Dialogic Looking: Beyond the Mediated Experience

"...dialogic looking creates rich educational experiences that do not solely rely on the mediating voice of the museum expert."

BY SARA WILSON MCKAY AND SUSANA R. MONTEVERDE

"I see more..."

Can an art space have an educational program without docents and didactic labels? We propose dialogic looking—exploring works of art through multiple dialogues—as an integral component, and perhaps alternative, to mediated museum experiences. In exploring an art space such as The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, a museum designed to encourage intimacy for the viewer of art by reducing the mediation of the aesthetic experience, we turned our attention to the many dialogues viewers may have while viewing works of art.

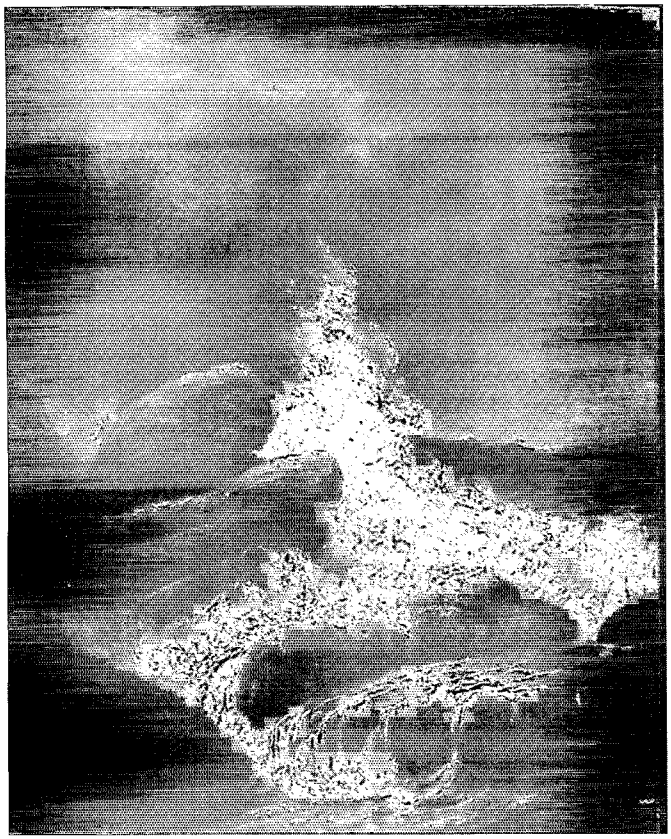
In *dialogic looking*, viewers exchange observations, memories, and associations with partners, while maintaining a second, internal dialogue as they work to understand the images they encounter. A third dialogue develops with the work of art itself, as it elicits questions and responses from each viewer. By acknowledging the importance of multiple dialogues, we propose that dialogic looking creates rich educational experiences that do not solely rely on the mediating voice of the museum expert, whether through written wall text or guided tours. This article considers dialogic looking as a way to engage with works of art in the museum setting that goes beyond most formal educational programs.

When looking at a work of art in a gallery setting, how do we go about looking? We recently paid special attention to how we were looking at the work of Brazilian artist Vik Muñiz in a temporary exhibition at The Menil Collection. Muñiz's work, an installation commissioned by The Menil Collection entitled "Model Pictures," provoked us to pay attention to our looking, and more specifically to the questions that arose while we looked. Operating out of an understanding of *heteroglossia* (many-voicedness), the key idea of Russian socio-linguist Bakhtin (1981), we describe the process of dialogic looking. Our account here is personal and specific to the Muñiz exhibition, but we propose that dialogic looking is a process that, in being named, has applicability to a wide range of art experiences—whether they occur in museums, in classrooms, or in our daily interactions with the world.

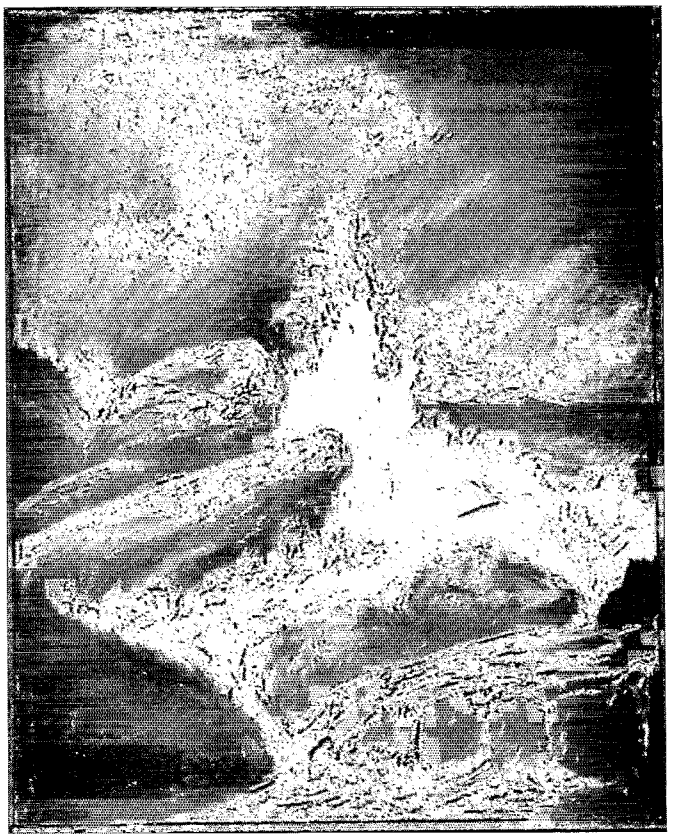
Paying Attention to Looking

Just outside the entrance to the installation hung a seascape of crashing waves entitled *L'onde* by Gustave Doré from the second half of the 19th century. Not noticing this work at the beginning, we entered the installation, a room hung with what appears, at first glance, to be photographed reproductions of works from The Menil's surrealist collection. Upon closer examination, especially of a photographic image of the same seascape hanging just outside the gallery, it became increasingly apparent that these reproductions were not photographs of the actual artworks. So what were they—what were we looking at?

In looking at Muñiz's photographs, many questions arose: *How different was the photographed image from the actual*



Gustave Doré, 2nd half of the 19th c., *L'onde* [*The Wave*]



Vik Muñiz, 2002, *Model Pictures* (Gustave Doré, *L'onde*, 2nd half of the 19th c.)

painting? How were they different? What might account for these differences? As we started asking these questions, we paid attention to the facet of the exhibition that makes it an installation rather than simply an exhibition of photographs. Near the center of the gallery, there is a scale model of the room in which the exhibition takes place that is installed with small "maquettes" or hand-made replicas of artworks from the Menil's permanent collection. Inside this model room there is yet another model complete with another set of scaled hand-made replicas of the maquettes. Noticing these seemingly infinite levels of scale and representation, we asked new questions: *What are these small painted "maquettes," and why do they exist? Who painted them in the first place? Why would Muñiz photograph them and enlarge the photographs to the size of the original artworks? Are we supposed to compare the original artwork with its photographed maquette? If so, what do we notice about the quality of the maquette or the quality of the original? Which artwork is the "original," or could each level of reproduction be an original in its own right?*

Muñiz's installation joins the ranks of other noteworthy exhibitions that are truly exciting educationally. Similarly stimulating exhibitions are frequently invoked because of their educational potential. For example, *Museum as Muse* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1999 asked artists to respond to the museum in their artworks, thereby revealing many layers of museum practice. The Museum of Jurassic Technology, which opened in Los Angeles in 1996, is often deemed an elaborate piece of performance art due to its blurring of unbelievable truths and supremely documented vagaries. The groundbreaking exhibition by Fred Wilson entitled *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore in 1992 addressed stereotypical presentations and misrepresentations in the museum. But these kinds of experiences in museums are not new since the 1990s. For example, *Fakes, Forgeries, & Other Deceptions* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1973 asked the viewer to engage with artworks in ways that extended the experience educationally as viewers tried to discriminate fakes from originals. And as early as the 1940s and '50s, Katherine Kuh was using a Gallery of Interpretation at the Art Institute of Chicago where she stated: "I believe in asking questions—and not always answering them," in an effort to help viewers articulate their experiences in the museum (Newsom & Silver, 1978, p.79).

Whether these exhibitions were noteworthy because of the new questions that viewers were provoked to ask or because of what they revealed about museum practices, we suggest that what all of these exhibitions have in common is that they encourage dialogic looking. We propose that by naming the element that truly makes an experience both educational and aesthetic, we will be better equipped to cultivate these kinds of experiences in museums and art education in general.

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Dialogic Looking: A Definition

The description of the "Model Pictures" installation above attempts to encapsulate the experience of dialogically looking at an exhibition. By dialogic looking, we suggest that viewers consciously articulate the questions that arise while they look. This process can take place as it did for us while viewing a museum exhibition, but just as importantly in the classroom. Feminist educator Madeleine Grumet (1988) writes, "the structure of the look is essentially dialogical," (p. 97) suggesting that in our looking, there is a need for a response—the creation of dialogue.

This dialogue is not a singular dialogue, but rather the result of the interweavings of at least three types of dialogue. The first type is the external dialogue, similar to that advocated by art critic Terry Barrett (2000), which takes place among viewers as they view an exhibition together. Viewers actively share and respond to the questions and thoughts they each raise with their partners in looking. In our case, while viewing Muñiz's installation, we asked each other whether the exhibition of photographed maquettes was compelling. *Did other viewers compare original artworks hanging in the Menil to Muñiz's model pictures?* We laughed as we puzzled through the exhibition together, enjoying the free exchange of ideas as we looked. External dialogue was very present in our looking at this exhibition.

A second important dialogue is the internal dialogue happening within the viewer, which usually continues long after an encounter with an artwork. This internal dialogue becomes apparent when we mentally keep track of the questions that arise while we are looking at a work of art. By keeping track of these questions, noting them in a journal, a museum pamphlet, or simply in our minds, rich and personal interpretations begin to emerge. Silencing this dialogue, or ignoring its existence, limits the experience of looking. This internal dialogue corresponds to the layers of experience that each viewer has personally. Many viewers may begin with questions such as *What is this?* or *Why would someone make something like this?* And other viewers may have more contextual information about a work of art creating more specific questions like: *Isn't this work a lot like Sherrie Levine's?* or *The critic in* The Houston Chronicle *called this work trite. Do I agree with this view?* These kinds of questions, which usually remain unexpressed by most viewers, are exactly the kinds of questions that should be asked in museums.

While the dialogue happening inside the viewer involves the viewer's developed expectations and past experiences, a third dialogue emerges between the viewer and the artwork itself, especially when the viewer allows the artwork to lead. For example, in looking at Muñiz's model room inside the exhibition gallery, the artwork asked us to consider our relationships to the world, to originality, to works of art themselves. As we considered these questions, we looked more carefully at the photographs and began to see inconsistencies and imperfections in the quality of prints, which made us reconsider our beliefs about what an artwork is and should be. The back-and-forth dialogue between a viewer and an artwork creates a situation where the viewer and the artwork are both affecting (and being affected by) each other (Dewey, 1934).

The three dialogues enumerated here do not occur in any particular order but emerge simultaneously, alternately, and at various isolated points. By acknowledging the importance of dialogic looking, the exchange of all of these particular perspectives creates a multifaceted looking experience that is greater than any individualized perspective on its own. Dialogic looking values these differing perspectives (in fact, it requires them) and holds them up as richer ways of engaging with works of art over other methods that might involve a group leader, such as a teacher or a museum docent, telling students what and how to see (Wilson McKay & Monteverde, 2002).

There are certainly precedents for dialogue and questions in museums. As mentioned above, Barrett's (2000) work calls on viewers to share and relate their interpretations to both personal and communal experiences often through external dialogue. The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) of Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen (2001) advocate the use of scripted and teacher-facilitated questions when looking at art. Inquiry-based art education also draws on the importance of questions when looking at art, sometimes encouraging questions to emerge from viewers, but the emphasis in using the questions seems to converge on *an interpretation, a story, an answer.* While the incorporation of more voices is important for drawing out personal connections to works of art, the process of looking should not stop at singular interpretations. Rather, through dialogic looking, art education can push further by fostering participation in the ongoing questions and ongoing dialogues involved in conscious looking—a process that continues and changes constantly, articulating the richness of the experience of looking at art.

In addition to the methods of museum education described above where questions are often rooted in the authority of the expert—the teacher, the art historian, the curator—dialogic looking creates *heteroglossia*, where multiple social voices come together and clash, giving rise to new ideas across varying experiences (Bakhtin, 1981). In

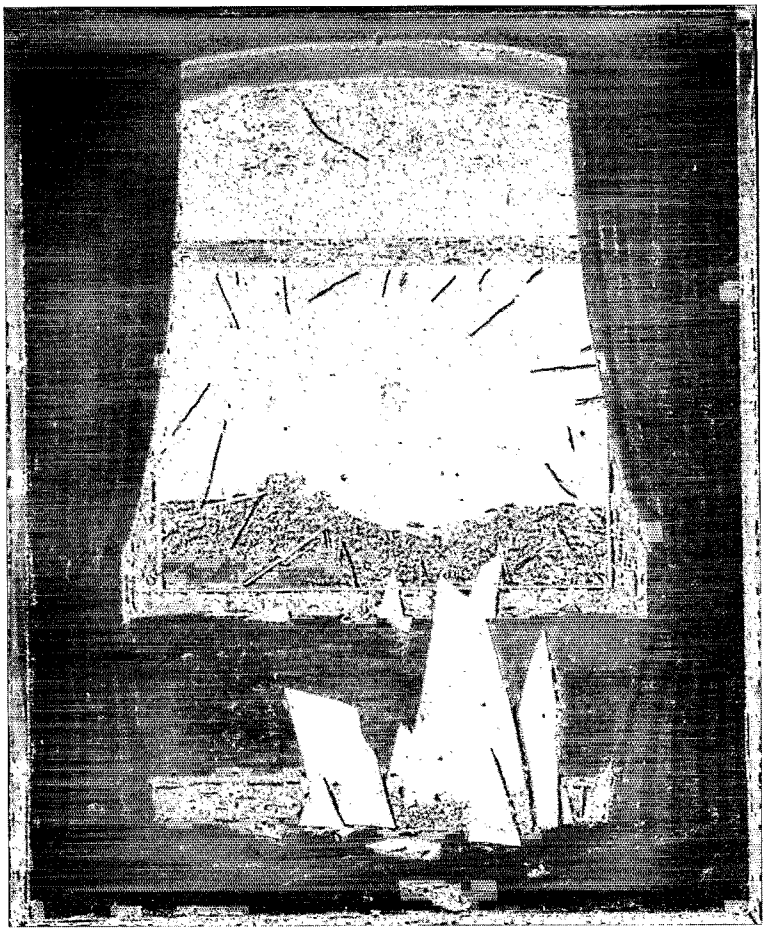
heteroglossia the voice of the art historian can intersect with the 8-year-old student's voice, and the working artist's voice is in dialogue with the museum curator's. In a sense, *heteroglossia* creates richer seeing—a sense that "I see more because I now also see what you see."

Our naming and writing about the phenomenon of dialogic looking is an effort to validate what we believe most people do naturally. Engaging with a work of art requires engaging with questions and with others, both of which are natural inclinations when looking. Previous experiences and public beliefs about art inhibit this process, and many museum visitors turn off the ensuing dialogues in favor of the voice of authority in whatever form it comes—didactic labels, audioguides, lectures, or docent tours. Thus we decided to further investigate the role dialogic looking can play in a place where the authoritative voice of a formal museum education program is close to absent.

"An Education Program Would Ruin The Menil Collection"

Traditionally, museums have been viewed as either "temples" for aesthetic contemplation or "forums" for expounding ideas (McLean, 1999). The Menil Collection is an example of a museum that has chosen to be temple rather than forum in terms of its mission, per the intentions of its founder Dominique de Menil (1987). The Menil Collection, a private museum with ancient artifacts and an impressive collection of 20th-century art, was designed in its inception to be a contemplative space free to the public, free of museum fatigue, and free from the sound of cash registers at a museum bookstore. In a world of blockbuster exhibitions and the omnipresent audioguide, it is indeed a welcome treat to step foot into a space dedicated singularly to engaging with works of art.

In creating this temple of artworks, the Menil has actively maintained no formal education program (Smart, 1997). Its founder adamantly believed that, "discourse must not take the place of art" (de Menil, 1987, p.7). And, its past director and chief curator Walter Hopps (1987) describes the de Menil's belief in, "the meaning and power of the work of art to generate for the viewer an individual communion, a dialogue in silence" (p. 13). With these statements, there is an indictment of education in the museum. Their commitment in practice to minimized mediation is limited to inobtrusive labels of attribution devoid of any contextual information. Thus, they turn away from discourse and articulated dialogue in favor of preserving space for, a seemingly contrasting, aesthetic experience. It is as though the purity of the aesthetic experience would be sullied by overt educational efforts, and so the Menil draws imaginary lines of degrees between desired illuminations of an artwork and aura-destroying explanations (Smart, 1997).



Vik Muñiz, 2002, *Model Pictures* (René Magritte, *Le soir qui tombe*, 1964)

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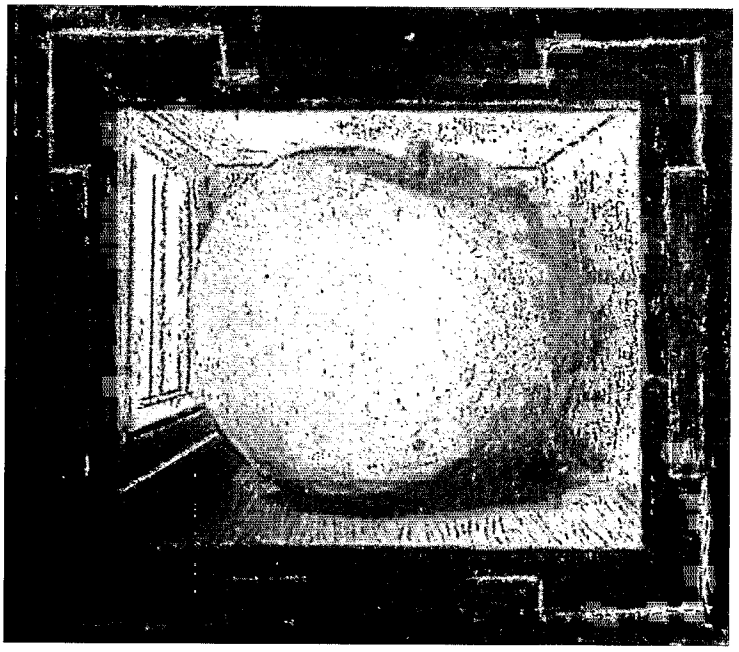


Vik Muñiz, 2002, *Model Pictures*
(René Magritte, *La chamber d'écoute*, 1952)

The Aesthetic Experience: Subject + Object = Experience

Understanding the Menil's pursuit of the pure aesthetic experience requires a closer look at what is meant by an aesthetic experience. Dominique de Menil's rigorous exhibition philosophy entailed making the invisible visible through exhibition installation. She believed that artworks could be and should be hung in ways to evoke dialogue among them, maximizing their potential. Pursuing this goal, de Menil went to great lengths in exhibition preparation by having the miniature artworks painted (not merely photographically reproduced) from those in the collection to experiment with the auras of the artworks in order to achieve the maximum aesthetic experience (Smart, 1997).

In contrast to this object-centered approach to aesthetic experience, philosopher John Dewey (1934) suggests that we examine what constitutes an experience: "Every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he [sic] lives" (p. 44). In short, every experience then is the necessary combination of at least one subject (live creature) and at least one object (some aspect of the world). According to Dewey, this process of interaction continues until both the subject *and* the object are, in some way, transformed. Conceiving of how an object can cause a transformation in a person is easy, but imagining the reverse is a little more difficult. Philosophically, Dewey suggests that we shape objects, and that consequently each viewing of an artwork essentially creates a new artwork: "Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art" (p. 54). For example, in Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, a silver pitcher is transformed from an elegant luxury item to an oppressive product of slave labor. Therefore, our impact on objects and theirs on us are the products of mutually transforming experience.

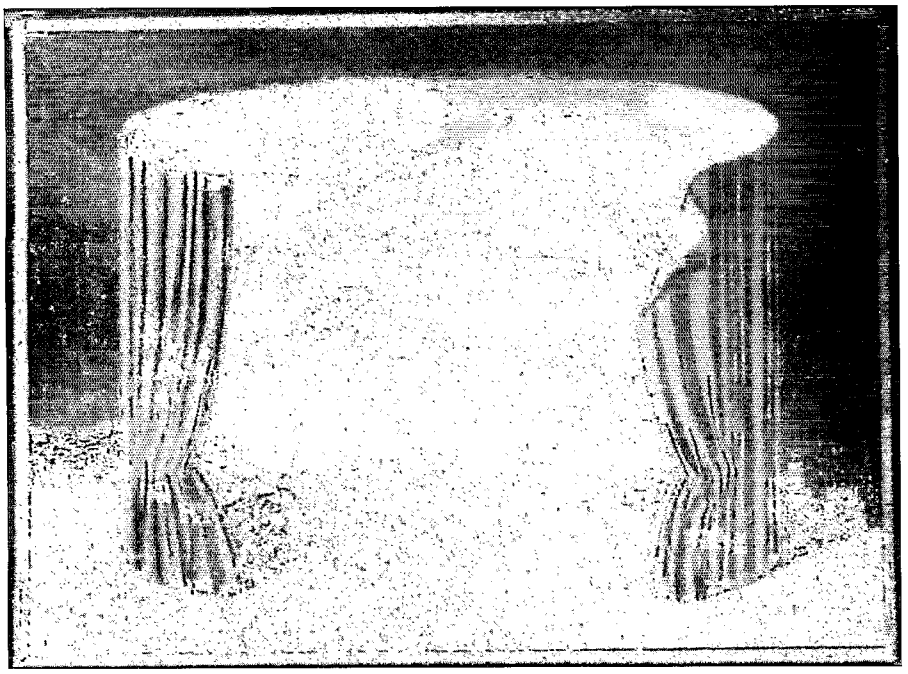
Dewey's idea of experience requires a subject that is viewed as an integral part of the object and vice versa—equal players who mutually constitute each other. In sharp contrast, this conception of experience differs from the Menil's idea of aesthetic experience since the Menil's cult of the object leaves little space for the subject.

Pursuing Experience by Reactivating the Subject

Genuine experience for Dewey, therefore, is necessarily always aesthetic *and* educational, and it comes from recognizing the relationships between subjects and objects. Unfortunately, the rich relationships between subjects and objects are frequently unexplored due to the vicious cycle of viewers' habits and expectations in the museum and museum structures that regard the viewer as a passive subject. We suggest that dialogic looking involves questions that unearth these relationships and intensify our understanding of the interrelatedness and mutually defining aspect of subjects and objects, of viewers and artworks specifically.

A first step in dialogic looking is puzzling through an exhibition. Doing so requires two things: willingness on the viewer's part and encouragement by the museum. Willingness of the viewer to puzzle through the amalgam of questions that arise when looking requires deliberateness that Dewey (1934) refers to as the "poised readiness of the live creature to meet the impact of surrounding forces" (p. 212). For Dewey, this willingness does not end at the meeting point, but extends to an understanding by the individual that change will occur from this interaction. This kind of engaged experience in the museum develops when the subject is actively involved. Certainly, this kind of engagement with works of art can take place in museums with and without formal education programs as well as in the classroom, but deliberateness from the viewer is imperative.

The second requisite component for effective dialogic looking is encouragement by the museum. In the Menil's case, there is little or no active encouragement for museum visitors to value the multiple dialogues that take place while looking at art. Yes, they have constructed the space for such dialogues to transpire, but their emphasis on the objects and their lack of encouragement to bolster viewers' dialogic behavior shrink the possibility of engaged experiences. Museums must encourage viewers to attend to the layers of experiences in dialogic looking. For example, one wide-reaching effort could be through the public relations department, setting up viewer expectations of active participation in the museum space in advance of a museum visit. Another idea could include a simple brochure upon entering a museum suggesting attentiveness to the ensuing dialogues. In museums with formal education programs, dialogic looking



Vik Muñiz, 2002, *Model Pictures* (René Magritte, *Les mémoires d'un saint*, 1960)

could entail designing educational materials with dialogue in mind, dialogue that emerges from non-authoritative rhetoric where the viewer both affects and is affected by the conversation (Lankford, 2002). These kinds of activities reinject the subject into the viewing experience; and if at all possible, it is not a singular subject, but rather multiple subjects having diverse voices.

In summary, dialogic looking requires active subjects and diverse voices, and it creates unified experiences in the museum. The unpredictable nature of these dialogues reveals their richness and their potential if acknowledged. The dialogue between the viewer and the artwork calls for a close study of artworks and a close study of how the viewer has approached the work of art in the first place. The internal dialogue within the viewer reveals the very particular perspective from which he or she looks, and this unique perspective is made explicit through external dialogue. By naming the element, dialogic looking, that truly makes an experience of an exhibition educational and aesthetic, we hope to further the discourse of museum practice specifically, and art education more generally, with a discussion of the collaborative and transformative role of dialogue.

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NOTE

This article is based on a presentation of the same title in Miami Beach at the NAEA 2002 National Conference.