PROVOKING CRITICAL THOUGHT IN THE GALLERY CONTEXT

Helen Lloyd

Figure 1: City Gallery Wellington. Gallery Educator Helen Lloyd and students from Lyall Bay School discussing *Fault* (1994) by Ralph Hotere and Bill Cuthbert as part of an LEOTC education programme in 2008, (image courtesy of Sherwin Mottram, Lyall Bay School).

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Ralph Hotere and Bill Cuthbert's site-specific art work *Fault* (see Figure 1), which straddles the front façade of City Gallery Wellington, is an ideal visual metaphor for critical thinking. Comprising two diagonal lines of strip lights which cross the building in the blackened windows, *Fault* was commissioned by the Gallery to mark the change in use of the building from the City Library to the City Gallery in 1994. When discussing this artwork with students I play "spot the artwork," as people very rarely seem to notice it, and I worked at the gallery for some months before I saw it for the first time! It strikes me as ironic that a large public artwork can be so invisible. But it is also poignant that it is, because the work references earthquake fault lines that none of us can actually see (although we feel them all too often).

Partial views or a feeling of invisibility can be experienced when encountering artworks for the first time. Artworks often reveal themselves to us in stages, and what might be apparent on first glance can with hindsight become only a partial view of the artwork's full potential significance, following closer examination, critical analysis, thought and reflection.

I believe the skills involved in critical thinking can enable students to notice things that are not always immediately apparent and give them the ability to literally "read between the lines" when scrutinising artworks. Using evidence gathered during "enquire,"[1] a gallery education project currently being undertaken in the UK, alongside anecdotal evidence from teaching at City Gallery Wellington, this article suggests ways gallery education programmes in New Zealand (such as the government's "Learning Outside the Classroom" (LEOTC) programmes) can work to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills for visual art students.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

> Critical thinking is a particular, structured type of thinking. It can be defined as a practice that enables students to challenge existing paradigms. The practice has variously been called criticism (Barnett, 1990), critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990), reflexivity (Beck et. Al., 1994) or critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987).[2]

According to the educational author Steven D Schafersman, writing about critical thinking in 1991 on the website *Free Inquiry*, critical thinkers "ask questions, pose new answers that challenge the status quo, investigate problems, discover new information, question beliefs, [and] challenge dogmas."[3] Other authors draw up even longer lists of the combined skills that make a critical thinker. In his book about teaching thinking skills, Stephen Bowkett suggests that critical analytical skills include: "Analyzing for assumption, analyzing for bias, attributing, classifying, comparing and contrasting, decision making, determining cause and effect, drawing conclusions, hypothesizing, predicting, prioritizing, problem-solving, [and] solving analogies."[4]

The term "critical thinking" is often referred to in educational literature in association with teaching students how to critically read and analyse texts within the curriculum areas of English or social studies. In the visual arts field, educators are more familiar with the term "visual literacy," used to describe the skills involved in making meaning from visual materials, and the various skills involved in communicating through images – both their construction and their interpretation.

Dr Anne Bamford, director of visual arts at the Art and Design University of Technology in Sydney, believes that in order to become visually literate a student needs to acquire the critical skills of "exploration, critique and reflection"[5]. Writing in a *Visual Literacy White Paper* (2003), she describes visual literacy as:

> developing the set of skills needed to be able to interpret the content of visual images, examine social impact of those images, and to discuss purpose, audience and ownership. In addition students need to be aware of the manipulative uses and ideological implications of images. [And] visual literacy also involves making judgments of the accuracy, validity and worth of images.[6]

From this description it is evident that there is a great deal of overlap between the skills needed for visual literacy and critical thinking skills. It could be argued that critical thinking is one aspect of visual literacy. However, critical thinking is also a skill that cuts across different curriculum areas. A simple definition used by Annals, Cunnane and Cunnane in their recent book, *Saying What you See,* cuts to the essence of the skill – "doing something critically, in a critical way, means that you consider it actively, you engage with it"[7].

Ultimately, beyond visual art subject specifics, the benefit of developing critical thinking skills is that students can become independent thinkers: critical of any messages around them in society, able to analyse information and to make considered judgments. A definition of critical thinking utilised in the "enquire" project's *Inspiring Learning in*

Galleries (2006) report reinforces this point: "Critical thinking enables a person (self) to deploy critical skills in order to interact with others and their environment and thus contribute to critical thought. …This thought thus enables individuals to work together to inform and potentially transform experiences; in other words it provides them with a degree of agency."[8]

I would argue that within visual arts education, the skill of critical thinking relates closely to an aptitude for analytical questioning and reflective thought.

SIGNIFICANT SHIFT

Rosmary Hipkins, who works for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, outlined what she understood to be the current spirit of change in the New Zealand curriculum at a seminar in Wellington in 2008. She said the shift involves students "Learning how to learn – developing an identity as a 'lifelong learner' and a greater emphasis on developing student autonomy."[9] She believes: "When students engage *critically* within each learning area in the curriculum, they have opportunities to develop the key competencies. By refocusing the way we currently teach, each learning area becomes a vehicle for developing key competencies."[10]

With the introduction of key competencies into the *New Zealand Curriculum*, thinking skills have taken on a new importance across all subjects. According to the *Curriculum* the key competency of "thinking" is "about using creative, critical and meta cognitive processes."[11] Students who are competent thinkers "reflect on their own learning, draw on personal knowledge and intuitions, ask questions, and challenge the basis of assumptions."[12] This description is in line with above definitions of critical thinking.

An enquiring learning approach to teaching is compatible with the facilitation of students' critical thinking skills. In the *New Zealand Curriculum* pedagogy section, we are reminded that

> Students learn most effectively when they develop the ability to stand back from the information or ideas that they have engaged with and think about these objectively. Over time, they develop … their ability to think critically about information and ideas. … Teachers [can] encourage such thinking when they design tasks and opportunities that require students to critically evaluate the material they use and consider the purposes for which it was originally created.[13]

Within the visual arts curriculum this relates most clearly to the achievement objectives of "Understanding the Visual Arts in Context" and "Communicating and Interpreting;" areas where students need to develop critical thinking, as they "critically reflect on, respond to and evaluate artworks."[14]

ACTIVE AUDIENCES

Contemporary art galleries and museums are ideal places for students to develop their critical thinking skills. Since their initial conception during the age of empire and colonisation, when museums arguably functioned as elitist storehouses of treasures and purveyors of authoritative "truths" about the world, museums and galleries are evolving to become more open, democratic places that are now more inviting of audience interaction and participation. Audiences are no longer always expected to stand and view artworks in revered silence, as if within what Brian O'Doherty terms "the sanctity of the church."[15]

Claire Doherty, curator and research fellow in fine art at the University of West England, Bristol, who is also a co-curator of the recent "One Day Sculpture" series in New Zealand, terms this shift "new institutionalism."[16] Many contemporary art galleries and museums now embrace a new focus on dialogue and participation and are more likely to "produce event[s] or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption."[17] As a result, audiences are more often likely to be stimulated by the questions exhibitions provoke, and take a more critical view of what they see, making these institutions ideal places within which critical thinking skills can be developed.

KEEPING IT REAL

In his editorial for the latest *ANZAAE* journal (volume 18:2, 2008), Ian Bowell states that "gallery and museum educators are becoming increasingly important in the way we teach visual art in New Zealand."[18] He believes that if visual art educators are to address the key competencies of the revised curriculum, they need to do it "with the community outside the school gates [and] galleries and museums are part of that community."[19]

Through the provision of the government's Learning Experiences Outside the Classroom (LEOTC) programmes, many galleries and museums in New Zealand are committed to providing authentic hands-on learning experiences for students outside the classroom. What is special and unique about these programmes is the *real* encounter with the artwork, the physical sensory experience of it (as opposed to looking at reproductions in books, websites and slide shows). In galleries and museums students are able to actively engage with and critically respond to art in a direct way.

SELFDOUBT

In our era of mass media, the experience of *real* encounter is vital. Often the scale of an artwork gives it meaning, impact and power. Figure 2 shows me discussing a large text-based wall piece, *Big Word – SELFDOUBT* by Rose Nolan (2006), with a group of students at the City Gallery Wellington in 2008. Confronted with the immense scale of this artwork, students typically enjoyed its overpowering physical presence. The formation of the letters makes them difficult to read. Students needed to step back as far as they could from the artwork in order to read the word. Once they had worked out that the letters spelt the word "selfdoubt," they immediately questioned the word choice and scale of the work. Students discussed the contrast between the size of the letters and the emotion evoked by the word. Some students suggested that sometimes when people feel insecure they overcompensate for it by being loud or showing off; others said that feeling insecure can be an overwhelming emotion. It seems likely that the physical presence of this artwork and its impact on the students, and their responses to it and interpretations of it, would be severely altered or diminished if they were looking at a reproduction of it in a book or on a website rather than engaging with the real thing.

Figure 2: City Gallery Wellington. Gallery Educator Helen Lloyd and students participating in a school holiday programme in 2008, discussing *Big Word – SELFDOUBT* (2006) by Rose Nolan, (image courtesy of City Gallery Wellington).

POSTMODERN ART PRACTICE

Just as galleries and museums are ideal places to develop critical thinking skills, much postmodern contemporary art provides the perfect provocation for developing critical responses. It could be argued that some contemporary artworks are partially incomplete without an audience's critical responses to them. This is a reflection of the way in which the conception of the formation of meaning of cultural texts, images and objects has changed during the development of postmodern theory. Since Roland Barthes wrote his book *Image Music Text* (1977),[20] it has become accepted that the author of any work cannot fully determine the meaning of it. Meaning is partially determined by the reader or viewer and therefore exists somewhere between the production and reception of an image or text.

Similarly, since Foucault wrote *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* in 1970,[21] it is commonly

understood that although dominant discourses exist within society that influence commonly held beliefs, there are no ultimate "truths;" all truths are relative to the personal knowledge of those who believe in that truth. Consequently there are no right answers, only viewpoints, and any object (such as an artwork) can be understood to have multiple meanings, influenced by the various subjective viewpoints of those interpreting it. It follows that anyone may challenge the dominant discourses surrounding the interpretation of any artwork and form a subjective, critical view of it, offering an alternative interpretation of its meaning. When students develop critical thinking skills they become able to critically analyse and challenge discourses around artworks. By using critical thinking skills students can effectively enter into a "dialogue" of critical thought, questioning any artwork they study.

THIEF

"Thief" (one part of a three-figure sculpture by Michael Parekowhai, *Poorman, Beggarman, Thief* 1994) is an artwork which provokes critical responses. Exhibited at City Gallery Wellington in *Reboot: The Jim and Mary Barr Collection* in 2007, this sculpture is a life-sized mannequin with Māori features and a name label saying, "Hello my name is Hori" (see Figure 3).

At City Gallery this sculpture was positioned with its back to the entrance to the West Gallery, so that as visitors approached the figure looked remarkably lifelike. It regularly surprised students who mistakenly thought it was the security guard. Often initially perplexed by the sculpture, students had contrasting emotional responses to it. Most students asked the question, "Who is he?" sparking debate about the various meanings of the word "Hori" and stereotypical notions of what or who this thief might be.

Parekowhai's work often confronts audiences with stereotypes of Māori identity. "Hori" is the Māori translation of "George," the name of Parekowhai's father, but also an offensive, derogatory term for any Māori male. It also has a third meaning, "falsehood" or "lie." Justin Paton comments in the catalogue for the exhibition: "everything about this sculpture puts you on the spot. Is Thief specific or generic? A life-sized stereotype or a proud assertion of identity? A family portrait or a pack of lies? Rather than tell us where he stands, Parekowhai makes objects that invite us to consider where we stand."[22]

This provocative, ironic and ambiguous artwork proved an ideal vehicle for promoting analytical questioning and enabled students participating in the City Gallery LEOTC programme to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. The sculpture invites an engaged response, it poses questions, and it challenges

Figure 3: Michael Parekowhai, *Poorman, Beggarman, Thief* (1994). Fiberglass mannequin, dinner suit, name badge, 1780 x 490 x 390mm, (image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland).

us to deal with difficult social issues. Following some initial analytical questioning about the sculpture and the artist's intentions, students entered into discussions which led them to challenge assumptions and beliefs about race, class, history, identity, culture and society.

"ENQUIRE"

Evidence of the development of student's critical thinking skills in a gallery context can be found in reports published recently as a result of "enquire,"[23] a gallery education programme organised by "engage"[24] in the UK. Jointly funded by the government departments for Culture Media and Sport, and Education and Skills, "enquire" pairs "clusters" of galleries with local schools and universities to pursue action research education projects which investigate the special learning benefits of gallery education.

I was involved in setting up the "enquire" project at Whitechapel Gallery within the London cluster in 2004, a project which focused on the facilitation of students' critical thinking skills by employing discursive and questioning strategies with students. "The emphasis in the interaction between artists and students was on asking questions and listening, so as to develop the student's critical and reflective skills."[25]

By examining the optimum conditions for learning in galleries, "enquire" action research projects are sharing good practice amongst gallery educators. The London cluster research identifies a number of positive outcomes: "students have used critical thinking skills throughout the project. … these were developed and extended due to changes in (teaching) practice: interventions by artists, relocating sites for learning, collaborative activities, reflective practice."[26] The report recommends that students need opportunities to:

- be alert, attentive and listen to others
- consider different points of view
- analyse and debate opinions
- participate in collective meaning-making
- acknowledge consensus and diversity
- pose problems as well as solve them
- interpret artworks in relation to contexts[27]

Within the UK's education system, critical thinking holds a particularly high status. Creativity and critical thinking are not discrete UK curriculum subjects, but they are viewed as crucial aspects of learning which should permeate the whole curriculum. Despite the differences in social and educational contexts, the recommendations from this report can be utilised by educators in museums and galleries in New Zealand.

ANALYTICAL QUESTIONING

As a result of the findings from the "enquire" report and from my own teaching experience, I believe the key to stimulating critical thinking is to encourage students to ask analytical questions about artworks. When looking at artworks with students, from a teacher's point of view it can be tempting to pose questions for students and, although this can be a good place to start discussions, ultimately the aim should be for students to be formulating questions themselves. By posing questions and seeking to answer them, through discussions with each other, students can discover new information about an artwork and critically analyse their own and other's thoughts and feelings in response.

Stephen Bowkett suggests that, when making a critical enquiry into any topic, one should ask students to develop questions using what he calls the "5 star questions" – "What? When? Why? How? Who?"[28]. He also suggests that a useful way of extending ideas about any topic is by asking "What if … ?" questions .[29] From my experiences

of teaching students at City Gallery Wellington, I have found that it is useful to encourage students to formulate analytical questions about the artwork they are studying using the following categories:

- *Symbolism*: What things and ideas are symbolised by elements of the artwork?
- *Ideas*: What ideas and associations are stimulated by looking at the artwork?
- *Context*: What is the personal, political, cultural, social, and economic context of the artist who made the work, of the society within which the artwork was made, of the society within which the work is exhibited and "read," including the specific context of the gallery or museum it is shown within?
- *Value*: What is the actual monetary value of the artwork? What is the perceived social or cultural value, and artistic merit of the work, and what do people think of it?
- *Opinion*: What do I think of the artwork? What do other people think of it? What has the artist said about it? What have critics said about it? Does anyone disagree with opinions about it? If so, why?
- *Belief*: What beliefs underpin the perceived reasons for making the work? How does it fit with my own beliefs? Can I determine the beliefs of the artist? How does it relate to commonly held beliefs within society?
- *Intentions*: What do I think the artist intended us to think in response to the artwork? What meanings does the artist intend us to build in relation to the artwork?
- *Feelings*: What feelings do I have about the work?
- *Narrative*: Does the artwork tell a story? What could the story be? Who is the story about? What has just happened? What will happen next?

MOURNING CHORUS

Identifying and discussing the symbolism, ideas, beliefs and values which underpin an artwork can enable students to develop and extend their critical thinking skills.

The sculptural installation *Mourning Chorus* by Fiona Hall (2007-8, see Figure 4), which showed at City Gallery Wellington in 2008, provoked much discussion amongst students participating in the LEOTC programme, and it enabled students to develop and demonstrate their critical thinking skills.

Figure 4: Fiona Hall, *Mourning Chorus* (2007/8) (detail). Resin, plastic bottles, lights, vinyl in vitrina, 157 x 217 x 88cm, (photo: Greg Weight, courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney).

Mourning Chorus is a glass coffin-shaped vitrine which contains 11 extinct or endangered New Zealand native bird species, represented by models of their beaks attached to empty plastic chemical bottles which previously contained poisons or pollutants. At the City Gallery it stood alone within an empty, darkened room with black walls. The plastic containers lit up the space, sporadically flickering on and off. Native New Zealand plants are etched on the glass sides of the coffin, and brass name plates fixed around the wooden frame pronounce their Māori names.

On entering the darkened room, students often gasped at the initial dramatic sight of this sculpture and typically stood around the vitrine and talked in hushed tones. Through facilitated group discussion and by helping students to form questions about the artwork, based on the categories listed above, students began interpreting this

sculpture. Initially identifying what they could see within it, students went on to suggest symbolic meanings for various parts of it. For example, the flickering lights were symbolic to some students of the struggle to survive which some endangered species have fought and lost, and the plastic chemical containers symbolised humankind's negative impact on the environment to the majority of students. The coffin-shaped vitrine and quiet darkened room suggested a funeral to some students. Other students recognised the native flora etched onto the glass of the coffin as being crucial in providing the native habitat for the birds inside it. After discussing many aspects of the sculpture's symbolism, students extended their critical enquiry by questioning why the artist had chosen to make the work, what beliefs and values underpin the work and what issues the artist might intend the audience to think about in response to it.

The issues students commented on included environmental pollution, protection of endangered species and threats to natural habitats. Students discussed the concept of *kaitiakitanga* (the Māori concept of guarding, protecting and preserving) and *kaitiaki* (caretaker/guardian) and projects such as the Kapiti Island Nature Reserve (which Fiona Hall had recently visited). They also discussed the impact of colonisation on the natural environment in New Zealand. Most students believed that the artist intended the audience to view humankind as being responsible for the degradation of the environment and the resulting impact on native bird species. Students were typically very excited to feel that they had contributed to the group's interpretations of the sculpture, and pleased to recognise links between it and other facts they had learnt previously at school about the environment. For some students, the sculpture appeared to take on a personal significance because it related to and reinforced some of their previously held knowledge and beliefs about the natural environment and current issues facing it, such as sustainability and protection.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that the skills involved in critical thinking, which equate closely to an aptitude for analytical questioning and reflection, can enable students to "read between the lines" when scrutinising artworks, and assist them in becoming independent thinkers. Critical thinking is an essential skill for visual art students to develop, especially in light of the revised *New Zealand Curriculum* which promotes "thinking" as a key competency, and the current shift taking place in education towards teaching students the skills involved in learning how to learn.

Education programmes within art galleries and museums provide fertile grounds for the development of students' critical thinking skills, and much contemporary art practice is effective in actively provoking a critical response. Museum and gallery educators can facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to pose and discuss analytical questions about artworks. The "enquire" gallery education project in the UK has demonstrated that, by providing opportunities for students to participate in collective meaning-making, listen to others, consider different points of view and debate opinions, students can demonstrate critical thought while interpreting artworks in relation to their contexts.

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1 *Inspiring Learning in Galleries: Enquire about Learning in Galleries*, ed. B Taylor (London: engage, 2006); '*02 Inspiring Learning in Galleries: Enquire about Learning in Galleries*, ed. B Taylor (London: engage, 2008).

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 B O'Doherty and M Mc Evilley, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

16 C Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," *engage 15: Art of Encounter* (2004).

17 Ibid.

18 I Bowell, "Talk of Change," *ANZAAE – Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators Journal*, 18:2 (2008), 1.

19 Ibid.

20 R Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

21 M Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

22 J Paton, *Reboot: The Jim and Mary Barr Collection* (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2007).

23 "Enquire" takes place in a number of regions across the UK and has been running for three years. Two reports have been published about the research projects, with evaluative findings from them. An extensive website has also been developed: www.en-quire.org.

24 Engage is the National Association for Gallery Education in the UK.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Bowkett, *100+ Ideas for Teaching Thinking Skills*.

29 Ibid.