

Families and Art Galleries: How Values and Philosophies Shape Spaces

Susan Hoppenfeld

Family and Youth Program Coordinator, Vancouver Art Gallery

The Vancouver Art Gallery strives to be “a place where people meet to experience inspiration, meaning and pleasure through visual art.”

From this mission statement, the curators in turn have articulated their artistic vision. They believe in the importance of foregrounding contemporary art, acknowledging a sense of place, connecting to the past, presenting multiple perspectives and leading locally, nationally and internationally.

As the Family and Youth Program Coordinator it is my job to reflect and integrate those two statements into a practice that clearly values early childhood and families.

Family programming at the Vancouver Art Gallery consists of a combination of supersunday, our monthly family day, Kidstops and Family Guides. On supersunday the Gallery is transformed into a hands-on learning environment for families. Up to a dozen exhibition-based activities that focus on looking at art are spread out over four floors, facilitated by eight staff and thirty-six volunteers. The activities change every few months with each new exhibition. supersunday attracts an average of 850 visitors each month. The Kidstops are environments created in Gallery exhibitions that include age-appropriate information in a child-friendly setting, offering things to touch, things to do, and ideas to think about. Family Guides are booklets that lead families on a tour of an exhibition with information, questions to consider and spaces in which to draw and write in responses.

In-Gallery Family Programs

The art object is central to the work that I do. Without the object I really could be doing this work anywhere, in a gym, at school. Perhaps it's not the art object itself but the totality of the gallery environment. It's out of the house, out of school, it's out the ordinary. With the Vancouver Art Gallery's emphasis on contemporary art there are sometimes objects on display that you would not notice if you passed the very same object on the street. Placement in the Gallery allows things to be seen from a different perspective. Programming in gallery spaces encourages families to look at things from different perspectives and interact in different ways.

A number of researchers, theorists and thinkers have helped to inform the values and philosophies that shape the decisions around these three programs.

Close Looking

David Perkins writes about how art objects lend themselves to a range of thinking dispositions. They provide sensory anchoring and become a concrete focus for thinking, talking and learning.

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Art objects in a gallery permit close examination and re-examination. Perkins believes that there is a potential for personal engagement because art is made to draw us in, hold our attention and sustain prolonged reflection. Art objects provide a dispositional atmosphere because meaning is negotiated. Extended looking has the potential to cultivate reflective intelligence and creative thinking.

Art crosses cultures and time. Close looking at art introduces children to the diverse histories that they are a part of. It validates their own experience as art makers and introduces them to artists who use art as a language to talk about contemporary culture and ideas. Ultimately it stretches their boundaries and broadens their understanding of the world. Viewing the world through the lenses of art provokes thought, imagination and creativity.

Looking Together

The work of Lev Vygotsky has greatly influenced family programming at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development. A second key aspect of Vygotsky's theory is centered on the potential for cognition in relation to understanding the zone of proximal development: that imaginary place just beyond the reach of a child's current understanding where adults offer assistance, enabling the child to reach a new level of cognitive development. This zone of learning becomes most apparent through social interaction. Cognitive development with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone.

Vygotsky foregrounds the importance of the family dynamic. Children learn within circles of trust and comfort. In a gallery setting, that means within families. Family programs are developed and presented by educators, but the parents and children themselves realize them. Learning happens better with friends and families than with strangers.

The social aspect of learning is the cornerstone of supersunday. In-Gallery environments range from quiet and comfortable to noisy and busy—all spaces for learning through social interaction. The intergenerational aspect of learning is emphasized and the family dynamic is respected. Adults and children of all ages learn together.

Playing Together

As a play-based early childhood educator, I look for ways to integrate Vygotsky's ideas about social learning with research that demonstrates that children learn best through play. Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg synthesized the dispositions of play when they said that play is intrinsically motivated, relatively free of externally imposed rules and carried out as if the activity were real. Play focuses on the process rather than the product, is dominated by the player and requires the active involvement of the player. Children are more completely themselves when they are free to express ideas, to play things out safely, make their own choices and decisions and actively experiment and explore. When learning is playful and pleasurable, it sets the stage for the future.

Vygotsky and Rubin's work supports the idea of developing environments rich in resources for families to construct their own learning through play. **supersunday** presents a myriad of choices for families to engage in learning through creative play that range from speculative discussion to immersive studio projects. With each activity firmly grounded in looking, families can respond by dancing with yards of fabric to explore movement in color and painting, creating a collage to explore composition in mixed-media work, playing a game to discover details in contemporary photography or acting in a skit in response to video work. Whether writing a poem, sketching from a still life or painting a picture, adults are teaching children; children are teaching adults and each other. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is buzzing with activity as families wander from activity to activity according to their interests: parents reading, children choosing, parents following, children responding creatively with answers and more questions. Children lead; parents follow: it's a very exciting dynamic to witness.

Constructing Curriculum

The MUSE (Museums Uniting with Schools in Education) Entry Points, developed by Howard Gardner's Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, provide a foundation for constructing curriculum that promotes informed viewing. MUSE turns the focus from the art object to the learner. The Entry Points describe five possible places to begin, entrances that people commonly take when they are considering works of art. With the understanding that people have a variety of learning styles and different ways of making meaning, the Entry Points are guidelines for constructing curriculum for families. They are, briefly:

- Logical: How was the artwork made, from what materials?
- Aesthetic: How do the formal elements, such as line, shape, color, texture, pattern and composition, work together?
- Narrative: What stories surround the artwork or are found within it—social, historical, personal?
- Foundational: What are the big philosophical questions that place the work in context, such as: Why is it art? How is it meaningful?
- Experiential: Gardner's research shows that in order for children to have a complete educational experience as a way to integrate their learning, they must have an opportunity to create something new.

This is an important theoretical underpinning of **supersunday**. It's not enough just to talk to children about what they see in an artwork. A layered experience coupled with the opportunity to respond is essential.

In the work we do at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Entry Points are manifest through a combination of age-appropriate information in the form of text or conversations, coupled with open-ended questions, things to touch and opportunities to respond. With their families, children create meaning around artwork based on the combination of their previous experience and new ways of thinking. Each child responds in a unique way through dialogue, dance, music, theatre or art making.

What's on the Horizon?

By bringing the strategies of critical pedagogy into early childhood education, I have an opportunity not only to question my theoretical foundations, but to question my questions. Why is it so important now to invite families into the Gallery to learn about looking at art? Perhaps it is the very nature of the conversations about looking that need to become the focus.

Through his writing, the educational theorist and cultural critic Henry Giroux is questioning the relationship between schooling and political life, challenging the traditional role of students, teachers and the institutional structures that bring them together. His ideas present another layer of criteria to consider when thinking about family programming.

Giroux believes that in the past, the role of schools was to uncritically serve and reproduce the existing social order. Giroux writes that we need to find a way to think critically about how knowledge is produced, mediated and represented.

His work offers a way to critique the notion of “just looking.” Although his ideas are not new and rest quite comfortably in the lexicon of postmodernism, Giroux’s work provides a synthesis of critical pedagogy with a call to action. If we read *gallery* where he writes *school*, perhaps we are in a position to investigate the role galleries and museums play in perpetuating certain ideas and their potential to challenge others. If we are interested in educating children to be part of a democratic society, and if we see art and the public institutions that support and maintain it as important facets of that society, how might that significantly change family programming? The Gallery is an environment that encourages thoughtful, intelligent discourse, where families can talk critically about representation and how it affects them. There is no inherent meaning in the objects we call art. Art does not speak for itself. When working with children, it is the role of the gallery educator to illustrate some of the conversations that surround works of art in an age-appropriate way.

Putting It All Together

In 2005, a survey exhibition of photography at the Vancouver Art Gallery provided a perfect opportunity to explore the connections between looking at art, encouraging creativity and fostering critical thinking in young children.

The exhibition provided multiple opportunities to discuss the interesting and problematic relationships between the real and representation that are associated with thinking about photography. How do we analyze the “truth value” of images we see? Is it important that a photograph works as a form of documentation? What do we use photographs for? What is the relationship between how a photograph is constructed and created and the things we think about when we look at it? These are some of the building blocks for making informed decisions about the images we see all around us.

Real Pictures: Photographs from the Collection of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft was a sweeping survey exhibition—350 photographs from a single collection, from early calotypes to

contemporary work by Vancouver photographers. The exhibition featured a small collection of late nineteenth-century portraits. Formal, posed, serious images, they speak to both the novelty and the momentousness of having a photographic portrait taken in those times. After viewing these photographs, families chose clothing from a “dress-up box” and posed for a family portrait, hand-colored and embellished their own copy. Clothes, pose and palette in a photograph are socially coded. Throughout this activity the conversation was about who we become, or pretend to become, when we change our clothes, and about the relationship between that person and the “real person.” How do we appear to be both ourselves and someone else?

That word, *real*, wove its way into many of the discussions related to activities in the exhibition. Examining Ansel Adams’ breathtaking landscapes through a viewfinder, families discussed the ways in which meaning changed with cropping and editing. In such a process, details become abstract. Only the entire photograph seems to suggest a “real place.” When a gallery educator opens up the idea that the whole photograph itself is really only a “detail” of a real place, chosen by the photographer from the panorama of nature, the conversation about how pictures are made and how photographers make choices can become much more complex. Families chose a fragment of detail from a landscape photograph. Each family member glued a copy of the same fragment to a piece of paper and extended it into a complete landscape, using watercolors and pen. The conversations that followed were exclamatory explorations of “artistic choice,” as families realized that each member assumed that his or her own interpretation was the obvious and only choice.

Throughout our work with families, gallery educators continue to use formal analysis: discussing how an artwork was made and who made it, offering opportunities for children to explore photography purely for its creative potential. These conversations are not ends in themselves but rather a way to move from looking to critical engagement. The emphasis simply shifted to encompass some of the ideas inherent in questioning the “truth value” of photographs—the relationships between the ways photographs are constructed and created, how we look at them and the many uses we put them to in the world around us.

From the work of Perkins, Vygotsky, Rubin, MUSE and Giroux I am reminded that the heart of each program, whether its supersunday, Kidstops or the Family Guide, is an in-gallery environment with a focus on the artwork, where families learn through their work and play together.

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