

**Art Means Something to Us:
Building Bridges between Artwork and Families
through Hans Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutics**

by

Ursula Tania Estrada

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes the use of philosophical hermeneutics as a theoretical basis to develop interpretive strategies for people who have little or no knowledge about art. The study inquired into the interpretive processes of a group of children and parents who attended a Museum Education program based on Gadamer's hermeneutic circle and on his conception of art, which was carried out at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City.

The study found that the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics helped participants develop a careful and reflective observation of artwork; participants were able to retain in their memories the general composition and details of paintings for prolonged periods of time. Some participants developed an understanding of artwork based on their own horizons of understanding, which led them to reflect on certain issues such as ethical behaviour, social justice, social equality, coexistence, tradition and modernity, among others; participants' interpretive processes also led to self-understanding.

Through the application of Gadamer's hermeneutics, participants developed notions of art as something that has a message that needs to be understood, and as something related to everyday life. It also led some participants to change their perceptions of art and museum visits, making them less unusual and more meaningful for them.

The inclusion of parents in the interpretive process allowed for interpretation to be enriched through the multiplicity of horizons of understanding that came into play during group conversations, and allowed for the development of a small community of interpreters. Including parents in the process also proved to develop in some of them an interest to foster their own and their children's interest in art.

The study also found that these outcomes of the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the program are limited by a participant's verbal, writing and manual abilities: participants with less developed abilities achieved a careful and reflective observation of artwork, but were unable to develop an interpretive project.

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To my mom

To Juan Carlos

To the families who participated in the study

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In this study I would like to propose the use of philosophical hermeneutics as a theoretical basis that could be used to develop interpretive strategies for non-specialized art publics – that is, for people who have little or no knowledge about art. Philosophical hermeneutic reflection on the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity, as well as on the interpretive or hermeneutic being of humans, might provide a framework that allows viewers to approach art through interpretive activities that make use of their own intelligence, imagination, knowledge, life experience, and patience. Hermeneutic-based programs could help visitors develop an individual and independent opinion about a work of art that is thoughtful and reflective; at the same time, this could also open up the possibility for visitors to approach art without being intimidated by art historical or curatorial knowledge they don't necessarily possess. In this sense, hermeneutic-based programs could help to bridge both intellectual and emotional distance between non-specialized visitors and art in museums.

In order to inquire about how hermeneutics can be a helpful framework for a public with little or no knowledge about art, I have designed a Museum Education program based on the concepts of art and on the hermeneutic circle of the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer. This program was carried out at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City and attended by a group of seven and nine-year-old children and their parents. This study analyzes the interpretive processes of these participants, and how these helped (or failed to help) gain an understanding of one work of art. This study also analyzes whether these processes were successful in making art less usual and more meaningful for them. The activities of the program I used for this study were designed as part of my B.A. thesis project, and have been adapted here in order to engage parents.

This study is set in the context of the understanding of the museum as a space of learning and communication, as promoted by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000). In “Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning,” she

argues for Museum Education strategies that engage visitors in the understanding of exhibitions, taking into consideration their previous knowledge, life experience and background. She also identifies the need to make museums and collections more accessible to several kinds of visitors.

What does accessibility mean in the context of Museum Education? Many museum educators today speak of intellectual access to art (Lynch, 2007; Meszaros, 2008; Yenawine, 2002). Museum educators also speak of the museum's "intimidating gestures," which can affect whether visitors feel welcomed in a museum or not and thus, whether they will choose to come to the museum or to stay away. In this sense, we could also talk about emotional access and emotional distance. These considerations would then point to three aspects that need to be taken into consideration when approaching the problem of trying to bring art and non art-publics closer (or close): physical distance, intellectual distance and emotional distance.

These aspects raise questions. Among them, there is one that comes insistently to mind regarding intellectual access: What intellectual tools does an art museum require from a viewer? Intelligence, capacity to observe, capacity to make sense of what is seen in words? Would these necessarily include art historical knowledge, knowledge of art techniques, knowledge of an exhibit's curatorial discourse? Would imagination or intuition be considered as intellectual tools as well?

Though these issues are being dealt with by museum educators today, they also seem to have shaped Museum Education in its early stages. In the 19th century Henrietta Barnett, one of the founders of the Whitechapel Gallery in the East End of London, was concerned with bringing art to less fortunate groups of the population, who otherwise would not have access to it.¹ During one of the exhibitions, Barnett (1894) overheard a conversation between two visitors who commented on a painting:

¹ The purpose of the Whitechapel Gallery, founded by both Henrietta Barnett and her husband, Rev. Samuel Barnett, was to organize an annual exhibition of art that "aimed to stimulate moral sentiments, patriotism and a felling for beauty among the residents of the East End slums and settlements houses" (McClellan, 2007, 9).

Lesbia, by Mr. J. Bertrand, explained as “A Roman Girl musing over the loss of her pet bird,” was commented on by, “Sorrow for her bird, is it? I was thinking it was drink that was in her” – a grim indication of the opinion of the working classes of their “betters”; though another remark on the same picture, “Well, I hope she will never have a worse trouble,” shadowed a kindlier spirit and perhaps a sadder experience. (as cited in McClellan, 2007, p. 14)

Even though this conversation took place over a hundred years ago, it points out to one of the challenges of Museum Education today: how to provide intellectual access to non-specialized publics, without either imposing on them perspectives on the contents of exhibitions, talking down to them, promoting arbitrary and uninformed opinions, or invalidating their own opinions or thoughts. This problem can be identified as early as the beginning of the paradigmatic first modern museum: the Louvre. Andrew McClellan refers to it in the following manner:

Founded in 1793 at the height of the Revolution, the Louvre was the embodiment of liberty, equality and fraternity. The museum was housed in a royal palace turned palace of the people; its collection of paintings, sculptures, and drawings was the confiscated and nationalized property of Church, Crown and exiled aristocrats. Admission was free to all and shared enjoyment of the nation’s new found artistic heritage aimed to cement the bonds of equality and citizenship. But Revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, the stratified publics of the *ancien régime* could not so easily be made one. ‘The lowest classes of the community’ did come to the Louvre in significant numbers, as foreign visitors were quickly to note, but their physical appearance and inability to respond appropriately to the high art on view made them conspicuous. (McClellan, 2007, p. 5)

McClellan points out the present-day relevance of problems faced by the Louvre, shared by museums today: “Balancing the needs of the poor and the elite, the art lover and tourist,

democracy and diplomacy, remains a central challenge for art museums and the source of ongoing tension among its publics” (p. 6). It could also be argued that the problem of intellectual access, which might at times be overlooked by the openness of physical access to museums, is just as old. Emotional access can also be considered a drawback for people who do not visit museums regularly, in spite of these being public institutions open to all.

Even though museums have undergone several transformations since the creation of the Louvre, these contradictions still seem to be present in these institutions, and might still influence the debate of Museum Education. Education in museums today often finds itself on the crossroads of two demands: on one hand, to find ways to make the works of art available to the public not only in terms of its physicality but also intellectually, and on the other, to attend to scholarly knowledge and curatorial discourse (Carter-Birken, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Lynch, 2007; Meszaros, 2008). In recent years, a need to attend to knowledge other than that provided by art history or art criticism in the museum has been the focus of many museum educators (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 2004; Project MUSE, 1996; Yenawine, 2002). For many, interpretation has become a viable strategy to enable visitors to understand works of art (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007; Carter-Birken, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Lynch, 2007; Lucket, 2007; Project MUSE, 1996; Raney, 2007).

The validity of audience interpretation is often mistrusted, as it draws away from curatorial discourse and academic connoisseurship (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Meszaros, 2008, 2007a, 2007b). This debate in Museum Education could be related to philosophical debates on knowledge, truth, objectivity and subjectivity. In this sense, philosophy could provide a theoretical framework to find ways to shape and validate interpretation strategies for non-specialized publics within the site of the museum (Burnham, Kai-Kee 2007b; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Meszaros, 2008).

The use of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in Museum Education has been promoted by Hooper-Greenhill (2000) in order to develop Museum Education strategies that take into

consideration the previous knowledge and experience of the visitor. I have decided to use Gadamer's work as the philosophical basis for this study because his idea of the interpreter as someone who constructs the artwork through interpretation (1986b) can be used to promote an active participation of the museum visitor in the understanding of a work of art. Gadamer's (1986a) understanding of art as an autonomous entity that keeps within itself the entirety of what it communicates, and thus is independent of its creator and of the context in which it was originally created, also helps create strategies that do not necessarily require from the visitor previous art historical knowledge. This gains particular importance when the interest of this study is to find ways to engage visitors with little or no knowledge about art.

In this study, I propose to use Gadamer's hermeneutics to develop interpretation strategies that help bridge intellectual and emotional barriers between art in museums and children and parents who have little or no knowledge about art. This study intends to find ways in which this philosopher's ideas about art and art interpretation can be used to make art familiar and meaningful for this kind of public, as opposed to it being distant or unusual, as well as to provide an understanding of visits to museums as meaningful and desirable experiences, as opposed to them being something unfamiliar, irrelevant or boring. It does not intend, however, to be an exact replica of Gadamer's model. Furthermore, the program does not intend to diminish or supplant the kind of understanding of art that is provided through curatorial or academic knowledge. In fact, it opens up the possibility for publics with little knowledge about art to develop an interest in finding out more about artwork and, therefore, of being eager to seek and receive this kind of information.

This study is based on my BA thesis *Our Images, our Words. An Art Workshop for Children Based on H.G. Gadamer's Hermeneutics*.² The actual title in Spanish is slightly different, and would sound awkward if translated literally to English: in it, the workshop is described with the word "acercamiento," which means "to bring near(er)" or "to come near(er)". The word "acercamiento" is often used in Spanish to identify a course, workshop

² The original title is *Nuestras imágenes, nuestras palabras. Taller infantil de acercamiento al arte basado en la hermenéutica de Hans G. Gadamer*.

or program that allows someone to begin to learn about a particular issue or object, in the hope that he or she will gain an initial knowledge and understanding of it. I chose this adjective and used it in the phrase “taller de acercamiento al arte” (which could be translated as “workshop designed to bring children near art” or “to allow children to come close to art”), because it described one of the main objectives of the project: to build a bridge between children and one work of art. By building a bridge I refer to visitors gaining an understanding of art as something meaningful for them using their previous knowledge, imagination and life experience, through different games of interpretation, imagination and creation.

The emphasis of this previous study was on designing a workshop that would fulfill this objective based on Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle and his understanding of art. The BA thesis was developed as a project, including a description of the necessary tools to implement it as a program in an art museum. There was a brief case analysis and some conclusions drawn from the processes of interpretation, as well as from other aspects of Museum Education brought forth when the program was carried out. These were drawn from the observation of children during the workshop, from a journal kept during the pilot test, as well as from a comparison between an interpretation of the children’s processes of interpretation and my own interpretation of each of the paintings they worked with, following Gadamer’s hermeneutics. The observations and interpretations of my assistant, also knowledgeable in the theoretical framework, also informed my conclusions. Nevertheless, there was little record of how participants experienced the different processes of interpretation throughout the workshop, and virtually none of their own perspectives on their interpretive processes were included. The analysis was rather broad and centered mainly on children’s drawings and paintings. It was approached only as part of the conclusions and as appendices to the thesis project.

As a follow-up to this previous study, my MA thesis inquires in-depth into the processes of interpretation fostered by the program, as experienced by participants. I have also adapted the BA design of the workshop into an education program that includes

parents in the process, as I have mentioned above. This provided the opportunity of inquiring into the processes of interpretation of adults, as well as of adults and children together.

Let me provide some background information to offer a fuller picture of this previous study. The workshop was tested at the National Museum of Art (Museo Nacional de Arte, MUNAL) in Mexico City, in the gallery dedicated to Mexican contemporary art of the first half of the twentieth century. Four children participated in it, between the ages of 7 and 11; they belonged to urban middle class and lower middle class families, and had had different or no kinds of engagement with art. Throughout this process, the children were able to develop certain themes around the works of art, such as fraternity, femininity, freedom and identity, among others. A closer confrontation between a hermeneutic interpretation of the works of art and the children's interpretive process and outcomes showed that these themes did not spring merely from their subjectivity, but were congruent with what each painting conveyed, even though the children didn't have any prior knowledge about it, its author or about studies made of the paintings.

There were other observations about the behaviour of the children in the museum. At the beginning, they walked with a certain insecurity, very close to me and my assistant, and were reluctant to walk around on their own. During the last session, they walked confidently in the galleries, and sat or even lay down comfortably on the floor while observing the paintings. The particular case of one of these children, Zoé, seven years old at the time of the study, serves to show other results of the program: her father approached me a few months later and told me that Zoé had asked him to take her back to the museum repeatedly, calling it "her museum", and asked for a copy of the painting she worked with. I think this shows that neither the museum nor the work of art were seen by her as something foreign, instead, they became something personal and significant. The workshop had allowed Zoé to establish an intimate engagement with the museum, opening up the possibility to establish similar relationships with other museums, as well as with other works of art.

In my BA thesis, I pointed out some limitations to the program. On one hand, that it could only work well with figurative painting, leaving out other forms of art. My BA advisor, Dr. Eugenia Macías, also pointed out that it would also be difficult to arrive at an understanding of art from religious contexts, or from cultures, societies or epochs foreign to viewers. In this sense, even though Gadamer speaks of the autonomous nature of the work of art, in the context of art education this perspective should be taken carefully into consideration when approaching artwork from radically different cultural or religious contexts. For this reason, I propose the use of the program I present and study here to help non-specialized visitors approach figurative painting that does not belong to a radically foreign context.

Throughout this MA study, I was able to identify other limitations of the program: participants who already have the ability to express themselves verbally or through writing in a clear manner, have a better chance to engage successfully in the activities of the program. Also, participants who feel they lack the ability to draw or paint, or who find it difficult to do so, may experience certain frustration while engaging in drawing or painting activities. This study also showed that the activities of the program do not always lead to an actual interpretation of the painting, nor to an understanding of it in the terms Gadamer proposed.

Adapting this program in order to engage parents proved to provide both benefits and challenges. One of the challenges was that parents sometimes inhibited the development of children's imaginative or creative activities when trying to explain the correct way to do them. The benefits of grouping children and parents were that, in the case of at least one of the families who participated in the study, parents were also able to develop an interest in art, as well as to recognize their children's interest in it. One of the parents explained that learning about their children's experience in the program, and sharing it, motivated him to find ways to foster this interest further in his children. Thus, the possibility for the family to go back to the museum or engage in other activities with art increased, while the possibility for the program to become an isolated experience for the child decreased. Another parent explained that going through similar experiences as her

children enabled her to understand them better, and to try to be more understanding of their responses to certain situations, not only during the program but also in other circumstances outside of it. Thus, the program enabled a different kind of understanding, one that was not directed to the work of art, but to the experience of others in the group. The program also proved to promote an understanding of art as something that needs to be interpreted, that allows a person to broaden her or his view of the world, or that allows one to understand historical transformations; these notions are related to Gadamer's (1986a) understanding of art as symbol, as well as to his ideas on the outcomes of art interpretation. By the end of the program, some participants had developed an understanding of the museum as a place of learning, which relates to Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) conceptualization of the present-day museum.

My interest in the interpretation of works of art by children and parents with little or no knowledge about art was influenced and eventually shaped by several experiences during my high-school and university education, when I encountered professors who promoted an understanding of art beyond the historical and aesthetic categories, taking its study towards the understanding of aspects of a particular culture or time, or to the reflection on human experience. While studying my BA in Cultural Studies, I recognized that the knowledge I gained through my academic studies also helped me reflect on and better understand the culture of my country and my society, as well as of how the past and present political, ideological, social, cultural and economic context of the country and of other countries have shaped it. Thus, I became interested in the potential of the visual arts, literature and music to promote different ways of understanding one's own context and place in it. I have found a theoretical ground for these experiences and concerns in the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, and particularly in their understanding of art. This has led me to use the philosophy of these authors as a framework for my professional practice.

In the Literature Review of this thesis (Chapter 2) I review interpretive practices in Museum Education in recent years, in both English- and Spanish-speaking countries. In it I discuss the meaning of "interpretation" in Museum Education, and the tensions between

authoritative knowledge and uninformed visitors in the museum. I also address issues related to interpretation that have been identified by museum educators, and review the work of museum educators who have used philosophical hermeneutics as a theoretical framework.

In Theoretical Framework (Chapter 3) I explain Gadamer's conception of art, as well as his understanding of art interpretation. In it I discuss Gadamer's anthropological explanation of the experience of art as play, symbol and festival. I also explain Gadamer's interpretive model, the hermeneutic circle, and how it is understood regarding the interpretation of art.

In Methodology (Chapter 4), I explain how I recruited participants, as well as the methods of data collection and data analysis I used. In Chapter 5, I present the Museum Education program I designed based on Gadamer's hermeneutics, explaining how Gadamer's ideas were translated into creative, ludic and imaginative activities.

In Chapter 6 I present the report of the findings of the research. In it I describe the experiences of the participants in order to illustrate their interpretive processes in relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics. In this chapter I use specific cases of participants in order to illustrate their interpretive processes, as well as to speak of the limitations of the program and of the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In the last section of this chapter I discuss what I learned from this study.

In Chapter 7 I briefly describe other findings that are related to participants' experience, as well as other findings that are not directly related to participants' interpretive processes, which form the basis for other studies which would need a space and a time of their own. Finally, I present my conclusions in Chapter 8, where I also discuss how this study adds to the current knowledge in the field of Museum Education, as well as the uses and limitations of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the development of interpretive strategies for children and parents with little or no knowledge about art.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that this study deals with the development of interpretive strategies for non-specialized publics in art museums (that is, people who have little or no knowledge of art), I will begin this literature review by trying to locate common issues related to interpretation in the current literature on Museum Education. I will address these issues, ranging from what is thought of as “interpretation” in the context of Museum Education, to the impact museum ambience has on interpreters, in more detail in subsequent sections. Finally, I will focus on how hermeneutics has been approached and used in Museum Education.

2.1 Issues about interpretation in the current literature on Museum Education

Interpretation in the context of Museum Education has become an increasingly relevant issue: during the last years, two journals have dedicated an entire issue to the debate of interpretation in Museum Education: the April 2008 issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal*, published in the U.S., and issue # 20 of *Engage: Journal of Contemporary Art and Museum Education*, published in England during the summer of 2007. The editors of both magazines speak of the diversity of approaches to interpretation that exist today, as well as to the sometimes sharp differences among them. Two articles are especially useful to trace the most recent concerns of museum educators: Heather Lynch’s (2007) “Interpretation Practices: Making Sense of Intellectual Access” and Pamela Carter-Birken’s (2008) “Interpretation and the Role of the Viewer in Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art”. Lynch and Carter-Birken present the results of surveys conducted among museum professionals in Scotland and in the United States, respectively. Helen Lockett’s (2007) “Seven Wonders of Interpretation” also addresses a wide scope of aspects of interpretation in museums that are relevant to its debate and practice.

Karen Raney (2007), editor of *Engage*, points out the troubled nature of interpreting art in the context of the museum:

The paradox at the heart of interpretation may come from the peculiar forms of double identity that visual art enjoys. One is to do with penetrability. Works of art both invite and resist explanation; they are understandable and unfathomable. Another is the vexed relationship of art to what lies outside of it. Art illuminates its subjects, at the same time as it muddies the waters; art participates in the systems it indicts. A third paradox is to do with the register in which art is made and experienced. Art is both intensely private, and inescapably social. Filtered through changes in theory and policy, this cluster of paradoxes might go some way toward accounting for periodic swings from one kind of interpretive strategy to another. It may also account for the ambivalence of interpreters toward their own project. (p. 2)

Indeed, positions adopted by museum educators regarding the paradigms that should guide interpretation for Museum Education present different, sometimes opposing tendencies. One major issue in the debate is how curatorial and academic knowledge about art should be included in interpretive strategies for publics with little or no knowledge about art (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; Carter-Birken, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Lynch, 2007; Meszaros, 2007a; Yenawine, 2002). The validity of interpretations constructed by visitors is also probed (Meszaros, 2007b). Views on the subject range from full reliance on the voice of the interpreting visitor, on one end, to full reliance on the voice of the art expert, on the other.

The objectives of interpretation in Museum Education are another important aspect that is addressed by museum educators; these, even if not always debated, are certainly diverse. The impact of how visitors feel within the museum – whether welcomed or intimidated – is also addressed as an important factor that determines interpretive experiences (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; Carter-Birken, 2008; Lockett, 2007; Lynch, 2007; Meszaros, 2008). Each of the authors who address this concern speaks of different

conditions that need to change in museums in order for interpretation to be successful. In the following pages I will address each of these issues independently and in detail.

2.1.1 What does “interpretation” mean in Museum Education?

The use of the word “interpretation” is so wide and ambiguous that it raises the problem of its definition. Some authors point out the conditions that might account for its changing nature: 1) shifts in paradigms and theoretical tendencies, related both to the study of art as well as to the design of educational strategies in art museums’ public programs; and 2) the background of viewers or changes they undergo throughout their lives, which might influence their understanding of the work, allowing them to see or find different meanings every time a work is approached (Luckett, 2007; Raney, 2007).

Luckett (2007) suggests that the term “interpretation” might be rather inappropriate, since it has been borrowed from a context other than that of Museum Education itself:

Like the words used to describe the people who come to galleries and look at art – audience, visitor, public, viewer – it [interpretation] has been borrowed from another context and does not precisely fit; and like that other contentious designation, education, it is often misunderstood. In the context of the gallery, every part of its definition – to explain the meaning of, to elucidate, unfold, show the purport of, to translate into familiar or intelligible terms – is fraught. (p. 6)

Luckett does not explain from what context the term “interpretation” was borrowed by Museum Education. She mentions that it began to be used during the end of the XXth century (p. 7).

As Luckett points out, there are a great number of meanings attached to what the word means in Museum Education. What makes this even more problematic is the fact that what is understood as interpretation is not always clarified by those who use it. In order to

bring clarity to the understanding of interpretation and of the objectives of interpretive strategies in museums, this lack needs to be attended to.

In spite of this confusion, there are museum educators who have attempted to clarify the meaning of interpretation within Museum Education. Raney (2007) states that “directly or indirectly, gallery education is about interpretation” (p. 2), since the term is used to refer to several strategies that help viewers understand art: text panels and labels written by curators, audio guides, lectures, guided tours, workshops, media-interactive and internet resources. Raney’s understanding of the relationship between interpretation and Museum Education resonates with arguments that set interpretive strategies in the core of the construction of new relationships between museums and audiences (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) points out that the word “interpretation” within museums can have two different meanings: 1) as a term used to “discuss matters of design and display, with the emphasis being on the work of museum personnel, who decide on the interpretive approach”; and 2) to refer to individual activity as “an active process of making meaning, where preferred individual interpretive strategies are used, and where prior knowledge and historical and cultural background play a part in assigning significance” (pp. 23-24).

Lynch (2007) states that the term interpretation has acquired meanings beyond those of gallery education strategies: “Interpretation now takes into account agendas of widening access and education with their imperative to tackle social exclusion” (p. 12). An understanding of art interpretation that goes beyond the walls of the museum guides the objectives of some independent programs that work in collaboration with schools and museums. The *dia* program – Desarrollo de Inteligencias a través del Arte (Development of Intelligences through Art) – developed in Mexico, argues for the use of art interpretation in order to develop cognitive and emotional abilities in students that will allow for harmonious social interactions, as well as for a self-understanding that enhances the capacity to express and deal with emotions (García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007, p. 113). The program *Piensa en Arte* (Think about Art), developed in Venezuela by the Cisneros

Foundation, is guided by the foundation's "conviction that education and freedom of expression are the pillars of a democratic society" (González & Spillmann Meier, 2006).

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000) identifies two major theoretical and philosophical currents that guide interpretative strategies in museums: constructivism and hermeneutics. She points out that there are similarities between these two approaches: "both hermeneutics and constructivism argue that knowledge is constructed through active interpretations of experience. Knowledge is not a single, self-contained body of facts that can be transmitted, unchanged, from one individual to another" (p. 25). Later, she adds: "Both hermeneutics and constructivism suggest that knowing is culturally inflected, and that in this sense knowledge is relative" (p. 25). From this perspective, both constructivism and hermeneutics emphasize the interpretive, relative and plural nature of knowledge, and place the individual in the center of its construction. Both constructivism and hermeneutics-based education programs see a strong link between knowledge and interpretation, and understand the latter as a way to construct knowledge of the work of art through the visitors' life experiences, world and intelligence, in order to arrive to an understanding of it (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Brodie, 2001; García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007; González, 2006; Hoffmann, 2007).

Meszaros (2006) also identifies hermeneutics and constructivism as major sources for interpretive strategies in Museum Education. In the article "Now That is Evidence: Tracking Down the Evil 'Whatever' Interpretation," she mentions how hermeneutics and constructivism have influenced Museum Education, and she also points out the differences between what theoretical and philosophical sources state and how they are understood within the context of Museum Education. Meszaros (2006) emphasizes how hermeneutics calls attention to the role of the individual subject in interpretation, as well as to the "finite and situated character of knowledge" (p.11). Meszaros points out that, in the museum world, this premise has been misunderstood: "the idea that meaning is made in relation to an individual subject does not imply that interpretive authority resides solely in the individual—as it is often understood in the museum world" (p. 11). She explains that hermeneutics understand interpretation as a relation between the text and the reader, and

mentions that a third “force” also participates in this interpretive relationship between the viewer and the artwork:

In hermeneutics there is a “third” mediating force, one that silently but relentlessly structures interpretations, determining what is possible, what is valid, what is meaningful, what is useful, what counts as questions, and what counts as answers. This “third” force has gone by many names over time: God, history, reason, the nineteenth-century fallacies, ideology, the subconscious, class and gender relations, and the market—to name just a few. (p. 11)

Meszaros also mentions method as part of this group, alluding to Gadamer’s criticism of the use of the scientific method as a way to arrive at universal truths, and his understanding of it as something that is not objective but that, rather, “is always implicated, affecting and affected by the things it constitutes as evidence” (p. 11). Thus, Meszaros sees hermeneutics as a way to make these “third forces” visible in the act of interpretation, as opposed to letting them act inadvertently or unconsciously. From my understanding, Meszaros would be arguing in favor of paying more attention to one element of the process of Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle, that which deals with the identification and confrontation of one’s own preconceived ideas of reality, so as to avoid misinterpretation. When referring to how constructivism has been used in Museum Education, Meszaros argues that some of the implications of this theoretical current have been “flattened” by Museum Education interpretive strategies. The first of these “flattened ideas” Meszaros identifies is that meaning is actively constructed by the individual from his or her experience (p.14). Meszaros explains that, in the context of the museum, this idea has led to the understanding of “received knowledge” as “bad,” and thus, has banned “received knowledge” from interpretive strategies. In this sense, Meszaros argues that this was not part of the constructivist project:

The constructivists saw knowledge as situated, yes, but they did not advocate dispensing with cultural knowledge in the name of personal meaning. In fact, they insisted that it is always *with* and *in the midst of* cultural knowledge that we produce any kind of interpretation. (p. 14)

Another “flattened notion” of constructivism Meszaros talks about is “personal meaning making” as the “end product” of visits to museums. Meszaros (2006) argues that personal interpretation in Museum Education is the “beginning” of interpretation: “Personal meaning-making is the beginning of interpretation that moves into the world, that acts in the world. It is the very substance of democratic society—it changes the world” (p. 14).

Constructivist and hermeneutic approaches to interpretation have different implications. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) defines hermeneutic interpretation as “a process of making confused meanings clearer; it is concerned with coming to a fuller understanding of how things mean” (p. 23). Meszaros (2007a) uses a definition put forward by the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, “the processes whereby the unfamiliar becomes intelligible” (p. 19). Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kee (2005; 2007b), whose pedagogy is based on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, implicitly define hermeneutic interpretation as a verbal process of meaning-making that leads to the understanding of a work of art. As can be seen from these definitions, in hermeneutic-based approaches to interpretation the emphasis is not necessarily on *constructing* a meaning, but rather on *understanding* what is conveyed in an artwork.

Although texts that explain constructivist-based interpretive strategies sometimes use the term “interpretation” (Boix Mansillas, 2007; García Crispín & Madrazo Crispín, ca. 2007; González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006), many of these authors do not provide a definition of their understanding of interpretation. From this literature review, constructivist approaches appear to be student-centered (or interpreter-centered), and emphasize the process of interpretation as a process of learning, through which other cognitive and emotional capacities are developed (Boix Mansillas, 2007; García Crispín & Madrazo Crispín, ca. 2007; González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006; Hoffmann, 2007). On the other hand, hermeneutic-based approaches focus on the relationship between the interpreter and the work of art, and emphasize the latter as an entity that keeps a meaning within itself, associated to “lived experience” of others or of the past (Brodie, 2003). Other hermeneutic-based approaches also emphasize the capacity of art or other cultural productions to help

interpreters understand certain aspects of reality or the world (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Brodie, 2003; Meszaros, 2007a).

Meszaros (2007a; 2007b) differentiates between two kinds of interpretations in Museum Education: the “whatever interpretation” and the “critically engaged interpretation”. She states that:

‘Whatever’ refers to the idea that individual interpretation should dominate all others. Understanding how ‘whatever’ came to dominate museum interpretation is relatively straightforward, partly because ‘whatever’ is enmeshed in larger, more generalized cultural phenomena that have to do with interpretive authority: who has it, and how it is established, justified, turned into truth or regarded as worthy. (2007b, p. 16)

Meszaros (2007b) explains that one of the arguments that support “whatever” interpretation in museums is the importance given to individual authority, and states that this threatens the very development of individual ideas, which can also result in a negative individuality:

... proponents of ‘whatever’ supported its ascent to power to free the individual from the tyranny of received ideas, only to find that without received ideas there was no way to become an individual, no backdrop against which to appear.

Meszaros adds to this argument a quote from Jean Luc Nancy, “the philosopher of community,” who states that “the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community” (as cited in Meszaros, 2007b, p. 19).

Meszaros’ call for a more critical view on interpretation in museums is certainly necessary and pertinent. Yet, the way in which she approaches this issue raises some questions. Meszaros (2007b, 2006) argues for academic and curatorial knowledge as sources for “received ideas” that challenge common prejudices. While this argument helps gain a better understanding of why and how academic and curatorial knowledge about art can be

incorporated in interpretive strategies, it could also be problematized *vis à vis* Gadamer's stance on scholarly knowledge of art and cultural institutions as expressed in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Gadamer, 1986a), where Gadamer argues that this kind of knowledge doesn't necessarily deal with what he understands as the knowledge communicated by the work of art, which is, in turn, associated with his understanding of art as symbol.³ Moreover, by generalizing how interpretive strategies work in museums, Meszaros seems to misrepresent the objectives of interpretation in Museum Education as expressed by other authors (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; 2007a; Busquets, 2003; García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007; González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006; Hoffman, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Some of them emphasize or demonstrate the potential of some interpretive strategies to build a sense of community (García Crispín & Madrazo, 2006; González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006; Hoffman, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000;), or explain how through their methods interpretation is performed collectively (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a, 2005).

Meszaros (2007a) differentiates “whatever interpretation” from “critically engaged interpretation,” defining the latter as:

... an awareness of the kinds of interpretive authorities or traditions of meaning-making that are called upon in an act of interpretation. Put more simply, critically engaged interpretation directs attention to how we make sense of things, and what occurs when the ‘unfamiliar is made intelligible.’ (p. 17)

She states that “critically engaged interpretation” takes into account “domain knowledge”, that is, that “of a generous and articulate expert” (p. 21).

Other uses of the word “interpretation” in Museum Education were found in the work of some authors who use the term to refer to the processes triggered by their methods or theoretical frameworks, but who do not define their understanding of the term with precision. Abigail Housen (2001) refers to the processes developed by Visual Thinking Strategies as interpretation. María del Rosario Busquet (2005) argues in favour of interpretive strategies in the museum based on constructionism, emphasizing its potential to

³ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as Symbol.

promote collective constructions of meaning in the museum (as opposed to individual ones), based on relationships between works of art, viewers' life experience and interpretive tools provided by museums. Busquet does not provide a definition of constructionism in her article. It can be understood as a theoretical current that claims that representations of the world, as well as human behaviour, are constructed by social factors, such as groups or institutions, or by individuals (Mallon, 2008). While constructivism focuses on the interpreter's experience as a source for meaning-making, constructionism seems to focus on the social factors that determine ideas or behaviour.

2.1.2 The objectives of interpretation in Museum Education

Interpretation in Museum Education can have several different objectives. Heather Lynch (2007), in a survey of museum educators and directors in Scotland, identified an interest in opening up accessibility to audiences which generally are marginalized from the museum, aiming for a greater social equality. Lynch's study found that:

Those responsible for interpretation were keen not to limit the multiple possible readings of the artwork. The mission of many gallery educators appears to be to whet viewers' appetites, and hold their attention without excluding other meanings; the challenge is to achieve this for a diverse population. (p. 14)

The interest in improving the accessibility of art for non-specialized publics in the context of the museum is also shared by other authors (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007; González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006; Hoffmann, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2004; Meszaros, 2008, 2007a; Rice, 2002; Yenawine, 2002), who are concerned with finding ways to engage visitors both in the enjoyment of and learning about art.

Rika Burnham and Eliot Kai-Kee (2005) find that interpretation in Museum Education can help visitors gain knowledge and an understanding of a work of art, as well as to connect with it on a personal and emotional level. They consider the task of the museum educator which enables interpretation to be "a delicate one":

On the one hand our goal is for people to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of a work, and on the other for them to connect with it personally, directly. Emotional involvement is a necessary precondition for awakening to a work's poetic possibilities. We know that the encounter of artwork is as much a matter of the heart as of the mind, that learning about artwork is motivated and held together by emotion as much as by intellect. (p. 74)

Many museum educators are concerned with visitors being thought of as passive receivers of information in the museum. Many agree that interpretation is a useful tool to promote active participation on behalf of the viewers, who are therefore engaged in the construction of meaning guided by museum educators (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007; Carter-Birken, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Lynch, 2007; Lockett, 2007; Shayt, 2008; Yenawine, Rice, 2002). Meszaros (2007a) states that "critical interpretation" can shape critical thought. She also emphasizes its potential to make visitors aware of how they create meaning, helping them to become conscious of how their ideas are influenced by those of their context.

The Entry Point Approach developed by Project MUSE, part of Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, following Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, and Jessica Hoffmann Davis' QUESTs project, share this view on interpretation. Hoffmann Davis (2007) explains that the objectives of this project are to develop inquiry and reflection around the work of art, as well as access to it, in order for interpreters to achieve an understanding of it. She also explains that their approach is student-centered and focuses on the activity of learning itself, as well as on experiences of observing art (pp. 21-21).

Project MUSE's views on the objectives of museum interpretation have been disseminated in Mexico. In 2007, the National Council for Culture and the Arts (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, CONACULTA) together with the program Wings and Roots for Children (Alas y Raíces a los Niños)⁴ edited a second edition of the Entry Point Approach program, under the name *Abriendo puertas a las artes, la mente y más allá*

(*Opening Doors to the Arts, Mind and Beyond*).⁵ In it Claudia Walls, National Coordinator for the Cultural Development of Children (Coordinadora Nacional de Desarrollo Cultural Infantil), states that this kind of approach “not only promotes knowledge of national and universal heritage, but also the possibility of enjoying it, since from this proposal enjoyment brings the opportunity for reflection, and therefore to reach significant learning”⁶ (in Boix Mansilla, 2007, p. 7).

I would also like to mention here two programs that have been promoted among museum educators in Mexico, who work together with elementary schools and museums. One of them is Development of Intelligence Through Art (Desarrollo de la Inteligencia a través del Arte), known as *dia*, which was developed in Mexico. This program sees art interpretation as a way to develop critical thinking, as well as cognitive, communicative, affective and social abilities (García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007, p. 115). This program focuses on interpretive strategies where the teacher or guide acts as a mediator, and children interpret artwork without any previous knowledge about the work of art. Interpretation is developed in three stages: “Language to know,” “Imagination to understand,” and “Interpretation and meaning construction” (García Crispín & Madrazo, ca. 2007, p. 117). Georgina García Crispín points out that the objective of this program is not to learn about art but, instead, “to integrate it as a stimulus for education and for personal growth”⁷ (p. 114).

Another program promoted in Mexico and other regions of Latin America, *Think in Art (Piensa en Arte)*, was developed by the Cisneros Foundation (Fundación Cisneros) in Venezuela. The goals of this program are to develop capacities of observation, expressive

⁵ This material was distributed to museums throughout the country (Boix Mansilla, 2007). It was also given out to participants during the Conference on Museums, Leisure and Cultural Heritage, (Museos, Ocio y Patrimonio Cultural) carried out in Mexico City in June, 2009. The book does not specify the date of the first edition.

⁶ Translation mine. The original reads “Este material que tienes en tus manos, no sólo promueve el conocimiento del patrimonio nacional y universal, sino la posibilidad de disfrutarlo, pues desde esta propuesta el goce brinda la oportunidad de meditar y así alcanzar un aprendizaje significativo.”

⁷ Translation mine. The original reads: “Los maestros *dia* no necesitan saber de arte, ya que el objetivo no es aprender acerca del arte, sino integrarlo como estímulo en la educación y el crecimiento personal.”

language and critical thinking among students through art interpretation. This program also uses interpretation in order to promote visual thinking and meaning construction among students (González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006). This program differs from the *dia* program in that it does incorporate information on the historical and cultural context in which the work was created. In the *Guide for Educators*, María del Carmen González and Cornelia Spillman-Meier (2006) explain that:

Even though the focus of this methodology is to emphasize the artwork as the primary source of exploration, carefully selected contextual information and questions asked after this information are essential for a better application of it. To know what the artist thinks about his own work, about the decisions he took while creating it, plus relevant aspects of his biography, besides historical or cultural references, stimulate the natural curiosity of students and allow them to develop their interpretations more in-depth, establishing a more complex understanding about an artwork.

Thus, this program aims to promote “grounded interpretations” (González & Spillmann-Meier, 2006). Comparing the different ways in which these two programs approach art can help reflect on how or why to incorporate other knowledge of art into interpretive strategies. I believe that looking at these examples together shows that having clarity about the objectives of interpretive strategies helps to choose whether or not to attend to knowledge built around it, and also helps to understand why. Thus, while the objectives of developing cognitive and emotional abilities of the *dia* program explain why art historical knowledge about the artwork is not an essential part of it, the objectives of the *Think in Art* program of developing complex and in-depth interpretations of the artwork justify why art historical information and information about the artists’ intentions are included in it. In this sense, the inclusion or absence of academic knowledge of art in each different interpretive strategy can be understood by paying attention to the objectives of each.

2.1.3 The inexperienced interpreter vs. the expert: which voice to listen to?

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) speaks of two different museum models: the post-modern museum and the modernist museum. She defines the educational aim of the latter as “to transfer information about ‘art history,’” which is the “academic discipline from which collections are viewed,” to the “general public.” She develops a critical stance on this aim, stating that:

Underlying this approach to communication is a particular view of knowledge, and of learning. The ‘transmission’ model of communication understands communication as a linear process of information-transfer from an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver. Knowledge is seen as objective, singular and value-free. The receiver of the message to be communicated is conceptualized as open to the reception of the message, which is received more or less efficiently, and in the same way by all. (p 15)

Hooper-Greenhill explains how this model is based on behavioural theories, and on models of communication that assume that there is one instance, the communicator, who sends out a message to a receiver, who “is rendered cognitively passive” (p. 17). Hooper-Greenhill calls this “one-way communication” and identifies the curator as the communicator who decides what art to show and how, based on his or her scholarly knowledge.

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) challenges the model of communication of the modernist museum, as well as the canon of art history, drawing on communication theory, as well as on feminist, post-colonial and post-modern studies. This author points out that the focus of the modernist museum on the exhibition itself “excludes the visitor, proceeding with no consultation as to whether the selected approaches will be familiar or unfamiliar, or will be accessible to those who do not already recognize the display codes and the art historical references” (pp. 17-18).

This author urges revision of two aspects of the authority of the modernist museum: first, what is said and who says it; second, who is listening, which is associated to issues of

interpretation, understanding and construction of meaning (p. 19). Hooper-Greenhill puts the authorities of the modernist museum in perspective, and emphasizes the role of the visitor as an interpreter who is engaged in understanding and making sense of what is exhibited. Thus, she argues for a museum where a different model of communication is employed, based on constructivism and communication theories. This new museum model needs to take into account the interpretive nature of knowledge in order to begin to value the interpretive and cognitive processes of visitors. Thus, she argues for the emergence of new voices and new narratives within museums.

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) also acknowledges how these approaches may encounter opposition from museum professionals, especially from those whose careers have been based on the values of the “modernist museum”: “For many curators, these intellectual approaches challenge the values on which their professional careers have been built, and this perceived attack on professional identity is felt deeply and personally” (p. 29).

Indeed, while some authors argue in favour of the construction of meaning by the visitors themselves, aided by art-historical information (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007, 2005; González & Spillmann Meier, 2006; Brodie, 2003), others criticize the way in which theories such as constructivism have been applied to interpretive strategies in museums, leading to a relativism in which uninformed interpretations are considered as valuable as those based on careful reflection (Meszaros, 2007a, 2007b, 2006).

The dispute of the validity of knowledge authority in museums as examined among curators and educators, is a problem that has been present in other moments of the history of museums. Andrew McClellan (2003) shows that these kind of problems were intensified around the 1920's, favouring the production and diffusion of scholarly knowledge over educational strategies for non-specialized audiences. The authority of curators and art-historical knowledge was established as the source of reliable knowledge in the museum, and the role of educators was seen as a minor one. This debate has continued throughout the twentieth-century, as the authority of curatorial discourse began to be strongly contested again by museum educators around the 1970's (McClellan, 2003).

The idea of legitimizing Museum Education as an endeavor as essential to the museum as that of the advancement of scholarly knowledge continues to this day. It has influenced the debate around interpretation in Museum Education throughout the last decades, raising questions around elitism, authority, knowledge and power (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 1992, McClellan, 2003). In regards to this, Burnham and Kai-Kee (2007a) state:

Once charged with translating curatorial interpretations to the public, educators are now charged with including everyone in the translation of the artwork. Knowledgeable in the collections and experienced with audiences, they bring people and works of art together for appreciation and exploration. (pp.11-12)

During the last decades of the twentieth century, many Museum Educators attempted to bring perspectives and understandings of art other than those of the curatorial discourse into museums, as well as to validate the interpretation of visitors from varied backgrounds in order to diminish the overwhelming authority of art historical knowledge in the museum. (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, 2000). During her research, Lynch (2007) found that this issue is still relevant for many contemporary art gallery educators, directors, and other staff members, who were concerned about elitism in museums, finding that “gallery tours and panel discussions... were believed to engage mostly the contemporary art enthusiast and did not really bring in a wider audience” (p. 14). She also identified the conflict “between the need to preserve the status of contemporary art and the drive towards access for all” (p. 14).

Many museum educators encourage us to make a shift museums from places where interpretation is centered on curatorial discourse and art history, to one where “visitors are not overwhelmed by the institutional voice but instead are brought together as valued communities of study and reflection, engaged in the enterprise of examining and interpreting art” (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a, p. 13). These authors, together with others, argue in favour of interpretive strategies that both give validity to visitors’ interpretations and allow them to develop interpretive skills, at the same time that curatorial and art-historical knowledge is taken into account to aid the process (Carter-Birken, 2008; Lynch, 2007; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; Yenawine, 2002). Some of them also stress the need

not to leave out scholarly information that is relevant for the understanding of a work of art (Carter-Birken, 2008; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a), or that is useful to avoid misunderstandings and misconceptions (Carter-Birken, 2008; Meszaros, 2008, 2007a, 2007b; Rice, 2002).

Burnham and Kai-Kee (2007a) believe that “curatorial research remains the critical foundation of Museum Education.” Therefore, they argue that art historical knowledge should not be ignored nor its usefulness be diminished; instead, they believe art historical information should be provided through lectures, publications and electronic sources (p. 13). According to these authors, museum educators should:

...be able to provide accurate and pertinent art historical and other contextual information. [...] But we must think of such knowledge and such techniques not as ends in themselves, but as tools to be used for the larger purpose of enabling each visitor to have a deep and distinctive experience of specific artwork (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005, p. 67).

These museum professionals also try to diminish hierarchies in Museum Education, by emphasizing the idea of a museum educator who is both a guide and part of the group under its guidance, someone who learns “alongside everyone else” (p. 73). Both of these authors seek not to impose an interpretation originated through scholarly knowledge but rather to encourage visitors to construct meaning through detailed, silent attention, conversation and pertinent art historical and contextual information that promotes discussion and understanding (2007a).

Conversely, Meszaros (2007a) speaks strongly against interpretations which are constructed without taking into consideration art historical or curatorial knowledge, and argues in favour of curatorial discourse as a relevant guiding principles of interpretation in Museum Education. As mentioned above, she criticizes the rise of “whatever interpretation”, describing it in the following terms:

Many factors have contributed to the triumph of ‘whatever’ interpretation. The first is the museum’s selective uptake of constructivist learning models that

demoted 'received knowledge' as oppressive and pedagogically backward and promoted 'individual interpretation' (sometimes also referred to and revered as 'the visitor experience') as supporting democracy and progressive educational thinking. The second factor that contributed to the victory of 'whatever' is a profound and pervasive change in the seat of interpretive authority. Over time interpretive authority shifted from the voice of the 'author' to the 'text itself' and in our time, it has safely delivered into the hands of the 'individual'. Perhaps the most pervasive underpinning of the 'whatever' though, is the extreme individualism fostered by both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism and bolstered by a market economy. (p. 18)

She also identifies a contradiction in the purposes of education in museums:

On the one hand, museums spend billions of dollars each year crafting specific messages about the objects on display and then deliver those messages through very elaborate exhibitions, publications and educational programmes. Yet, on the other hand, those same museums promote 'whatever' interpretation by championing the idea that personal meaning is the pedagogically and ideologically favoured outcome of the museum visit. (Meszaros, 2007a, p. 18)

I believe this discussion should also take into consideration the different viewers which attend the museum. The knowledge produced by museum professionals and communicated through exhibitions, publications or educational programmes can certainly be useful and should find ways to become understandable for non-specialized publics. Yet, this does not address the needs of those who begin to gain contact with museums, or whose areas of expertise are other than those related to the arts and humanities, for whom other means of engagement are necessary.

Jessica Hoffmann Davis (2007) states that even though it is common to oppose approaches based on visitors' inquiries to those that provide academic information, the MUSE Project and QUESTs programs understand that both go hand in hand. She explains that the different entry points proposed by them also shed light on the different kinds of

information available for visitors, and acknowledges that this information can be helpful for individual inquiry (p. 24).

María del Rosario Busquets (2005), states that embracing the voices of visitors within the museum does not imply that experts renounce their knowledge but, rather, that they value the experience of others:

It is not a matter of displacing a collection or its discourse from its place in order to give it to the public, rather, it is a matter of giving value to the interaction between both as the best way to potentiate the knowledge and experience of the museum, making it accessible and bringing it closer to all visitors⁸ (p. 13)

It could seem that museum interpretive strategies that are centered on the visitors' capacities of understanding, and on the knowledge they bring from their life experience, disregard academic or curatorial knowledges. Yet, Busquet's and Hoffmann's arguments provide a ground to question the reality of this opposition. They show that both kinds of knowledges about art can coexist within the museum, not as separate universes but, instead, as interrelated ones.

In this sense, it is also important to pay attention to the objectives of interpretive strategies within museums – this could give us clarity as to how, why and *when* to incorporate both types of knowledge together. Particularly, to question *when* it is suitable for a person to gain academic knowledge about art, places the problem of knowledge authority in museums in a different perspective: it becomes a matter of finding the right time for each visitor to do it, rather than doubting about whether it should or shouldn't be done. Certainly, it could also be discussed if whether finding the right time is a decision that museum professionals or visitors should take; I would argue that this depends on the nature of each education program and on the decision of the individual visitor.

⁸ Translation mine. The original reads: No se trata de desplazar a la colección o al discurso para poner en su lugar al público, sino de dar valor a la interacción entre ambos como la mejor manera de potencializar el conocimiento y la experiencia del museo, haciéndolo accesible y cercano a todos los visitantes.”

2.1.4 The space of the museum: feeling welcomed or intimidated?

Many art educators agree on the negative effect museum ambience has on visitors. Feeling intimidated is how it is most often described: a feeling of inadequacy, of not quite belonging in the museum, or of being under-prepared for it. Some authors locate this negative effect in the grandiose nature of the architecture of museums (Luckett, 2007; Meszaros, 2008), which has gained new force during the last decades, when museums have sought to adopt unusual, groundbreaking designs from renowned architects with the objective, among others, to attract tourism to its doors (Fraser, 2005, 2002).

Feeling intimidated is directly linked to the visitors' lack of confidence in their own capacity to participate in the process of interpretation (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a; Luckett, 2007; Lynch, 2007). This lack of confidence arises not only from the architecture of the gallery alone, but also from intellectual barriers (Lynch, 2007; Meszaros, 2008; Yenawine, 2002). Meszaros (2008) points out how physical accessibility is often mistaken with intellectual one:

Accessibility, in the largest sense of the word, has to do with both physical and intellectual access. It is not enough for visitors simply to be in the presence of art; they require ways of making sense of art and, particularly with contemporary art, ways to recognize that it is indeed art. The art museum sincerely welcomes these people who are already conversant with the discourse that make and sustain art, those who already know the "rules of the game", as Bourdieu (1993) put it. (p. 159)

Meszaros talks about a contradiction in the "welcoming gestures" of the museum, in which she includes the grandiosity of the architecture and the sometimes awkward politeness of museum staff most visitors encounter. Meszaros (2008) establishes, referring to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological studies, that only those people who already know what behaviour is expected of them in a museum feel welcomed and at ease in this institution, whereas people who do not enjoy this familiarity feel intimidated.

Lynch's (2007) survey of museum professionals showed that:

Negative perceptions, limited experience leading to limited confidence, and general disinterest were seen as major challenges for those employed to improve accessibility. These factors were being addressed through an ever-expanding range of practices aimed at disturbing existing perceptions and behaviours around contemporary art" (p. 13).

In the same study, Lynch found out that many of the museum educators interviewed were dissatisfied with the language used in text panels and labels, "as they tended to use intimidating or excluding art jargon" (p. 13). In the conclusion to her article, she urges the art world to reconsider the meaning of 'access' to the museum beyond its physical meaning and taking into account the intellectual and cultural backgrounds of all those involved in Museum Education, whether professionals or visitors, asking "Does access mean delivering culture to those presumed not currently in receipt of it, or does it mean generating new understandings of what constitutes culture across different communities?" (p. 15).

Burnham and Kai-Kee (2005) identify factors of distraction that can also function as a barrier for visitors to engage in interpretation in museums:

Even though works of art are mounted on pedestals, or hung in elaborated frames, or bracketed by text — all of which are designed to direct attention to them — most casual visitors spend little more than a few seconds with each. Museum environments are almost always beautiful, but they are often noisy and distracting, too. People's reasons for coming to the museum are varied. Why should they stop and attend to the objects? As museum educators, we are obliged to create a structure of engagement, a means of inviting people to appreciate and understand great works. (p. 68)

These arguments show that, in order for the relationship between museums and visitors to change, the efforts of museum educators must be supported by the museum as a whole. The studies and reflections of these authors also indicate that museum educators themselves also

need to revise their own attitudes towards visitors, in order to provide a truly “welcoming” environment in the museum.

2.2 Hermeneutics in Museum Education

Hooper-Greenhill (2000) has argued for the use of hermeneutics, and particularly of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as a basis for understanding interpretation in the context of Museum Education, as well as for designing interpretive strategies. She has often used hermeneutics as part of the theoretical framework that supports her work, together with other theories and studies. Other museum educators who use Gadamer’s hermeneutics in order to design interpretive strategies are Elliot Kai-Kee, Rika Burnham and Cheryl Meszaros. These authors apply Gadamer’s hermeneutics in different ways in order to develop interpretive strategies for Museum Education.

In a recent article, “Interpretation and the Hermeneutic Turn,” Meszaros points towards hermeneutics as a way to counter-arrest the “whatever interpretation” (2007a). She mentions how some interpretive strategies guided by this philosophy have been adopted by the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver (CAG) with successful results. Meszaros (2007a) explains that hermeneutics were used to develop interpretive strategies that focus both on meaning-making and on reflecting on how that meaning was made, with the purpose of developing “critically engaged audiences for contemporary art” (p 19). Meszaros explains how this interpretive strategy focuses, first, on reflecting with students on the ways in which we make sense of things – based on what we are told, on the connections we make, and through experience (p. 20) –, in order to begin paying attention to what the artist “tells” through interpretation, with the aid of the guide who provides information about what is not visible in the work itself, and constantly going back to the initial reflection. Meszaros also mentions other sites in Canada where hermeneutics are being applied to design interpretation strategies, such as ArtStart in Vancouver, as well by the Library and Archives of Ottawa and other museum associations in Ontario (2007a).

In her article, Meszaros identifies the hermeneutic circle as a way to enable a much more critical interpretation than that provided by what she calls the “whatever interpretation”. She argues that the hermeneutic circle has the potential to help visitors reflect on how meaning is constructed, and sees in it a way to provide viewers with knowledge from art experts. Meszaros emphasizes the role of ‘tradition’ in interpretation based on hermeneutics. She points out that hermeneutics would ask of the museum the responsibility to provide viewers with the means of interpreting a work of art while at the same time making them aware of the tradition from which their interpretation springs (Meszaros, 2007a).

Kai-Kee and Burnham, educators at the Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art in New York respectively, have used Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle, as well as other concepts from the same philosopher, in order to develop different strategies to help visitors interpret and understand artwork (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007b). These educators use this philosophical model to enable a conversation with a group of visitors as a guided interpretation: “We use our own hypotheses about a work’s meaning to help guide the group’s experience. Intense looking and deep concentration enable every viewer to construct his or her own meaning, within boundaries charted by the artwork itself” (2005, p. 73) In another article, they add: “Engaged in the exchange of thoughts and observations about artwork, carried into the back-and-forth flow of discussion about the artwork, visitors translate impressions into conjectures, and, ideally, understanding and interpretation” (2007, 12). For these authors, the outcomes of interpretations, even though guided, are unpredictable:

Like the artist’s own process of creation, experiencing a work of art is not a regular and predictable process. [...] A museum instructor who teaches for any length of time knows that often our viewers expect, or hope to arrive at “what an artwork means,” a single interpretation, with some sense of solidity and finality. The instructor reinforces and relies on the viewers’ trust that meaning is possible, yet at the same time, teaches that ultimately the interpretation of works of art inevitably encounters complexity and ambiguity. (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007a)

Burnham and Kai-Kee seek not to impose an interpretation originated in scholarly knowledge; instead, they encourage visitors to construct meaning through detailed, silent attention, conversation and pertinent art-historical and contextual information that promotes discussion and understanding. They also suggest that:

... by virtue of living in the world, by virtue of our observations and interactions with the people we know, we have within us the essential knowledge to read this sculpture, and then the next work of art we encounter, and so on. (2005, p. 69)

This seems to be supported by Gadamer's idea of prejudices and of the horizon of understanding, and how these play a fundamental role in interpretation.⁹

In her doctoral dissertation *The Hermeneutic Approach to Museum Education*, Lee Brodie (2001) presented a framework that allows for the development of interpretive strategies based on Dilthey's hermeneutics, and particularly in his concepts of experience, expression and understanding. In her program, she promotes an approach to artifacts in museums that emphasizes the understanding of "lived experience" (pp. 77-78). In order to do so, she designed a template that helps teachers and museum educators develop experiential or hands-on activities that will lead the child to this kind of understanding. Brodie emphasizes the need to provide information on the context of the object, following Dilthey's hermeneutics (p. 83). Even though in her approach the teacher or guide act as mediators, the way in which the diagram is designed, and how it asks teachers to develop content and themes around artifacts, makes the program run the risk of turning into one which simply transmits content, instead of allowing students to develop an interpretive hermeneutic understanding of artifacts. When working with hermeneutic approaches it is also important to consider that, more than a method, hermeneutics is an attitude towards knowledge.

Even though some of these approaches use hermeneutics in order to arrive at an understanding of the work of art from the visitor's perspectives, these approaches are based

⁹ Cf. Theoretical Framework, Hermeneutic Interpretation.

only on conversational and linguistic abilities, and leave out other possibilities of approaching the work of art, such as creation or imagination. These approaches also require the presence of a guide throughout the development of interpretation, which, on one hand, favors collective constructions of meaning; yet, on the other, it could prevent interpreters from developing abilities to independently engage with works of art.

2.3 Conclusion

Most museum educators agree that the use of interpretation in art Museum Education helps open up accessibility to the collections for non-specialized publics, or publics with little or no knowledge about art. Many of them recognize the need to make changes in the ambience of the museum in order to foster physical, intellectual and emotional accessibility. Museum education is seen as a key factor in this process, as well as in that of addressing elitism. Efforts to validate ways of engaging with art other than those of curatorial and art-historical discourse are both encouraged and questioned. At the same time, many museum educators argue in favour of the pertinent inclusion of scholarly information in interpretive strategies.

The validity of visitors' interpretations has proved to be a contested arena: there is a rising acceptance of the multiple perspectives and backgrounds that are put into play while engaging with a work of art, and thus, diversity of interpretations is both encouraged and accepted; then again, there is also a call to re-validate curatorial and art-historical discourse as the legitimate knowledge in the museum. Theoretical and philosophical knowledge which can bring clarity to this debate have been called into play, philosophical hermeneutics being one of them.

This study is located within those interpretive strategies that argue in favor of interpretation as a way to engage visitors with art, and to open up user-friendliness for those who do not regularly visit them. It also follows the tendency to use hermeneutics as a theoretical framework, and challenges the inclusion of academic knowledge as a necessary part of interpretive strategies, arguing that its pertinence depends on the objectives of each program.

Throughout this literature review I have presented several Museum Education programs based on interpretation, which use either constructivist, hermeneutical or empirical bases. These programs argue for a new relationship between museums, visitors and works of art, and address this situation with effective strategies. The proposal I present here shares similar views on interpretation and its use for Museum Education, as well as on the epistemological implications of interpretation within the museum. It also attends to the need to foster both individual and collective interpretation and understanding of artwork, which has been indicated by various museum educators and programs. Yet, throughout this literature review, I identified that there is something lacking in the objectives of museum interpretive strategies. These programs and authors focus on the need to find new ways to approach and understand art that take into consideration visitors' worldviews. However, it seems to me they do not assume with clarity that, in order for new relationships to become possible, the probability of visitors *wanting* to see art and to go to museums *of their own accord* must be constructed.

Some of the ideas and programs I've reviewed above have the potential to do so, and perhaps do so implicitly. Yet, the proposal I present through this study focuses on creating this potential through interpretation: the opportunity to establish a close relationship between a visitor and a work of art, to create a bridge between them in a way that visitors will want to return to museums, and will be able to do so on their own. Once this kind of connection is created, the chances that visitors themselves look for ways to engage with art in similar or in different ways will increase.

These programs and authors do not directly answer the questions how and why does a person begin to enjoy art, or how and why do they develop an interest in attending museums. These issues are also related to when or how does a person begin to foster an affinity for art with an interest in academic knowledge relevant to it. I believe these points are crucial for the development of a new relationship between art, museums and visitors.

Something else I became aware of by means of this literature review is how most of these programs focus on the development of linguistic or verbal activities. The proposal I

present as part of this thesis incorporates verbal, conversational and creative (that is, painting, drawing and story-telling) activities.

As I have mentioned above, most of these programs guide visitors through interpretations and, thus, make the presence of guides necessary in order for visitors to be able to engage with art. On the other hand, the proposal of this study also allows for activities that are guided by program guides, as well as for others that are carried out by visitors themselves. This allows visitors to develop abilities to engage with art independently, without having to create a dependence on the aid of museum guides or docents in future visits. This doesn't mean that the work of docents and museum guides is not valuable to help visitors understand the museum's collections but, rather, it leads to enabling visitors to approach the museum and its collections on their own, should they choose to do so. It also gives each participant not only the opportunity of understanding the work of art from their own imagination, intelligence, knowledge and life experience, but also to convey that knowledge through creative processes of their own. It also gives them the chance to go beyond understanding, opening up the possibility of agreeing or disagreeing with what an artwork communicates to them.

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Gadamer's concept of art

“What is art?” Gadamer, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, approaches this question searching to find something that could be common to all forms of art. Even though his reflection is set in the context of a discussion of modern art and how it began to question previous conceptions and understandings of what was considered to be art, he tries to find what the experience of art itself is. He tries to find this answer not in aesthetics, but, rather, in the anthropological experience of art. Thus, in this work he develops the question “What is the anthropological basis of our experience of art?” (1986a, p. 22). In order to answer this question he makes use of the concepts of play, symbol and festival.

3.1.1 Art as play

Gadamer's understanding of the play of art is quite complex, and involves several different aspects. In order to explain what he understands as the play of art, Gadamer (1986a) begins by considering what play is in itself in nature, moving on to what he understands as human play and finally arriving to the elaboration of play in art. Here I will concentrate on three approaches to art as play: 1) as a movement, 2) as a “playing along with,” and 3) as an “as if”.

Play as movement is understood by Gadamer (1986a) as a movement which is constantly repeated, such as the back and forth movement of the waves in the sea, which could be referred to as “the play of the waves” (pp. 22-23). This movement is also an impulse, a self-movement of that which moves that does not have a particular end or purpose: thinking of the play of the waves, Gadamer(1986a) states that “what characterizes this movement back and forth is that neither pole of the movement represents the goal in which it would come to rest” (p. 22). Thus, play is a “non-purposive movement” (p. 23). Yet, in human play this non-purposive movement is accompanied by a rationality that

creates rules for it, for example, a child that bounces a ball on the ground and counts how many times he can do this without it getting away from him (p. 23). Therefore, play is a self-movement without a purpose, but with an intention. The rationality that creates rules for this movement is what gives sense to human play.

The act of playing furthermore requires a “playing along with” (Gadamer, 1986a, p. 23). When he talks about this, Gadamer concentrates on the role of the spectator: when I watch someone else play I participate in a game by observing it and by following its movements, as though I was myself taking part in those movements. Gadamer (1986a) explains it in the following manner:

The act of playing always requires a ‘playing along with.’ Even the onlooker watching the child at play cannot possibly do otherwise. If he really does ‘go along with it,’ that is nothing but a *participatio*, an inner sharing in this repetitive movement. This is often very clear in more developed forms of play: for example, we have only to observe on television the spectators at a tennis match cricking their necks. No one can avoid playing along with the game. [...] The spectator is manifestly more than just an observer who sees what is happening in front of him, but rather one who is part of it insofar as he literally ‘takes part.’ (pp. 22-23)

Why is all this relevant to art as a form of play? For Gadamer, just as a spectator takes part in a game by following the movements of its players and is, in a way, a player himself, a person who observes art also participates in the work: that is, he or she is not merely a passive observer, but an active participant in a work who is also involved in its creation. Consequently, art which is actively observed is art that is constructed by the observer. For Gadamer, this certainty is so strong he even affirms that art is not just the work in its materiality, but, rather, art only becomes art when an observer plays along with it, that is, when an observer re-constructs it through interpretation. In this sense, a work of art is not only something material, but rather something ephemeral, an inner participation of it by the observer, as well as the “effect” it produces on him or her (Gadamer, 1986a, pp. 24-26).

What does Gadamer mean when he talks about this inner participation of the observer in the work of art? Gadamer (1986a) states that art has a “hermeneutic identity” that “consists precisely in there being something to ‘understand:’

[Art] asks to be understood in what it ‘says’ or ‘intends.’ The work issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer – an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge. And the answer must be his own, and given actively. (p. 26)

The construction of what the work of art communicates would be the spectator’s answer to this challenge.

In order to allow the viewer to participate, the work of art leaves a “free space” to be completed by the spectator. Gadamer explains this using literature as an example: the places, actions or characters described to a reader in a novel are re-created in his mind through his or her imagination; Gadamer also points out that a literary description is imagined differently by each reader. This would be the “free space” that art leaves for the reader to be filled. A similar condition occurs with visual arts: “A synthetic act is required in which we must unite and bring together many different aspects. We ‘read’ a picture, as we say, like a text. We start to ‘decipher’ a picture like a text” (Gadamer, 1986a, p. 27). Later on he gives the following example:

Someone who, on admiring a famous Titian or Velazquez depicting some mounted Habsburg ruler or other, thinks, “oh, yes, that’s Charles V,” has not really seen anything of the picture at all. Rather, it is a question of constructing it, reading it word for word as it were, so that after this necessary construction it comes together as a picture resonant with meaning. It portrays a world ruler upon whose empire the sun never sets. (pp. 27-28)

For Gadamer (1986a), the reconstruction or “reading” of a work of art involves reflective and intellectual activity: “The challenge of the work brings the constructive accomplishment of the intellect into play” (p. 29). This construction, together with the “as

if” of the play of art, is related to the concepts of mimesis, representation and recognition. These considerations will afterwards lead us to talk about art as symbol, but let me first attempt to explain what Gadamer means by the “as if” of art.

In the article “The play of art” Gadamer (1986a) explains this “as if” in relation to an “acting as if”: that is, an action that pretends. In human play, Gadamer (1986b) explains this “as if” in relation to the rules of a game, and how these are followed and respected by the players: “The playfulness of human games is constituted by the imposition of rules and regulations that only count as such within the closed world of play” (p. 124). In order to follow and respect the rules of the game, players have to take them seriously; otherwise, the “as if” of the game would be broken. Gadamer sees this “as if” and this “seriousness” of human play as an intrinsic part of culture. He mentions, for example, social and professional activities that require a “role” to be “played” (1986b, p.124). Let’s think of how different roles and professions ask of us to learn and reproduce certain behaviour in order to become that: a parent, a teacher, a politician, a lawyer. There are rules, whether tacit or explicit, that regulate these and other roles in society and culture, and these different kinds of behaviour are imitated in society.

Gadamer (1986b) states that, in certain forms of social interaction, roles played are not always sincere:

The simulated astonishment of feigned sympathy that people play at in social intercourse is quite different from this. Imitative representation is not the kind of play that deceives, but a play that communicates as play when it is taken in the way it wants to be taken: as pure representation. (p. 127)

In the play of art, this “as if” refers to artistic representation: art doesn’t want to be believed as the thing that is represented in it, but as something that it pretends to be in order to show something else. Art represents something else than that which it presents to our senses: it stands for something else, it is a symbol. When we encounter art as a symbol, we enter into it as “an act of identification and, consequently, of recognition” (1986b, p. 129).

3.1.2 Art as symbol.

Now, let us try to understand what Gadamer understands as “symbol.” In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer (1986a) makes reference to the actual origin of the word “symbol”: the Greek *symbolon*, used to refer to the *tessera hospitalis*, a tablet broken in two that was used as a form of identification between a host and a guest:

The host presented his guest with the so-called *tessera hospitalis* by breaking some object in two. He kept one half for himself and gave the other half to his guest. If in thirty or fifty year’s time, a descendant of the guest should ever enter his house, the two pieces could be fitted together again to form a whole in an act of recognition. In its original sense, the symbol represented something like a sort of pass used in the ancient world: something in and through which we recognize something already known to us. (p. 31)

Using this definition of symbol, Gadamer begins to introduce several ideas of art as symbol: 1) art as something that gains meaning when it is completed; 2) art as a past that finds validity in the present; 3) art as recognition, and 4) art as something that stands for something other than itself.

Let’s pay closer attention to these ideas. According to Gadamer (1986a), art communicates (p. 127-128). Still, art doesn’t communicate as would do a bearer of a message that delivers it, but rather, art *is* that which it communicates, as though the bearer and the message were the same being. Gadamer explains it in the following way: “The symbolic does not simply point toward a meaning, but rather allows that meaning to present itself. The symbolic represents meaning” (p. 34).

What does Gadamer mean by representation? This concept is related to the concept of mimesis. Gadamer (1986a) goes back to the Greek concept of mimesis in order to explain the kind of imitation that takes place in art. According to him, the Greek concept of mimesis is not understood as “an imitation in which we strive to approach an original by copying it as nearly as possible. On the contrary, it is a kind of showing” (p.128-129).

Gadamer recognizes this showing not as an offering of proof in order to demonstrate something. He understands showing as a pointing at something else, as a “pointing hand.” As a result, what is represented in a work of art does not indicate only itself, but also something else it is trying to make visible to us. This representation doesn’t imply that “something merely stand in for something else as if it were a replacement or substitute that enjoyed a less authentic, more indirect kind of existence,” (p. 35) nor that art be “a simple transference or mediation of meaning” (p. 37). Rather, that meaning which is represented in art *is there*, in that representation: it *is* that representation. According to Gadamer (1986a), “the essence of the symbolic lies in the fact that it is not related to an ultimate meaning that could be recuperated in intellectual terms. The symbol preserves its meaning within itself,” and thus, he states that “what the work has to say can only be found within itself” (p. 37). Gadamer’s understanding of art as a symbol plays within two tensions: in the first place, that art as symbol “preserves a meaning within itself” that cannot be accessed merely in intellectual terms and, secondly, that this meaning can be “recuperated” only in the interplay between the interpreter and the work of art.

The concept of representation is also related to the concept of recognition. In “Cassirer and Gadamer: Art as Symbol”, Patricia Claudia Montero (2005) states that Gadamer finds the particular character of representation in art in that it does not necessarily “refer to” something else, but, rather, it “moves us to tarry in the recognition of the represented” (p. 64). As mentioned above, this recognition is not understood as the identification of the images contained in the work of art, but instead, as the understanding of what these images are trying to point at, of what they are trying to “say” or communicate.

Gadamer (1986a) uses another reference from the ancient Greek world to explain art as symbol: the well-known myth of the androgyne which was separated in half and made into two separate beings: a man and a woman. Gadamer makes reference to this myth as it appears in Plato’s *Symposium*: originally, all human beings were spherical creatures, who were punished by the gods because of their misbehaviour; consequently, the gods cut these creatures in two halves, each of which continually seeks its other in order to be made complete again (pp. 31-32).

The reference to this myth emphasizes the idea of art as something that seeks completion: that is, that art can only be wholly itself when it is completed by another. In this case, this other would be the interpreter. It is not only the interpreter who completes the work of art and through that action makes it art, but the interpreter is also completed by the work of art. In this idea lies Gadamer's argument for art as part of human life: after a spectator has participated of the play and symbol of a work of art, s/he undergoes a transformation of himself or herself, after which the world will be rendered differently to him or her (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 101-102).

3.1.3 Art as festival

When he speaks of art as festival, Gadamer (1986a) considers the particular experience of time as related to art. He explains that during an encounter with art time is lived in a very different way than it is in our everyday life. He speaks of the difference between two experiences of time. On one hand, there is everyday, utilitarian time, as a "time for something":

This time is at our disposal; it is divisible; it is the time that we have or do not have, or at least think we do not have. In its temporal structure, such time is empty and needs to be filled. Boredom is an extreme example of this empty time. When bored, we experience the featureless and repetitive flow of time as an agonizing presence. In contrast to the emptiness of boredom, there is the different emptiness of frantic bustle when we never have enough time for anything and yet constantly have things to do. When we have plans, we experience time as the "right time" for which we have to wait, or as what we need more of in order to get the thing done. These two extremes of bustle and boredom both represent time in the same way: we fill our time with something or we have nothing to do. Either way time is not experienced in its own right, but as something that has to be "spent." (p. 41-42)

On the other hand, there is festive time, as time that is not meant to be of a particular use, nor needs to be filled. Gadamer (1986a) calls this time “fulfilled” or “autonomous.” Gadamer explains that “this fulfillment does not come about because someone has empty time to fill,” but rather, time itself becomes festive with the arrival of the festival (p. 42). In Spanish, the term “autonomous” is translated as “propio,” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 104), as someone’s own time, a time that belongs to someone not in the sense of property but in the sense that the experiences associated to it, such as childhood, youth or maturity, cannot be measured or determined by an external, calculating concept of time:

... everyone has his own time, his autonomous temporality. It is of the nature of the festival that it should proffer time, arresting it and allowing it to tarry. That is what festive celebration means. The calculating way in which we normally manage and dispose of our time is, as it were, brought to a standstill. (1986a, p.42)

Just as human beings have a time of their own, an “autonomous” time, art also has a time of its own, a time that we must learn to discover when we encounter art and engage with it. Gadamer (1986a) refers to art’s “autonomous temporality” in the sense that it is “determined by its own temporal structure rather than by the quantifiable duration or its existence through time” (p. 43). This temporality needs to be discovered with the active participation of the listener, reader or spectator, through their own “inner ear,” in order to “elicit” its “rhythm” (pp. 44-45):

Every work of art imposes its own temporality upon us, not only the transitory arts of language, music and dance. When considering the static arts, we should remember that we also construct and read pictures, that we also have to enter into and explore the forms of architecture. These too are temporal processes. One picture may not become accessible to us as quickly as another. And this is especially true of architecture. (p. 45)

Thus, Gadamer (1986a) states that every work of art has a time of its own, and that our encounter with art should be guided by trying to follow the time-rhythm that a work asks from us. This idea is related to the experience of time in an encounter with art as an experience of lingering - in order to engage with art, one needs to give to it one's own time, one needs to remain in its company: "When we dwell upon the work, there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us. The essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way" (p. 45).

Gadamer (1986a) also speaks of the experience of art as continuity between past and present: "... the riddle that the problem of art sets us is precisely the contemporaneity of past and present" (p. 47). This idea is linked to Gadamer's understanding of tradition, and how through it the past is always present, and constantly actualized. At the same time, for Gadamer (1986) the modern idea of the *tabula rasa*, of starting anew, leaving all tradition behind, is more of an ideal than of a possibility, since the present from where we think and move is that very same tradition, which also offers possibilities for the future (pp. 48-49). For Gadamer, tradition "means transmission rather than conservation" (p. 49). In art, we encounter tradition and actualize it:

This transmission does not imply that we simply leave things unchanged and merely conserve them. It means learning how to grasp and express the past anew. It is in this sense that we can say that transmission is equivalent to translation.

In fact, the phenomenon of translation provides a model for the real nature of tradition. The ossified language of literature only becomes art when it becomes part of our language. The same is true for the figurative arts and architecture as well. (p. 49).

Gadamer (1986) explains this by giving an example of architecture, and how old buildings and monuments are adapted to the necessities of transportation, our ways of lighting and other conditions of present day life:

The task involved in bringing together petrified remnants of the yesterday and the life of today provides a vivid illustration of what tradition always means: not just the careful preservation of monuments, but the constant interaction between our aims in the present and the past to which we still belong.

It is a question, therefore, of allowing what is to be. But this “letting be” does not mean the repetition of something we already know. We let the past be for us as we are now, not by the repeated experience of it, but through an encounter with it. (p. 49).

In this sense, an encounter with art, according to Gadamer (1986a), is also an encounter with the past and with the tradition from the standing point of the present. In this sense, past and present are simultaneous in an encounter with art.

Community is another important aspect of art as festival. Gadamer (1986a) speaks of how a festivity is always lived with others, in community. He begins by placing celebration as an activity that we go to in order to rest from work. Thus, he begins to oppose these two activities: at one end, work separates us as individuals, in spite of activities that need to be developed jointly with others, due to its every-day purposes; the activity of celebration, at the other end, consists primarily of people gathered together, and thus is intended to unite. The experience of art, according to Gadamer, is an experience of community, and this argument serves him to question the practices of engagement with art of modernity: “If art shares anything with the festival, then it must transcend the limitations of any cultural definition of art, as well as the limitations associated with its privileged cultural status” (1986a, p.50). Gadamer (1986a) uses the example of Greek tragedy represented during religious festivals, which were attended by all sectors of the population to argue that the “proper function of art” is not to become available only to a certain part of the population, nor to satisfy particular tastes.

Gadamer (1986a) argues for art as community in the sense that he sees in it (and in the “modern songs so popular with the young people of today”) “a capacity to establish

communication in a way that reaches people of every class and educational background” (p. 51). Later on, he adds: “The inseparability of form and content is fully realized as the non-differentiation in which we encounter art as an object that both expresses us and speaks to us” (p. 51)

3.2 Hermeneutic interpretation

In the article “Sobre la lectura de edificios y cuadros,”¹⁰ Gadamer (1996) defines hermeneutics as the art of allowing something to speak again (p. 255). Letting an item speak again requires of the interpreter the ability to listen, to ask and to answer. Hence, this “art” Gadamer talks about takes the form of a conversation (Gabilondo, 1996, p. 20). This conversation can take place between two people, between a text and a reader, or, in the case of art, between a work and a spectator.

Each of these two beings enters a hermeneutic conversation from their own “horizon of understanding.” The “horizon of understanding” is a key concept in Gadamer’s hermeneutic model. It is related to his reflection on the historicity of human understanding, which is, in turn, influenced by Heidegger’s reflection on the historicity of being in *Being and Time*. In the article “Sobre el círculo de la comprensión,”¹¹ Gadamer (1992) credits Heidegger with recognizing the structure of pre-understanding (pp. 66-67), which acknowledges that someone’s understanding of the world is always based on a network of meanings that belong to a particular culture, society and time. This structure of knowledge is infinite, since it is constantly changing throughout time (p. 60). Gadamer uses the word “prejudice” in order to refer to this structure of pre-understanding. He uses the word not in a negative sense, but rather as a way to explain that, when we approach something in order to understand it, we always do so based on the previous ideas of reality we have acquired throughout our lives. In this sense, we always enter a conversation, an interpretation or an

¹⁰ A rough English translation of the title of this article could be “On the Reading of Buildings and Paintings.” Its original title is “Über das Lesen von Bauten und Bilder.” Its Spanish translation is included in the anthology *Hans Georg Gadamer. Estética y Hermenéutica*. Madrid: Tecnos, 1996, 255-264.

¹¹ A rough English translation of the title of this article could be “On the Circle of Understanding.” It is included in *Verdad y Método II. (Truth and Method II)*. Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, pp. 51-70.

act of understanding with previous ideas about something else: that is, we always approach it from our horizon of understanding.

The “horizon of understanding” holds in itself another phenomenon of understanding from this hermeneutical perspective: the “anticipation of meaning.” This is when we encounter another person, text or work with a hermeneutic intention and we begin to generate an idea about what that other entity is trying to tell us. Now, this anticipation of meaning is built from our horizon of understanding, while the horizon of understanding of that other entity may be different from ours. As a consequence, we begin to impose on it ideas that are not really part of it, him or her. It may be that our horizon of understanding helps us to begin to listen to what the other entity has to say, regarding that which is common between that entity and myself, but it may be that my prejudices are preventing me from listening to what the other entity is trying to tell me. This is an ambivalent situation of the horizon of understanding which has to be necessarily faced when we enter an interpretive process in this hermeneutic sense. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic process itself will allow these prejudices to be put into play, to be questioned, validated or invalidated. This happens when the prejudices of an interpreter’s horizon of understanding are confronted with those of the other entity’s horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 1992, pp. 67-69).

As we enter a hermeneutic interpretation, we are constantly elaborating and re-elaborating a “project of understanding”. An initial elaboration, as I’ve mentioned before, is constructed as an anticipation of meaning. Further re-elaborations are constructed both through this putting into play of the horizons of understanding, as well as through a constant return to “the thing itself”, that is, to that which we are trying to understand. This works as a way to substitute preconceptions that are not validated in the thing itself by others that are more adequate (Gadamer, 1992, p. 66).

This movement of return is what constitutes this circle of interpretation, in the sense that the interpreter constantly goes back and forth between her or his own project and horizon of understanding, and the other entity’s horizon and intention of communication. This movement also alternates between the part and the whole of that unity which the

interpreter tries to understand. Through these circular movements my understanding of that which the other entity tries to tell me widens (Gadamer, 1992, p. 63).

Another key element of interpretation is the question. The question opens up the possibility of dialogue for the interpreter, since it is the interpreter who first directs a question to that which he or she interprets. Lizarazo Arias (2004) points out that asking does not imply a predetermined answer, but rather opens up the possibility for the work to be listened to (p. 33). In *Truth and Method* Gadamer (1975) speaks of the hermeneutic importance of the question in a negative sense: that is, the question as the acknowledgement that we do not know (p. 356). In order to be able to ask in a hermeneutic sense, we must consider the question as something to open up the possibility to learn something we don't know. Gadamer (1975) explains that unauthentic questioning comes from asking something to which we already know the answer, which happens when someone wants to prove him or herself right; authentic questioning would come from someone who seeks to learn from someone or something else (p. 356). Authentic questioning requires an open mind: "...the path of all knowledge leads through the question. To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined, awaiting a decisive answer" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 356).

Gadamer (1975) also explains that a particular question creates a particular perspective on something, it begins to entail a particular sense in the answer:

A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective. When a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object, as it were. Hence the logos that explicates this opened-up being is an answer. Its sense lies in the sense of the question. (pp. 356-357)

This is related to the "horizon of the question," that is, the particular place from which a question emerges. Lizarazo Arias (2004) explains the horizon of the question by pointing out that the sense of a text is subject to the question to which that text becomes an answer. According to Lizarazo Arias, this also means that the meaning of a particular text (or work)

goes beyond the answer it gives, since there will always be different questions directed to the text, and the text will always respond differently to them (p. 33). Therefore, just as each entity in a dialogue is placed in its own horizon of understanding, the question will also be placed in its own horizon, which will have further implications for interpretation and understanding.

In “Sobre la comprensión de edificios y cuadros” Gadamer (1996) also highlights the task of understanding of hermeneutic conversations. There are several ways in which Gadamer has explained what he means by understanding. In this article, he refers to it as a “participation in a common meaning;” by “common”, he refers to a meaning that is shared, of which more than one participates (p. 264). Jean Grondin (2002) points out that the verb “to understand” in German [*sich verstehen*] can also be defined as “to agree”, “to come to an agreement” or “to concur.” He uses an English expression, “we understand each other”, in order to explain this notion of Gadamer, “meaning that the partners in a conversation find themselves in a basic agreement” (p. 39). This agreement found between interpreter and the entity interpreted belongs, then, neither to the interpreter nor to the interpreted alone, but to both: “To understand, in Gadamer’s sense, is to articulate (a meaning, a thing, an event) into words, words that are always mine, but at the same time those of what I strive to understand” (Grondin, 2002, p. 41). Thus, the interpretation is *common*, that is, it belongs to a new community built through dialogue by interpreter and text.

Understanding for Gadamer is also related to the “fusion of horizons,” and the particular kind of communication achieved through it. Gadamer (in Gabilondo, 1996) explains how hermeneutic communication does not consist of imposing one’s opinion on the other, nor on adding one’s opinion to the other as a sum; rather, hermeneutic communication is an “achieved dialogue”, that is, a coincidence that is no longer only one or another’s opinion, but a widespread interpretation of the world (p. 21). Ángel Gabilondo (1996) writes that this is achieved through conversation: through the moments which bare the meaning of the discourse. He also points out that hermeneutic conversation which arrives at a fusion of horizons “does not bring forth a previously fixed meaning,” but rather “takes care of the opacity of the other as the only possible way to be legible and, even, audible” (p. 21).

Grondin (2002) calls attention to the fact that Gadamer's interpretation of understanding is closely related to the concept of translation, which I have previously delineated when I discussed art as festivity:

The meaning (event, person, monument) that is to be understood is always one that needs to be translated, so that understanding, application, and translation become almost equivalent terms for Gadamer. What I seek to translate (understand, apply) is always something that is at first foreign to me, but that is in some way binding to my interpretation. I seek to understand Plato, Schubert, a scientific theory, and so forth. I cannot say whatever I want, but I can only unfold my understanding in terms that I can follow and hope to communicate. Understanding, as an application, is thus always a challenge, but I can only rise up to it if I succeed in finding words for what needs and cries to be understood. I can only understand Plato by using language that is familiar to me, even if what I'm striving to comprehend is a thinking that was formulated in the ancient Greece of the fourth century B.C. (p. 43)

Later on, he adds:

Of course, this understanding can only be tentative. It is an attempt on my part to come to grips with what needs to be understood, but which can never be absolutely final. One can always find better words for what needs to be understood, more suited "applications." (p. 43)

When speaking about understanding, the notions of objectivity and subjectivity are problematized by Gadamer in such a way that the validity of a hermeneutic interpretation is not related to positivist notions of truth, wrong or right. Diego Lizarazo Arias (2004) explains how Gadamer states that all human knowledge is, in itself, an interpretation: that is, every relationship between a subject and an object is already mediated by the subject's previous opinion on things. This previous opinion which Lizarazo Arias talks about (which constitute the horizon of understanding) belongs to the historicity of that subject, and thus,

the knowledge produced through it will find validation within a particular historical frame (p. 33). This means that what a person understands about something or someone else will be determined by those kinds of ideas and questions found in her or his own historical context. In this way, Gadamer relativizes truth as something that is necessarily transitory or precarious.

Again, this does not mean that interpretation and knowledge are arbitrary, nor mere projections of the interpreter. Rather, Gadamer urges the interpreter to pay close attention to the thing itself, to be open to someone else's opinion, to learn to listen to what someone else is saying (Lizarazo Arias, 2004, pp. 30-31). Ángel Gabilondo (1996) comments that in order to be able to listen, the interpreter can't expect to necessarily hear something that confirms what he or she already knows, but rather, to be open to be affected by it (p. 15). In "Sobre el círculo de la comprensión" Gadamer (1996) speaks of this as well, saying in hermeneutic interpretation we must be open to the possibility that the other may be better informed on something than our opinion is. Thus, hermeneutic interpretation requires a particular attitude of the reader: of wanting to hear, of having the necessary humility to allow something or someone else to tell one something he or she is not aware of yet. Other necessary attitudes for hermeneutic interpretation are, on one hand, that the interpreter engages willingly in interpretation, and that he or she be interested in it; on the other, that the other which we try to understand be "respected and valued as an authentic alterity" (p. 33), that is, as an other and not just as an object to be studied or analyzed.

Lizarazo Arias (2004), quoting M. Aguilar, states that Gadamer's hermeneutics imply an epistemological rupture with two paradigms: 1) the understanding of knowledge as a relationship between object and subject, in the sense that the object becomes an other, a *you* with which a common knowledge is built; and 2) with subjectivism, in the sense that Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of dialogue and language put into play the *us* comprehended by text *and* reader, rather than the isolated *I* of the subject (p.33). These ruptures have implications for the manner in which we regularly consider, and approach, knowledge and understanding.

Jean Grondin (2002) confirms that Gadamer's notion of understanding emphasizes the implication of the interpreter in the matter that a text brings forth: "If Gadamer insists on this element of agreement, it is to underline the point that understanding is primarily related to the issue at hand and not to the author's intention as such" (p. 40). Later on, he adds: "One will read a poem of Rilke, a tragedy of Sophocles, or the *Elements* of Euclid very differently, i.e., by relating to the subject matter, by being concerned by what is said, not by who says it" (p. 40-41). This, as Grondin (2002) explains, does not mean that to seek the understanding of the author's or artist's intentions of creation is not valid, but rather, Gadamer considers this a secondary inquiry, since he is more concerned with the subject matter as "the primary focus of understanding" (p. 41).

3.3 Interpreting art

Throughout the previous subchapters, I have already talked about art interpretation according to Gadamer's hermeneutics; this is an idea that readers, perhaps, have already been contemplating. The way in which Gadamer approaches interpretation in one of his major works, *Truth and Method*, is closely linked to the interpretation of the work of art itself and, therefore, it is near impossible not to talk about art interpretation while trying to clarify Gadamer's hermeneutics. Therefore, in this chapter I will mention other aspects of art interpretation I have not presented above, and I will try to tie together Gadamer's understanding of art and his model of interpretation, in order to clarify what art interpretation is like within this framework.

"The work of art says something to us" states Gadamer in the article *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* (1977, p. 98). In the Introduction to the anthology *Estética y Hermenéutica (Aesthetics and Hermeneutics)*, Gabilondo (1996) describes this is the starting point of the hermeneutic labour of understanding a work of art, because it places art within the sphere of what is there for us to understand (p. 23). This means the work of art is not a mute vestige or ruin, nor an event from the past, but rather, it can be reactivated and recreated; it happens in the present (pp. 24-26), whose sense is not strictly limited to its original

historical horizon (Gadamer, 1977, p. 95). As a consequence, the work of art is not a mere object, but rather something that is capable of declaring, and to declare to us in our present. In order to reactivate it, to recreate it, to let it speak again, to hear what it can tell us, a work of art needs to be read.

Gabilondo (1996) specifies different ways to appreciate the “reading” of art through Gadamer’s philosophy. One of them is to see it as an “encounter” with art: in this sense, art is seen as an other, rather than as an object with which one is confronted (p. 18). This encounter, like hermeneutic interpretation, occurs in the form of a conversation (p. 20). Gabilondo (1996) speaks of this exchange as something that directs itself to “the task of giving voice to that which has been said,” and leads to “appropriation and interpretation” (p. 20). In this sense, a hermeneutic interpretation of art would not be a reiterative copy of what is communicated in the work of art, but rather, a reconstruction of its meaning (p. 20) in what it can tell *us* (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 100-103).

Gadamer’s statement, “The work of art speaks,” also implies that “the work of art communicates itself” - that is, it “cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 96). In “The play of art”, Gadamer (1986b) states that precisely because the artist has manifested himself in a work of art, he confers to it the totality of what he intends to express: “His works speaks for him” (p. 128). Gadamer (1986b) also speaks of the work of art as an object constituted as an organic entity, a construction (*Gebilde*), which contains in itself that which it intends to communicate, and therefore becomes self-sufficient (p. 126). Namely, it becomes independent of its creator, and is not limited to the sense it acquired within the historical context for which it was produced. In this sense, the work of art is “open to ever newer comprehension” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 97).

But, if the work of art does not properly “speak,” how can it convey a message to us, in what kind of language? Gadamer (1977) explains in the following way:

What we are calling the language of the work of art, for the sake of which the work is preserved and handed on, is the language the work of art itself speaks, whether it is linguistic in nature or not. The work of

art says something to the historian: it says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous. Thus our task is to understand the meaning of what it says and to make it clear to ourselves and others. Even the nonlinguistic work of art, therefore, falls into the province of the proper task of hermeneutics. (p. 100)

Interpretation and understanding are related to the idea of translation and appropriation. In as such, Gadamer (1977) sees in a hermeneutic interpretation of art the encounter of two languages, “a translation from one language to another:”

But insofar as we can only translate from one language to another if we have understood the meaning of what is said and construct it anew in the medium of the other language, such a language event presupposes understanding. (p. 99)

Thus, interpretation as translation necessarily implies that the work of art be comprehended by the interpreter. How do we begin to understand a work of art, to “listen” to it? In “Sobre la comprensión de edificios y cuadros,” Gadamer (1996) speaks of the “radiation of meaning” as a phenomenon proper to the work of art through which it begins to summon us, to silently call us in order to come close to it and begin to listen to what it has to say (p. 264). Maybe this idea refers to an experience some of us might have had when stepping into an exhibition room. It might be that as we glance to the works displayed there, we feel attracted to one of them in particular, and we walk directly towards it to take a better look. Gabilondo (1996) explains the reason why a work of art calls our attention in such a way is because it relates to a question latent in ourselves, independent of whether we have formally put this question to ourselves consciously or not. Attending to the radiation of meaning of a work of art establishes the possibility of opening up a dialogue with it, of entering into the play of the construction of its meaning (p. 26).

Constructing the meaning of a work of art through conversation and play has the implications I have hinted at in the previous sections. In the particular case of the

interpretation of a work of art, it means a spectator begins to attend to the challenge that the work of art poses. He or she begins to craft this challenge as an answer to a question that was latent and becomes manifest in him or her during the encounter with the work of art. During art interpretation, the interpreter begins to focus on this matter consciously, and begins to enter into a dialogue with the work of art in order to follow the direction of that question. This exchange unfolds when the interpreter observes the work of art in order to recognize what is in it.

Yet, to recognize has particular implications within Gadamer's hermeneutics, and is also associated to the concept of representation as detailed in the section "Art as Symbol" – in a few words: what is represented in the work of art is not only what can be seen and named, but rather, what the work intends to communicate. Gabilondo (1996) highlights how for Gadamer the kind of gaze necessary for this kind of recognition to happen does not merely rely on looking at the work of art but, instead, in a *going to* the work of art, a *going into* it, a walking through it, so to speak, in order to construct it for ourselves (pp. 28-29). All this happens while the spectator "plays along with" the work of art, and begins to fill the "free spaces" left for its interpretation.

This process is also associated to the construction of the meaning of the work of art through the hermeneutic circle, as explained above. Consequently, "reading" or "interpreting" a work of art will also require a circular movement, in which the interpreter constantly goes between the work and him or herself, developing the play of question and answer proper to Gadamer's hermeneutic model, in order to start to recognize what it wishes to communicate.

In "Sobre la comprensión de edificios y cuadros," Gadamer (1996) explains that the interpretation of the work of art "makes explicit, extracts, that which is already implicit in it, in order to recompose it again as a whole" (p. 263). Therefore, the conclusion of this hermeneutic process of the work of art will be a "declaration," yet, it won't be a declaration imposed by either side: neither the interpreter of the work, nor one that is "neutral." More precisely, this declaration belongs to the work of art *and* also to the interpreter, in the sense that he or she has been actively involved in its creation. It is an experience of finding a

common language between both parties, which, simultaneously, transforms both of them. It is communication; it is a “common participation in the world of understanding” (p. 263-264).

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

The question that guides this study is “How do non-specialized visitors with little or no knowledge about an artwork engage in its interpretation through a design based on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics?” The purpose of the study was to inquire into the experience of a group of seven and nine year-olds and their parents during a Museum Education program. This program was designed based on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and was carried out at the Museum of Modern Art (MAM) in Mexico City.

Several authors argue that studies guided by questions such as “how” and “why” are better served by a qualitative or conceptual methodology, since they focus on describing and interpreting a phenomenon rather than on measuring or proving something related to it. Therefore, this study followed a qualitative methodology, using hermeneutical approaches, as well as different methods of data collection.

In order to carry out this research I worked both as a program guide and as a researcher. The reason why I decided to do this is because carrying out the Museum Education program I propose requires a thorough understanding of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as well as of the kind of attitudes and approaches to art and communication it fosters. Preparing someone else to guide the program would have taken a considerable amount of time which I unfortunately did not have at my disposal. Therefore, it seemed to me best to guide the program myself with the help of an assistant. One advantage of working as the guide was that it allowed me a close observation of participants and of their experience.

Data collection consisted of audio recordings, photographs, and participant observations of the activities of the group, as well as group interviews about their experience. data was analyzed to understand how each participant engaged in the interpretation of one work of art. I followed a hermeneutical approach both during group interviews and during participant observations, as well as to describe and understand the

experiences of the participants during the education program. I followed Gadamer's model of the hermeneutic circle to approach data for the same purpose.

Below I describe the criteria used to recruit participants and choose the site, as well as my methods of data and analysis.

The Museum Education program participants attended was adapted from the one I developed as part of my BA thesis, in order to include parents in the process. Its design is based on Gadamer's understanding of art and on his hermeneutic circle, in order to provide an interpretive experience based on play, creativity, imagination and conversation. I provide a detailed description of the program, as well as the explanation of how Gadamer's hermeneutics were built into it, in the next chapter, "Gadamer's hermeneutics translated to an art Museum Education program."

4.1 Participants

Participants were recruited at the Public Elementary School Alfonso Herrera. The criteria for choosing this institution were:

- 1) Location: the school is located near the MAM, making it easier for participants to attend the workshop sessions at the museum after school.
- 2) Academic Level: according to information provided by website of the Ministry of Education of Mexico (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP), this school had better academic achievement and a lower drop-out rates and discipline problems than other schools located in the same area. Participants with a higher academic achievement and less discipline problems would facilitate the development of the program and of data collection.

The process to recruit students from the school was the following: after contacting the principal and explaining to him what the study was about, he suggested that I distributed a letter to all the students of the 3rd grade class with information about the study in order to

invite families to participate in it. The letter was distributed to students by their teacher, and provided information about the research objectives, procedures, benefits and requirements, as well as contact information. A couple of weeks after the letter was distributed, I attended a monthly meeting with parents at the school to provide further details about the study, as well as to establish contact with parents who might be interested in participating. Some parents provided their contact information, and were contacted by my assistant in order to learn of their final decision. During this phone call, parents were informed of the dates and times of the sessions of the education program, as well as of the location of the museum.

The criteria I used to choose to work with children was that, based on my teaching experience, I believed children would be much more willing to engage in imaginative and ludic activities than groups of other ages; I also considered that these kind of experiences are already part of their everyday lives. I became interested in working both with children and with their parents because during the defense of my BA thesis, one of the members of the committee called attention to whether programs like the one I proposed impacted children in the long term, or if they remained extraordinary experiences. This made me reflect about how Museum Education programs for children are often isolated experiences without continuity, unless there is someone close to a child who continues to promote them. As a result, I thought it would be necessary for parents to live a similar experience to that of their children to increase an interest in art in them as well, in the hope that in the future parents would be motivated to take their children to art activities, and to take part in them.

The criteria for the age of children who would participate in the study were based on my experience during my BA thesis. During that study I worked with seven-, nine- and eleven-year-old children. I found that seven-year-old children had more difficulty developing interpretive work than nine and eleven year-olds. Therefore, in the present study I tried to recruit children within a range of nine to ten years old, an age that corresponds to 4th grade children in Mexico. When talking to the principal at the Alfonso Herrera School, he suggested that I recruited children from the 3rd grade group, since this is larger than the fourth grade one and, therefore, there was a better chance to recruit the number of participants I needed for the study. Because of these reasons, I agreed to recruit nine-year-old-children. Two of the families who agreed to participate in the study had seven-year-old

children, and were interested in having all of their children participate in the study. Therefore, I also worked with children of this age as well.

I was interested in working with approximately four children and their parents, since this same number proved to be manageable during my BA thesis study. After sending out an invitation, five families agreed to participate in the study: a total of five 9-year-olds, two 7-year-olds, and seven adults, though only one family (two adults, one seven-year-old and a nine-year-old) were able to complete the program.

Another requirement for participants to be part of the study was to have very little or no knowledge about art in general, and specifically about the artwork they would work with. The families that participated in the study had no knowledge about the art they worked with during the program, although some of them had gone to museums as part of school activities.

4.2 The assistant

In order to carry out the activities of the education program at the museum I required the help of an assistant. The assistant was an acquaintance of mine who had experience teaching English to elementary school children, and who offered to work voluntarily. She also had experience with crafts, and had a good rapport with children and parents.

The activities of the assistant included obtaining consent from participants, helping to prepare materials for the activities, and providing information and some guidance for participants. The assistant also aided me in taking photographs of the workshop activities while I was engaged in them with participants, and provided relevant information on the participants' experience based on her observation, as well as on conversations she had with them.

These observations were recorded through three interviews with the assistant: one of them took place while the program was still in progress, another one after the program was finished, and yet another one during data analysis. These interviews followed a qualitative approach and were guided by interview guidelines with open questions, and developed around participants' behaviour in the galleries and during the activities, as well as around certain aspects of the participants' experience. Participants seemed to feel more comfortable expressing certain feelings or opinions to my assistant than to me. In this way, my assistant was able to provide me with information I otherwise would not have had access to.

4.3 Site

The site of the study was the Museum of Modern Art (MAM) in Mexico City. The MAM holds a collection of Mexican Modern Art produced during the first half of the twentieth century and also shows temporary exhibitions of art produced during the XX and XXI, produced by both Mexican and international artists.

As part of the architectural project of the museum, which is located in the cultural area of Chapultepec Park, the museum's garden shows a permanent collection of Mexican modern sculpture. The building housing the offices of the Department of Education Services is partly surrounded by it. Often one of the paved pathways of the garden is set-up with tables and chairs as a space for education activities. The hands-on activities of this study's education program, such as drawing, writing and painting, as well as group interviews, were also carried out in this place. Interpretive activities which required observation of the paintings were carried out inside the gallery.

4.3.1 The collection

Part of the museum's collection of Mexican Modern Art is permanently on display in one of its galleries. At the time this study was done, the show which represented this

collection was “Disidencias compatibles” (Compatible Dissidences). This was the exhibition in which participants engaged.

The museum’s press release states that the exhibit aims to draw attention to the aesthetic and conceptual complexities and contradictions of modern art in Mexico. This show also attempts to reconsider how the museum’s collection has been shown, presenting a different group of works based on a historic revision of how Mexican Modern Art been thought of and perceived (Disidencias compatibles, 2008).

The works in the collection are arranged according to different thematic areas. Each reviews an aspect of modern art in Mexico in relation to social and historical aspects (Disidencias compatibles, 2008). It is important to mention that these aspects are related to the social, economic and political reconstruction of the country after the Revolution of 1910. Art played a remarkable role in this reconstruction, since it served to create an identity for the country and for its inhabitants, by portraying the different traditions and customs of small towns and indigenous peoples, and appropriating them as heritage of the nation as a whole, and as part of the Mexican identity. Post-revolutionary art also helped legitimize the Revolution and the new government established after it, creating myths around those who participated in the Revolution (military leaders, workers, peasants) and presenting them as heroes. A new interpretation of the history of Mexico was also built during this period and art helped to create its images and to divulge it among the population through murals. Nevertheless, some artists criticized these processes and confronted the idealization of the Revolution and the rhetoric of the government with the social, economic and political reality of the time. These are some of the contradictions and complexities that the exhibition “Compatible Dissidences” intends to explore through its different thematic areas.

4.3.2 Paintings chosen by participants.

During the education program, each participant chose one painting to work with. All participants chose a different painting, except for two brothers, who decided to work with the same one. The paintings are the following:

- *El Vasilon Pulqueria (Pulquería el Vasilón)*, 1919, Jesús Cabrera, oil on canvas.
- *The Little Mule (La mulita)*, 1923, Abraham Ángel, oil on cardboard.
- *Mexico City (La ciudad de México)*, 1949, Juan O’Gorman, tempera on pre-door.
- *The Devil in the Church (El diablo en la iglesia)*, 1947, David Alfaro Siqueiros, mixed media.

The paintings chosen by the participants belong to three thematic areas of the exhibition. *The Devil in the Church* belongs to the thematic area which shows art criticizing post-revolutionary government rhetoric, and points out the contradictions between the ideals of the revolution and the social reality of the country at the time. “*El Vasilón*” *Pulquería* and *The Little Mule* are part of the thematic section which explores the contradictions between tradition and modernity, while *Mexico City* belongs to the one reflecting on the genre of landscape as a way to create a Mexican identity.

The reason why I chose to work with this collection was that, since it is a permanent show, it would allow me and the participants to go back to the collection as needed during the development of the research, without time restrictions. This collection also worked well with one of the limitations of the education program, which is designed to approach figurative painting which includes people or other kinds of characters as part of its composition.

4.4 Methods of data collection.

Data about the experiences of the participants throughout the workshop was collected through audio-recordings, photographs, group interviews, and participant observation, as well as through drawings and paintings made by them. I describe below how and why these methods were used.

4.4.1 Participant observation.

The purpose of participant observation was to record how participants engaged in the activities of the program, their behaviour within the museum, and their interaction with each other and with the program guides. I refer to it as participant observation because I was the program guide as well as the researcher at the same time.

My approach to participant observation was based on the method I used in my BA thesis: a variation of an anthropological observation journal, which was adapted by my BA thesis advisor, Dr. Eugenia Macías. The method consists of keeping track of observations in two columns: in the first one, I described the attitudes and behaviour of participants during the activities of the program, including information on the date, site and activity recorded. On the second column, I described these observations again, but now in the form of abstract concepts, such as “appropriation of space,” “interpretation,” or “background.” The purpose of this conceptual description is to begin to identify possible venues of inquiry or findings to be further developed later.

Participant observation allowed me to record and reflect on the attitudes, behaviour, body language, interest or lack of it of participants as they engaged in the different activities of the program, and how these changed throughout it. It also allowed me to register how participants interacted with each other, with my assistant and with myself, as well as within the different spaces of the museum (the gallery, lobby, garden and education services area). Participant observation further allowed me to reflect on my own interaction with participants.

4.4.2 Photographs

During the program activities, photographs of participants engaging in them were taken either by myself or by my assistant. The purpose of taking photographs was to record and illustrate participants' attitudes, body language and physical interaction with each other and with myself or with the assistant. Photographs were used together with audio recordings during data analysis.

Photographs were taken by my assistant during the activities in which I was actively working with participants. While participants drew, wrote or painted, I was able to take the photographs myself.

4.4.3 Audio recordings

The purpose of audio recordings was to record group conversations during the activities of the education program at the museum. Mainly, two kinds of conversations were recorded: 1) conversations about paintings, which represent an important part of the interpretive process of participants; 2) conversations held during hands-on activities, which offer relevant information about how the activities of the program were experienced by participants. Other verbal interactions held during the program were also recorded, such as conversations held at the beginning and end of each session, as well as explanations of different activities.

4.4.4 Group interviews.

Group interviews were carried out as informal conversations with participants in the space for educational activities of the museum. An interview guide was elaborated previously, which served to point out certain aspects I found relevant to the study. Two interviews were carried out throughout the program: one of them after the last session of

the program, and a second one a few weeks after. Interview guides for both interviews are attached as Appendices C and D.

The first interview was carried out as a conversation while children and parents painted during the last activity of the program. The interview started out with questions about their experience throughout the course which I directed to the group, without announcing that we would have an interview, but more subtly, making it look like a casual conversation like others we had had during other sessions. My decision to conduct the interview with this approach was based on a previous experience: in order to write a paper for one of the courses of the MA program, I interviewed an acquaintance of mine in relation to her experience in a museum. The interview was conducted in a space familiar to her, in a very casual environment, and was held as a conversation. This proved to help gather information from her in a very fluid and rich manner, and the person interviewed herself stated that the casual nature of the environment and of the interview helped her feel comfortable enough to speak about her experience. Based on this, I thought it would be beneficial to find a time and place to interview participants that was relatively familiar to them, and that would help them feel comfortable enough to share their experience of the program with me.

In this fashion the first interview was conducted in a space within the museum already familiar to participants, since they had been engaging in different activities in it through several sessions. The space itself, which is close to the museum's garden, created an atmosphere of comfort and tranquility. I waited for a moment in which participants were already looking comfortable painting in order to casually propose the first question. As they answered, I began introducing other questions as part of the discussion. Later on, the need for prodding ebbed and participants themselves began talking about aspects of their experience they wanted to share, and about their opinions on the program. Participants also shared their opinion on museums, and on how they could establish contact with their audiences.

The second interview was carried out in the same place, yet, this time participants were asked to come to the museum in order to attend a closing ceremony, and to have a conversation about their experience throughout the program. I was careful not to talk about it as an interview, since I thought this could make participants feel intimidated or insecure about how or what to answer. This second interview proved to be very fluent and rich with information. Again, some of it was guided on one hand with the help of the interview guide, and on the other with the issues participants themselves brought forth.

Other elements of group interviews taken from research done with focus groups were taken into consideration in order to carry out interviews. David Morgan (1996) defines focus groups as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher,” and he adds that this definition “locates the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data” and “acknowledges the researcher’s active role in creating the group discussion for data collection purposes” (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). Even though the interaction between participants was neither the main source of data nor the focus of this research, interaction within the group during interviews provided important data.

Jenny Kitzinger (1994) points out that focus groups are useful when trying to “encourage people to engage with one another” and “verbally formulate their ideas” (p. 106). Morgan (1996) also indicates one of the strengths of focus group interviews, as opposed to individual ones, as “that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other” (p. 139). During this study, these strengths of focus group interviews were used in order to encourage participants to talk about their experience, as well as to gather data I might not have been able to obtain through individual interviews.

Morgan (1996) also explains how a comparison made between individual interviews and focus groups has “concluded that the dynamics of the individual interviews put more burden on the informants to explain themselves to the interviewer,” which in the study proved to be helpful in allowing participants to feel less intimidated to share their experience. On the other hand, Morgan also points out that group discussions involve “mutual self-disclosure” (p. 140). During this research, some participants, in group

interviews, did acknowledge that they felt intimidated by speaking in front of the group; others seemed to be unwilling to disagree with each other, or to contradict others. In this sense, the interviewing technique used during this research might have missed information that could have been registered through individual interviews. Unfortunately, due to participants' time availability, and to the difficulty of interviewing children without the presence of their parents, this was not possible.

4.4.5 Participant's drawings and paintings

Drawings and paintings made by participants were part of the development of the activities of the program, yet they also served as sources of data to help understand the processes of interpretation experienced during the program. These drawings and paintings were photographed and archived digitally. The original paintings were kept by me throughout the data analysis in order to work directly with them.

4.4.6 Written surveys

A written survey was administered to participants in order to collect information about their backgrounds in relation to museum and art experiences. The survey was also used to learn about participants' experience during the program. It used open-ended questions in order to gather this information, and also asked other information such as age and gender. It was printed as a questionnaire and handed out to participants to fill out during the closing session of the program.

Surveys were answered by participants in group, and they talked about their answers out loud with each other, providing information not registered in the surveys in written form. This verbal interaction was audio recorded.

I designed two versions of the survey, one for parents and another one for children. The information asked of both is the same, though each survey uses a different kind of

language, taking into consideration the difference of language capabilities between the young people and their parents. These two versions are attached to this thesis in Appendices B and C.

4.5 Data analysis

Data analysis of this study had two purposes: it aimed to describe the experience of participants throughout the program, based on their own comments and observations about their experience as recorded in interviews, as well as through audio recordings, participant observation and photographs; it also aimed to understand this experience based on a hermeneutical approach. I understand the hermeneutical approach of this research as the part of my theoretical lenses allowing me to *interpret* the experience, in order to understand it and relate my comprehension of it to others. My hermeneutical analysis of the data was guided by my in-depth familiarity with Gadamer's interpretive model, the hermeneutic circle, as explained in the Theoretical Framework.

Data gathered through the different methods mentioned above was analyzed in two stages: during the first one, I read the participant observation and listened to the audio recordings in order to map the different interpretive processes that participant's experienced throughout the workshop; during the second stage, these sources of data, as well as photographs, drawings and paintings, and my assistant's observations, were used with the intention to describe and understand collective and individual experiences of the different processes that were identified in the first stage.

Once these processes were mapped out, part of their analysis was carried out by establishing relationships between the philosophical understanding of interpretation as explained in the Theoretical Framework, and the data collected on the participants' interpretive processes. These processes were reconstructed based on the following: 1) participants' understanding of their own processes, drawings, paintings and written

narratives,¹² as recorded during group interviews and audio recordings of the program's activities; 2) through my observations and my understanding of the participants' processes; and 3) through my assistant's observations as recorded in the interviews. The analysis of the participants' images produced during the workshop was guided by the following: 1) their explanations of their drawings and paintings, as registered in audio recordings; and 2) my analysis of them using a hermeneutical methodology to analyze images, partly guided by Diego Lizarazo Arias' (2004) proposal in *Hermeneutics of the Image (Hermenéutica de las imágenes)*.

Initially, seven families began to participate in the study, though only one was able to complete the whole program. Therefore, data analysis of this study concentrates on the information gathered around the experience of this family. Yet, since some results are based on the interaction of participants from the different families whom initially attended the program, certain parts of the report of findings will include data gathered from them as well.

Data analysis can be metaphorically imagined as creating a tapestry aspiring to identify, describe and understand the collective and individual processes of interpretation experienced by participants during the Museum Education program. This tapestry was woven with the threads of data collected and with the needles and scissors of theoretical understandings and perspectives guiding my approach to this research.

The findings are presented in Chapter 5, "Art Means Something to Us: Analysis of Participants' Interpretive Processes", which details the kind of interpretive processes experienced by participants throughout the program. In Chapter 6 I also describe briefly other findings about participant's experiences not directly related to the interpretive processes developed by the program.

In the report of findings, I describe both individual and collective processes of interpretation. By individual processes of interpretation, I refer to each of the participants' interpretation of the painting chosen individually. Each one of these processes was

¹² With "written narratives" I refer to an activity of written story-telling that was part of the program's activities. See subchapter "Telling the story of myself inside the painting" in Chapter VI, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics Translated to an Art Museum Education Program."

analyzed by concentrating on the one aspect of hermeneutic interpretation they best represented. One of them, “Mónica and *The Little Mule*, and Raúl and *The City of Mexico*” is built from data gathered from two siblings who were unable to complete the education program at the museum, but whose experience offers contrasting and valuable information I believe is indispensable for this study. Collective experiences involve other aspects of hermeneutic interpretation that are lived as group experiences, such as the experience of time and of conversation in relation to interpretation. Another phenomenon identified, appropriation, is presented through information from all the participants’ interpretive processes, since it was identified in all of them.

Chapter 6 describes other issues brought up during the program, which would require further studies so as to be understood in depth. The descriptions of these are based on my observations, as well as on data gathered from photographs and audio recordings. Some sections in this chapter are based primarily on the experience of participants as lived by them, such as “Appropriation of Space” and an important part of “The Role of the Workshop Guide.” The rest have their foundations mainly in my own perspective on these topics, since they relate to questions beyond the participants’ own experiences.

The findings of this research consist of descriptions of the interpretive processes and experience of participants, including in certain parts, translations of audio recordings originally spoken in Spanish. The analysis of these processes is interwoven with the descriptions, and focuses on illuminating interpretive processes from a hermeneutical approach, and on analyzing the way in which Gadamer’s hermeneutics shaped these processes and experiences.

CHAPTER 5 GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS TRANSLATED TO AN ART MUSEUM EDUCATION PROGRAM

The museum program I present here was first designed as part of my BA in Cultural Studies thesis. Its main objective was to “enable a dialogue between works of art and participants in a way that the latter be able to recognize the contents of the works and make them their own through their intelligence, sensibility, intuition and life history” (Estrada, 2005, p.50). Secondary objectives were: 1) to create an atmosphere where participants can feel confident working both in the museum galleries and with the program guides; 2) to enable an interpretive dialogue through language, imagination and creation; 3) to enable an understanding of what a work of art could say to a child or parent about their world; 4) to empower children and parents to approach a work of art as something that could communicate something about themselves, and to see the museum as a place where an individual can go “listen” to art (p. 50).

The objective of my BA thesis was to design this education program based on Gadamer's hermeneutics, to provide an approach to art for young people. In the present study, this program will be expanded by: 1) including parents in the process; 2) concentrating on the analysis of the interpretive processes experienced by the participants; 3) reporting other findings related to the experience this program facilitates.

How have Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics served as a basis for the art Museum Education program? This philosopher's ideas about art and interpretation allowed me to understand the art spectator (in this case, children and their parents) as an active participant in the work of art, not merely a passive observer or recipient of information. This spectator that hermeneutics allowed me to imagine is a co-constructor of the work: in other words, someone who can understand and appropriate what a work communicates through attentive observation, inner intellectual and imaginative activity, creation and conversation.

Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, as well as his ideas on art as play, served as a basis for activities to stimulate an interpretive movement between the spectators and a work of art.¹³ This movement is a constant coming back to *one* work of art, which was chosen individually by each one of the children and parents who attended the program. On one hand, there is the circular movement of interpretation, which in the program translates to several different imaginative and creative exercises allowing participants to come back again and again to the same work of art, aiming to permit them to look at it more attentively and to continue developing their interpretive project. On the other hand, there is the movement of art as play, which is characterized by Gadamer as an inner intellectual movement which participates in the re-construction of the work of art.¹⁴ In the education program I designed, this inner movement is put into practice through imaginative exercises, drawing and painting.

There are two other elements of the hermeneutic circle and of art as play that were decisive in the design of the workshop: the question and the "as if" of play. Both of these elements work together in the activities of the workshop: the question sets off imaginative activity in the workshop, which is intended to help participants begin to pay attention to the form and content of the work of art by means of pretending to be in interactive situations with the elements represented in it.

The importance Gadamer gives to verbal language in order to achieve hermeneutic interpretation was put into practice by including discussions between participants in which they spoke of their imaginative and creative processes to the group, as well as through verbally sharing imaginative and creative exercises.

In his work, Gadamer does not speak of creative or hands-on activities as part of the process of interpretation, nor as interpretive tools. Thus, in order to guide the inclusion of creative activities in the design of the program during my previous study, I used the work of the Mexican educator José Gordillo, as explained in his book *The Child Teaches the Man*. Gordillo's work does not deal with hermeneutic philosophy, nor with art as

¹³ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as play, Hermeneutic Interpretation, and Interpreting Art.

¹⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as play.

interpretation, yet, his perspective on creation was useful to call my attention to the possibility of incorporating creative activities in the program, in order to reproduce certain aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle. Gordillo (1992) points out the importance of creative activity for children, as well as for any human being. Gordillo argues that engagement with different artistic activities – music, theater, visual arts, dance – is fundamental for the development of children's perception, as well as of their ability to know, understand and be critical of their context. For him, artistic and creative endeavors are in themselves a form of knowledge. Based on this, I used drawing and painting in the workshop as a way to enable children to better observe, make sense of and understand the work of art each of them selected. One of the first activities of the workshop, in fact, is borrowed from José Gordillo's work.

The program is structured in four different sections, all made up of several activities. I describe them below, adding to this description a few comments about the objectives of each activity, and making reference to the concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics that support their design.

The program has been designed for collections of paintings, in which there are recognizable characters, such as people or animals, to execute the activities proposed in sections 2, 3, and 4. Further research could examine how this workshop works with other kinds of visual art.

5.1 A walk around the museum

The activities of this first part of the program are intended to make participants feel confident in the museum, in its galleries, and with the program guides. Furthermore, these activities are designed to encourage participants to engage in creative activity, such as drawing and imaginative games.

5.1.1 Musical scribbling

This activity is proposed by Gordillo (1992) in *The Child Teaches the Man* (p. 217-219). In it, children scribble with crayons on a white piece of paper, while yelling as loudly as possible. For this program, the activity was adapted by asking children and parents to scribble to the rhythm of music, instead of while yelling. The piece of music chosen was “Saade” (“I’m Happy”), from the album *Pieces of Africa*, performed by the Kronos Quartet. This piece was picked because of its liveliness, in the hope that it would allow more diverse forms and directions of lines.

Gordillo (1992) writes that this activity tries to generate an atmosphere of confidence and trust between children and guides. He also states that it “allows children to feel less intimidated by a blank piece of paper, as well as to develop a freer, happier and more enthusiastic creative activity” (p. 219). In this program, parents also participate in the activity for the same purposes. This activity also establishes game and play as desirable and legitimate practices of the program.

5.1.2 Breaking the barrier of the museum: observation

Once an atmosphere of playfulness has been established between participants and program guides, it will be necessary to help the former feel less intimidated by the environment of the museum. By this I mean that often there is a certain atmosphere of solemnity, in which the required behaviour is silence or whispering, quiet observation, and slow walking, as though one were walking into a church or another kind of temple.

The first part of this activity is asking children and parents if they have been in a museum before, and if they have seen how people behave in it. Some children might have had previous experiences, while for others this may be their first time in a museum. During this group talk, the guide can draw on children’s comments to signal certain rules which are important to follow for the safety of the artwork, explaining the rationale behind it. This

talk can also be used to set in motion participants' familiarity with appropriate behaviour in museums.

After asking them to observe how people behave in it, the second part of this activity is to walk with the group inside the museum's gallery. Some subjects that may guide their observation are: how do people walk inside the gallery? How do they look at the art work? How do they talk? It is important to emphasize that during this first walk through the galleries attention is to be concentrated on people rather than on the art displayed. After this exploratory walk, another group talk will take place in which children and parents share their findings and observations. During this group talk, it will be especially important to help them reflect about why they think people follow that behaviour.

These activities are intended to help children and parents reflect on the behaviour in the museum, in order for them to understand it or, maybe even, be critical of it. This also means to generate a conscious and critical appropriation of this behaviour, or the construction of an individual behaviour by each member of the group that minds the necessary conditions for the care and preservation of the artwork, as well as for respect for other visitors' experiences.

5.1.3 Breaking the barrier of the museum: mimic

This activity is directed to approach behaviour in museum galleries with a ludic attitude. It is based on two ideas: 1) Gadamer's concept of the "as if" of play,¹⁵ and 2) Gordillo's (1992) ideas about behaviour and humour. The latter states that the representation of adult behaviour by children leads, first, to laughter, and then to consciousness of it, as well as to seeing it with refreshed eyes (pp. 309, 314).

The activity consists of a game of mimicry, in which only children will participate. They walk through the gallery imitating other visitors' behaviour. This performance of humour within the space of the gallery is intended to diminish stiffness in the children's

¹⁵ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as play.

behaviour, so as to make them feel less intimidated by the sometimes solemn atmosphere in the gallery. This activity will also help children begin to pay attention to the art work. In fact, it is important to ask them to commence doing so as they walk through the gallery.

Parents might be unwilling or hesitant to participate in this exercise. Therefore, they will only be asked to walk around the gallery and look at the work in the manner described in the next activity, while their children are engaged in this game.

5.1.4 Finding the work that calls me.

This activity is linked to the game described above. As children walk through the gallery watching the art work, they will be invited to stop before a work that attracts their attention. It is important to remember that children are *not* asked to focus their attention on what they *like*, but rather, on what *catches* their eye. Parents, as they walk, will be asked to choose a work of art using the same criteria.

It is important that children and parents find something that *attracts* their attention or *catches* them because, in this way, a hermeneutic attitude can begin to be established. This is based on Gadamer's idea of the "radiation of meaning" of the work of art as explained by Ángel Gabilondo (1996).¹⁶ He theorizes that a work of art attracts our attention because its creation is guided by a question asked of ourselves, even if we are not fully aware of it. Thus, if a child or a parent chooses a work of art with which they share a common concern, there is a better chance that their own life experience will aid them in the interpretation and understanding of that particular piece.

This will work on two hermeneutic levels: 1) there will be a response to the work's "radiation of meaning", and, in this sense, there is the possibility to establish a first intuitive project of meaning¹⁷; and 2) there will be a common interest between the spectator and the work of art, which will facilitate the development of interpretation and understanding.

¹⁶ Cf. Chapter 3, Interpreting Art.

¹⁷ Cf. Chapter 3, Hermeneutic Interpretation.

5.2 Hey, I've got a question

This set of activities intends to begin to develop interpretive activity through imagination, drawing, and conversation. These activities are mainly rooted in Gadamer's ideas about art interpretation as a re-construction of the art work by the spectator. They follow Gadamer's ideas of the "as if" and of the "movement" of play¹⁸; of the importance of the question, of dialogue and of the circular movement of interpretation of the hermeneutic circle¹⁹; as well as of Gordillo's ideas around the capacity of every human being to create.²⁰

5.2.1 An imaginary conversation

Through this game, children and parents will begin interpretive activity. In it, they imagine a conversation with one of the characters represented in the piece: that is, they begin to ask questions of the characters, and they imagine what these characters would answer.

Participants who select a work of art through the previous activity will be allowed to observe it in silence for a few moments. After a while, a workshop guide will approach them and ask them to imagine questions they can ask to one or more characters, as well as the answers from them. Some queries that can be given to assist in participants' understanding of the activity are: "What question would you pose to one of the people painted here?" "What do you think they would answer?" "What other things could you ask them?" Each participant will be given the necessary time to engage in this conversation.

This activity also helps spectators in reflective observation of the work of art, that is, to carefully observe what is represented in it, at the same time they begin to make sense of it. In this way, the themes or topics children and parents begin to observe will be based on what is actually represented in the work of art. This reflective observation and this initial construction of a project of meaning may also be based on the relationship between what is represented and children's and parents' life experience, previous knowledge, every-day life,

¹⁸ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as play.

¹⁹ Cf. Chapter 3, Hermeneutic Interpretation

²⁰ Cf. Chapter 3.

imagination, sensibility or interests. Through this, participant's prejudices and pre-understandings will begin to be put into play. Through each new question, children and parents will have a chance to better observe the details of the painting; each question will also function as a new circle in this hermeneutic conversation.

5.2.2 Comic and conversation

Once each child and parent decides that their imaginary conversation is finished, they will go to the area assigned for hands-on activities within the museum. There, a guide will give them paper and markers for them to reproduce their imaginary conversation as a comic strip. The choice of markers as opposed to other media is deliberate: in Mexico, primary school children are used to using colour pencils as drawing media, often after having first outlined their drawing with pencil. The use of pencils and colour pencils allows them to concentrate on the perfection or realism of their drawing, constantly erasing and drawing again. This, besides extending the exercise for too long, may divert attention away from the actual representation of the dialogue, and the identification of those parts of the painting's composition retained in the memory of the observer. Markers, on the other hand, do not allow corrections, and therefore help to avoid this kind of distraction.

Additionally, drawing this comic strip is a way to perform another circle in the interpretive activity of the workshop, allowing participants to return to the painting, as well as to their first interpretive project, through memory and creative activity.

5.3 Inside the painting

The activities of this third section are intended to further develop reflective observation, as well as each participant's project of meaning.

5.3.1 Sharing my comic

In this activity, each child and parent shares their comic strips with the rest of the group. This helps participants remember their previous interpretive process, and lets other members find out about the interpretive processes of others. The group goes from one painting to another, sitting or standing around it, while each participant shares their drawing and their imaginary conversation.

This activity is guided by the program guide, who will ask each participant to talk to others about their drawing or their experience. It will be important to allow the participant to lead each talk as much as possible, yet it may also be necessary for the guide to point out certain aspects about their drawings or experiences that participants might miss. Guides should be careful not to direct the participants' talk; moreover, they should be careful not to affect their interpretation, or make them feel that it is incorrect or insufficient. This also gives participants a chance to reflect again on their interpretive project by verbalizing it; other members of the group might also point out things about the painting or the comic strip that could enrich the participants' observation of the painting and their project of interpretation.

5.3.2 Picturing myself inside the painting

After all the members of the group have shared their comic strip, each of them will go back to the painting they chose to perform another imaginative game. While the whole group is still together, the guide will explain to them that they will observe the painting and imagine that they can walk inside it and move around in it. The guide will ask participants to pay attention to the kind of things they would do if they were inside the painting, as well as to the things they would hear, smell, touch or taste, the things they would see from different perspectives or would walk through or into, as well as the things they could say to the characters represented in it.

In order to help children and parents remember these things, the guide will give each of them a handout with the following questions: ²¹

- What can you see?
- What can you hear?
- What things can you touch?
- What things can you talk about with other people in it?
- What are you wearing?
- In what part of the painting are you?
- What are you doing?

Again, each of these questions will function as a new circle that allows additional reflective observation and interpretation to take place. Through this activity, attention paid to characters in the previous game will be diminished, in order for participants to pay attention to the rest of the composition. Again, participants will be allowed to engage in this imaginary game for as long as they need to.

5.3.3 Writing a story about myself inside the painting.

The purpose of this exercise is, on one hand, to register the previous imaginative experience, and, on the other, to help participants remember what they imagined when they share it with the group during the next session. Program guides will provide paper and pens or pencils for participants, and will ask them to tell write about what they imagined, as though they were telling a story. Participants will be encouraged to try to remember and tell as much as possible about their imaginative exploration of the painting.

Again, this exercise serves as another turn in the hermeneutic circle. Through it, participants will reconstruct again, now through memory, the paintings' composition both

²¹ See Appendix I, "Inside the Painting" Handout.

through careful observation and using their own background to aid them in its imaginary reconstruction.

5.4 Are we speaking about the same thing?

Up to this point, most of the interpretive activity is accomplished through imaginative games, drawings and narrative. At this point, interpretation of the paintings will be approached through language, in a more reflexive and rational way. Nevertheless, creative and imaginative activity won't be left aside, but will be used as interpretive tools during this last part of the process.

In order to be able to guide participants through this last stage, it is important that program guides be familiar with each participant's interpretive process. Therefore, before this last session, program guides will look at the participants' comics and narratives, taking into consideration what each of them commented on each group talk, and will try to identify certain topics that spectators might have developed, even if they've not done it consciously yet. Some examples of these topics might be fraternity, identity, maternity, passing of time, etc. The program guides will work on this analysis while also closely paying attention to the painting and to what is in it, performing a hermeneutic interpretive exercise themselves, so that they can be as familiar as possible with the paintings participants are working with, approaching them hermeneutically, in order to better guide them. This can also help program guides come up with questions that they consider could help each participant reflect on their own interpretive process.

It is important to point out that program guides should be careful to *guide* participants through this last exercise – that is, to help them make sense of their own findings through conversation and through a more reflexive approach, rather than imposing on them contents of the guide's own interpretation of the work.

Again, this activity will work as a new circle in the hermeneutic interpretation, which will allow participants to enrich and finalize their project of meaning.

5.4.1 The painting speaks

The purpose of this activity is to review each participant's process throughout the whole workshop, in order to approach the painting as something that speaks and communicates in the hermeneutic sense.²² Throughout it, participants will begin to reconstruct what they've been discovering about the work of art in a more concrete, rational and reflexive way. The tacit questions guiding this exercise will be "What has the painting told me?" "What have I been listening to?" "What knowledge have I built together with it?" These are tacit questions in the sense that they will not be enunciated as such during the activity, but the intention is to arrive at the answers these questions require.

In this activity, the guide will ask each participant to talk to the group about what they've imagined about the painting with the help of their comic strip and their narrative piece. As the child or parent talks about their findings, the program guide will have them notice, with the use of questions and conversation, what they've discovered together with the painting. The guide will assist them reflect on these findings, in order to come to a conclusion. That is, they will arrive at an idea or series of ideas or statements about their interpretive reconstruction of the painting.

5.4.2 In my own images

After the conversation of the previous exercises is completed, the program guide will invite participants to imagine how they would transform the painting in order for it to express the ideas that they found in it. Participants will be able to either change the composition of the painting, or to come up with a completely different one. The tacit question that will guide this activity will be "How can I represent what I have interpreted from the painting in my own images?" It may be the case that children or parents agree with what they have found the painting says to them, or it may be that they disagree with it. Through this variation of the original painting, children and parents will update what it communicates, that is, they

²² Cf. Chapter 3, Art as symbol.

will be able to show what it tells them that is valid for their world and for themselves. In other words, children will translate the painting into their own images.

Participants will be given time to remain in front of their painting, so they can think about and imagine how they could transform it. Once they are ready, participants will paint their imagined composition. Guides will provide brushes, acrylics and suitable paper for them. The imaginative and creative exercise children and parents have done before will serve as a basis to build this last composition.

5.4.3 Speaking about my own images

The last exercise of the program will be one final conversation, in which each participant will share their painting with the rest of the group, explaining in what way they changed the original painting each of them chose, and what they want to communicate with their own composition. This will be the last turn of the interpretive circle proposed by this program, which will allow children and parents to conclude the program by appropriating the painting through creation and conversation.

CHAPTER 6 ART MEANS SOMETHING TO US: ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT'S INTERPRETIVE PROCESSES

6.1 An overview of the Museum Education program at the MAM

The Museum Education program was carried out in the Museum of Modern Art (MAM), in Mexico City, during the month of March, 2009. The program centered on the exhibition *Disidencias Compatibles* (Compatible Dissidences), which showed Modern Mexican paintings and photographs as part of the museum's collection.

The program was attended by families who had children between seven and nine years old. They were recruited at the Alfonso Herrera Public Primary School, located near the museum. Originally, five families signed up for the program and began attending it. Unfortunately, due to time restrictions, only one family, the Hernandez family, was able to complete the program. The findings that I present here focus on the experience of this family. I also talk about the experience of the children of the Morales family, who were able to attend about 70% of the program. I use the case of the Morales children to talk about some of the limitations of the workshop. What's more, in some parts of the report I include data obtained from other participants, since some activities in which the Hernandez and the Morales participated were done collectively, particularly at the beginning of the program.

The Hernandez family is made up of two children, Luis, seven years old, and Gabriel, nine years old. Luis is in the 1st grade and Gabriel was in the 3rd grade when they attended the program. Ana and Raúl are their parents. This family had gone to museums before as part of school homework. Some of the museums they mentioned they had been to were the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología), The Jewish Historical and Holocaust Museum Tuvia Maizel (Museo Histórico Judío y del Holocausto Tuvia Maizel), and an exhibition on instruments of torture. The Hernandez children had taken a Saturday drawing class in the La Salle School. According to what Luis

said, during this class they learned some drawing techniques by copying images selected by the children.

The Morales family had a very similar structure as the Hernandez: they have two children, Samuel, who was 7 years old and, like Luis, was in the 1st grade and Karla, 9 years old, who was also in the 3rd grade and in the same class as Gabriel. Since the Morales family wasn't able to attend any of the interviews, I obtained less background information on them. It is possible that they had also gone to other museums as part of school homework, since they attended the same school as the Hernandez children. Yet, when during the first session I asked the group if any of them had been to museums before, neither Samuel nor Karla answered affirmatively. The Morales family was unable to attend the last session of the program, when the first interview was carried out, and also the last interview, which also took place on a Sunday at the MAM.

The weekday sessions were attended by Gabriel, Luis, Karla, Samuel, and their mothers, Ana and Carolina. Gabriel and Luis's father, Raúl, attended both weekend sessions, while Karla and Samuel's father, Armando, was able to attend one weekend session.

Three other children from the 3rd grade class began attending the program: Héctor, José and Javier, all of them seven years old as well. These children attended only two sessions of the program. José's sister, Vicky, and Héctor's parents also attended the same number of sessions with them. All the boys in the program seemed to get along well with each other, and most of them are friends in school.

During weekend sessions, the activities that correspond to the sections "A walk around the museum," "Hey, I've got a question" and "Inside the painting" were carried out. During the first weekend session, the first part of the activities of the section "In my own images" took place, and they were completed in the following weekend.

Thus, children and their mothers carried out their imaginative and interpretive activities during weekday sessions, and during the third session, they shared their process with the fathers. Fathers were able to see what the other members of the family had done

during the previous sessions, and participated in the conversational and creative activities of the last section of the interpretive activities, “In my own images”.

Below I describe and interpret how the processes triggered by the program were carried out and experienced by participants, by focusing on three different cases: 1) Gabriel’s and Luis’, who chose the same painting, “The Devil in the Church” by David Alfaro Siqueiros; 2) Ana’s and Raúl’s, who engaged in the interpretation of “El Vasilon Pulqueria” by Jesús Cabrera; and 3) Karla’s and Samuel’s processes, who chose “The Little Mule” by Abraham Ángel and “The City of Mexico” by Juan O’Gorman, respectively.

6.2 Gabriel, Luis and “The Devil in the Church”

Gabriel and Luis had been to museums before. Their parents had taken them because they had been asked to at school. They recalled being to the National Museum of Anthropology, and to an exhibition of instruments of torture that was rather popular for a time in Mexico City. They were both very excited about choosing the same painting – “The Devil in the Church,” by David Alfaro Siqueiros. The reader can view an image of Siqueiros *The Devil in the Church* on the following web page: http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/siqueiros1.html.

I will begin by focusing on Luis’ and Gabriel’s drawing of their imaginary conversations, and on the explanation of the drawing each of them made. This will allow me to begin analyzing their interpretive process.

Before discussing Luis and Gabriel’s interpretation, I would like to point out that the way in which the figure of the devil is lived in Mexican Culture might be quite different from how it understood in other cultural contexts. Mexican Culture is often referred to with the word “syncretism,” which in this context refers to different processes through which the different cultural traditions that inhabited this territory during the conquest and in following centuries merged, creating new traditions which at the same time preserve and transform those original cultures. Even when cultures such as the Chinese, French, English, and

African ones form part of this syncretism, it was mainly pre-hispanic cultures that merged with the Spanish one of the “conquistadors.” These syncretic traditions remain to this day, both in rural and urban areas, and influence the way Mexicans relate to Catholicism, among other things. I am discussing this particular tradition because it relates to the contents of Siqueiro’s painting and to Luis and Gabriel’s approach to it. The figure of the devil in Mexico is not only lived within what it represents for Christian tradition, but it also forms part of other non-Catholic festivities and is represented in different kinds of crafts, intended for purposes of decoration and are not considered religious figures. The devil is also present in the “pastorelas”: theatrical representations of Jesus’ birth. In them, the devil’s role is to unsuccessfully try to stop a group of indigenous peasants from paying tribute to the newborn, by constantly attempting to deceive them and lead them out of their way. The devil here appears together with a group of other “little devils”, and all of them are represented in a humorous way. Thus, figures of the devil represent mischief in a humorous way, and not always make reference to the Devil in Christian tradition, but rather to mischievous creatures. Other times, conscience is represented through the figure of an angel and of a devil, each of whom advice a person to do something good or something bad, as might be the case in other contexts. While this is not an exhaustive analysis of the figure of the devil within Mexican Culture, I hope this brief discussion will help the reader understand part of Luis and Gabriel’s horizon of understanding.



Figure 1. Gabriel, Luis and *The Devil in the Church*.

The Devil in the Church represents a scene inside a church, seen as though the viewer were standing on the altar. Therefore, the altar is missing in the painting: instead, we see a large group of people standing and raising their arms, all of them dressed in white; in between them, we see round figures, dressed in colours, which represent women lying on the floor. This group fills the first level of the church; the way they are dressed indicates that they are indigenous people, most probably peasants. If we look up, we see that there is a second level in the temple, where we see figures of people dressed in different colours. Some of them appear to have hats, and, overall, they give the impression of being somehow superior to the rest. If we continue our way up, we see that the dome of the church is broken, and that a monstrous creature substitutes it, suspending itself over the scene by holding on to the edges of the broken cupola with his hands and feet; through the spaces in between his body and the ruins, we can see part of a blue sky.

Luis established an imaginary conversation with one of the characters of the paintings: one of the figures that can be found in the second level within the church, which he referred to as “the king”. While explaining his comic strip (see Figure 2), Luis told the group that he had directed three questions at this “king”:

- Here I copied the king, the one up here; this is me, and I asked him if he was the king, and he said yes, – said Luis, pointing at the first box of his comic strip, where he drew himself as a robust person in green next to the king, whom he identified as one of the central figures in the upper part of the church.
- Here I asked him if that was the real devil, and he answered yes, because there it says “The Devil in the Church” - he said pointing at another part of his comic strip, and at the title of the painting written next to it on the gallery wall.

The figure of the king seems to have functioned as a guide that explained to Luis what the things represented in the painting were. In the first part of the drawing, Luis represented this king with a crown; yet, in subsequent ones, the crown is lacking. Luis represented himself wearing green clothes and a green hat, and he appears as a robust figure. This first imaginary exercise works as an initial recognition of what is represented in the painting, and as a project of anticipation.²³ The figure of the king can be associated to issues of power, which is a theme that was further developed by Luis, Gabriel and other members of the group during the following sessions.

Luis related the title of the painting to the figure represented in the upper part of the temple, and identified it as the devil. He mentioned that he had also identified it as such because his body was monstrous in the sense that it was made up of different parts of animals: “A lion’s head, crab’s hands... His feet I think are... dragon or crab...”

In this first exercise, Luis thought that the group of people in the lower part of the church were lifeless, since he saw figures lying on the floor. Yet, during subsequent exercises and group conversations, he began to challenge this belief, looking more attentively and stating that they seemed to be asking for something, and identifying that the

²³ Cf. Chapter 3, Hermeneutic Interpretation.

figures lying down on the floor were female, while the ones standing up were men. This speaks of how the simulation of the hermeneutic circle of the design of the program allowed him to question and change his initial assumption; this is one of the implications of the hermeneutic circle as explained by Gadamer.²⁴



Figure 2. Luis' comic strip.

It is particularly important to note how Luis's drawing speaks of a careful observation of the general composition of the painting: he reproduces its general structure, and visually describes the figure of the devil in the same position as it appears in Siqueiros' painting; he draws the detail of the columns from which the curved white line springs, and remembers that there were human figures both standing and laying on the ground. It is also important to take into consideration that this drawing was not made while Luis was in front of Siqueiros' painting, but rather, it was drawn from what he remembered of it; this speaks

²⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, Hermeneutic Interpretation.

of how careful and prolonged observation of Siqueiros' work enabled Luis to retain several details of the painting in his memory.

Gabriel's imaginary exercise has certain similarities with Luis'. It's possible one of the two brothers imitated the interpretation of the other; during one of the sessions, Gabriel complained that his younger brother had "copied" his ideas, which Luis denied.

Gabriel's comic strip (Figure 3) presents two boxes. During his explanation to the group, he told us about other questions he had imagined but hadn't had time to draw in his comic strip. Gabriel's explanation of his drawing followed Luis', and, in fact, he began by saying "I only drew two [questions]." I told him it was ok, and he continued:

- Well, here you can see the people... the people are worshipping the devil, there at the top, - he said, pointing to the figure of the devil in Siqueiro's painting. I asked him if he was the real devil, and he said yes, he added.
- Ok, what made you think that that was the devil?
- Because of the face. It looks like... like...
- The thing is, he looks like he has fangs... – added his brother.
- Mhm – replied Gabriel, assenting.
- Did you form any other questions that you didn't have time to draw? – I asked Gabriel.
- Mhm. I asked them why they were making a reverence to the devil.
- And what did they answer?
- That he was their leader.
- Ok. Did you ask them any another questions?
- No.

Throughout his imaginary conversation with Siqueiros' painting, Gabriel approached different characters through his imaginary conversation. One of them was the devil, to whom he directly asked about his identity; yet he concentrated more on the group of people located in the lower area of the temple in Siqueiros' painting. Like his brother, he also identified a figure of power: in this case, it was the devil himself, which Gabriel interpreted as the leader of the group of people in the lower part of Siqueiros' painting, who, in Gabriel's imagination, were worshipping him.



Figure 3. Gabriel's comic strip.

During one of the interviews, Gabriel and Luis said they felt very nervous when they talked about their drawings in front of the rest of the group. They both acknowledged they were worried about saying things right, and that nervousness made them forget what they wanted to say. Therefore, it is possible some data about the questions and answers they

imagined might not have been recorded either in the drawings or in the children's account of it.

This exercise served both for Luis and Gabriel as the construction of a project of anticipation. The imaginary conversation and the comic strip representing the conversation, worked each as a circle of interpretation; the children's explanation of their comic strips worked as a third. This constant return to the painting allows for a more detailed observation of it, and it also brings interpretation back again and again to the painting itself. In this way, the project of anticipation is founded both on what is represented in the painting and on how it is seen from the horizon of understanding of each viewer. In the following exercises, this project of anticipation continues to be developed as a project of meaning.

During the second set of imaginary and interpretive exercises "Inside the painting,"²⁵ the children imagined they could go inside the painting, walk around and talk to other characters. Like I lay out in Chapter 4, this exercise is another return to the work of art allowing for further observation and for the development of the project of meaning. Instead of drawing about their experience, children write about it in the form of a story.

In his story, Luis now becomes an active participant of what is happening in the painting, which through his actions becomes a battle:

At the beginning, I climbed on top of the devil. After that, I stole his crown for the king and made everyone stop praying to the devil. The devil smelled bad and the blood did too. The king's crown was hard. I screamed a lot to make them stop.

Then he drew a line, separating what he had written above from what he wrote below it. This last part was an answer to one of the questions of the handout:²⁶ "If you were inside the painting, how would you dress yourself?" His answer was: "with a cap, t-shirt, trousers and black tennis shoes."

²⁵ Cf., Chapter 5, Inside the painting.

²⁶ See Appendix F.

In this imaginary exercise, the king stops being Luis's guide and becomes an opposing force. Luis imagined a link between the king and the devil, and tried fighting both of them. Luis' intentions were to stop the people from their veneration of the devil, and therefore tried to dominate the devil and take away the symbol of power of the king: his crown. Even though he didn't talk about it, this may account for Luis drawing himself as a robust man in the comic strip.

Luis' story develops the idea of power: he fights against the king and the devil in order to stop a practice that he considers wrong, trying desperately to end it in his imagination. Luis's interpretation also has certain similarities with his brother's, as will be seen below.

In this exercise, Gabriel's telling of his imaginative experience within the painting was structured as an actual story, in which Gabriel is the main character who faces a conflict solved with an open ending. I impart here a translation of Gabriel's story:

I found the kings in the upper level. When they reached the devil a very strange sound was heard. I found the people worshipping him. Long live the devil, long live. I hid under a table where I was very afraid because the devil was mad and he gave off a horrible smell. The devil realized I was there. So I ran and hid among the people and I spoke to a man who asked me: What are you doing on the floor, son, why are you touching the crown of the devil's king? Well, sir, I am just a helpless boy, I have trousers made of rags and a wool vest; how could I steal the king's crown? Traitor, traitor, traitor! Guards!

Like his brother, Gabriel has a confrontation with the people in the church. Though, unlike him, he does not deal them openly, but as an alternative, he attempts to pass unseen, but is finally discovered. Gabriel doesn't clearly state whether he did steal the crown or not, but he does give us clues to infer he is being searched for: he needs to hide from the devil, who somehow perceives his presence; he brings in a conversation with the man who makes reference to him "touching," though not "carrying," the king's crown when he is among the

crowd, and is finally accused of treason. Here, the impulse of depriving the king of its crown is also present. Unlike Luis' story, Gabriel seems to be tragic, in the sense that he does not accomplish whatever his unspoken intention was: he stops before making its outcome known to us. In this sense, Gabriel's story has an open ending, since it is only suggested and left for the reader to complete. When Luis talked about his story to the group, I emphasized how well-structured his writing was, how so much like a story it was indeed. His mother, Ana, said she had been very impressed when she read it.

In both of the imaginative and creative exercises of these two brothers, the crown becomes an important asset seeming to represent power, and in both confrontational events take place. During this exercise, the theme of power continues to be elaborated, now as a struggle between opposing forces. Both Luis and Gabriel attempt to defeat a kingdom that fosters a practice they oppose.

The third set of interpretive exercises is less focused on the participants' imagination, and more on relating their imaginary exercises to the painting itself. This is done through an exchange with the leading question being: "What do you think the painting is about?" Before putting this topic to Luis and Gabriel this, I asked them to talk to the group again about their comic strip, and to tell us, for the first time, about their stories. This was done for two purposes: 1) it serves as an introduction to the work done on the workshop for the parents who are incorporated into the program during this session; 2) it works as a kind of "summary" of the imaginative-interpretive work done so far, serving as grounds on which to answer this query.

Luis and Gabriel said that they thought the painting spoke about "the tradition of people who ask favors" of the devil, and of those who ask favors of God. They thought the painting spoke about following "good" behaviour and good thoughts, as opposed to giving in to "bad" thoughts or behaviour. Both Gabriel and Luis arrived at this assumption by relating their interpretations of the painting to one element of their horizon of understanding: "they say that the devil stand on your shoulder, and he tells you to do bad things to others," according to Luis, "Things like that are not good," according to Gabriel.

Luis and Gabriel further explained their understandings of the characters represented in Siqueiros' painting, stating they saw two "bad" characters: the devil and the king, who was the one who "believes in the devil" to whom everyone wanted to listen, who "told" people "to keep praying to the devil." Up until this point, Gabriel's and Luis' interpretation of *The Devil in the Church* centered around the opposition of good and bad, and on a power struggle between the power exercised by the "king" and the devil and Gabriel's and Luis' effort to end this rule.

The participation of parents during this conversation allowed different interpretations to arise, influencing and challenging Luis and Gabriel's initial project of understanding. During the discussion about Luis and Gabriel's interpretation of *The Devil in the Church*, Armando, Karla's and Samuel's father, and Raúl, Luis and Gabriel's father, developed other meanings based on their own life experiences, and triggered by the children's interpretation. Armando and Raúl pointed out what they considered to be accurate observations on behalf of the children, and elaborated on them.

Armando called attention to the sharp distinction between social classes in the painting, making reference to how in the upper part of the church the people seemed to be well-off and powerful, in contrast with the people in the lower part. He also commented on one of Luis's ideas: "Like Luis said, there really is no devil, but the reality is that, all those who are there can be the devil themselves, right? Each and every one of them can be the devil themselves," he said, probably taking the children's idea of "bad" behaviour to other contexts where it could have more serious consequences.

Raúl also commented on the interpretation of Gabriel and Luis, how they emphasized the people in the lower part of the painting presenting an attitude of "submission in a situation from which they can obtain a certain benefit" were on their knees and worshipping. He also highlighted the distinction between classes in the painting, stating: "... the difference can be seen in what the people wear, which speaks of what people lack." Raúl further explained the children's understanding of the painting in relation to Armando's and his interpretation, which was formed from the perspective of adults:

“...in the case of children, all these things are synthesized in that they see something good and something bad, but we have a different vision of what is affecting us in that situation.”

Throughout this conversation, the parents’ interpretations of Siqueiros’ paintings were constructed based on the children’s interpretation of it: the latter allowed them to pay more attention to the content of the paintings, and to give a different interpretation based on their own horizons of understanding. This dialogue demonstrates how parents underscored the way in which children perceived the painting, relating it to its contents as a representation of class distinction and power struggles, and they seemed to recognize that, even from their understanding, the children had been able to identify elements of what they considered were the actual contents of the painting. In addition, parents stressed the role imagination played in their children’s interpretation, and how it sometimes was helpful and others times it made them imagine things that were not actually portrayed in the painting.

Something common to all interpretations, both the children’s and parents’, is a power struggle within Siqueiros’ painting. It is interesting to note how both Luis and Gabriel, in their imaginative exercises, strive to overthrow the rule of the king they see in the character located in the center of the upper level of the painting. It is intriguing to observe this in relation to Siqueiros’ artistic goals: he was a member of the Communist Party in Mexico, and actively promoted the creation of unions to protect the rights of workers and miners. His work is closely related to communist ideas about class struggles, and is intended to publicly criticize the abuse of power of the ruling classes, as well as the failed ideals of the Mexican Revolution, in order to make these abuses known to those who suffered them. He understood art as a force to influence social change. In *The Devil in the Church*, this denouncement of the sharp differences between classes is also present, associated with his criticism of ecclesiastical power.

The ideas developed during this conversation were related to some of the issues raised by Siqueiros in his works, particularly through the participation of Armando and Raúl. The children interpreted these contents of the painting in the form of a power struggle between good and evil. Both of them, through their imaginative exercises, intended to liberate the people in the church from the rule of the king, who was somehow accounted

with the people in the church worshipping the devil. Parents saw this interpretation of the fight between good and evil as a young perception of power scuffles between classes.

The last session of the program centered on discussing the manner in which each participant would change the composition of the painting they chose in order to come up with a composition of their own, in which they showed what the artwork had communicated to them.

Gabriel began by saying that his brother had thought something about the painting, regarding his idea of defeating the devil: “Luis said that defeating the devil is like in the “posadas,” when they cover your eyes and since you can’t see the devil, you have to... break the piñata and at the end, the candies come out of it and that is the prize for... for defeating the devil.” Luis added, “you shouldn’t listen to the little devils that sit on your shoulder.” I asked: “So, you mean you need to defeat this devil with force, because it is so strong?” Both of them said yes, and Gabriel added “If you say, I’m not gonna do bad things, if you say it, you won’t do it, you won’t do it.” “So you need your will to do it?” I said. Gabriel said that was correct.

Here, Luis and Gabriel were using two elements of their horizon of understanding to interpret the contents of “The Devil in the Church.” One of them, a traditional celebration of the Christmas holiday, called “posada.” The literal translation of this word is “lodging” or “inn”, yet in Spanish the word also refers to “shelter,” as when one person receives another one in his or her house for the night as an act of help. In “posadas” a representation of the Christian figures of Mary and Joseph in their search for a place where Mary could give birth to Jesus takes place. During this representation, people sing a traditional chant, and go from one place to another asking for shelter. Other people represent those who deny them shelter, as well as the one who finally gives Mary and Joseph a place to stay; these people also sing their assigned parts of the chant. Another activity that is part of this celebration is the breaking of the “piñata,” a clay pot that is decorated with coloured tissue paper and is filled with candy and fruit. Traditional piñatas have seven paper cones attached to the clay pot, and each of them represents one of the seven capital sins. The tradition is for people to try to break it with a stick, one person at a time, while blindfolded. The piñata

hangs from a rope held by two men, who move the rope around making it more difficult for someone to break it. When someone finally does, everyone rushes to pick up the candy and fruit. Breaking the piñata is a symbol of defeating the temptations of the devil, and the candy and fruit represent the reward for it. Luis, according to Gabriel, associated the symbolism of this tradition to his imagined defeat of the devil and the king, which throughout the interpretation of both children represented bad actions.

The other element of these children's horizon of understanding used during their interpretation was the image of a little devil speaking into a person's ear. This image is common and well-known in Mexico, probably taken from cartoons and TV shows which make use of it. When children brought up this image during the conversation, Raúl and Armando confirmed that they knew what the children were referring to. In one of the interviews, Luis explained that he had seen something similar in a movie on TV. In it, there was a girl in a toy store who wanted a toy. According to Luis, a little devil appeared and urged her to steal the toy. She did it, but then realized that Santa Claus was looking at her. In the interview, Luis and Gabriel pointed out this part of the movie as something that represented the act of choosing between doing something good or doing something bad. Again, this, in association with the representation of the devil in Siqueiros' painting, led to their interpretations of the presence of this figure as an indicator that the people in the temple were followers of the devil, and henceforth doers of bad things. This, in turn, led to their desire to stop them, which they manifested in their imaginary battles against the king and the devil. This leads one to think that they would argue in favor of doing good instead of doing bad.

During this conversation, Gabriel and Luis incorporated some of the ideas and opinions that Armando and his father Raúl had about the painting, which they had heard during the last session: they stopped referring to the figures they had previously identified as kings, and began calling them powerful or superior people. In this sense, Luis and Gabriel's prejudices were changed by the adult's opinions about them. As a result, they stopped using the word "king" and referred to this figure as "the most important" and "superior" people, or "the ones with the most power." In this sense, the inclusion of parents

in the program allowed different horizons of understanding to come into play and, therefore, it also allowed for assumptions to be questioned.

The children elaborated on how they would alter the painting: they both agreed on taking out the devil and painting a figure of Christ instead, as well as on representing all of the people who attended the church on the same level. Gabriel added that he would place glass boxes with figures of angels and saints in the same place where, in Siqueiros' work, people of upper classes were represented.

While discussing the painting, Luis, Gabriel and Raúl added new contents to their interpretation, and there was a chance to look at the painting in more detail and defy previous ideas of it, allowing for yet another hermeneutic circle. At the same time, both Luis and Gabriel continued to reflect in the way in which they would change Siqueiros' composition.

Raúl commented on what the children had mentioned about the attitude of the people in the lower floor of Siqueiros' painting. He said that more than reverence, it looked like a plea, like asking for something. He said that the children had somehow mentioned it before, when they said that the people there were asking for favors:

- Like they said, the people who have their arms extended look like they are asking for something, while the ones that are on the floor look like a bundle, as though they are going through some torment, Raúl said.
- Ok, as though they had suffered a lot and they were asking... , I suggested.
- Yes, yes. What's more, look at how they're inclined to the floor... It can be interpreted in different ways, not precisely because they are at ease, but rather, they are all asking, according to their needs, he added.
- Okay. Luis, you were going to say something...

I said, since Luis had attempted to say something while his father was speaking.

- It could also be that the people there, you can see their clothes are torn, instead of that, I would painted them with good clothes, he said, referring to how else he could change Siqueiros' painting in order to create a new one himself.
- That everyone had the same worth. Not that one person was worth more than someone else, added Gabriel.
- And that there were sons and daughters, and couples, because there, it seems like there are no couples. It looks like a farm-yard where there are many animals, and the devil is like that for them, as though he were the one who takes care of them and could beat them, but that would be terrible! said Luis.
- Like... that everyone had the same worth, not one more than the other, Gabriel insisted.
- Okay, how would you paint that, Gabriel?
- Well... Putting two people, one with dark skin and one with white skin one beside the other, and... like, well... peasants together, he answered.

Raúl's comment on the attitude of people led the children to pay more attention to what had been represented in Siqueiros' painting. His comment on the people's gesture as a plea, more than reverence, set the children off in the direction of paying more attention to that group of people, as well as on developing ideas of social inequality, as part of what they thought *The Devil in the Church* represented. In the following part of the conversation, Luis and Gabriel persisted in focusing on the group of people in the lower part of the church:

- It looks like the people are offering their lives to be happy, said Gabriel.
- What do you think they are asking for?
- To have better clothes, said Luis.
- To be richer, added Gabriel.

- Or to have food to eat..., added Luis.
- Or to be happy..., added Gabriel.
- Or to have children..., added Luis.

In the following part of the conversation, Luis, Gabriel and I focused on the figures lying down on the floor. Gabriel argued that they had somehow offered their lives, and were already dead, yet Luis had a different opinion:

- This one I think is, like, kissing the floor, ventured Luis, pointing at one of the figures lying on the floor.
- This one?, I asked.
- No, they are already dead, Gabriel insisted.
- Ok, it could be that they are already dead, or that they are very tired, I suggested.
- Or they fell asleep..., added Luis.
- It could be so... but it tells us about something like... a lot of tiredness, I said.
- They are asking for something but... But nothing happens, said Gabriel.
- Like they ask for something and nothing happens and they fall to the floor because of tiredness, added Luis.
- Or they get bored and they fall... they fall because they're waiting so long, said Gabriel.
- They die without food or water, said Luis.

The ideas of social distinction Armando and Raúl had discussed during the last session were brought into the interpretations of Luis and Gabriel. As I have pointed out before, these ideas are an essential part of the artistic work of Siqueiros. In this sense, Luis and Gabriel's interpretation, together with Armando's and Raúl's, led the group to an

understanding of part of what Siqueiros' painting intends to represent: power issues and social inequality.

Throughout this talk, Gabriel and Luis constantly reflected on how they would show their disagreement with that inequality represented in Siqueiros' work when they made their own painting. Their interpretations here broadened: first, the painting was interpreted as representing the rule of the bad that needed to be overthrown so that the good could reign. After this reading was analyzed and enriched by Armando's and Raúl's ideas, Luis and Gabriel began to see a sharp distinction between rich and poor people in Siqueiros' painting, which they felt needed to be changed so everyone could be equal.

It is interesting to note here that these ideas of equality are similar to the ones Siqueiros promoted. Together, adults and children arrived at this conclusion without mentioning anything about the painter's background, his intentions, or scholarly studies about the painting. In this sense, the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics proved to be useful in allowing participants to reflect on issues intentionally brought up by the work itself, as well as to arrive at an understanding of the work of art which was to a certain extent coherent with what it intends to communicate.

In his "In my own images painting" (Figure 4) Luis, unlike Siqueiros, chose to present the view of his version of the church from the exact opposite perspective: he shows it as though the viewer were standing in the very back of the church, instead of from the front. It appears as though the viewer were positioned within the entrance of the temple, which doesn't lead to the inside of a building but out into the open. In the foreground, there is one long bench where people are sitting. We can only see their heads: some of them have black hair and others are blond, as though Luis was trying to allude to the disappearance of class distinction by having those who represent wealthy people (the blond) with those who represent the lower classes (the ones with black hair). This stereotyped distinction is part of everyday life in Mexico, where people with fairer skin are regularly thought to belong to well-off families, while most people in the lower classes tend to be thought of as having darker skin and dark hair. This stereotype is often promoted by soap operas, in which the wealthiest people have white skin and tend to be tall and blond, while those who represent

lower socio-economic classes are represented by shorter people with dark skin, often indigenous. Luis draws these people paired, sitting in couples, in sync with his ideas about what the people in Siqueiros' painting needed.

Instead of the inside of a church, Luis shows the people sitting in a landscape where there are apple trees, birds flying, and a blue, sunny sky. In front of the people sitting on the bench, Luis drew a person wearing a blue robe and hat, each one of them imprinted with a Christian cross. In front of all of them, there's a large Christian cross. Luis said he had painted the temple in the country because he liked landscapes. He also explained that he had painted some animals: a deer on the right, a little above the edge of the bench and below an apple tree. He also said that he had drawn a lion, which is on the left side of the cross. When I asked him what he wanted to express"with his painting, he answered: "That there be peace and that they didn't do anything... to, to call the devil. And that's it, and that there be peace."



Figure 4. Luis' "In my own images.

Gabriels' painting shows a similar perspective as Luis's, even though he does draw the temple within a building (Figure 5). He also shows a bench from the back, situated in the foreground. Gabriel shows the heads of four people: three of them look male and one looks female. The sizes of the male heads all differ: the one on the left is the smallest, then follows a bigger one, and the biggest one is on the right. Perhaps Gabriel intended to represent a family like his: the children on the left, and the parents on the right, though he didn't state that this was his intention when he explained his painting. Above these people, there are two squares: one is yellow and the other one is blue. Gabriel clarified that he intended to represent a glass box with angels and saints there, but that he hadn't been able to paint it well. He explained that the figure with the black and white robe holding a cross was a priest "teaching the word of God." The central upper part of the painting are "the feet of God," that is, the feet of Christ on the cross, which he wasn't able to represent in its entirety because there wasn't enough space on the paper. Gabriel mentioned he had tried to represent that there was no one who was worth more or less than others by putting everyone on the same level, including the priest.

It is interesting to consider this last element in Gabriel's painting in relation to Siqueiros' work. In *The Devil in the Church* there seems to be a criticism not only of social inequality, but also of the ecclesiastical institution, as well as to its use of power. In the upper level of a church, several figures are seen extending their arms and holding each other, and, in one of the rows in the back, we can see something similar to a hat, as one that forms part of a high priest's dress. In this sense, the painting would be representing the superiority not only of wealthier classes, but also of ecclesiastical figures. Gabriel, in his painting, decides to represent his idea of equality extending it to the priest, who is also set on the same level as those who attend mass, and thus is neither inferior nor superior to them.



Figure 5. Gabriel's "In my own images."

During the last interview I asked Gabriel and Luis: "If you told your friends or classmates about the workshop, what would you tell them?" Gabriel answered: "That the paintings there represent something... Let's see... Something very... like very normally... Or that has happened... Or that has happened to us." Luis replied "No, because each painting... they say that, each painting has a message." Luis quite clearly explained what he thought about what paintings are: something that "has a message". This is related to Gadamer's understanding of art as a form of communication, as I have explained above.²⁷

Still, I was puzzled and intrigued by Gabriel's idea about painting, so I asked him "You mean that it can be normal, that it can happen to a lot of people?" Gabriel answered: "Like the one in our painting... That some people believe in the devil..." Luis interrupted

²⁷ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as symbol.

him and added: “And some people don’t.” This interrupted Gabriel’s explanation of his idea. I didn’t quite understand it, so I asked him again: “What do you mean by “normally” Gabriel?”

- That... hmm... Many times that happens, like what happens in “The Devil in the Church.” That, we all have a devil inside...
- Like a movie that I saw about Santa... or something. About Santa and the devil that we saw... That a girl wanted a doll and a big devil appeared and told her... - added Luis.
- Ah, yes! - said Gabriel.
- “Here, it’s yours. Take it!” And the girl took it and Santa was looking. And something like that... But it was horrible!
- Like they give you advice to do bad things. That, like my mom’s painting... How things change. If before there was peace and calm, now, not so much. – concluded Gabriel.

It seemed that Gabriel, after the program, thought what is represented in paintings relates to events in people’s lives. This idea relates to Gadamer’s notion of self-understanding, one of the outcomes of hermeneutic interpretation according to Gadamer. In “The play of art” Gadamer (1986b) explains:

... the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly rises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about. (p. 130)

In this sense, Gabriel’s understanding of art seemed to be related to what we can be, perhaps we may all “have a devil inside,” or be prone to carry out actions that we know may cause negative outcomes, and that we might be able to fight that tendency through a strong will. Gabriel also seemed to see in art a way to understand how life in the city has

changed, compared to how it was before, through his mom's interpretation of the painting "El Vasilon Pulqueria," which will be analyzed in the following chapter. Thus, for Gabriel art became a mirror in a similar sense to how Gadamer describes it.

Similarly, Luis related the contents of the painting, particularly the figure of the devil, to something that was familiar to him: a movie he had seen on TV. The association between what he saw in the painting and what he had seen in the movie helped him construct a meaning about the painting having implications about ethical behaviour, or, to put it in Gabriel's terms, "That we all have a devil inside" who "gives you advice about bad things." This relates to Gadamer's model of interpretation, particularly to how the prejudices that make up the horizon of understanding are part of the basis that enables interpretation and understanding to be achieved. In Luis's case, his horizon of understanding was partly made up of the contents of TV, including movies targeted to children. This particular movie he talked about, when brought into his on-going project of understanding, helped him build a new meaning for the figure of the devil in Siqueiros' painting, one that reflected on "good" and "bad" actions, not only for the people inside the painting, but to anyone, including his brother and himself.

The study of this interpretive process illustrates how participants engaged in the reflection of issues of social justice and ethical behaviour, in such a way allowing them to imagine new possibilities of social coexistence.

6.3 Ana, Raúl and "El Vasilon Pulqueria"

Ana is Gabriel and Luis' mother. She is a sales person in her forties. She said she had never taken art lessons, but she had gone to some museums as part of her children's school homework. Some of the museums she mentioned going to were the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología), a museum of electricity and a museum of wax figures; she also mentioned going to the Ex-Convent of the Desert of the Lions (Ex-convento del Desierto de los Leones), which is considered part of Mexico's Cultural Heritage. Raúl, her husband, is also in his mid-forties and is an employee. Like his wife, he

commented that he hadn't taken art lessons before, though he had been to some museums, like the National Museum of Anthropology, the Wax Museum, the Ripley's Museum, and the Jewish Historical and Holocaust Museum. He explained that he had gone to some of these museums as part of one of his sons' school activities.

Ana chose a painting called "El Vasilon Pulquería" ("Pulquería el Vasilón"), painted by Jesús Cabrera in 1919. The title of this painting refers to the name of a kind of bar, similar to a saloon or "cantina", where a drink called "pulque" is sold. This drink is of a pre-hispanic origin: the myth goes that the secret of how it is made was revealed to a woman by a god, and it was then drunk by both high and low social classes. After the conquest and up until today, it has been considered a drink common among lower classes, peasants or indigenous people and it is very cheap. The "pulquerías" generally are places only men go to, and they are primarily popular in small towns or in rural areas, though some "pulquerías" can also be found in cities. The name of this "pulquería," "El Vasilón," refers to a word that is a Mexican idiom, referring to having a good time, having fun or making jokes.

The painting represents several scenes from a town. It centers on a long street that runs next to a river. The street and river can be seen from the perspective of someone looking at it from the left: things on this side of the painting look closer, while the ones that run along the street, extending itself towards the opposite angle, grow smaller and smaller. There are several buildings placed on the street, among which a colonial building with archways, a church, and the "Pulquería El Vasilón" can be identified, among others. The street appears unpaved, and the streetcar's tracks run all the way through it. There are several people on this street: musicians playing music, people dancing to it, walking, carrying goods, selling things, men going in and out of the pulquería, and people riding on boats, among others. In addition, the painting shows some vegetation, noticeably along the river, and behind the buildings. In the right corner, a patch of grass can be seen, as though it were the opposite bank of the river; in it there is an advertisement that reads: "Pure pulque at 6 cents a liter."



Figure 6. Ana, Raúl and *El Vasilon Pulqueria*.

In her imaginary conversation (See Figure 7), Ana asked questions to some of the objects portrayed in it, such as a building and a streetcar, as well as to some people, such as the ones who were in the boats or “chinampas:” the musicians, a woman selling food and a dog that was near her. Throughout it, she began to pay attention to the general atmosphere represented in the painting, as well as to some of its characters and the activities they were engaged in. She first spoke to a colonial building. Rather than asking something of him, she spoke to it, stating: “What tranquility this place inspires! You must have been built many years ago.” When she explained her comic strip, Ana articulated that the front of the building was similar to those seen in “rancherías,” or in small towns. With these two statements, she began developing an idea of an ancient place, filled with an atmosphere of idleness, which she continued to develop in the rest of her imaginary conversation.

The second question was directed to the streetcar. When she explained her comic strip, she stated that she had noted how the car seemed to be just arriving to the town, and had written on it the word “Ixtapalapa.” This is the name of a place now absorbed by Mexico City, though it used to be a town on its outskirts. “What distance did you travel to get here?” Ana asked the streetcar. Even when she did not write an answer in her comic strip, with this question she was already referring to this place as one that was in some sense distant, a place to which one had to travel in order to get to it.

The third question she drew in her comic strip was directed to a woman who was selling food, to whom she asks: “What are your “gorditas” made of?” “Gorditas” are a traditional food made of corn flour and filled with beans, cheese or other ingredients. Ana said that, in her imaginary exercise, she had directed this question to the woman to get her attention, because the woman was distracted, looking at something else. Ana didn’t write an answer to this question either, yet she did write one for the question she made to a dog who seemed to be stealing something from next to this woman’s street stand: “Are you hungry, little dog?” “Of course I am,” he answered, “that’s why I took this chicken from the table.”

The next and last box in Ana’s comic strip shows the river with two boats in it. These boats are called “chinampas,” and are similar to canoes in their structure; they are moved in a way similar to Italian gondolas: a man propells them with a long stick hitting the floor of the river, pushing the boat forward. These “chinampas” are sometimes covered with a roof held by four posts. In Cabrera’s painting, there are two “chinampas” with people in them. Ana directed her last two questions to the people inside: “Do you like the ride?” “Of course,” the person answered, “you can enjoy this beautiful landscape.” What’s more, she directed a query to a musician who was playing a guitar for a couple: “What tune are you playing?” she asked. “A romantic song,” he answered. When she explained her comic strip, Ana didn’t talk about any other imaginary questions she might have made to people in the painting, which she might not have had time to draw.



Figure 7. Ana's comic strip.

With this imaginative-interpretive exercise, Ana developed a project of anticipation which began to explain the scene represented in the painting as a place of leisure and idleness, where everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. There were two conditions that seemed necessary for this idleness to exist: on one hand, that it was removed (away from the city, as she would explain in one of the conversations), and, on the other, that it was a small town. These conditions were associated to situations that happened during holidays or vacation time, that is, not the activities of everyday life.

During the following set of activities, "Inside the painting," Ana imagined walking around the avenue. In her piece of writing she explains:

I see a town and I'm going towards the center, but I also observe in front of it there is a lake, I feel curious and I go inside the church, I see images; on the wall there are religious paintings. I walk back out on the

street and I see a lot of people, each one of them occupied in their activities, I hear voices and in front of me I see a canoe that takes a couple who are taking a ride on the lake, a man playing a tune on a guitar, I see two people dancing since they are playing a trumpet and harp for them. I smell food since there is a lady selling food and “gorditas”. I can touch the plants someone carries in a canoe, the fruits that are in the stand, I ask a man what is the flavor of the “pulque” he’s drinking, how do you prepare the dish that is so delicious!

Like her son Luis, at the end of her writing Ana answered one of the questions of the handout I gave participants to guide this activity: “If you were inside the painting, what would you wear?” She answered: “Comfortable clothes, jeans, ‘huaraches’ or tennis shoes, and a blouse made of ‘manta.’ I would like to be in the canoe and then eat ‘antojitos’ because the taste of food in ‘provincia’ can’t be matched.”

Before I continue detailing Ana’s process, I will explain the meaning of some regional words she uses that do not have a precise translation to English. One of them is “huaraches,” which are similar to sandals, made out of leather. They are of pre-Hispanic origin and are worn by indigenous people, though their use is now popular among the rest of the Mexican population. “Manta” is a kind of fabric made of cotton which is used in many traditional indigenous clothes. It also is of a pre-Hispanic origin, and is now used to make other clothes not belonging to indigenous traditions, but that have some similarities with them, often in the embroidery designs used. The use of these clothes is not restricted to indigenous groups, and all different types of people nowadays wear clothes made of “manta”. “Antojitos” is a word used for a certain kind of snack or appetizer, often made of fried corn, and can be easily found in street stands; “gorditas” are a kind of “antojito.” And, finally, “provincia,” which is a word used to refer to any part of the country outside Mexico City. For people in the city, this word has specific connotations, among them, a place where life is quieter and less stressful.

After Ana explained her comic strip and story to the group, I asked her what she thought the painting was about. Ana, together with the rest of the group, identified three

different themes in the painting: an idealized perception of rural life, a reflection on social life, and topics related to differences between the wealthy and the needy, as well as ethical issues around this. Based on their observations, the group began to reflect on the transformation of the town of Ixtapalapa (which has now been absorbed by Mexico City) throughout the last century, and on the differences between rural life and city life.

At the beginning of the conversation, Ana continued developing her initial idea: that the painting represented a place of leisure and recreation, emphasizing the aspects of social interaction and tranquility. Ana stated that the painting spoke to her “About the social life of the place, of the traditions the town has, what is around it and what things one can take advantage of there.” And then she added: “It gives a sense of tranquility, people are very calm.”

When she finished commenting on other people represented in the painting, she remained silent and kept looking at the painting for a while, and then added: “It looks pretty, doesn’t it? Because there is a lot of vegetation, trees, you can see a sky that is clear, and here in our city it’s grey, black, and one feels wanting to be there.”

Ana reflected on the transformations the town of Ixtapalapa had undergone throughout the last century: “It looks like a normal town, but, Ixtapalapa... Well, that is a place here [in Mexico City] but maybe before it was a town...” As Mexico city grew, the town of Ixtapalapa, like several other areas, was absorbed by the city, and is now a rather poor and dirty area. It seemed as though it was difficult for Ana to believe the Ixtapalapa she knew could be the same as the Ixtapalapa represented in the painting, that it once had been a small, picturesque town. Ana referred to the date of the painting, 1919, and began to consider the passage of time and how it had transformed this place. Furthermore, this discussion led the group to reflect on the differences between rural life and city life, remarking on the way in which the painting spoke about a life with “no worries and less stress.”

They pointed out the differences between Ixtapalapa then and today, and how the city and life in it had changed. Luis and Gabriel spoke about the tranquility before, unlike

today. Raúl spoke of how Ixtapalapa, according to the painting, used to be a place to visit, and how now it is very dirty. They talked about how the river became polluted, when the river in the painting appeared to be clear, “as though one could swim in it.” They talked about the overall pollution of the city, and the difficulty of finding a peaceful place. Raúl began telling us a little bit about the history of streetcars in Mexico City: how they were used originally to connect the city with other outlying communities with the Center of Mexico City. He spoke about products from other places transported to the Center of Mexico City in boats through different waterways. It didn’t occur to me then to ask him if he had done some research about this subject, but it is interesting to note that he hadn’t talked about this information in the previous conversation about the painting, so this might be a possibility.

The group pointed out the festive environment of the painting, where people are dancing, singing, playing music, eating, drinking and talking a walk. Raúl indicated that the painting “expresses that in that time of celebration, of coexistence, there are no differences among people, it’s simply the pleasure of being with each other, spending time together, or the pleasure of enjoying the food, the pleasure of enjoying one another...” Ana agreed with Raúl, and added a remark in relation to Siqueiros’ painting: “There you can’t see what we were talking about in the other painting [*The Devil in the Church*], that you could see the differences, here all people look the same, and it doesn’t matter what each one is wearing or doing, everyone is just concentrated on what they’re doing.”

In relation to these comments, Armando, Karla and Samuel’s father, argued that the painting did not intend to represent social classes, nor differences among them. In response to this, I called their attention to a group represented in the painting: an old man wearing a black suit, black hat, white socks and black shoes, who walked with his hand on the shoulder of a young boy who was dressed with white trousers, black shoes, a white shirt, a blue suit, a red tie and a blue hat. They were both smiling, and the man rested his other hand on his pocket. Near them, and walking away from them, was another boy, who wore torn black trousers, a torn white shirt, a torn hat and had no shoes. He had a mischievous smile and was holding a clock from the chain from which it hanged.

Ana explained that in the painting people weren't rejecting the boy that was wearing torn clothes, affirming her idea about the lack of differences among the people represented in Cabrera's painting. I called attention to the hand of the boy, who was carrying a pocket watch, which triggered a conversation around ethical behaviour and about distinction between social classes. Raúl stated that the boy carrying the watch could be a thief, to which I replied:

- Yes, he could be a thief. So maybe these differences are a bit more hidden, the painting talks about them but more discreetly....
- As though he had a wallet in his hand... said Luis, perhaps translating this situation to one that was more familiar to him.
- Like the other painting, that... Like they say that we all have the devil inside, said Gabriel, referring to *The Devil in the Church*.
- The devil in this case is his necessity... I mean... he stole the watch. But in reality it is his need, it is not because of wanting to do something bad, argued Raúl.
- But the man and the boy are walking calmly, but maybe the boy took out the man's wallet out of his pocket, said Luis.
- Or maybe it was also... That the boy if he doesn't have the need to steal, it is better for him to work, stated Gabriel.
- Or his parents. Or maybe he could ask for money, or sell gum, added Luis.

The identification of themes around the painting speaks of how, through conversation and further of observation, the group was able to listen to part of what the painting told them, and consider aspects of their everyday life, which allow them to notice certain aspects of their context in a different light.

It was intriguing to watch participants engaged in the discussion about the painting, relating its contents to other paintings, such as "The Devil in the Church." Even when I did not ask participants to pay attention to the curatorial structure of the exhibition, some

relationships among the works in the collection the curatorial program dealt with were pointed out, emphasized, and discussed by the group, through the comparison of both paintings. This was done without my direction, instead it was the participants who established connections between the different paintings in the exhibition. In this sense, the application of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle was able to lead participants to listen both to what the painting said, and to some aspects of what the curatorial program intended to communicate.

Unlike Gabriel's and Luis' interpretive process, which was led more by their and the group's participation, Ana's interpretive exercises needed more of my participation in order to lead the group to pay more attention to the painting, in the hope that both description and interpretation could be deepened.

It was fascinating to note that during the conversation, Luis and Gabriel sometimes struggled to participate while their parents were speaking. Luis kept insisting on joining in until he was able to say what he wanted to say, while Gabriel waited for a chance to speak, but at times each forgot what he wanted to say or simply refrained from saying it. While Luis was speaking about the boy stealing the watch, Ana whispered something to Raúl about how parents sometimes stop children from participating. Raúl's answer wasn't clearly recorded, but this comment helps to focus on the interaction between parents and children during group conversations, and how it was perceived by parents: Ana seemed to be very aware of how her children tried to participate in the discussion but couldn't, because the adults kept talking. Raúl seemed to be unaware that his children were trying to add something while he was speaking.

After this conversation, I asked Ana how she would change the painting in order to turn her ideas about the painting into a composition of her own. She said that she didn't think she'd change anything about it, but then mentioned several things she would like to see differently in the painting: she would paint the "pulqueria" further behind, as though hiding it; she would take the drunken people and the people who were fighting out of the painting. She said she would also change the face of the boy who was stealing the watch, making it more agreeable and taking out the watch from his hands. It seemed that, after the

conversation, Ana identified certain elements in the painting that disturbed the tranquility and peaceful social coexistence represented in the painting, and wanted to take them out. I asked her why she would make these changes. She and Gabriel tried to answer at the same time. Then they both remained quiet, waiting for the other one to speak. Finally, Ana asked her boy to go ahead:

- Because it is very close to the church, and it would be like... disrespectful, he said.
- Well, I'd change it because we see that there is a child... well, two children, and it looks like it is a family-friendly environment, people who go shopping, and it gives it a bad appearance to have it [the "pulquería"] beside them and, like Gabriel says, so close to the church. And the boy, he also looks bad... I mean, I would add more good values to it [the painting], so they [her children] learn from the beginning not to do such things.

Both Ana and Gabriel seemed to disagree with certain behaviour they considered inappropriate, disrespectful, or lacking good values. By taking these out, Ana hoped to come up with a composition that would be able to teach good values. Ana added:

- I would also take the stands from being right in front of the church, I would put them aside, I mean, to...
- Why?, asked Luis
- Because... Even if it's closed, it doesn't look right that there are people there..., explained Ana.
- Or close it down..., Luis added
- Close down... what? The stands? I asked.
- No, the "pulquería"... Luis clarified, and we all laughed.
- Everyone agrees on taking out the pulquería, why?, asked Raúl.

- Why? Because it doesn't look right for people to be there, that person fighting, the other one drinking... It is... And, is that an officer who's also there? asked Ana, referring to a man in a uniform walking towards the pulqueria. He's also... doing the same thing, she added.
- Well, that's what it promotes, right? It is what it is somehow telling us, what that kind of places is all about..., argued Raúl.
- Which is something common in all places, in all places that is common ... But it is always in more distant places, nowadays, maybe before, since everything was concentrated in the center, then it is right there..., Ana added.
- And when you drink "pulque", your brain is affected, and then things like those can happen..., stated Gabriel.
- Ok, so you may start doing things..., I tried to rephrase.
- That you shouldn't, Ana finished the sentence.

I then called their attention to how indeed most everyone wanted to take out the "pulquería," when the very title of the painting was "El Vasilón Pulquería." It would be called "The Little Town of Ixtapalapa" ventured Gabriel. Ana said that she would definitely change the title of the painting. Luis added that he would take out all the drunk people, the poor people and the thief. Gabriel pointed out that he would take out the thief because he could "ruin everyone": "I mean, he could say 'Look, I stole a watch,' to his friend, and that's how there are more and more and more thieves." "And if he is a child and then an adult, then he begins telling his children to do the same thing and so on...," added Luis. "Like a chain, that doesn't end?" I suggested. Both of them nodded.

During the conversation, we concluded that even though the painting seemed to represent a very peaceful and agreeable environment, there were things that made us see that not everything was as it might seem at first sight. Ana noted that the overall style of the painting made people think that this could be Xochimilco, another place in the city that used to be a town on the outskirts, built on a lake, where people to this day still go to buy

flowers and to take rides on “trajineras.” She said that she overheard a person saying that the painting could be a portrait of this place, though she pointed out that close observation lead us to have doubts about this first impression and identify the place as Ixtapalapa.

During this conversation, another possibility of hermeneutic interpretation as envisioned by Gadamer (1986a) in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, began to take shape: the festive nature of art (in the terms explained by this philosopher when he refers to art as “festival”), as “the place where the communication of everyone with everyone else is regained”²⁸ (p. 45). During the last sessions of the program, the group became a small community of interpretation, in which participants were able to communicate with others, and in which everyone communicated with the work of art, and the work of art with them. This interpretive community was able to engage not only with one painting but with several, and thus also began to establish communicative relationships between different works of art, in such a way that this community was made up not only of several participants, but also of several paintings. The festive character of art could also be appreciated during this conversation through the experience of time: most participants stopped being concerned about how much time had passed, and began suspending the calculating perception of time in order to experience it through tarrying. This experience of time is another element of the festival mentioned by Gadamer (1986a).

In her last painting, “In my own images” (Figure 8), Ana draw a representation of the composition she had already thought about during the conversation. In it, she reproduces some elements of Cabrera’s painting: the church and two buildings, the streetcar with the name “Ixtapalapa” written on it, several trees, a couple of people near the tracks and people in the “chinampas,” and left the “pulqueria” out. She pointed out that she had

²⁸ I am citing here the Spanish version of *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, which informs the understanding of this work of Gadamer in the Spanish-speaking world. This translation of the festive seems to me to be a more fitting description of how this concept was carried out in the program than its translation in English, which seems to me refers to something more abstract. The English version explains the festival “as the inclusive concept for regaining the idea of universal communication.” It seems to me that seeing the festival as a “place” rather than as an “inclusive concept” is more appropriate to explain what happened during group conversations in the museum. Also, the Spanish translation emphasizes the relationship between individuals, while the English version presents a more abstract explanation of the activity of communication by calling it “universal communication”. The translation of the fragment in Spanish is mine, the original reads: “...la fiesta como el lugar donde se recupera la comunicación de todos con todos.”

intended to draw more people dancing, the woman cooking “antojitos,” and people selling their merchandise, and explained that she hadn’t had enough time and space on the paper to do it. She also revealed she wanted to add more houses, and mountains in the background. She shared that she had intended to emphasize the greenery. She said she wasn’t sure yet about the title of her painting, but she stated that it could be something similar to “The Town” or “The District” of Ixtapalapa.



Figure 8. Ana’s “In my own images.”

It is interesting to note how Ana’s and the group’s interpretation of Cabrera’s painting relate, to a certain extent, to Gadamer’s idea about the simultaneity of past and present in art. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer (1986a) states that both present and past co-exist in the work of art, and are simultaneously present in it. This simultaneity of the present and past is also a condition of the interpreter: “In our daily life we proceed constantly through the coexistence of past and future” (p. 10). “El Vasilon Pulqueria” represented, for the group, an entry into the past of Mexico City. Through the group’s

interpretation of the painting, this past was allowed to enter into dialogue with our present, when they both appeared at the same time in the conversation: as a result, the group launched a reflection about how the city and life in it had changed, and defined what life in the city is like now in contrast to how it was before, relating it to other works in the exhibition – *Mexico City* and *La Mulita* – which I talk about in the following section. This discussion allowed the group to envision a place in which the tribulations of both worlds would disappear, thus imagining perhaps not the possibility of a future, but an idealized present (and past).

Raúl engaged in the interpretative activity of the program first by listening to the children's and mothers' interpretations, and by participating in interpretation through these conversations. Afterwards, he choose one of the paintings among those selected by other participants, in order to communicate what he had found out in the last exercise, "In my own images".



Figure 9. Raúl's "In my own images."

Raúl's "In my own images" (Figure 9) represents a grey building in a natural setting: there is a large tree beside it and a river flows in front of it. The sky appears to be blue and he painted a boat-like figure with flowers, like one of the "chinampas" in Cabrera's painting. He transformed the scene in which Cabrera had depicted part of the town life of Ixtapalapa, removing elements from it, in order to emphasize the nature in it. The building Raúl painted follows the architectural style of one of the buildings from Cabrera's painting, though the palette is much more sober, made up of green, blue and grey tones, and there are no people in it. He explained the idea of his painting had been:

... to express something about... that we don't necessarily need big buildings, we don't really need a lot of urbanization, and that the painting is referring to something pleasant, something we can enjoy, something that we have been gradually losing to today. And what people really need is space, a place to live, to coexist healthily, something that does not require great luxury... Simply by having a place, a space, well... It is enough to have one's food and water, those are the only things one needs. They don't need to be conquering anything, because really... what mankind really has to conquer is himself, in order to appreciate what he has, and not necessarily to get lost in... Well, he wouldn't have to, let's say... ambition to anything more than what's necessary to live.

Raúl's reflection helps one to understand another one of the guidelines of Gadamer's hermeneutics: to find the universal through the particular. By listening to and engaging in his wife's interpretive process, and by constructing a painting of his own, he arrived at an interesting conclusion about the purpose of humankind, and about the way of life we ought to pursue. This implies criticism of the state of things in the world today, particularly interests fueled by ambition and excessive urbanization.

Like Gabriel and Luis, Ana and Raúl connected the contents of the painting to an understanding of their everyday life, or of their aspirations for it: in contrast with the sped-up pace of their life in the city, full of activities, stressful and surrounded by pollution, they

imagined a more peaceful life: Ana, one similar to the life of “provincia,” where people could enjoy themselves and the landscape without falling into vices or corruption; Raúl, a much more quiet, humble and introspective life. Again, this is also related to Gadamer’s idea of self-understanding as one of the outcomes of his interpretive proposal:

The experience of the Thou also manifests the paradox that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is "understood." But I believe that I have shown correctly that what is so understood is not the Thou but the truth of what the Thou says to us. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it. It is the same with historical tradition. It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves. (Gadamer, 1975, xxxii)

Gadamer’s observation about his idea of hermeneutic art interpretation draws attention to one of the specificities of the interpretive process of participants: that what they “heard” from the artwork is what it tells *them*, that they were able to discover something about their world that they probably would not have paid attention to had they not engaged with those particular artwork.

6.4 Karla and *The Little Mule* and Samuel and *The City of Mexico*

Karla and Samuel are siblings. Karla is nine, and she attended the same class as Gabriel. Samuel is seven, and he attended the same class as Luis. Both of their parents, Carolina and Armando, attended the program, though, like I’ve explained above, the family wasn’t able to complete the program, nor to attend interviews. Therefore, I have less information about them. Based on conversations during the activities of the program, it is probable none of them had attended art lessons previously. They never commented on having gone to other museums before either.

During the first session, it was hard for Karla to choose a painting she liked that could work well with the design of the program. She originally chose a still life painted by Frida Kahlo. When I explained the “An imaginary conversation”²⁹ activity to the group, she waited until everyone was gone to ask me: “But what if it’s not a person and it’s something else?” “You could imagine questions to ask that something,” I suggested. She replied: “But what if it’s a fruit?” “Mmm...” I thought. I knew, from the previous study, that the program had this limitation: it could work well with figurative painting, particularly with that which represents characters that can speak, such as people or perhaps animals, since this facilitates imagining a conversation with the painting. When I tried out the first version of the program for my BA thesis, two girls did engage in conversations with an object that in reality doesn’t talk in human language: one of them with a bird, and another one with a building. I remembered and tried, first, to encourage Karla to imagine a conversation with the still life, asking her if she could think of any questions she could ask. She said she liked it very much, but she couldn’t find a way to engage with it through an imaginary conversation. There was silence: she didn’t know what things she could talk about with a group of fruits; I didn’t know what else to suggest for her to engage with that still life she had liked so much. So I said: “I’m afraid you’ll have to choose another one, Karla.”

I asked Karla if there was another painting she had liked. She pointed to a large canvas which represented human-like figures objects that resembled a fair, called *The Ballad of Frida Kahlo*, by surrealist painter Alice Rahon. We walked towards it and I suggested a few questions she could ask: “Imagine you can ask questions to these things that look like people, you can ask them what are the things here, or what is going on... All right?” Mhm, she replied, moving her head up and down. Karla worked with that painting during that first session, but during the second one she ended up choosing another painting, *The Little Mule*, by Abraham Ángel. This difficulty becomes relevant for Karla’s interpretive process in the light of what Gadamer (1975) explains is one of the conditions for hermeneutic interpretation: that the text or artwork grabs the attention of the interpreter. Gabilondo (1996) explains this idea by relating it to Gadamer’s notion of the “radiance of

²⁹ Cf., Chapter 5, Comic strip and conversation.

meaning” of a text. According to Gabilondo, a work of art gets the attention of an interpreter because it echoes a question he or she has, it resonates with some subject matter the interpreter is already engaged with, even if he hasn’t become consciously aware of it. This sets a common ground between the artwork and interpreter, and, in the case of the program, this common ground can facilitate the interpretation and increase the possibility of understanding the work of art from the interpreter’s horizon. Since Karla wasn’t able to engage with the artwork that caught her attention, and chose another one she might not have felt so attracted to, she might have found it more difficult to find something in common with *The Little Mule*; she might have lacked a common ground between herself and the artwork, which resulted in the difficulty she experienced to develop a project of meaning with it.

The Little Mule, painted by Abraham Ángel, depicts a scene in a neighbourhood street. The street is paved with stones and flanked by trees; the houses look old, but are very colourful; at a distance, we see the dome of a church, and further beyond, some mountains. In the middle of this setting, we see a man driving a cart pulled by a mule. An image of this painting can be found in the following webpage: <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Landscapes/popup.php3?language=1&image=img13mbm>.



Figure 10. Karla and *The Little Mule*.

When she drew her comic strip, Karla, like Gabriel, Luis and Samuel, divided the piece of paper in four and wrote down four questions (Figure 11). Unlike other participants, she recreated the setting where the painting hung in her comic strip: it hangs from the gallery wall, and, in the first box, there are zigzag lines representing the title of the painting and the name of the artist. Karla drew herself standing next to the painting. She represented the overall composition of “The Little Mule”: the buildings on the back, including a “cantina,” houses, and the main street in which the cart carried by the mule stands. During her imaginary conversation, Karla talked with the person driving the cart. In the boxes, marked 1 and 2 by Karla, she asked the driver the same question: “What do you have there?” “Food,” the man answered in both cases. When she talked about her comic strip to the group, she explained she had made a mistake writing the same question twice, and added that she had intended that the man’s second answer was “Fruit” instead of “Food.” She also explained how in box 3 she asked the driver: “Would you give me some?” “Of course,” the man answered. In box 4, Karla left the dialogue balloons empty. During the conversation about her comic strip, she explained that she had forgotten to write down the

last dialogue: she had imagined the man said that he was carrying bananas. I asked her if she had asked another question she hadn't had time to draw and write down. She said that she had also asked the man for a banana, and the man had answered "Of course."

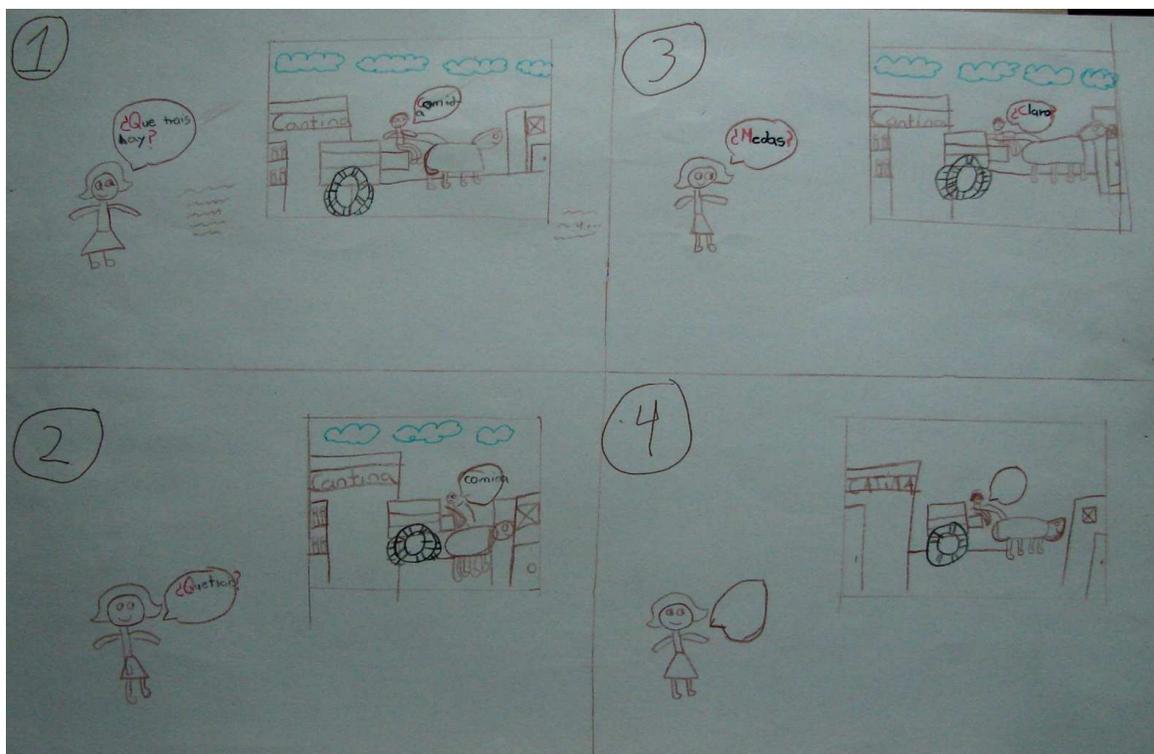


Figure 11. Karla's comic strip.

Karla seemed a bit nervous explaining her comic strip, especially after becoming aware that she had made a mistake in the order in which her boxes were arranged: after describing the first one, she continued with the third one, and after reading it, she realized she had proceeded in the wrong order. She remained silent for a while, and then went back to the second one, then realizing she had written the question twice. She explained she had made a mistake, and seemed confused about her own drawing. I told her that it was okay, and called her attention to the last box. Then she confessed to having forgotten to write the last question, and went on telling what it was.

Karla's imaginary conversation concentrated on the same object: the cart and its contents. Sharing her comic strip, she verbalized that she thought the contents of the cart could be food or fruit because she imagined the people living in the surroundings houses would need to buy food. During this conversation, I tried to indicate other elements in the painting, asking "What kind of place do you think this is?" Other participants agreed that the place looked like a street in a small town "because of the he façade of the buildings, and because we can see the volcanoes in the back, as though it were 'provincia,'" according to Ana. Other children added that it looked like a small town because there were hills, and because in cities there usually aren't carts pulled by horses. Yet, Karla did not participate in this conversation.

After this session, my assistant told me that she had noticed that Karla seemed particularly insecure about what she was supposed to do for each activity, and had told her she was worried about doing things right. This might have accounted for her nervousness and confusion, as well as for the difficulty to participate in group conversations: she might have been anxious about answering in front of the group, or she might not have understood what I meant.

These difficulties Karla faced are useful to see how the program does require certain abilities from the participants, such as an ability to express ideas verbally, and a certain amount of self-confidence. It could also be that activities were not clearly explained by me, and therefore I would need to find other ways to make them more explicit, clear and simple for participants to understand.

The following activity was "Inside the painting,"³⁰ in which participants imagined that they could go inside the painting, walk around it and talk to its characters. Karla spoke in a very low voice and I had to ask her to try to speak up so that the rest of the group could hear her. At a certain point, her father rather impatiently asked her to speak up, at which Karla laughed nervously. I would like to mention here another one of the issues that arise from bringing children and parents together. Sometimes, parents tried to point out to children how they should or shouldn't perform an activity: speak loudly, write with correct

³⁰ *Cf.*, Chapter 5, Inside the painting.

spelling, use less or more paint in the brush, draw or paint something in a particular way, or sit down correctly, for example. Often, this inhibited children's performance, making them more self-conscious when speaking, and unsure of themselves as they were speaking, drawing or writing. This is an issue hard to resolve from the position of the workshop guide or assistant, who, even if leading the activities, cannot interfere in the relationship between parents and children. In this case, judging from Karla's reaction, she became uneasy after hearing her father's request.

In order to provide imaginary possibilities, I gave each participant a handout with some questions.³¹ When she wrote about her imaginary experience, Karla, like other participants, chose to answer the questions one by one:

What do you see? Houses, donkey and men.

What do you hear? So many people I don't know what to say.

What do you smell? A lot of food and "antojitos."

What things can you touch? Trees and houses.

Karla wrote down all the questions of the handout in her piece of paper, but left some of them unanswered. When she talked about her imaginary tour inside the painting with the group, she added more details: she had heard the bells of the church and the man yelling the names of the things he sold. She also added that she had smelled the food the man carried, and the smell of some shops, "if there were any, I don't know, it occurred to me that there could be," she pointed out quite conscientiously. I asked her what she had been able to touch: "Well... the walls of the houses... Trees... And the Donkey."

Once Karla had summarized her imaginative exercise through her drawing and writing, I asked her, like I had done with the rest of the participants, what the painting said to her. She uttered a prolonged "Hmm..." I then suggested: "Or maybe it doesn't say

³¹ See Appendix E. Inside the painting handout.

anything, maybe it is just a painting about a man who sells fruit?" She agreed, and added she wasn't sure about what the man sold.

During this conversation, Gabriel had continuously tried to suggest the use of the word "merchandise," particularly when Karla tried to find a word to say that the man sold something, but that she couldn't know whether it was fruit, food, or something else. Gabriel's linguistic precision, compared to Karla's struggle to make herself understood, serves to explain another limitation of the program: the benefit of participants being able to use verbal and written language in order to engage in the activities successfully. Karla might have felt frustrated at being unable to explain herself, and this might have had a contradictory effect: instead of helping her feel more comfortable about talking about paintings based on her own imagination, sensibility and intelligence, she might have felt intimidated or unable to do so.

During this second set of imaginary activities, Karla paid attention to other elements in the *The Little Mule* she hadn't mentioned in the last exercise. Unfortunately, her approach to these exercises did not allow for a project of interpretation in hermeneutic terms. In fact, her agreement with the idea that the painting didn't really communicate anything, but was just a picture of the man, helps us see another limitation of the program: not all visitors will necessarily engage in an interpretive process, nor all choices of paintings will lead to one.

Nonetheless, during the remainder of the conversation, the rest of the group was able to identify certain themes within the painting, and to compare its contents with those of other paintings chosen by participants. They began by comparing *The Little Mule* with *El Vasilón Pulquería*, based on someone's observation that the word "vasilon" was included in both paintings. Raúl commented that many of the paintings chosen by the group represented very traditional places, such as churches or certain kinds of architecture, as well as the peaceful life of the outskirts of the city or "provincia." Armando and Luis reflected on how the formal aspects of the painting could be associated to its content by calling our attention to the fact that the buildings in the painting looked old, broken or somehow abandoned, and venturing the style used in the painting made the scene look picturesque or

pretty, somehow hiding how the place was deteriorated. Raúl argued that perhaps the intention of the artist had been to represent a particular value in relation to the roots or identity of younger generations. One of the interests of some of the artists included in the exhibition was to try to find what was essential to the identity of Mexico by turning to the representation of popular scenes and traditions of different parts of the country. In this sense, it is noteworthy how other participants were able to develop these themes around *The Little Mule*, in comparison to how Karla's process developed with the same painting.

Samuel, Karla's brother, had a harder time than her choosing a painting. Overall, he seemed rather distracted when we had a talk before going into the gallery for the first time, when I asked the group about their previous experience in museums. Samuel moved around a lot, and constantly whispered things to his friends. While the children were walking around the gallery to choose an artwork that caught their attention, he walked next to his friend Luis, and looked at some paintings Luis was interested in, but he hadn't shown an interest of his own in any. Samuel followed Karla and me from a distance while we were trying to find a painting for her. When she began her imaginary conversation with *The Ballad of Frida Kahlo*, I turned to him and asked, "What about you Samuel? Is there a painting that catches your attention?" He shook his head from one side to the other, meaning no. I told him, "Let's see. Let's walk together from the entrance." We began walking together. Samuel wasn't looking at the paintings, instead, he looked straight in front of him. So I started pointing at paintings, but Samuel didn't seem interested in any. After a while, I suggested he worked with *The Football Players, (Las Futbolistas)*, by Ángel Zárraga, which he had stopped and looked at before with Luis and Héctor. The painting shows a group of three women in soccer uniforms standing next to a bench and in the distance, three women playing in the field can be seen. "Do you like this one?" I asked him, but he was indifferent.

Finally, Samuel worked with *The City of Mexico*, by architect and painter Juan O'Gorman. After the session was over, my assistant told me that she and Karla had tried to help Samuel choose a painting. Karla had commented that Samuel liked maps, so they chose this painting which shows a map of Mexico City. My assistant assisted Samuel to try

to develop his imaginary conversation, suggesting a few questions and inviting him to observe and identify what was represented in the painting.



Figure 12. Samuel and *The City of Mexico*.

Samuel's comic strip is intriguing (Figure 13). It, in fact, is not properly a comic strip, since there are no dialogues written in it. During a conversation with his mother, she explained that it was difficult for Samuel to write, and that he had been having problems learning how to do it. Yet, his drawings show a good visual understanding of O'Gorman's painting, which shows two images of Mexico City: in the foreground, a map of the city held by a man, of whom we only see his hands holding it; behind it, there's a view of the city seen from the top of a monument, the Monumento de la Revolución (The Monument of the Revolution). An image of *Mexico City* can be found in the following webpage: <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Landscapes/popup.php3?language=1&image=img21mcm>

In the first box of Samuel's comic strip, he shows a person holding something like a piece of paper with drawings in it. When he explained his drawing to the group, he confirmed he was the man holding the map in O'Gorman's painting: in his drawing, Samuel translated the absence of this man into its presence, showing him standing, looking at us, and holding the map in his hand. He also remembered several elements of the composition, and he was able to place them as they appear in O'Gorman's painting: the Mexican flag held by two angels on the upper right corner, which Samuel shows as two people, and, beside them, to the left, an eagle and a snake, the symbols of the flag. Below them, on the left corner, he drew a man, the construction worker who stands in the same place of the composition in O'Gorman's painting.



Figure 13. Samuel's comic strip.

In the two other boxes, he recalled other elements of the painting, like the buildings and two characters: one of them is the construction worker who holds a diagram in his hand. In

the fourth box, he drew a view of the city, including buildings, trees and cars, which were also part of the composition in *The City of Mexico*. It was exciting to see how he reproduced the view of the city from the height of the monument, as it is shown in O’Gorman’s painting.

When it was Samuel’s turn to explain his comic strip to the group, he was very shy: hesitant to speak and to show his comic strip. If we consider that Luis, Gabriel and their mother Ana all admitted that they had felt nervous about speaking in front of the group, it is probable Samuel felt the same way too. At the beginning of the conversation, he stood with one hand near his mouth, and he rocked himself from one side to the other, holding his drawing in his hand. He sometimes spoke in a high-pitch tone and quickly, so it was hard for me to understand what he was saying. I had to ask him several times to repeat what he said in order for others to be able to hear him.

I asked him “What is the name of your painting, Samuel?” He whispered, pointing at the title of the painting in the wall “The City...,” he stopped for a while, and then resumed “of Mexico.” His voice was so low I had to lean down in order to hear him, and I had to repeat what he said so the others would know. I then asked him if he could show us his painting, but he shook his head and rocked himself. I gently insisted and suggested I could hold his comic strip for him. I began describing it and confirming what Samuel had drawn in it, asking him questions in order to guide him through his description. Through short answers, he identified certain elements of the painting he had reproduced in his comic, such as those represented as part of the city and its surroundings, and also identified the construction man. Throughout the conversation, other children called attention to the building plan the construction man carried in his hand, which Samuel also recreated in his drawing. The group identified important aspects of the landscape represented in *The City of Mexico*, such as the two volcanoes seen from the city, located in the south: the Iztacíhuatl volcano, which in the language of the Aztecs means “Sleeping Woman”, and the Popocatepetl volcano, which in the same language means “Smoking Mountain”.

Through these activities, Samuel and the group identified what was characterized in the painting, but a project of meaning didn't begin to be developed there. This would be developed during the following conversation by the group as a whole.

The exercise "Inside my painting" was also important in Samuel's case. Since his mother had already talked about his difficulty in writing, I decided to record his account of what he had imagined instead of asking him to write about it. But Samuel was reluctant to tell about what he had imagined. Therefore, I decided to walk him through the exercise, using the questions in the handout as a guide.

We sat in front of the painting and I asked Samuel questions about his imaginary tour. He imagined he would be dressed as a construction worker and would look at the city from the top of the building. He imagined he would listen to the sound of construction machines, but that, because of the height, he would not be able to hear the sounds of the city, except maybe for someone selling food. He imagined the man holding the map was trying to find directions to go to certain places in the city, such as the park. He said that if he were in the painting, he would eat or sleep next to the wall that was being built. During this conversation, Samuel was able to focus on particular features of the painting. Some of his answers seemed to be tied to the painting itself from his perspective, others, it appears as though he came up with answers because he felt somehow obliged to respond to my questions. Other answers could be more associated to things he would've liked to be doing independently of what was represented in the painting, such as eating or sleeping.

Throughout the conversation, Samuel remained sitting in front of the painting; at times, he would move around. At one point, towards the end of the conversation, he actually lay down on the floor, and I had to ask him to sit to look closer at the painting. From this it can be inferred that he had begun to lose attention or interest, or that he might have been tired, or needed to be engaged in more kinesthetic activities. In this sense, Samuel's case helps identify another limitation of the program: it is focused on a limited number of abilities, mainly visual and verbal, as well as imaginative and musical, but leaves out others that might help other visitors engage in the interpretation. In this sense, other activities could be designed in order to incorporate a broader range of abilities into

the program. Samuel's case makes us consider each participant's experienced time in the program: it could be that, since a great amount of time is dedicated to a single work of art, Samuel grew restless or disinterested in it.

When going over his previous imaginary exercises in order to set the groundwork for the question: "What do you think this painting speaks about?," Samuel continued to be shy and reluctant to speak. As I had done before, I directly guided the account of his experience, partly through my understanding of it, and partly by confirming with Samuel if what I explained about his painting was correct. In this session, Samuel's confidence to speak grew, and, eventually, he even began to interrupt me or others, or to take advantage of moments of silence, in order to add things about O'Gorman's painting, such as explaining how the eagle and the snake painted on the upper part of the painting represented the symbol of the flag, even when painted outside of it.

As in Karla's case, to develop a project of meaning was a difficult task for Samuel, though he was able to develop careful observation and a detailed description of *The City of Mexico*, and he eventually began to gain confidence to participate in the conversation, pointing out aspects of the painting relevant to the group discussion.

Again, as in the case of his sister, other participants were able to develop themes around modernity and tradition, thinking about the project of modernization of Mexico City based on O'Gorman's painting, and reflecting on the relations between this and other paintings in the exhibition. Gabriel pointed out that the map could indicate how the city would be constructed, as a design for how it would look like in the end. Both Gabriel and Luis talked about the idea of building a city that didn't have old or damaged buildings, but, instead, looked new and pretty. Samuel pointed out here there were three buildings under construction in the painting, emphasizing this idea.

Participants compared O'Gorman's painting to the representations of small towns in *The Little Mule* and in *El Vasilón Pulqueria*, after I pointed out how differently buildings were represented in *The City of Mexico* compared with *The Little Mule*. Gabriel pointed out how *Mexico City* spoke of an idea closer to the present than what which was represented in

The Little Mule, and Ana commented this difference could speak about how the city had changed over time. The interpretation of the painting by the group was related to O’Gorman’s profession: he was both a painter and an architect, and he participated in some of the many projects of the city during the post-revolutionary period which aimed to modernize it.

Throughout this subchapter, I have pointed out several limitations of the program which might have caused Samuel and Karla frustration or boredom while engaging in the program. Again, this can only be inferred, since I was not able to ask them about how they actually experienced it. The comparison between Karla and Samuel’s case, in relation to Gabriel and Luis’s, shows children who have more developed verbal, writing or drawing abilities are able to engage in the activities of the program more successfully than others who do not. In this sense, it should be considered whether the program would need to help participants develop some of these abilities before engaging in the imaginative-interpretive activity.

I would like to note there were positive outcomes about the experience of these siblings as well: they were able to observe the paintings they worked with in more detail than perhaps they would’ve done otherwise. Samuel, particularly, was able to eventually gain more confidence when speaking about his own imaginary and creative exercises. Compared to the extreme lack of interest Samuel showed during the first session of the program, in the last conversation about his painting he showed a much more active and at times genuinely eager participation in it. Both Karla and Samuel were able to gain confidence when moving around the galleries of the museum.

Overall, I conclude that, in Karla’s and Samuel’s case, the program wasn’t able to help them develop a project of meaning about the artwork and, therefore, it would be difficult to presume hermeneutic interpretation or understanding in their experience. This could also be due to the difficulty to fulfill a key condition for hermeneutic understanding according to Gadamer: the interpreter’s response to the artwork’s radiation of meaning,

manifested in the fact that the artwork attracts the attention of the viewer.³² It would be interesting to ponder whether the results could have been different for Karla and Samuel had they engaged with a painting that actually caught their attention. On the other hand, it could also be true that not every viewer, nor every artwork, calls for a hermeneutic-based mode of understanding.

6.5 Knowledge gained from data analysis

In this section I reconsider my analysis in order to reflect on the knowledge I gained from this study.

I believe this analysis shows the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics allowed participants to develop a careful and reflective observation of paintings. In most cases, children were able to remember the general structure of the painting, as well as details from it, for a considerable amount of time after having seen it. Children were also able to reproduce the overall composition and details of the painting in their comic strips. This is partly due to the extensive period of time which participants dedicated to the interpretation of one single work of art - around three and a half hours. This kind of attention to a work of art is related to Gadamer's (1986a) understanding of the experience of time during interpretation, which he considers must necessarily be ample.

The description and analysis of the interpretive processes of Luis, Gabriel, Ana and Raúl show the way in which the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics – particularly of his conception of art – led these participants to arrive to an interpretation and understanding of the work of art. What is referred to as interpretation in their case is related to two ways of understanding. There was self-understanding when participants were able to reflect on aspects of the world, of human beings, or of history related to their lives or their context, through their engagement with the work of art. This idea is related to self-understanding as one of the outcomes of Gadamer's model of hermeneutic interpretation, as he specifies (1986b).

³² Cf. Chapter 3, Hermeneutic Interpretation.

Furthermore, interpretation relates to how, in each different case, participants identified and elaborated definite themes in relation to the paintings: power issues, social justice, social equality and ethical behaviour, in the case of Luis, Gabriel and *The Devil in the Church*; coexistence, festivity, spirituality, and changes in the landscape and lifestyle of Mexico City through the passage of time, in the case of Ana, Raúl and *El Vasilon Pulqueria*; modernity, tradition and, again, changes in the landscape of Mexico City over time in the case of *The City of Mexico*, *The Little Mule* and the group. This idea of interpretation is based on Gadamer's (1986a) definition of his understanding of the concepts of "representation" and "recognition": when speaking about a portrait of Charles V, he explains that recognizing does not consist of identifying him as Charles V, but, rather, recognition depends upon "constructing" the painting, so it "comes together as a picture resonant with meaning." Gadamer gives this example of meaning in the following terms, referring to this painting: "It portrays a world ruler upon whose empire the sun never sets" (pp. 27-28).

In the same work, Gadamer (1986b) speaks of what he understands as "reading" a work of art and "understanding" it:

"What is reading? We know we are able to read something when we cease to notice the letters as such and allow the sense of what is said to emerge. In every case, it is only the constitution of coherent meaning that lets us claim that we have understood what is said. (p. 48)

I believe the interpretations developed by these participants achieved the development of a "coherent meaning," in the sense that the themes uncovered by them were based on what the paintings represented and on what they intended to communicate, rather than on merely subjective or arbitrary appreciations.

On the other hand, the cases of Karla and Samuel show the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the design of interpretive strategies I've proposed not always led participants to interpretive processes. This might be due to the fact that hermeneutic interpretation in Gadamer's model calls for a good development of the ability to express

oneself in verbal and written language, which is an ability that not all participants possessed. The use of this language ability, as well as the ability to draw and paint, proved to be essential for participants to engage in the activities of the program. According to the analysis, Karla's and Samuel's engagement with the work of art was limited by their lack of these fully developed abilities.

Through the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics, some participants developed an understanding of art as that which has a message to be understood, and is related to everyday life. These ideas are related to Gadamer's understanding of art as play and symbol, as well as to his conception of self-understanding.

Another condition that might have limited Karla's and Raúl's interpretive process is related to Gadamer's (1975) idea that one of the conditions for hermeneutic interpretation is that the entity that we are about to interpret calls our attention. Gabilondo (1996) explains this idea in relation to Gadamer's concept of the "radiation of meaning" of the work of art. He explains a work of art "radiates" its meaning, which we perceive, consciously or subconsciously, and are drawn to it because it deals with a similar issue that the viewer is, either consciously or subconsciously, dealing with. This sets a common ground between participant and artwork and establishes the possibility of understanding based on a comparable previous experience. In this sense, the fact that the artwork chosen by Karla and Raúl didn't arrest their attention from the beginning of the interpretive process might account for this absence of a project of interpretation.

Throughout the case studies I have presented above, I have identified other aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics in relation to the interpretive processes of the participants. Summarizing them, they relate to the manner in which aspects of each participants' horizon of understanding gave meaning to the work of art, as well as to how their understanding of the work of art is the result of what each painting told *them*, that is, what it told each participant based on their own horizon of understanding and about their own context. Again, these are aspects of hermeneutic interpretation that Gadamer (Gadamer, 1975, 1992; Lizarazo 2004) himself points out. Group interpretation as a realization of part of Gadamer's conception of the "festive" character of art was one of the outcomes of the

analysis. In the case of Ana, Raúl and *El Vasilon Pulqueria*, there was an reflection on the relationship between past and present, which could be associated to Gadamer's (1986a) notion of the simultaneity of past and present in the work of art; this idea could be extended to the group's consideration of modernity and tradition through their interpretations of *The City of Mexico* and *The Little Mule*.

The analysis of these cases shows, as I have illustrated above, interpretation and understanding throughout the program were centered on self-understanding and understanding as that which the artwork informs a particular interpreter. Contemplation of the prejudices which might lead to misunderstandings of the artwork, as well as of confrontation of the participant's prejudices, was not given as much importance throughout the program as the aspects I've mentioned above.

I would ruminate here about a possible pedagogy associated to the application of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. Gadamer's hermeneutics allows to center learning on things or objects that caught the attention of the learner. In this sense, what is learned becomes the choice of the learner, and is closely related to an aspect of himself or herself and/or of his or her context that is relevant to him or her.

Gadamer's hermeneutics spells out the amount of time dedicated to one particular object of learning: as this philosopher places emphasis on dedicating as much time as necessary to one work of art to achieve understanding, the amount of time regularly dedicated to one same object during learning would drastically vary; in this sense, depth would become more important than the scope of what could be approached.

A pedagogy based on Gadamer's philosophy would also view the learner as an interpreter, who would actively and considerately seek understanding of that which he approaches to be involved in self-understanding. In this kind of pedagogy, knowledge would be understood as constantly changing, constructed upon the horizons of understanding of the entities in play during the act of learning, teaching or producing knowledge. In this sense, to teach with a pedagogy rooted in these positions of Gadamer's philosophy would mean to pass on a reflection of knowledge as something that does not

have a universal validity but, rather, is something that is transitory and based on the historical horizons of each different context. A pedagogy founded upon Gadamer's hermeneutics would allow for the recognition and reflection of those aspects of the learner's horizon of understanding that lead them to arrive to certain awareness of the world.

Gadamer's hermeneutics shows us aspects of learning related to the attitude a learner or interpreter has towards knowledge. As Gabilondo (1996) points out, this attitude has to do, mainly, with humility – that is, the recognition that an object or other person can inform me of that which I am not aware of yet, or that I ignore (intentionally or unintentionally). This attitude of humility is also related to developing the ability of listening and of engaging in dialogue with an other.

CHAPTER 7 OTHER FINDINGS

In this chapter I will attend to the other outcomes of the study, related to the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the program and to the experience of participants throughout the program, particularly in sections "What did participants think they obtained from the program" and in "The possibility for future engagements with art," as well as to other aspects I would like to include about this study, such as the use of reimbursements as a way to extend the experience of the program. In addition, in this section, I briefly describe other findings not directly related to participants' experience in relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics, such as the role of the workshop guide, participants' appropriation of space, and gender issues.

7.1 What did participants think they obtained from the program?

A few weeks after the program was completed, I asked participants to go to the museum to have a conversation about it. I asked both of the families whose cases I've studied here to attend, but only one of them was able to do so, the Sanchez family: Gabriel and Luis, and their parents Ana and Raúl. This section consists of comments from this interview, and from a previous one, held during the last session of the program with the same participants.

During this conversation Ana and Raúl emphasized how their experience in the museum during the program had been very different from other visits to other museums. They both explained they had gone to museums before because it was an activity required by school teachers, but they hadn't found them very satisfactory since they didn't know exactly what they were supposed to do in the museum, nor how to approach the exhibitions. Referring to the program, she said:

It is remarkable because you made us think and pay more attention [to the paintings]. Because, for example, when they send them [to museums] from school, well, you do go and it is their homework and

you copy [the information] and look around, but they really don't tell you what you need to do so that maybe you become more interested, to make it more interesting or learn more. So, it would be important that... maybe all schools did something similar.

Raúl added he had noticed a difference between going to museums “out of pleasure and not because it is an obligation.” Gabriel and Ana insisted it was crucial for similar programs to work as part of school activities, in order to ensure that students and their parents visited museums together. Ana was adamant about the importance of schools becoming involved in sending students and parents to museums in ways similar to the program, stating that “Only then we realize what we're missing.”

Ana commented on how her perception of painting had changed through her experience in the program: “Well, we now understand them... I mean, by having come to this activity. Before, well, one only looked at a painting and said ‘ah, well, they're kind of pretty,’ but you never look at them in-depth, you don't... you don't try to see that there is more to a painting, right? Try to interpret them.” To this, Gabriel added: “To see what the painting expresses.” Both Ana and Gabriel seemed to understand paintings in a comparable way after the program. Ana put it in the following terms: “The painting wants to express something.”

Raúl talked about what he thought they all had learned: “We are somehow learning, each of us in our own way, each of us according to our understanding, the artworks that are being exhibited.” He also pointed out “the difference between seeing a painting without much interest, and seeing it more in detail. To make it yours. Like the children were doing, right? If I see the painting and imagine that I am there, how would I interpret it. I make it mine.”

Raúl added that he thought the workshop allowed his children to see “that it is necessary to visit these kind of places,” because they “begin to have a broader view of things.” Raúl pointed out, in relation to a visit to the National Museum of Anthropology

with his kids, that it would allow them “to have a more concrete idea of history.” He added that it was a way for children to see images that don’t come from advertising or television.

Raúl said that he had particularly liked the way in which children interacted with other people, sharing their opinions. Both Gabriel and Luis said that they had enjoyed discussing paintings with others. Luis stated that it had been “as if we were going to vote... but giving our opinions about paintings.” Gabriel added “And about what we were doing.” Ana said that she had found it “very interesting, because it got the attention of a lot of people,” referring to how some people would come closer to the group while we were discussing a painting, and remained listening for a while. She said that it was amazing to look at paintings in more detail, to see a difference between looking at paintings on a superficial level and looking at them in detail. Luis then contributed:

- And there are people who don’t know how to appreciate art.
- Well, yes... Sometimes they just ask us to come from school, but we come only because we feel obliged, said Ana.
- Not because we want to..., added Gabriel.

When I asked them how to appreciate art, there was a prolonged silence. After a while, Gabriel ventured:

- By practicing it.
- No, by looking at it, right? By looking at it, what it is..., argued Ana.
- By looking at it. By looking at it and... And... And something that we like... that is art for that person, Luis explained.

Ana, Raúl and Gabriel said that the activities of the workshop made them feel more relaxed and at ease. “When we left, after the program, we felt good, relaxed, happy... Different, with a clear mind.”

Ana explained going through the same activities as her children - particularly those when they had to speak in front of the group, which they found difficult because of nerves and insecurity-, she was able to understand them better and to be more considerate of the challenges they faced:

If one as an adult feels nervous, then, we need to understand children, because we might as well say ‘Why don’t you speak loud’ or say other things they should or shouldn’t do... It is not the same when you are actually doing them, than just to be telling them what to do, so, we need to understand them a bit more, to be more patient with them.

Thus, this benefit Ana saw in the program extends beyond its objectives, indirectly promoting a different attitude from parents towards their children, based on the understanding of what they go through in certain situations.

7.2 The possibility for future engagements with art

During one of the interviews, Ana told me that she had arrived earlier to one of the sessions because she wanted to take Gabriel and Luis to see the artwork in the gallery next to the exhibit we were working with, a retrospective on Alan Glass’ work. She said she had had a chance to see it during the first session at the museum, and wanted her children to see it too. She was very surprised at how the artist had used objects like buttons, or bee’s wax, or other every-day objects in the compositions. Luis was enthusiastic about this uses of objects, and said he would like to do something just like it.

At the end of the last session of the program, Ana pointed out that she hadn’t had time to add some things to her painting: “Maybe I’ll get more paint and color them later,” she said. “Yes!” exclaimed Luis right away, excited about the idea of painting at home.

Raúl said that listening to what his children said during the activities of the program gave him the opportunity “be enriched from what they say.” He said that this also gave him

an opportunity to see how he could nurture the interest in art his children had shown during the program.

Gabriel suggested museums could be made known to children through television, since “all children watch a lot of television.” He suggested the paintings and other objects exhibited in museums could be advertised, so children could become more aware of them.

During this interview, I asked the family if they’d go back to the museum. Gabriel answered he would, provided that he had enough time to go. This seemed to be an issue for the family: in several occasions, they had expressed interest in going to museums, but that it was difficult for them to find the time to do so. Gabriel pointed out that it would require a lot of time to go back to the museum to do what they had done during the program. Raúl added, referring to his children:

I was just telling Luis that... It is nice, it is nice to see how you arrive to a museum and even when you don’t go with a lot of enthusiasm, that yes, it is nice to see the children and listen to how they express themselves, how surprised they are about the issues, I mean, about what they can find... in a museum and that, it is worth it, it is worth it to come. One learns as well, but more than anything they, in some way... Well, learn, and appreciate more what a museum is.

Gabriel added “The thing is that when you go but have never been to a museum you think, that... that they are a simple painting, but... when you see it is, it is more than a simple painting.” Luis said he would like to return and to see a squirrel in the garden and to paint it there. Ana said she’d come back to look at the exhibitions at a slower pace, and “to try to see each... thing, I mean, find an interpretation, not just pass by them. This is a reason I would like to come back,” and she added: “And if I had more time, I would like to go to other museums. Because if here we find interesting things, well, in others there will be more.”

Moreover, I had asked participants the same question in the written surveys I asked them to fill before the start of the last interview. In his, Raúl

stated that he would go back to a museum because “Culture is important for the development of society”; Ana answered that she would go back because “There are many things to learn, one learns to interpret what is expressed in art, and to enjoy everything that is exhibited, it is a way to know more since there is so much variety.” Gabriel and Luis also responded to the same question. Gabriel wrote he would like to go back to an art museum “To see new things, to learn how things were before”; Luis recorded he would do it “To learn more things.”

After the last interview at the museum, I gave each member of the Sanchez family a diploma, as well as a set of three books for all of them, in order to show them my appreciation for participating in the study. After this, we said good-bye and they left. My assistant and I watched them walk away and stayed in the Education Services area for a while longer, rearranging tables and chairs, making sure everything was clean and packing things away. After about 15 minutes, we headed for the museum’s exit. As we walked by the entrance of a gallery, Ana called us. They were walking out of another exhibition, a retrospective on the work of French-Mexican surrealist painter Alice Rahon. I was very glad to see they had taken the time to stay in the museum, even when they had a family reunion and were in a rush to leave. It seemed they had also seen another exhibit on Mexican abstract painting also in the museum, since Ana asked me “Ursula, we have a question, are those paintings with lines and things like that also art?” I explained to them that it was, that it was called abstract art. I talked to them a little bit about Kandinsky’s book *Point and Line to Plane*, and how he explained how certain kinds of lines, colors, shapes and their arrangement in a canvas could communicate certain emotions or ideas. They looked at me with certain disbelief. I then told them that they could find information about abstract art in one of the books I had given to them as reimbursement, *Arte para comprender el mundo (Art to Understand the World)*, by Veronique Antoine-Andersen³³ and pointed at some chapters and pages in the book. The children took it, sat in some nearby stairs, and began looking at the

³³ The English version of the title is mine. The original title in French is *L’Art pour comprendre le monde*.

book. Ana and Raúl talked with me for a while longer. They asked me what I thought about the way of life of an artist, they wanted to know if it was really as hard as they had heard it was. They explained that they posed this question to me because they noticed one of their children had talent for painting, he showed a lot of interest in art and they were considering that he might, at some point, be interested in pursuing a career in the arts.

7.3 Reimbursement as a way to extend the experience of the education program

In order to thank them for their time and effort to help me carry out the research, I gave the Hernandez and the Montes families two art books for children: *El juego de las miradas* (*The game of gazes*)³⁴, by Gabriela Olmos, and *Arte para comprender al mundo* (*Art to Understand the World*),³⁵ by Veronique Antoine-Andersen. I chose these two books because they related to the activities of the program and to the understanding of art it promotes.

In *El juego de las miradas*, Olmos introduces works of art from the perspective of a little child. The book begins: “When they talked about art in school I thought that Egyptians walk sideways, and that they had very funny bodies.” This first line is illustrated with a fragment of a mural in the tomb of Tutmosis VI, which represents “the creation of the solar disc.” About the *Winged Victory de Samothrace*, the narrator says “[I thought] that Greek women didn’t have arms, nor heads,” and about Boticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* “that pretty women were born from oysters.” The book presents in a similar fashion works from the Mexican Baroque period, Impressionism, artists Picasso and Dali, among others. The book ends in the following way: “Then I found out that the world has really changed, but what has changed the most is the way we look at it. [I found] That art exists because everyone’s gaze is different. And that all gazes are important. Also mine.” I chose this book because it emphasizes gazes as points of view and as they are various reaffirming the idea

³⁴ Translation is mine. Gabriela Olmos’ book is illustrated by Valeria Gallo and was published by CONACULTA (the National Council for the Culture and Arts), its program “Alas y Raíces a los niños” (“Wings and Roots for Children”), and the editorial house Artes de México (Arts of Mexico).

³⁵ The original title in French is *L’Art pour comprendre le monde*.

that each of the participants' perspectives are valuable. It underscores what a child can see in a work of art from his or her own perspective differs from the way an adult would look at it. In this way, the book gives a chance to think about art as viewed by children, and to realize that personal perceptions, understandings and engagements with art change throughout a person's lifetime.

In the Introduction to *Art to Understand the World*, Antoine-Andersen (2005) explains that through her book she tries to provide opportunities to answer the question "What is art for"? Part of her reply is to demonstrate that art was not always found in museums: "What were those images, paintings and sculptures for before they were exposed in museums? What intention did their creators have?" (p. 3). Antoine-Andersen explores five different possibilities: "Art to act in the world," "Art to conquer beauty," "Art to represent the world," "Art to give testimony, teach and reflect," and "Art to express emotions." In each section, she presents specific cases from the History of Art in Occident and in the Ancient World. The texts in each section are simple to understand and are not lengthy, and Antoine-Andersen provides several examples. Thus, it works as a good way to introduce participants to contextual and art historical knowledge about art, at the same time facilitating thought on the different purposes and functions art has fulfilled over the course of history of different parts of the world. I thought this book could be appealing and useful both for children and for parents.

7.4 Other issues about the program and participants' experience

In this section I point out certain issues about the program and participants' experiences. Some of these are directly related to the research question, others less so. I briefly describe them here, and suggest they could be further researched as independent studies.

7.4.1 The role of the workshop guide

I intended my guidance of the workshop to be as unobtrusive as possible: I tried to limit myself to explaining the activities of the program, in the hope that they alone would be able to provide the basis for imaginative, creative and interpretive activity. In this sense, one of my roles was to give participants instructions and clear up any doubts or questions. I also acted as a mediator during group conversations: I would moderate participation, or point out portions of someone's comments about the painting, stressing an issue or establishing relationships with other paintings.

I tried to be particularly careful not to influence participants' interpretations, since one of the objectives of the research was to find out how non-specialized participants with little or no knowledge about an artwork would engage in its interpretation. Therefore, I refrained from sharing information about the artwork, and only brought that information in when participants' interpretation or group discussions led in that direction.

I often repeated or paraphrased what participants said, for several purposes: 1) to make sure everyone had heard what each participant said, and so keep the group engaged in the conversation; 2) to clear up the meaning of a participant's comment; 3) to try to avoid making remarks that would put me in the position of judging whether observations or comments were right or wrong. While listening to the recordings, though, I found that I often used the words "Okay" or "Good," and thus probably didn't fully accomplish this last objective, since these might have been understood as approval; at other times, I realized I did sometimes use these phrases to show my agreement with someone's comment or creative work.

I strived to foster confidence in the members of the group to engage in creative activity and in conversations. I sought to achieve this by letting them present their own understanding and experience of the activities to the group, allowing themselves to be the ones to guide group conversations as much as possible, and by accentuating that hands-on activities were not focused on technical perfection but were a means to record imaginative exercises and to practice memory and observation of paintings. Yet, some participants did

feel unsure about their performance at certain moments of the program. At times this nervousness arose from the activity itself, such as speaking in front of a group of people, which made many of them tense and worried about saying what they wanted to in the correct way. My assistant informed me that some participants felt confused about what they were supposed to do during the activities and felt discouraged. My assistant suggested that I motivate these participants, emphasizing their accomplishments, in order to make them feel confident about their process. It might be important to review how instructions were given, in order to find a way to make them clearer to all participants.

Overall, I envisioned the role of the workshop guide as someone who would point out directions to participants, but would let them carry out those instructions at their own pace, permitting them to arrive at their own findings. From the data gathered, it seemed that this approach worked well for some participants, but for others it presented difficulties. So as to contemplate further on the role of the workshop guide in this program, it would be necessary to learn more about how participants experienced this guidance to identify both strengths and weaknesses, as well as to develop solutions for them.

7.4.2 Appropriation of space

Throughout the workshop, the differences among participants' movement through the gallery and in the museum were observed. Particularly the children, during the first sessions, tended to walk in pairs or in groups, while by the end they walked on their own and more at ease. This could be due to them becoming more familiar with different spaces in the museum: the gallery, the lobby, the garden and the education services area. This confidence was also manifested through more easy-going behaviour on behalf of the children, as well as from parents. At the beginning of the program, some of them looked awkward and self-conscious: they crossed their arms in front of them and children sat close to their parents. By the end of the program, they stood in front of the paintings in more relaxed positions; children sat on the floor comfortably, and at times stood up to point at a certain element in the painting of their own initiatives. Children and parents began to speak

more loudly, more fluently and with more confidence. The fact that some of them went into other galleries after or before the sessions of the program, accounts for them feeling comfortable in the space of the museum, showing their desire to be in it. These changes were observed in several participants, though when interviewed, some of them stated that they hadn't felt any change in this respect throughout the workshop.

I found children behaved quite differently in different parts of the museum. In the gardens they would run or walk quickly or with a relaxed pace, they would speak loudly and express their ideas and feelings more freely, and they also spoke to others. However, in the gallery, behaviour was more controlled, body movement was more restricted, as was the volume of the voice and the possibility of speaking openly to others. This is positively related to the behaviour proper to museum galleries, in which walking slowly, speaking softly and being careful of one's own movements in order not to put the artwork in danger is standard.

In the last interview, I asked the Sanchez family if they felt more comfortable in one part of the museum than in another. They remarked feeling comfortable both in the galleries and in the garden. The children commented that there had been moments in which they had felt awkward, particularly when gallery guards had asked them to stay away from the paintings, or to speak in a quiet voice. The children said this had made them feel bad. Because of this, their behaviour in the gallery was always regulated so its appropriation happened within the limits of these rules.

It would be interesting to dedicate an entire study to participants' experience of being in the different spaces of the museum during the program, focusing on whether the space of the museum becomes more familiar throughout it, and if so, how.

7.4.3 Differences on gender approaches to the program's activities

Throughout the program I noticed undeniable differences between how fathers and mothers engaged in the program's activities, particularly in group conversations. There was a sharp

contrast between the frequency and manner of participation of fathers and mothers: the former expressed their thoughts and opinions quite often throughout the conversation, while the latter did it less frequently or never. Fathers tended to articulate their ideas with confidence, and tended to use a more sophisticated vocabulary. On the other hand, mothers were inclined to excuse themselves before any mistakes could be made, and had a propensity to disqualify or doubt their own opinions as soon as they had finished expressing them. These are general observations of the behaviour of mothers and fathers in the group; surely, these attitudes varied according to each participant's personality and interest in the conversation, yet the contrast was noticeable.

Other differences were identified by comparing the experience of the program as carried out during my BA thesis with the present study. While participants in the former were mostly girls, in this study most of the children who participated were boys. I noticed differences among these genders in their engagement with hands-on activities: in my BA study, girls tended to be more careful about their drawings, and added more details to them, while boys in this research made less careful and less-detailed drawings. Another difference was that, during the "Comic strip and conversation" activity, girls recorded several imaginary questions in their comic strip, on occasion close to or more than ten, while boys asked if they could draw only a few of them, complained about having to draw many of them, and tried to deceive me about the number of questions they had actually imagined in order to draw less.

A detailed analysis on this issue could inquire into gender approaches to art. In this sense, the program could be used to develop research around gender studies that could explore differences in both childhood and in adulthood.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSIONS

The question that guided this research was “How do non-specialized publics with little or no knowledge about art engage in the interpretation of one work of art through a program based on H.G. Gadamer’s hermeneutics?” There is no single answer to this question, since all participants had an individual experience, none exactly the same as the others. Some of them went through similar processes, like Luis, Gabriel, Ana and Raúl, while the development of others differed enormously from them, such as Karla’s and Samuel’s.

According to the study, the use of Gadamer’s understanding of art as play, as symbol and as festivity, as well as of concepts of his hermeneutic circle, such as the horizon of understanding, the question, the radiation of meaning, and the constant return to the artwork itself, developed processes of understanding of artwork based on participants’ imagination, intelligence and life experience, which led to self-understanding and to the identification of themes in paintings as outcomes of participants’ interpretive processes. In this way, participants pondered issues such as coexistence, social justice, social equality, power, ethical behaviour, modernity, tradition, changes within the landscape of Mexico City throughout the passage of time, and different ways of inhabiting the world.

The use of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the design of the program proved to promote Gadamer’s (1986a) understanding of art among participants, without these ideas being enunciated in any form during the program. A few participants, by the end of the program, understood art as a message needing to be interpreted, and as an object related to everyday life. Other participants spoke about art interpretation and appropriation as part of their experience. The use of Gadamer’s hermeneutics corroborated as a way for art to stop being “otherworldly” and start becoming familiar, and perhaps even necessary, to participants.

On the other hand, the attention that Gadamer’s (1975, 1994) model pays to the importance of verbal and written language in the process of interpretation, followed in the design of the program, constrained the performance of some participants, who had difficulty expressing themselves verbally or through writing. The ability to draw or paint

was established as relevant for participants to engage in creative activities, and was a skill not all participants possessed. Participants with these limitations were unable to develop a project of meaning about the artwork they chose, and therefore, did not develop a theme around the artwork nor arrived to notions of self-understanding. This absence of an interpretive process could also be due to the fact that one of the conditions that Gadamer (1975) points out as necessary to engage in hermeneutic interpretation was absent, that is, that the work of art has to catch the eye of the viewer. These participants had difficulties choosing a painting that caught their attention, and so engaged with paintings that didn't necessarily do so. This condition of hermeneutic interpretation which lays common ground to connect the artwork and the interpreter was absent.

Some aspects of Gadamer's (1986a) conception of art as "festivity" were also observed during group conversations, which allowed for the group to become a small community of interpreters participating in the construction of the work of art, sharing their different understandings of it. The festive character of art was put into practice through the experience of time, as a time of tarrying in the encounter with the work of art and in conversations about it with others.

One of the elements of hermeneutic interpretation that perhaps needs to be focused on in the program is the confrontation of the interpreter's prejudices through interpretation, as well as a more conscious revision of interpreters' project of meaning. Though some prejudices were questioned and altered by several participants after listening to others' opinions and interpretations of paintings, this is not an objective that was intended in the design of the activities. The way in which I tried to incorporate this element in the program was by asking participants to describe selected observations which gave the impression of not being based on close observation of the composition of the painting, challenging them with the painting itself. But, through data analysis I realized I was not always able to identify them during the program, and that sometimes a clearer opposition between participants' prejudice and what was represented in the painting was called for. In this sense, the program pulls away from Gadamer's model in relation to contesting prejudices through hermeneutic interpretation.

One likeness among participants' experiences was that all developed a careful and reflective observation of the painting each one of them chose: the whole group was able to remember the general structure of the painting after the first imaginative activity of the program, even though drawings were done without having the originals nearby. Participants memorized a number of details of the painting. The second imaginative experience helped participants discover new particulars, look more carefully and, in a few cases, to change their ideas about what they had originally seen and thought about the painting.

Not only did participants remember their own paintings well even a few weeks after the program was finished, but they were also able to recall details about other people's paintings. During the last interview, both Gabriel and Luis described in detail their painting and their mother's, and Gabriel said he didn't have a hard time painting his comic, since the painting had been imprinted onto his memory. This was achieved by the program's intention to reproduce Gadamer's hermeneutic circle as a constant return to observing the paintings; imagination was the tool allowing observation. This constant revisiting took place in the form of drawings, story-writing or painting; through these exercises, participants described the painting visually and verbally by recollecting what they had imagined about it. The constant return to the work of art was guided through group conversations, in which participants recalled one more time their imaginative exercises by sharing them with the group, and received comments about their painting from other participants, improving their observation. This outcome can be associated with the prolonged amount of time each participant engaged with his or her selected work of art, following Gadamer's (1986a) understanding of the experience of time during art interpretation.

Remarkable to note is the style of group conversations developing more thorough and careful observation of the paintings, due to the different opinions and perspectives shared by participants. As the group became more involved with each painting, conversations around it became richer. As a result, eventually more and more people began to become occupied in examining and comprehending what was represented in another participant's painting and its interpretation. In this way, even though participants worked closely with one painting, they also had the chance to learn about other artwork.

This kind of group commitment did not take place when the program was carried out with children alone. Then, group interaction was limited to children explaining briefly what they had imagined or had a conversation only with the program guide. In this new version of the program, the participation of parents turned out to be key in order to develop both observation and interpretation further. According to the data gathered from the cases of the two families analyzed in this study, it was the participation of fathers which seemed to motivate additional comments from other participants the most, though it is true that a number of children participated actively and contributed to the observation and interpretation of artwork as well. In group conversations, both children and parents served as interpretive tools for one another, since their comments built upon what others said. Particularly in the case of Raúl and Armando, comments were based on what their children and wives had described, imagined, interpreted or observed about the paintings during previous activities. Without this, fathers most probably would not have been able to comment the paintings in the way they did. Then again, father's comments, and the directions in which they led conversations, enabled children and mothers to gain perspectives on the paintings they hadn't imagined before and, therefore, altered and enriched their projects of meaning.

According to the results of the analysis, it seems that children who had already been to museums or had had certain engagement with drawing or painting, were more able to develop the activities of the program successfully. In contrast, children who hadn't been to museums before or hadn't ever approached drawing or painting had a harder time completing the activities, and were not able to cultivate a project of meaning around the artwork they chose, as I've mentioned before. On the other hand, these participants did show progress in the way they observed the painting, and at times gained confidence and interest to participate more in group conversations. From this, I would suggest the program have to become part of a lengthier plan, one which could begin by improving drawing, painting and story-telling skills, in order to prepare children and parents for imaginative-interpretive activities. The program could be extended to incorporate curatorial and academic knowledge into the observation and interpretation abilities the program develops.

The use of Gadamer's hermeneutics as I've considered them here adds to the understanding of how heremeneutics helps engage visitors with artwork in museums. By focusing on specific cases of participants, they provide detailed analysis of methods for visitors to engage with works of art through this philosophical perspective, while other studies focus on participant's interpretive processes in less detail.

The program differs from other Museum Education proposals that use Gadamer's hermeneutics as a theoretical framework (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2007b; Meszaros, 2007a, 2006). In the texts examined during the literature review, I was not able to find information on the specific concepts on which these authors establish their understandings of the use of hermeneutics for Museum Education. From my understanding, Burnham and Kai-Kee's use of Gadamer's philosophy centers on the dialectic aspects of the hermeneutic circle, and also involves the understanding of the artwork in relation to Gadamer's concepts of "representation" and "recognition," as well as on self-understanding. From my understanding of Meszaros' use of hermeneutics, she concentrates on hermeneutic reflection on interpretation itself and on the confrontation of the interpreter's prejudice through the hermeneutic circle. The research I've presented here focuses on several aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics that are not expressly attended to by these authors, such as the philosopher's conception of art as play, symbol and festivity. Plus, it deliberates on the importance of the artwork's "radiation of meaning" and its importance to establish an interpretive dialogue. In this sense, this study offers the use of other aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics not previously approached by other authors in Museum Education.

The application of hermeneutics in this investigation differs from Kai-Kee's, Burnham's and Meszaros' in other aspects. While Meszaros concentrates on the aspects of hermeneutics that reflect on the act of interpretation itself and stresses this reflection in her Museum Education proposal, this study pays less attention to this reflection on the act of interpretation. Instead, it focuses on hermeneutic art interpretation in relation to the autonomous character of art, as explained by Gadamer (1986a, 1986b). Thus, it accents the possibility of engaging publics with little or no knowledge about art in art interpretation through their own intelligence and life experience, which the autonomous character of art, together with Gadamer's understanding of art as play, allow.

There are similarities and differences between Kai-Kee's and Burnham's use of hermeneutics with the one I've developed here. They both attend to linguistic aspects of the hermeneutic circle, and remain faithful to his conception of "representation" and "recognition." This can lead to notions of self-understanding as an outcome of the interpretive process. Kai-Kee and Burnham propose to work with a selection of artwork, as I do here. Yet, this study argues for this selection to be performed by participants themselves, based on Gadamer's conception of the "radiation of meaning," while Burnham and Kai-Kee choose the artwork a group will engage with. Kai-Kee and Burnham insist upon the inclusion of pertinent art-historical knowledge in the interpretation process, while I focus on the autonomous character of the work of art in order to provide publics with little or no knowledge about art the opportunity to develop an interpretation based on their own intelligence, imagination, creativity and life experience, as well as to the development of the ability "to listen" to the work of art. Kai-Kee and Burnham focus on language and conversation as interpretive tools, while I propose here the use of imagination, hand-on activities, and written language as other possible interpretive tools.

The application of Gadamer's hermeneutics I've proposed in this paper adds to Museum Education by proposing different ways of connecting participants with art. Regarding the amount of pieces that Museum Education programs tend to cover in one visit, this program suggests that each participant relates closely to one, and indirectly to a few others. In relation to the amount of time participants engage with a single work of art, I propose that participants focus around three and a half hours total in the interpretation of a single work of art, although this is not common in Museum Education programs. Finally, the program requires that participants attend several sessions, as opposed to one day school-visits, guided tours or after-visit workshops, which have a shorter duration.

The idea that participants focus in depth on a single work of art, instead of on several, allows for more detailed observation, a more profound understanding of it, and perhaps even the possibility that the painting could become a dear, personal memory for participants, to be revisited again. This was the case with a child who attended the program during the study for my BA thesis: Zoé, seven years old at the time, asked her father to take her back to the museum, referring to it as "*her* museum" with the intention to "visit *her*

painting.” Dedicating time to a single work of art nurtures a close encounter with it and may help participants regard it as more than mere decoration. Furthermore, it may aid in visitors becoming familiar with art in museums, making them be perceived as meaningful, relevant, or even necessary, as some of the participants perceived. In this fashion, the application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as I propose here supports a necessity within the field of Museum Education identified by Kai-Kee and Burnham (2005), that is, to the development of interpretive strategies that help visitors connect with paintings both emotionally and intellectually.

As pointed out by Busquets (2005), in relation to the emphasis being placed on interpreters’ voices within Museum Education, the fact that the application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics I propose here does not necessarily attend to art historical knowledge does not mean it seeks to displace art historical or curatorial discourse “from its place to give it to the public,” but rather, it seeks to value interpreters’ voices in order to make the museum more accessible and to bring visitors closer.

The application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics I put forward presents both advantages and disadvantages: it offers a challenge for the museum to be able to ensure the assistance of families to several sessions. It could be problematic for parents to find the time to be able to take part in the program. Alternatively, according to the results of the study regarding the possibility of future visits to museums, the program could become a way to attract new visitors and to create new audiences, based on the development of a genuine interest in art. Hence, the application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics has the potential to create assiduous visitors for museums, who might be interested in attending other programs or events organized by these institutions.

As I have mentioned before, during the program several participants developed an understanding of art as something that communicates a message, or that expresses a message. These ideas are related to some aspects of Gadamer’s understanding of art: he speaks of the work of art as something that speaks, as something that communicates.³⁶ Gadamer does not use the word “message” in order to refer to what the work of art

³⁶ Cf. Chapter 3, Art as symbol.

communicates. As I explain in the Theoretical Framework, Gadamer's understanding of how an artwork communicates is complex, and involves the concepts of "imitation," "representation," "recognition," "symbol," "play" and "festivity" as understood by him. Gadamer even warns about understanding his concept of art communication as though the artwork was merely the bearer of a message; instead, he says that the work of art is that which it communicates, and that it contains in itself everything that it needs in order to communicate. Yet, in spite of participants' use of the word "message," some of them were able to experience and recognize art as effectively speaking and it spoke to them. In this sense, many participants were able to "listen" to the work of art as it spoke to *them*, based on their horizons of understanding.

It is important to underscore Gadamer's understanding of interpretation as never final, subject to revisions and to each interpreter's historicity. He often reminds the reader that there is no final or absolute interpretation of a work, but rather, a multiplicity of them. Again, this does not have to do with interpretations being mere occurrences or projections of the subjectivity of participants. More precisely, with this Gadamer wants to say what is considered objective knowledge is subject to a particular view of the world, and thus, all knowledge will be produced based on the ideas, preconceptions or prejudices of that world view. In the program, participants "listened" to the work of art from their historicity, from their "moment of being" (Gadamer, 1974, xxii); they "listened" to what it told *them*. With this I do not intend to be apologetic of what the program might or might not be able to achieve in terms of developing a hermeneutic interpretation of the work of art. Rather, I think this indicates a questioning of the epistemological ground of education, of Museum Education precisely, that has also been done by other authors before (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 1992). Gadamer places interpretation upon ontological and epistemological ground: knowledge is interpretation. In this sense, participants' interpretations of artwork, however far they may be from widely accepted information or knowledge about art, can be considered a form of knowledge. During the program, quite a few participants arrived at an understanding of an aspect of their everyday life, of human beings or of the world through their interpretation of a group of paintings, that Gadamer refers to as self-understanding.

I would like to invite the reader to consider this in relation to what the program I propose here and other interpretive programs in museums foster: is it really just personal projections or occurrences what non-specialized publics can achieve through them? What roles do these visitors' intelligence, life experience, prior knowledge, sensibility, imagination and creative capacities have in relation to what can be said about art? What do we consider valid knowledge, and why? Have all societies and cultures, present and past, understood it in the same way? Should different sets of knowledge take on a battle for the conquest of validity, or is it possible to recognize different ways to explain, understand and make sense of the world—and also of art?

From my perspective, there are different paths to knowledge that lead to different destinations that might intersect. Walkers may stand at one or another point in these paths, and each one of them goes according to his or her own pace. Like all routes, the starting point and the goal depend on where each journey begins – someone's introduction might be someone else's finish, or one more place to stop; there is no definite say as to what is the first and the last. Through the application of Gadamer's hermeneutics I've proposed here, I have intended to build not only a trail, but a bridge that leads to other ways: one that may link up some of the gaps preventing visitors unacquainted with art to enjoy and learn from the fine arts in museums. I offer up a passage to lead to new paths of wisdom about art for museum visitors in the future.

Burnham and Kai-Kee (2005) call attention to the museum educator's responsibility to create "structures of engagement" as "means of inviting people to appreciate and understand" artwork in museums (p. 68). The use of Gadamer's hermeneutics I have proposed and studied here ultimately attends to this: to *invite* visitors to connect with artwork, by building an interpretive strategy to serve as a gateway between families and works of art through Gadamer's hermeneutics.

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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A. PARENTS PROFILE SURVEY

ENGLISH VERSION

Participant's profile

Parents

The following information will help us understand your experience in the workshop better. Thank you!

Age: _____ Sex: ____ Female ____ Male _____

Occupation: _____

Have you been to other museums before? YES ____ NO ____

If your answer is yes, do you remember which?

Have you taken art lessons before? YES ____ NO ____

If your answer was yes, could you describe it?

Would you be interested in visiting a museum again? YES ____ NO ____

Why?

Thank you for your assistance.

SPANISH VERSION

Perfil del participante

Padres de Familia.

La siguiente información nos ayudará a entender mejor su experiencia en el taller. Le agradeceremos que nos proporcione los siguientes datos.

Edad: _____ Sexo: ____ Femenino ____ Masculino ____

Ocupación _____

Había asistido antes a algún museo? ____Sí ____No

Si su respuesta fue sí, recuerda a cuál o cuáles?

Usted o sus hijos habían tomado otro taller de pintura o arte antes de asistir a éste? ____ Sí
____No

Si su respuesta fue sí, a cuál o cuáles? Dónde? Por cuánto tiempo?

Le interesaría regresar con sus hijos a un museo? ____ Sí ____ No

Por qué?

Agradecemos su colaboración.

APPENDIX B. CHILDREN'S SURVEY

ENGLISH VERSION

Participant's profile

Children

The following questions will help us understand better your experience in the program.

How old are you? _____

You are: A girl ____ A boy ____

Is this the first time you've been to a museum? ____ Yes ____ No

If you have, do you remember their names?

Have you taken art lessons before? ____ Yes ____ No

If you have taken art lessons before, do you remember what you learned?

Would you like to come back to the museum? ____ Yes ____ No Why?

Thank you!

SPANISH VERSION

Perfil del Participante

Niños

Las siguientes preguntas nos van a ayudar a entender mejor tu experiencia en el taller. Te agradecemos que nos ayudes a contestarlas.

Cuántos años tienes? _____

Eres: ____Niña ____Niño

Es la primera vez que vienes a un museo? ____ Sí ____ No

Si has ido a otros museos antes, recuerdas a cuáles?

Has tomado otros cursos de pintura o dibujo antes? ____ Sí ____ No

Si has tomado cursos de dibujo antes, recuerdas qué te enseñaron?

Te gustaría regresar a un museo de arte? ____ Sí ____ No

Por qué?

¡Gracias por participar con nosotros!

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE 1 FOR PARTICIPANTS

How did you feel when you first entered the museum?

How did you feel when you first entered the gallery?

Do you feel different now? If so, how?

Did you think differently about it after the imaginary games and the drawings you did about it? If so, how did your thoughts changed?

What do you think about it now?

What did you feel when you first saw the painting you chose?

Did you feel differently after the imaginary games and the drawings you did about it? If so, how did your feelings changed?

How do you feel about it now?

What was engaging in these imaginary games like for you?

What was engaging in these drawing activities like for you?

Did you enjoy some of the activities more than others? Why?

Did you feel uncomfortable with any of the activities? Why?

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE 2 FOR PARTICIPANTS

What caught your attention about the painting you chose?

Was it difficult for you to imagine things about paintings?

How would you describe what we did in the workshop in a few words?

Did you feel different after the activities of the program?

What things did you talk about after the program?

In your opinion, what is art?

Was your idea about art different before you attended the program?

Would you go back to a museum? Why or why not?

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE 1 FOR ASSISTANT

Do you remember how parents and children moved around the gallery at the beginning of the program?

Do you remember how they moved around the gallery towards the end of the program?

Did you notice any changes in behaviour between these two stages?

Did you notice any differences of behaviour between adults who attended the program and other adults you saw visiting the exhibition?

Is there anything that got your attention about the way children and parents engaged in the different activities of the first stage of the program?

According to what you could observe, how would you describe the way in which parents and children interacted during the activities of the program?

According to what you could observe, what attitudes did children and parents adopt throughout the program?

Did you notice any differences in the way different families who attended the program engaged in the activities?

Do you recall any other groups of children and their parents that you saw attending the exhibition before?

Do you notice any differences between the interactions of families attending the program and other families you saw attending the exhibition before?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE 2 FOR ASSISTANT

From what you could observe of participants, would you say that they showed interest during conversations about the paintings?

Do you think that, at times, my performance as a guide made participants feel unsure, intimidated or insecure?

Why do you think some participants were unsure about what they wanted to do?

How did you help Samuel engage with the painting he chose?

How did Karla help you achieve this?

What did you talk about with him?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX D. “INSIDE THE PAINTING” HANDOUT

ENGLISH VERSION

Imagine that you can walk inside the painting, and that you can move around in it. Try to imagine...

What can you see?

What can you hear?

What things can you touch?

What things can you talk about with other people or animals in it?

If you could enter the painting, what would you wear?

In what part of the painting would you be?

What would you do?

SPANISH VERSION

Imagina que puedes entrar al cuadro y que puedes moverte dentro de lo que está pasando en él. Imagina lo siguiente:

¿Qué ves?

¿Qué escuchas?

¿Qué hueles?

¿Qué cosas puedes tocar?

¿Qué cosas puedes platicar con otras personas o animales que están pintados en el cuadro?

Si pudieras ser parte de la pintura, ¿cómo irías vestido? ¿En qué parte de la pintura estarías?

¿Qué estarías haciendo?

APPENDIX E. BREB CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
 Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
 Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kit M. Grauer	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Curriculum Studies	UBC BREB NUMBER: H08-02352
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution	Site	
N/A Other locations where the research will be conducted: Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. The research will be conducted in the galleries of the museum where artwork is exhibited, as well as in the room for education programs. Alfonso Herrera Public School, Mexico City. Participants will be recruited among 3rd and 4th grade students and their parents.		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Ursula Tania Estrada		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A		
PROJECT TITLE: Interpreting in the art museum: building bridges between non-specialized visitors, artworks and museums through H.G. Gadamer's hermeneutics.		
REB MEETING DATE: December 11, 2008	CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: December 11, 2009	
DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: March 5, 2009
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol: Interpreting in the Art Museum: Building Bridges between Non-specialized visitors, artworks and the museum through philosophical hermeneutics. Research Proposal.		
Consent Forms:		
Consent Form	Version 1	October 28, 2008
Consent Letter Parents Spanish Translation	Version 1	February 25, 2009
Consent Letter Assistant	Version 1	February 25, 2009
Consent Letter Parents	Version 2	February 25, 2009
Consent Letter Assistant Spanish Translation	Version 1	February 25, 2009
Assent Forms:		
Assent Letter Children Spanish Translation	Version 1	February 25, 2009
Assent Form	Version 1	October 28, 2008
Assent Letter Children	Version 2	February 25, 2009
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		

Children and Parents Interview Guidelines	Version 1 February 20, 2009
Assistant Interview Guidelines	Version 1 February 20, 2009
<u>Letter of Initial Contact:</u>	
Initial Contact Letter for School Spanish Translation	Version 1 February 20, 2009
Initial Contact Letter School	Version 1 February 25, 2009
<u>Other Documents:</u>	
Museum of Modern Art Letter	N/A February 4, 2009

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

***Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:***

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair