this socially dynamic understanding of myth in representing art museums as ritualized spaces conferring what it means to be cultured—a civilized person. Through the choice, arrangement, and organization of artworks in galleries, museum curators are not merely representing a traditional story of culture called art history. As visitors enact the museum ritual of wandering the ordered halls and exhibition spaces, they take in a narrative of what knowledgeable citizens in the present should know, a myth created through contemporary professional practices (Duncan, 1995). In effect, Duncan turns our gaze away from the myths artists portrayed in artworks, such as those of

the lives of Greek gods, to the mythmaking of museum practice. Although Duncan focuses on the overarching myths governing the display of art objects, what might be gained from looking at the kinds of mythmaking in which museum educators engage?

Recently some colleagues and I pursued such a project concerning our varied areas of art education<sup>1</sup>. As a museum educator I focused my attention on identifying habitual ways of thinking, speaking, and doing that could be considered myths of art museum education. What resulted was not unlike one of David Letterman’s Top Ten Lists. Here I present my list of top 10 museum education myths. In so doing I also hope to “demythtify” these aspects of the field. While the focus of the list is art museum education, art educators in schools and community sites will likely find that several of the myths resonate with their practice. As is the case in the first myth listed, our teaching is shaped by the preconceptions—the myths—that our learners hold, as well as by our own values about what is good for visitors.

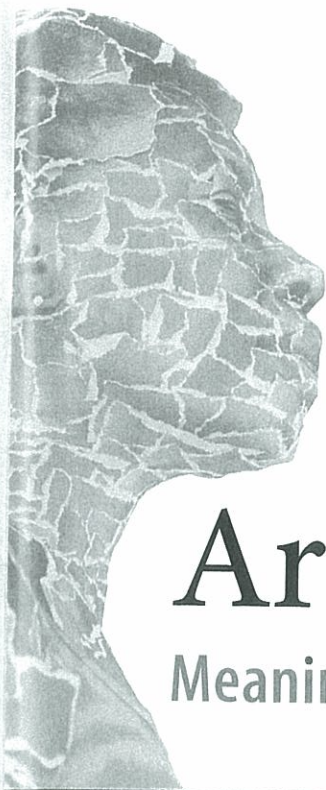
Art educators in schools and community sites will likely find that several of the myths resonate with their practice. ... our teaching is shaped by the preconceptions, the myths, that our learners hold as well as by our own values about what is good for visitors.

## “Demythtifying” Museum Education

### (1) “SHH! This is a museum. That’s like a library times 10!”

While on a self-guided tour of the Chrysler Museum of Art, a teenager was overheard to snap the above chastisement at a fellow more talkative teen (Howe, personal communication, September 29, 2010). This vignette reveals a common myth held by many museum visitors—*be quiet*. I often commenced tours with some clever trick intended to let visitors know that I really wanted us to talk together as we explored the galleries. I found countering the myth of silence easier with school children than with adults, even when a well-intentioned teacher had included not talking on the list of museum fieldtrip manners. Adults, however, are more thoroughly indoctrinated into this myth of silence and have a hard time letting go of it. This is not surprising considering that the art museum often is associated with churches, temples, and libraries both in general society and in professional literature (Duncan, 1995; Carr, 2006). Wandering galleries, quietly

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# Beyond Art Waitressing:

## Meaningful Engagement in Interactive Art Galleries

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Though this metaphor provides a valuable model for engaging visitors, the question quickly arises of how we can go beyond “serving” an arts experience to a museum visitor.

**I**nteractive galleries in art museums are a tangible example of a reorientation of museums toward their visitors, in which they become an organization that is “with” rather than “for” visitors (Freire, 2000, p. 48; Gogan, 2007). In employing the metaphor of art waitressing one aspect of this shift is evident, namely, a reorientation where museum staff embrace the notion that “visitors are at the heart of the twenty-first century museum’s experience” (Falk, 2009, p. 20), signaled by a focus on facilitating positive experiences through excellent customer service.

A multitude of new roles that museum educators perform have opened through this reorientation, (i.e., collaborator, engager, access-provider [Willumson, 2007], facilitator, animator, and platform-creator [Simon, 2010]), but not all of these roles are intuitive for museum educators who have been trained in more traditional museum education practice (Adams, Moreno, Polk, and Buck, 2003). The metaphor of “art waitressing” is a valuable tool for educators who seek guidance in enacting many of these new roles in museums, particularly the role of facilitator in an open-ended interactive gallery. Though this metaphor provides a valuable model for engaging visitors, the question quickly arises of how we can go beyond “serving” an arts experience to a museum visitor. How can we build a relationship rather than simply offer up a program or experience (Graham, as cited in Gogan, 2007, p. 235)? How can we perform the broad range of roles available to us in order to deepen visitor engagement, especially in an interactive gallery setting (Garoian, 2001; Gogan, 2007)?

By drawing upon my own experience as an interactive gallery educator, as well as reviewing the literature for examples of techniques and approaches that museums and educators have used to move beyond art waitressing,

three strategies for visitor engagement emerge. First, participatory practice is essential to the reorientation of museums. Participatory methods grounded in dialogical models of interaction, collaborative practice, and acknowledgement of the museum context are particularly relevant to interactive art gallery practice (Falk, 2009; Falk and Dierking, 2004; Garoian, 2001; Gogan, 2007; Kester, 2004; McKay and Monteverde, 2003; O’Donoghue, 2010, 2011; Simon, 2010). Second, visitors’ understanding of original works of art is deepened through engaging the processes that artists utilize, particularly contemporary artists (Adams, et al., 2003; Gogan, 2007; Gude, 2004, 2007; O’Donoghue, 2011). Finally, a culture of experimentation is vital to support educators who seek to engage visitors in a relationship with their organization (Adams & Moussouri, 2002; Gogan, 2007; Simon, 2010). These three strategies—participatory and dialogical practice, engaging in artistic process, and experimentation—provide means through which museum educators can move beyond art waitressing in interactive art galleries. Before discussing these strategies in further depth, I illustrate art waitressing through a short narrative and explain key components of the art waitressing process.