

Identifying a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Visitors' Verbalizations of Self-Awareness while Exploring Contemporary Art in a Museum Context

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Abstract: Within the context of a research project in a museum setting where adults are engaged with contemporary art, the purpose of the article is to outline a comprehensive conceptual framework for the identification of moments of self-awareness. In particular, based on the analysis of 70 adult visitors' discourses, we advocate the use of Morin's model of self-information and levels of self-awareness to identify and articulate moments underlying the discovery of self that could contribute to an optimal museum experience. The transposition of Morin's model into a conceptual framework will help researchers pursue their investigation into visitors' art appreciation for the purpose of building authentic dialogues between contemporary art and adult visitors.

Keywords: Museum education; Contemporary art; Adult visitors; Self-awareness; Conceptual framework.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this article is to present Morin's model of self-information and levels of self-awareness (2005) as a feasible conceptual framework for the study of self-awareness verbalizations of adult visitors exploring contemporary artworks in a museum context. From the start, it is important to understand that when a person is self-aware, he or she is in a state where one becomes the object of one's own attention (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Morin (2011) explains that "in this state one actively identifies, processes, and stores information about the self" (p. 808), that is self-information. These elements of self-information relate to different levels of self-awareness, whether they are private (higher) elements, which are more conceptual in nature or those that are public (lower), which are categorized as perceptual. These concepts will be further explored in this article. Studying the verbalizations of visitors' self-awareness represents an opportunity to better picture the complexity of multidimensional art

explorations and in doing so, I seek to identify and articulate key moments underlying optimal museum experiences when viewing contemporary art.

Rationale of the research

As with earlier artistic trends, contemporary art has a number of distinctive characteristics that compel us to adopt a fresh perspective (Arches, 2012; Azam, 2004; Camara, 2011; Cauquelin, 1996; Feehan, 2010; Heinich, 1998a, 1998b; Ruby, 2007a, 2007b). In fact, unlike traditional or classical art, contemporary art is no longer primarily based on canonical principles of beauty, but more on principles of communication (Barrett, 2000; Griswold, Mangione, & McDonnell, 2013; Hanquinet, Roose, & Savage, 2014; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Pierroux, 2003; Reese, 2003; Roberts, 1997). This has the effect of prompting viewers to question, partially, their contemplative attitude and become actors in a creative process (Caillet, 1995, 2007; Ceva, 2004; Heinich, 1998a, 1998b; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Jacobi, Miège, & Tauzin, 2004; Pierroux, 2003; Simon, 2010). From this perspective, since 1996, I have been studying the reactions of adult visitors exploring contemporary artworks in museums to better understand their psychological states in such situations.

The results of my previous research on the sources of pleasure¹ experienced by adult visitors exploring contemporary art, tend to confirm that pleasure in relation to contemporary art is not primarily linked to beauty or the general perception of the artwork, unlike traditional art. Indeed, with the 30 visitors studied, we counted 288 occurrences (38%) related to aesthetics and 470 occurrences (62%) related to visitors' self-awareness linked to their capacity of making sense regarding the contemporary artwork being explored (Émond, 2013; Émond, Marin & Dufresne-Tassé, 2012). These results indicate that it would be useful to intervene so as to discern

¹ *The public at large and contemporary art : from rejection to pleasure*, Standard research grant from the SSHRC 2009-2013.

the various sources of self-awareness experienced by visitors while exploring contemporary art.

Studying the emergence of visitors' self-awareness contributes to the wave of research conducted by Barrett (2000), Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 2000), Garoian (2001), McLean (1999), Reese (2003), Roberts (1997), and Wallach (1998), who have all sought to develop alternative museum educational practices focused on visitors. From this perspective, scholars such as Degain and Benharkate (2009) mentioned visitors' self-awareness as one of the benefits that a museum visitor could enjoy, but they did not supply any empirical support. However, Paris and Mercer (2002) as well as Weltzl-Fairchild and Gumpert (2006), studied the correlation between visitors' self-awareness reactions and socio-cultural factors. In their study, the researchers demonstrated empirically that the fact that visitors learned about themselves while viewing diverse museum objects or traditional art, favoured a positive museum experience. In keeping with these previous research results, I consider the study of visitors' self-awareness an important component in the development of innovative museum educational programs especially concerning contemporary art exhibits. Acknowledging the importance of the self in a museum experience and identifying the type of self-awareness visitors verbalize during their interactions with contemporary artworks, I believe will have promising implications for museum education practices. This will inform museum professionals on how visitors behave and interact with contemporary artworks and how those interactions might contribute to evolving visitors' self-awareness as a source of pleasure. In order to achieve this objective, a conceptual framework is needed to study more closely the manifestations of visitors' self-awareness.

Theoretical foundations of the conceptual framework

When we place the visitor at the centre of his or her museum experience, the concept of self is unavoidable. In early psychological literature, "self" is defined as an individual aware of his or her

centrality and a number of elements that contribute to the coalescence of his or her identity (Munn, 1946). More specifically, “‘Self-awareness’ refers to the capacity to become the object of one’s own attention. It occurs when an organism focuses not on the external environment, but on the internal milieu; it becomes a reflective observer, processing *self-information*” (Morin, 2005, p. 359). Self-information is the result of an individual’s process of self-observation, of learning about different aspects of him/herself. In the context of this research, I was interested in a person’s verbalizations of self-information while he/she is exploring contemporary artworks. Thus, the type of awareness that I was trying to identify is an awareness described by Natsoulas (1997) as being immediate as opposed to retroactive. Morin (2005) associates this with self-awareness. It is important to specify that self-awareness is not necessarily based on having a clear notion of the way in which one operates in different circumstances. It is possible to be aware of one’s feelings, but not know exactly why or how they developed. As Hurley (1998) mentioned, an individual may feel pain without understanding the concept of pain or its causes. Self-awareness involves being conscious of oneself as a unique individual, a self-concept, and the personal appropriation of one’s thoughts, actions, and experiences.

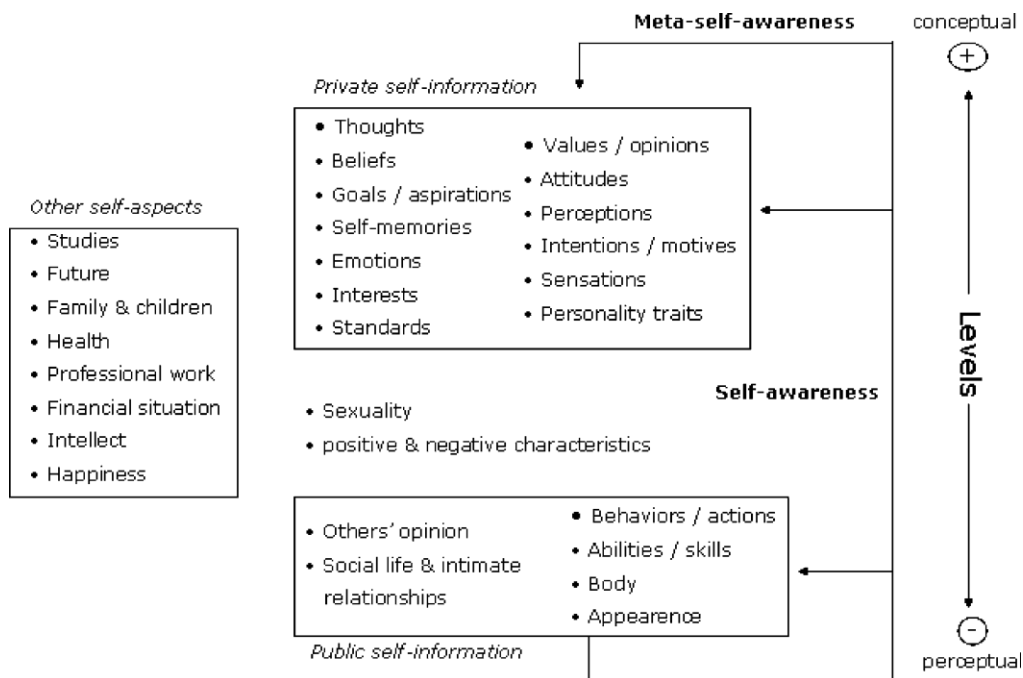
For a thorough understanding of the state of self-awareness corresponding to visitors’ museum experiences, it is relevant to return to the distinction between private and public aspects of this state proposed by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975). The private aspects of self-awareness include data, which cannot be directly accessed by others. In particular, these are sensory events and internal physical modifications of different systems of the organism. The private aspects include events and characteristics unobservable from the outside—such as emotions, physiological sensations, perceptions, values, objectives, motivations, etc.—while the public aspects are observable. They include attitudes such as behaviour and physical appearance (Morin, 2005; Rimé & Le Bon, 1984).

Another aspect to consider is a person's level of self-awareness. Morin (2005) suggested that private self-awareness is a superior form of self-awareness compared to the public version, because this type of self-information is more conceptual, that is, more abstract. Furthermore, Morin and Everett (1990) proposed a final level of self-awareness, that is, meta-self-awareness when individuals are conscious of being aware of themselves. Morin gave the example of a person who says the following: "I am angry." To represent meta-self-awareness this same person would instead say: "I am aware of the fact that I am angry." This distinction strikes us as promising for a more in-depth analysis of visitors' verbal discourse during their art appreciation.

Thus, Morin's (2005) model was selected to study the presence of private and public self-information in our visitors' discourses, because it presents, in a very complex and still evolving area, a comprehensive synthesis of nine recent models of levels of self-awareness dating from 1976 to 2004.

Morin's model

In order to be able to identify verbalizations of self-awareness in the discourse of visitors, Morin's (2005) list of self-information and levels of self-awareness presented in Figure 1, became an essential component of our study.



Note: From Morin, 2005, p. 362.

FIGURE 1
Private (conceptual) and public (perceptual) self-information and levels of self-awareness

Morin's model presents a way of looking at the level of awareness of self-information. The handling of raw information occurs at a lower level of awareness while access to more sophisticated forms of self-information happen at a higher level. There is a difference between representations of oneself, that is, between the perceptual (for example, the body) and the conceptual (for example, the symbolic) fields, the latter being more abstract and, therefore, requiring higher levels of cognitive efforts (Legerstee, 1999). This distinction is very important in the context of the study, since the discipline of museum education is evolving rapidly and, according to many researchers, one must consider not only the cognitive aspects, but also the sensory aspects of the museum experience, even in the interpretation of works of art (Brodsky, 2002; Classen & Howes, 2006; Douesnard, 2013; Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006; Howes, 2005; Levent & Pascual-Leone, 2014). It is important to note that the study of self-awareness allows identification of the presence not only of cognitive aspects, but also of sensory aspects, in

visitors' appreciation of artworks. Consequently, enhanced self-awareness could become a central element in the context of the development of interactive and multisensorial educational museum programs to bring adult visitors closer to contemporary art.

Analysis of visitors' discourses using Morin's model

The design of such a conceptual framework requires the interpretation of the data in liaison with an initial model that may influence the relevance and interpretation of the data collected—in this case, Morin's model. To verify the efficacy of Morin's model as a conceptual framework for the study of visitors' states of self-awareness, 70 adult visitors' discourses were analyzed using the model. The Thinking Aloud (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) protocol was used to collect the data. This method consists of a single observer, who is fully attentive to the visitor's responses, recording what the visitor says during the visit.

Through the analyses of visitors' verbalizations with Morin's model, it became evident that the two fundamental aspects of self-awareness, the private self-information and the public self-information, are relevant to museum experiences that focus on contemporary art (see Table 1). These are the two parts of the conceptual framework that will be further discussed in this article. The analyses of visitors' discourses while engaged with contemporary artworks, provided enough information to identify elements found in Morin's model categorized as private self-information, that is, thoughts, beliefs, goals, self-memories, and emotions, to name just a few. As a visitor verbalizes his or her thoughts, opinions, and feelings about a contemporary work of art, he/she will often have various reactions such as: "It makes me think...", "When I look at art I see myself...", or "I don't believe it should be in an art museum...", all of which are indications that the visitor has expressed self-information triggered by connecting with the artwork.

Defining all possible private and public self-information is beyond the scope of this study, but it is interesting to see, in Table 1, the different forms such information could take in a museum context. With the use of Morin's model (see Figure 1), I was able to extract from visitors' discourses the information that I was seeking about visitors' self-awareness during their art exploration. This confirms the pertinence of Morin's model as a conceptual framework for my study. At this stage of the research it is possible to envision that with the use of the Thinking Aloud protocol, researchers have access to visitors' verbalizations of self-awareness in the form of public self-information and private self-information. This may confirm that if one wants to study the verbalization of self-awareness moments in an individual, it requires, first of all, the presence of a public (Scheier, Fenigstein, & Buss, 1974), or at least a single observer (Carver & Scheier, 1978), which occurs with the presence of the accompanying person in the Thinking Aloud protocol. The observer, adopting the role of a *Friendly Stranger* (Émond, 2011), must be fully attentive to the visitor's responses (Rimé & Le Bon, 1984). The researcher as a Friendly Stranger moves alongside the participant in the museum context without influencing the participants' experience. In this role, the researcher creates a relationship with a participant who is unfamiliar with him/her prior to the visit. The advantage of being a Friendly Stranger is that it allows the researcher to accompany the participants without being viewed as a threat. In this context, within a few minutes of being engaged in the visit, the participants feel at ease and safe revealing what they think to the researcher in a spontaneous fashion. Participants will often share information that they would usually find quite difficult to do with family members and close friends because even though the researcher is friendly, he is still a stranger.

TABLE 1
Examples of museum visitors' self-information while engaged with contemporary art

Meta-self-awareness	Private self-information	Examples of visitors' verbalizations
+	Thoughts ⁱ	"Well, deep down I realize that I am perhaps not very contemporary, not of my time." V103
	Beliefs ⁱⁱ	"We have to always experiment. You have to put yourself inside out." V85
	Goals/Aspirations ⁱⁱⁱ	"I am trying to understand the link between the ball that spins...very intense...which turns to the other side and the person that is represented here." V90
	Self-memories ^{iv}	"That's...that reminds me...it reminds me of my anthropology studies." V88
	Emotions ^v	"Here, for example... what a relief...after having seen...had been part of the artwork... Where it is interactive for the visitor. Because emotions come out when there is something that moves, when something concerns your body, the movement and everything." V99
	Interests ^{vi}	"I am always interested in knowing how he did this" V103
	Standards ^{vii}	"I would not like to have this in my living room. Something violent." V92
	Values/opinions ^{viii}	"I don't believe that the mind is used to think in terms of things like that. I am talking about myself evidently. It is more the monetary aspects that seem to take over. For sure! ... Because, for sure, at a rational level we don't accept this [as art]." V99
	Attitudes ^{ix}	"I think I'm a very superficial person. I have trouble to see the "deep" and everything there is." V86
	Perceptions ^x	"But as soon there is light, it is me that breathes, it's me that relaxes, it is I who breathes. Then suddenly the immaculate white is even whiter. Always heaven... and freedom I feel. It draws you in, we want to fly, you feel like... you really want to disassociate from what is heavy, what is heavy, that is material, so to find the...the...the wind..." V99
	Intentions/motives ^{xi}	"Maybe, after this, I will go to a park and I will do exactly the same things as him. It could be great." V99
	Sensations ^{xii}	"Ououou... the first thing is that my head spins, the first thing...It's just like if I had a glass of wine." V99
	Personality traits ^{xiii}	"I can spend hours in a museum in silence." V102
	Public self-information	
	Others' opinion ^{xiv}	"I am shy. I don't know anything about the exhibit." V78
	Social life and intimate relationships ^{xv}	"I myself am a landed immigrant. But I have lived here most of my life. But still, maybe I should learn more about what is happening here in Quebec concerning the arts. But...being from a family that travelled a lot in Europe and all that, I spent more time trying to understand their art. But now I am totally interested in what is happening here." V99
	Behaviours/actions ^{xvi}	"I am very pragmatic. I really need to see things." V68
	Abilities/skills ^{xvii}	"I don't know much about the history of the Native American people." V99
	Body ^{xviii}	"The museum fatigue is here. Just to have a look...I can't move anymore." V71
-	Appearance ^{xix}	"I don't think I am dressed for the visit." V55

Thus, in order to pursue this research project, the Thinking Aloud protocol will be used to collect further data with, however, one slight adjustment. This will consist of intervening, as a Friendly Stranger, in the form of interviews with visitors, immediately following the exploration of each contemporary artwork, so that visitors can provide us with information on the importance accorded to what they learned about themselves during their assessment of the works. The interview will provide access to the opinions of visitors regarding the importance given to their state of self-awareness during their exploration of contemporary artworks. The interview will begin in an open manner by asking visitors to offer their impressions of their processes of art appreciation. Then, through a series of questions, the perception of gains will be identified by visitors, that is, what they considered as essential components in their art explorations and how becoming aware of oneself contributed to their experiences. Also, visitors will be questioned about the ways in which their participation in this research project might impact their future museum visits

Conclusion

Museums were developed based on a linear model of communication, with prescribed messages transmitted to a public. However, they have been transformed in recent years through the use of interactive models of communication, which emphasize participation on the part of individuals (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). From this perspective, it would be beneficial to develop future research into the impact of adult visitors' self-awareness on the appreciation of contemporary art. In particular, it would be pertinent to verify if being aware of oneself, while engaged with contemporary art facilitates adult visitors' appreciation of this type of art and in doing so entices the visitors to repeat the experience in a renewed fashion.

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ⁱ The product of mental activity; that which one thinks. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thought>

ⁱⁱ Something believed ; an opinion or conviction. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/belief>

ⁱⁱⁱ The result or achievement toward which effort is directed; aim; end. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/goal>

^{iv} The mental capacity or faculty of retaining and reviving facts, events, impressions, etc., or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/memory>

^v An affective state of consciousness in which joy, sorrow, fear, hate, or the like, is experienced, as distinguished from cognitive and volitional states of consciousness. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/emotion>

^{vi} The feeling of a person whose attention, concern, or curiosity is particularly engaged by something. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/interest>

^{vii} Something considered by an authority or by general consent as a basis of comparison ; an approved model. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/standard>

^{viii} Relative worth, merit, or importance. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/value>

^{ix} Manner, disposition, feeling, position, etc., with regard to a person or thing; tendencies or orientation, especially of the mind. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/attitude>

^x The act or faculty of perceiving, or apprehending by means of the senses or of the mind ; cognition ; understanding. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/perception>

^{xi} An act of instances of determining mentally upon some action or result. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/intention>

^{xii} The operation or function of the senses ; perception or awareness of stimuli through the senses. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sensation>

^{xiii} A person as an embodiment of a collection of qualities. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/personality>

^{xiv} A belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/opinion>

^{xv} Pertaining to, devoted to, or characterized by friendly companionship or relations. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social>

^{xvi} Manner of behaving or acting. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/behavior>

^{xvii} Power or capacity to do or act physically, mentally, legally, morally, financially, etc. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ability>

^{xviii} The physical structure and material substance of an animal or plant, living or dead. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/body>

^{xix} The state, condition, manner, or style in which a person or object appears ; outward look or aspect. In Dictionary.com. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/appearance>