

Review

Conner, Lynne (2013), *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era*, Palgrave MacMillan, ISBN: 978-1-137-02391-9. 220 pages, £62 (hardback).

Lynne Conner's monograph will be of great interest to scholars working in the field of cultural management, museum studies and sociology of culture, but also to professionals working in museums, as educators and curators. The primary aim of the book is to explore 'the theory that an audience member's pleasure is deeply tied with the opportunity to interpret the meaning and value of an arts event or arts object' (p. 1). This process of meaning making has to overcome two challenges: 1) art historians' and other art professionals' control over meaning and 2) the audience's lack of agency to enter the interpretative process. *Arts Talk* is presented as a new modality for conversations that reframes the roles of dialogue (consensus building) and discussion (debating analysis), in which producers and consumers gather and share meaning and learn from each other.

The book is divided into two parts: 1) Defining Arts Talk and 2) Facilitating Arts Talk, each consisting of several subchapters. The first part deals with the fundamentals of social interpretation with a particular focus on meaning making with regard to experience, taste, talk, pleasure and engagement. The second part analyses the role and function of dialogue and learning on which the design and implementation of a culture of Arts Talk could be built.

Arts Talk is influenced by the idea of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle and its proposal that meaning arises from a fusion of different interpretations through meaningful conversation. In this context, Connor uses the term 'talk' to reflect upon the inclusiveness of types of conversation (let's talk), but also refers to the shop talk quality of a deeply meaningful discussion. Talk frames how an art experience is explored by expressing a particular taste and how this expression is exchanged, leading to pleasure, as a 'deep satisfaction that comes from working something through' (p. 15). This formulation and expression of opinions engages the audience. Experience, taste, talk, pleasure and engagement are the key elements of *Arts Talk*. The concept of talk is explored through historical and non-art examples. Conner demonstrates that historical audiences felt authorised to comment on aesthetic matters by giving a wider range of examples, such as, Greek theatre, Renaissance music or Victorian poetry. Furthermore, she shows how audience-generated social interpretations directly influenced arts workers and artists. Other

examples include pamphlet wars with a public audience or the formation of music, drama and arts societies, in which amateur artists could participate in various forms of creative expression. Connor suggests the arts and culture have become 'sacralised' and 'divine' since the late 19th century providing a source of distinction for the emerging middle classes, while silencing broader arts audiences in line with that period's ideas of appropriate etiquette. In the final pages of the first section of her book, Connor analyses other contemporary practices of social interpretation (geographies) that might shed some light on meaning making in the arts. Her examples include sports talk, reality television and gaming. Connor discusses the role of opinion formation, participatory culture and paratexts, which convincingly demonstrate the constitutive role of talk for the formation and meaning of sport or gaming.

The second section applies these conceptual considerations to the idea of learning communities and their increasing importance. Art audiences become successful learners when they control their own interpretations and have pleasurable experiences when this meaning making is social. This idea is supported by various learning theories that suggest that we concentrate better and learn more efficiently when we are verbally active. Learning communities are thus important not only because of an exchange of meaning, but due to a collective process of meaning making and subsequent learning, which leads to the question of how such collectively shared and productive talk can be initiated. The ground rule for productive talk is that the facilitator does not control the meaning given to the audience, but establishes an environment to make meaning together. Such an environment can be created based on three operations: 1) open talk, which signals that talking is a legitimate procedure for sharing ideas, 2) powerful questioning, which refers to the ability to deepen and expand discussions, and 3) effective listening, which is listening for meaning rather than simply a recording of meaning. These operations should facilitate talk with the audience challenging their existing knowledge and creating new meaning, instead of the arts workers telling people what they should think. Based on these operative criteria, Connor distils 10 key values for facilitating productive talk, which can be understood as practical guidelines and can be applied to various art institutions and contexts. These key values include, for example, to create talk among equals, to be transparent, to listen carefully, to welcome dialogue and contradictions or to be comfortable with silence. Additionally, the publication provides a rich list of existing guidelines on participation in the United States thereby giving a critical overview of current projects and their best practice.

Lynne Connor's monograph provides an important contribution to processes of meaning making in the arts. Her conceptual vocabulary concerning concepts of interpretation, talk and pleasure provide an interesting direction to explore audience development and learning. Future research would have to pay more attention to the cognitive and affective dimension of talk, perhaps, by going beyond the usual arts audience and also including people with learning disabilities. Connor's practical questions and guidelines are useful for arts workers and art lovers alike to stimulate inclusion and active participation. However, there is potential for more detailed case studies and real world

examples. Nevertheless, Connor's *Arts Talk* model presents a healthy antidote to the 20th century legacy of the quietised arts audience.

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Biographical Note:

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