CultureCase

How talking events help people make sense of art

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Summary

This paper examined how 'talking events' (formal programmes such as exhibition openings and artist talks) affect people's engagement with art. It found that talking events 'draw people into art spaces and prolong their interactions with the space. Further, for individuals who find galleries and museums intimidating, talking events represent a more approachable setting for engagement with art.'

The study was based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Accra, Ghana, and Johannesburg, South Africa

The author attended 25 talking events (and while there listened to what people said and watched how they behaved). These observations were complemented by 61 interviews with people connected to galleries about their experience of talking events.

A solitary and uninformed experience can become a collective endeavour through talking events

Looking at a painting or sculpture in order to make sense of it ends up 'involving visitors, artists, curators, museum/gallery staff, and other art world members'. The comments of other people in the gallery help reveal 'aesthetic details that may have gone unnoticed'. By encountering different perspectives (whether directly addressed or merely overheard), gallery goers sometimes

reassess their original perspectives of a work or an artist. When artists and curators 'discuss the artist's biography, motivations, and conceptualisation of the work' it helps people to re-evaluate and better interpret the work they would otherwise encounter alone and unaided.

Keywords

interview   museum   gallery   observation   Ghana   South Africa   visual art   interpretation

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