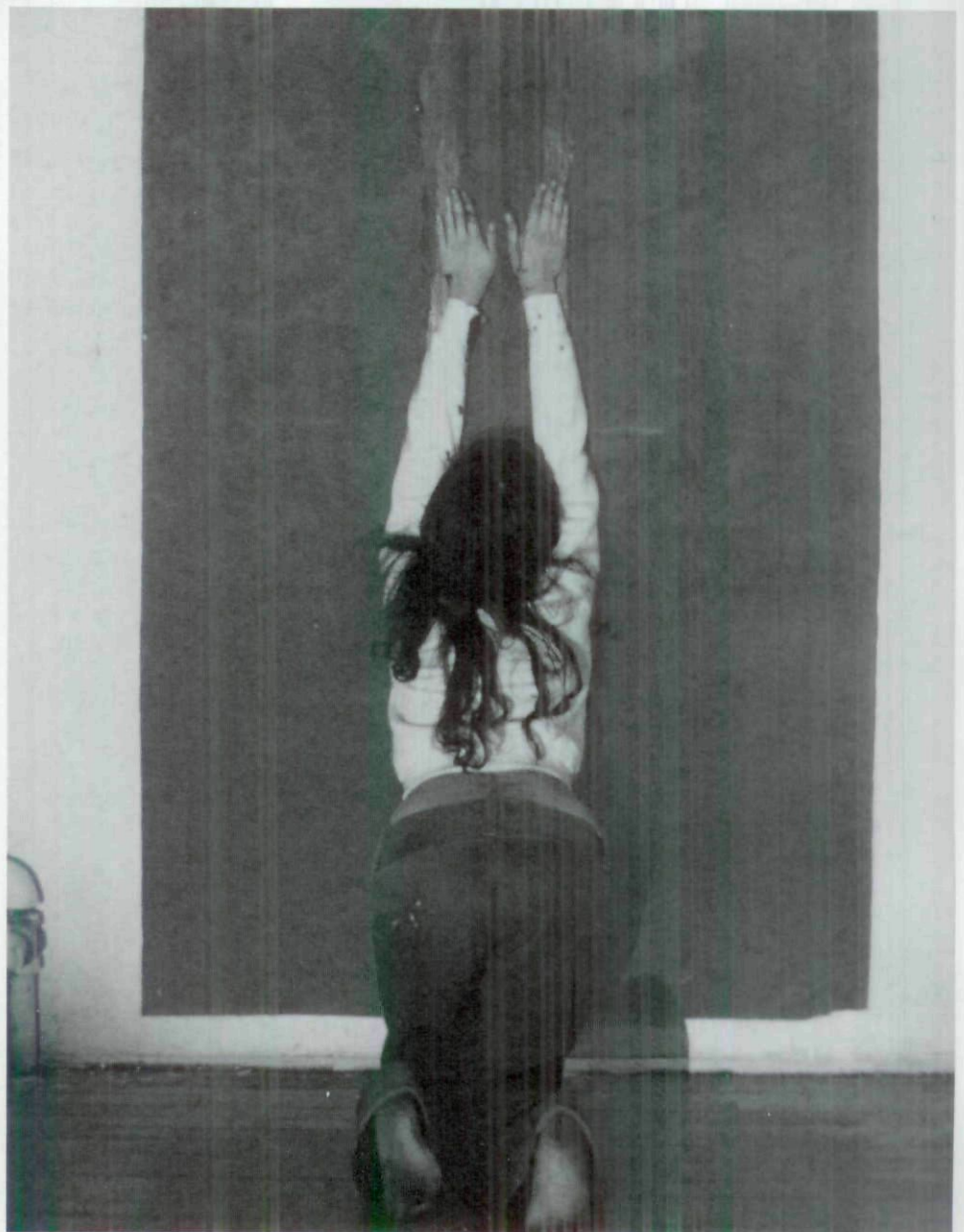


Figure 1. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Body Tracks)*, 1974. Lifetime color photograph 10 by 8 inches. ©The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.



Complete Engagement: *Embodied Response in Art Museum Education*

BY OLGA M. HUBARD

Learning from Art: Rational Thought and Embodied Experience

Imagine a 5-year-old girl mesmerized in front of a video. The video shows artist Ana Mendieta sliding her blood-covered hands downward against a wall (see Figure 1). Emulating the artist, the child lifts her arms up and slowly glides down until her body reaches the floor. Now envision a 15-year-old boy looking at a scroll of Chinese calligraphy. Without noticing, the young viewer begins to make sound effects—*swish, swash, swoosh*—as he follows the direction of the different brushstrokes with fluid arm movements. Think, now, of the 30-year-old woman who looks at a Baroque crucifixion. As her eyes fall on the depiction of open flesh, she recognizes the pain the wounds suggest and instantly flinches, “Ouch!”

Observant museum educators are familiar with these kinds of spontaneous sound effects, body gestures, and emotional reactions in visitors. But, what is the place of such physical and emotional responses in education? Are they passing, trivial manifestations? Or, do these embodied responses entail learning?

From a Cartesian perspective, the answer to the last question is likely to be no. In the Cartesian model, which derives from the ideas of 17th-century philosopher René Descartes, logical reasoning is considered the one path to true knowledge. A separation of intellect and body and a mistrust of physicality and emotions characterize this school of thought (Kerka, 2002). Descartes wrote:

Can I affirm that I possess any of all those attributes ... belonging to the nature of the body? After attentively considering them in my own mind, I find none of them that can properly be said to belong to myself ... I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, understanding, or reason. (Descartes, 1901/1641, as cited in Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005, p. 723)

The investigation of embodied learning is particularly relevant in art education. Unlike the contents of written texts, artworks present themselves as physical (or virtual) entities that exist in the same space as we do.

The idea that humans can only gain knowledge through the intellect has dominated Western culture since Descartes’ time. From the 20th century on, however, many scholars have pointed out the limitations of the Cartesian schema and reconsidered the status of the body in the construction of knowledge (Arnheim, 1969; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005; Hanna, 1985; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Thomas, 2003). Discoveries in cognitive science have confirmed that concepts and reason are rooted on the experiences of the body (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Freedberg, 2002; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). In the words of Lakoff & Johnson, “our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies” (1999, p. 17); moreover, “the mind is not merely corporeal but also passionate, desiring, social” (p. 565). Nevertheless, education today continues to be driven by Cartesian views: The logical and the measurable predominate, and physicality and emotions are regarded as something that must be “tamed or controlled to achieve cognitive performance” (Kerka, 2002, ¶ 2). Thus, the Cartesian schema “has led to devaluing the significance of emotions and sensations in the process of becoming educated” (Anttila, 2004, ¶ 2).

A number of theorists have recognized the relevance of body-mind integration in schools. These authors have contended that far from being only “mind” or “reason,” as Descartes suggested, learners are whole beings, creatures that make sense of the world through bodily sensations and feelings as well as through rational processes (Anttila, 2004; Bresler, 2004; Brodkey & Fine, 1988; Johnson, 1983; Kerka, 2002; McLaren, 1991; Stinson, 1995).¹

The investigation of embodied learning is particularly relevant in art education. Unlike the contents of written texts, artworks present themselves as physical (or virtual)

entities that exist in the same space as we do. Works of visual art are embodied in images that the eyes perceive and in things that can potentially be touched (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Therefore, there is a sense of immediacy in the way viewers begin to apprehend an artwork: a physical, sensorial, and often emotional, engagement that precedes the conceptual (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Langer, 1953; Sontag, 1982).²

This is not to say that art speaks exclusively to people’s bodies and emotions; intriguing artworks can also provoke viewers to form interpretations through rational thought processes (Barrett, 2003; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Housen, 2002; McKay & Monteverde, 2003; Tishman, 2000). Thus, experiences with works of art can be simultaneously conceptual and embodied; they can set in motion at once a person’s reason, senses, emotions, and motor channels of response.³

The integration of different ways of knowing is, according to many, a defining characteristic of the aesthetic experience (Burton, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Custodero, Neumann, Hansen, & Kerdeman, 2005; Hubard, 2003; Yenawine, 2002). This fusion of the whole being contributes to making the aesthetic a “refined and intensified form of experience,” (Dewey, 1980, p. 3)—an experience capable of throwing off the covers bred by routine and making people wide awake to themselves and the world in which they live.

Teachers who want students to look beyond the conventions that surround them, those who want young people to be fully awake to themselves and to the world, will recognize that “art pedagogy has its greatest power and meaning in its inherent possibility to combine different modes of knowing” (Anttila, 2004, ¶ 7). Certainly, this kind of pedagogy includes embodied responses to art.

Facilitating Embodied Responses to Artworks

Discursive Approach. Embodied responses can, and often do, happen spontaneously as viewers encounter an artwork. Teachers attuned to their students' facial expressions, body gestures, and special sounds are in a good position to acknowledge physical and emotional reactions and to incorporate them into the art program.

Educators can also deliberately help elicit and deepen embodied responses to works of art. One way to do so is through discursive language. For example, a teacher might ask students to imagine what it might feel like to be inside a given image: What sounds might they hear? What kinds of scents might they smell? What would the objects around them feel like to the touch? What would the temperature be? Using language, students can then share and reflect about the responses that these questions set in motion.

This said, there are limits to how discursive language—distinct from poetic language—can represent embodied experiences. Upon seeing an image, “The mind operates by apprehending the products of freely interacting field forces” (Arnheim, 1969, p. 246). Much of this complex apprehension occurs under the threshold of rational consciousness (Arnheim, 1969; Langer, 1953). Discursive language, however, is “a one-dimensional string of words... used by [conscious] intellectual thinking to label sequences of concepts” (Arnheim, 1969, p. 246).³ Therefore, as Elliot Eisner wrote, “What we come to know through... the arts is not reducible to the literal” (n.d., ¶ 8).

Aside from making visits more dynamic and fun, non-discursive activities make unique contributions to museum learning. They help visitors engage their bodies and emotions in response to an object, they grant viewers access to those aspects of a work that may elude discourse, and they enable people to express their responses through processes other than rational thought.

So while discourse—the medium of art critics, art historians, and aestheticians—can help students engage in intellectual processes in response to artworks, symbols other than words are generally closer to the immediate experiences that are germane to art (Stinson, 1995).

Non-discursive Approach. For years art museum educators engaged viewers with art through movement, sound, poetry, drawing, and other non-discursive means (Durant, 1996; Rice, 1995; Zeller, 1987). Educators and museum visitors enjoy these activities because they can help break the ice between participants, change the rhythm and dynamics of a session, and make the learning experience more enjoyable. But aside from making visits more dynamic and fun, non-discursive activities make unique contributions to museum learning. They help visitors engage their bodies and emotions in response to an object, they grant viewers access to those aspects of a work that may elude discourse, and they enable people to express their responses through processes other than rational thought. In short, non-discursive activities can help activate, in particularly direct ways, the embodied ways of knowing that are so essential to aesthetic experience.⁴

Should experiences in the visual arts remain visual? Does the introduction of sound, or movement, or poetry, to an encounter with an artwork pollute the experience?

The prevalence of lectures, conversations, and written texts about art indicate that people readily accept the mediation of visual experiences through discursive language. Yet, discursive language is no more neutral than

sound or movement or poetry, nor is it a better fit to visual expression (Baxandall, 1985; Stinson, 1995). And although it is true that the marriage of art and discourse has long been one in the West, it is not only art critics and art historians and philosophers that publicly respond to art and help us make sense of it. Think of Octavio Paz writing poetry to Manuel Alvarez Bravo's photographs; think of Martha Graham adjusting her choreography inspired by Isamu Noguchi's sculptural sets; think of Modest Mussorgsky composing music stirred by his friend Victor Hartmann's paintings.

The truth is that no one form of aesthetic mediation can “replicate... the qualities that [an artwork possesses] because clearly no such replication is possible” (Eisner, n.d., ¶ 13). Yet, different facilitative approaches can bring people closer to one or another quality of a work and activate in viewers one or another way of knowing.

Five Instances of Embodied Engagement

There are potentially as many non-discursive museum activities as there are artworks and educators. And although most non-discursive strategies share the goal of fostering embodied engagement, every activity does this in a particular way. In the following section, I describe five instances of embodied engagements with works of art. My purpose is to illustrate how different non-discursive teaching strategies can activate different physical and emotional ways of knowing in viewers. Through these examples, I will also show how certain activities bring to the surface aspects of a work that may not appear as prominent in other activities.

I selected the five strategies here out of many that I and other teachers have used. Though these examples typify different forms of embodied engagement, they do not come close to exhausting the sorts of physical and emotional interactions that students can have with works of art. Likewise, these instances are not meant to represent all, or even the most effective, non-discursive activities. Rather, they are intended to give teachers an idea of what various sorts of embodied engagements might look like and to inspire them to envision strategies of their own.



Figure 2. Clyfford Still, *Untitled*, 1946-1947. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Clyfford Still, 1986. Photograph by Lynton Gardiner. Photograph © 1987 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Instance 1: Responding with Poetry. A group of graduate students sit in front of an abstract painting by Clyfford Still (see Figure 2). The teacher invites them to look in silence at the painting and to write the first word that comes to their mind. "Sun," "Rough," "Falling," "Opposing," and "Joints" appear on the index cards that students hold. The viewers then combine their words to form a poetic response to Still's work:

*Snow
Rough gorge falling
Thermal opposing, Wicked isolation
Sun
Sharp ice
Joints, jigsaw, geological
Barren*

When people write or speak the first word that comes to mind, they tap into their immediate response to the object. Much like detectives' hunches, immediate responses are informed by things that viewers apprehend even before they can examine their impressions rationally. Immediate responses can thus be closely aligned with physical and emotional experiences: sharp, falling, isolation. Moreover, immediate reactions often highlight essential aspects of an artwork in particularly poignant and direct ways, as the poem in response to Still's painting illustrates.

Instance 2: Becoming the Work. A group of middle school students pay close attention to a series of models created by a Japanese architect—concert halls, museums, bridges, and public buildings. As they observe a particularly complex one, the teacher asks them to break into small groups and "become" that structure with their bodies. One student stands on her toes reaching high towards the sky, balancing her body slightly forward. She is a tall, tilted building. Opposite her, another student crouches on the floor, curving his back and wrapping his arms around his head to become a short, rounded edifice. A third student reaches her arms and legs out towards the opposite directions where her peers are, curving her torso to emulate a dynamic bridge that joins the two buildings.

When students use their bodies to “become” a building they gain an intimate sense of the makeup of the structure. As they test their balance, challenge gravity, and physically connect with each other, they respond to the building’s configuration beyond a clinical, formal analysis: Their embodied response allows them to understand the building in relation to human experiences of reaching, balancing, bridging, and being physically grounded.

Instance 3: Creating a Soundtrack. A group of high school students pays close attention to a painting by Mexican Muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (see Figure 3). The picture depicts

an abandoned infant [who] sits amid the detritus of industrial civilization. Clad only in a red cloth draped over one shoulder, he wails in unmitigated pain ... The ... child ... sits atop a carefully composed landscape of rubble, triangles formed by wires and the cylinders of scrap plumbing... At the right are [industrial] tanks [and a] ballooning cloud at left. (*Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, 1990, p. 645).

The teacher encourages the young viewers to imagine the sounds they might hear if they were to walk into this scene. She offers a series of everyday objects—scissors, pencils, a clipboard, paper—and invites them to collectively create an acoustic response to the work. After a brief conference, a couple of students begin to sing an even hum that alludes to ongoing industrial activity. Another student joins in, emulating a crying child. There is metal clinking, on and off. The crying becomes increasingly intense as another student, and then another, join in with high-pitched wails. The humming of the distant factories continues and a long, muted bang suggests an explosion in the distance. Then, all is quiet, all except for the monotonous crying of a single child.

In this example, viewers deliberately activate a sense other than sight as they apprehend the picture. In doing so, they enter an alternative world imaginatively and



Figure 3. *Echo of a Scream*, 1937. Siqueiros, David Alfaro (1896-1974) ©ARS, NY. Enamel on wood, 48 x 36". Gift of Edward M. M. Warburg. (633.1939) The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA. Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

pay heed to different dimensions within it. For example, when students generate sounds reminiscent of metal and blasting smoke, they connect with the qualities of the materials that make up the landscape. When students offset escalating wailing against empty silence, they pay heed to the picture’s narrative (an abandoned child who survives industrial destruction) and relate to its emotional tone. In contrast to immediate responses, imagining the sounds (or textures, or temperatures, or smells) in a work calls for engagements that are slower, longer, and more nuanced.

Instance 4: Drawing Details. A cluster of 4th graders look intently at a wooden sculpture of a human arm created in the Marquesas Islands. Holding a sketchpad in one hand and a pencil in the other, they observe the intricate carved design that covers the sculpture’s surface. The students’ eyes and hands move slowly as they follow the direction of a given line—now right, now down, now curving up again; now thicker, now thinner, now shaped like a heart. Gradually, a section of the sculpture’s complicated design begins to take shape on each student’s sketchpad.

In contrast to immediate responses, imagining the sounds (or textures, or temperatures, or smells) in a work calls for engagements that are slower, longer, and more nuanced.

When people slow down to draw, details and nuances that may not be immediately obvious reveal themselves. Drawing calls for the integrated work of visual perception and arm movement. Therefore, by following the carved lines on the sculpture's surface, viewers go beyond labeling the design as intricate and the lines as delicate: They experience, through the motion of their arms and the varying pressure exerted by their hands, the intricacy of the design in all its complexity and the delicacy of the line in all its gentleness. Again, this embodied response helps charge what could be a cold formal analysis with significant experience.

Moreover, as students draw, their hand follows the same path the carver's hand trailed when he created the object. Students thus connect with the physical actions undertaken by another person in another time and place to create a meaningful work. Appreciation for the artist's skill is gained in this way. Furthermore, drawing a carving prompts students to reflect about the qualities of different art materials and processes—making a drawing of an indented design makes it evident that pencil and paper cannot do what chisel and wood can.

Instance 5: Transforming Paper. A group of college students look carefully at a Nepalese mandala from the late 14th century. The teacher asks them to use their hands to transform a piece of paper in response to the image. The young viewers begin to tear, bend, fold, crunch, and join, looking up at the mandala now and again until each completes a distinct paper sculpture.

In some of the students' works, concentric areas enclose a central space: They embody the experience of centeredness. Other sculptures feature a number of rounded, overlapping shapes reminiscent of petals: They capture the fragility of flowers and speak to the power of repetition. Yet other paper sculptures include stylized body parts—arms, legs, torsos, hands—positioned in interesting ways: They highlight the specificity of the body postures depicted in the image.

These paper responses bring to the surface important aspects of the mandala such as salient shapes, spatial relationships, and the organization of space. In a mandala, though, a concentric composition, stylized flowers, and body postures are not merely formal devices meant to please the eye. Rather, each of these aspects is also imbued with meanings that are fundamental to the Buddhist spirituality. Specifically, the concentric organization characterizes the structure of the meditation temples that mandalas represent. The remarkable body gestures refer to particular modes of meditation. The simplified petals allude to the lotus flower, Buddhist symbol of spontaneous generation and hence of divine birth. Thus, after making their paper sculptures, students stand on an ideal platform from which to reflect about the place of essential human experiences (of centeredness of simplification, and of experiencing the transcendental in one's body) across different cultures.

Summary

To recap, there are a variety of non-discursive activities that can facilitate embodied responses to works of art. But these activities are not all the same: Some help viewers experience the structure of a work, others highlight the feel of its materials, and yet others facilitate connections to the artists' process. Moreover, certain non-discursive activities give viewers access to the narrative a work suggests, whereas others help viewers empathize with its emotional tone or its cultural significance.⁵

Aside from bringing people closer to particular facets of a work, however, the various non-discursive strategies also activate particular modes of response in viewers: Some tap into direct, immediate reactions; others call for extended, nuanced looking. Thus, it is key for teachers to select an activity that aligns well with the character of the particular work and with their educational goals.

Conclusion: Is There Learning in Embodied Response?

I began this article by highlighting a view of cognition that goes beyond the rational and the measurable, one where perception, physical sensations, and emotions all constitute valuable ways of knowing. I also suggested that artworks, by their very nature, call for responses that integrate the different dimensions of the self. Embodied responses are an important piece in this equation. Without them, there is no complete engagement.

Do embodied experiences entail learning, then? Embodied experiences do not only aid in the construction of knowledge; they also help make this knowledge meaningful. As the examples presented earlier showed, it is the body and the emotions that enable people to empathize (Kerka, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), to lend their lives to a work of art, (Greene, 1996), humanizing their aesthetic encounters. If students are lucky enough to experience art through the different dimensions that together make them human, the works they see will enter their lives in more significant and memorable ways.

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ENDNOTES

¹For more critiques of the Cartesian schema see Bachelard (1964), Derrida (1978), Gadamer (2000), Irigaray (1991), Klemola (2004), Lyotard (1984), Matthews (1998), and Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945, 1998/1964). For more on the role of the body in education see Burnard & Best (2005), Cheville (2001), Dall'Alba & Barnacle (2005), McDade (1987), Noddings (1992), Sellers-Young (1998), and Taylor (1991).

²Text-based contemporary artworks that blur the boundaries between immediate apprehension and conceptual understanding include those by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries.


³Faced with the insidious undervaluing of art in education, art educators have felt a responsibility to let the public know that, far from being mindless, artmaking and viewing involves significant cognitive work. These important efforts have, however, been accompanied by a loss as many educators have disconnected their practice from the body (Stinson, 1995).

⁴Non-discursive museum activities are not to be confused with activities that change the dynamics of a group tour without a focus on embodied response. For example, effective strategies such as asking viewers to discuss an artwork with a partner, or asking students to describe an object to someone who is not looking are still grounded on discursive modes of communication.

⁵In spite of the importance of emotions in aesthetic response, engaging students with a work by asking, "What does it make you feel?" is not necessarily an effective strategy. In my experience, this question can confuse students and often leaves them at a loss for words. I believe this happens because, in art viewing, emotions play out in complex ways. For instance, even when students recognize, say, the sadness or the anger in a given work, they may not automatically feel sad or angry themselves. Alternatively, students may feel excited by the discoveries they are making in a work, even while they empathize with the depressing mood the object suggests, for example. Moreover, a work that is hard to understand or that challenges accepted ideas might make viewers angry, even though the object itself may not evoke any one mood in particular. Pointed questions such as "What might the character in the picture be feeling?" or "How would you describe the mood of this work?" can therefore lead to more productive explorations (assuming that the particular work indeed suggests a certain mood).

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