GUIDING THE EYE

VISUAL LITERACY IN ART MUSEUMS

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Waxmann 2019
Münster · New York
Contents

Preface .................................................................................................................................. 7

Lode Vermeersch and Ernst Wagner
Importance and Expectation
On Seeing, Visual Literacy and Art Museums ................................................................. 9

Ernst Wagner and Lode Vermeersch
What You See Is Who You Are (Four Short Conversations) ........................................... 21

Frants Mathiesen
Interaction between Schools, Pupils, and Museums ..................................................... 33

Claudia Rosskopf
Art Museums and Cultural Education: Expertise and Experimentation ....................... 43

Priscilla Van Even and Lode Vermeersch
Visual Literacy, Young People and Art and Design Museums in an Era of Images: The RETINA Project ......................................................................................... 51

Charmaine Zammit
Visual Literacy through Art Museum Education Outreach .............................................. 61

 Brian P. Kennedy and Mike Deetsch (Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, USA)
Speaking Visual at the Toledo Museum of Art ............................................................... 71

Peter Carpreau (Museum M, Leuven, Belgium)
Visual Literacy as Curatorial Strategy ........................................................................... 79

Chantal Eschenfelder (Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany)
View, Read, Understand: The Digitorial® as a Means to Developing Visual Competence ......................................................................................................................... 87

Ivan Jurica (Mumok – Museum of Modern Arts, Foundation Ludwig, Vienna, Austria)
On Disturbing and Intervening: The Limits of a Museum Must Not Constitute Limits on Education Through Arts ................................................................. 97

Holger Otten (Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany)
Some Thoughts on the Requirements for Art Mediation and Visual Literacy .... 109
Nobumasa Kiyonaga (Kyoto International Manga Museum, Japan)
Visual Literacy and the Manga ................................................................. 117

Marie Fulková (Department of Art Education, Faculty of Education,
Charles University in collaboration with Museum of Decorative Arts,
Prague, Czech Republic)
Children in Active Zones ........................................................................ 125

Barbara Kolb and Karl Borromäus Murr
(State Textile and Industry Museum, Augsburg, Germany)
Reading Fashion with all of our Senses ..................................................... 137

Robert Brown, Marnee Watkins, John Quay, Jennifer Andersen
(The University of Melbourne) and Michele Stockley
(The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne, Australia)
Artful Experience in the Gallery: Weaving Together Being-
Doing-Knowing ...................................................................................... 147

Jochen Meister (Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany)
From Eye-Catcher to Eye-Opener:
The Red Frog in Automotive Design .......................................................... 153

Rainer Wenrich
On the Implementation of Visual Literacy in Art Museums:
Theoretical Contribution, Findings and Conclusions .............................. 161

Authors ....................................................................................................... 171
Preface

This is a book about visual literacy. Being able to read and write visual language is a crucial prerequisite for social participation in an age of ubiquitous imagery and cultural diversity. Apart from the individual ability to read and write visuals, the notion of ‘visual literacy’ also encompasses the awareness of visual communication which enables individuals and groups to reflect, understand and use visual information actively.

In 2016, a group of European researchers and educators developed a competence model for visual literacy that resulted in the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy.¹ Up until then, little attention had been given to the idea that art and design museums might have an interesting role to play in the theory and practice of visual literacy. Given that art museums have a vast array of visuals on display, curated in a specific way, they would nonetheless appear to be interesting learning environments for acquiring and applying visual literacy skills.

In January 2018, experts from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Malta and the United States came together for a three day working conference on the topic of Visual Literacy in Art Museums at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich to discuss and explore ways to use the concept of visual literacy in art museums. This working conference was organized by the Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, the Bavarian Museum Academy, the University of Leuven (KULeuven), ENViL and the Toledo Museum of Art. During the conference, the participants mapped various approaches to visual literacy in art museums.²

At the same time, the idea of a publication began to take shape, to reflect on examples in curating and/or education relating to the implementation of visual literacy. As the editors, we eventually decided to broaden the focus and also include papers on theoretical and empirical research, as long as they reflected the idea of how visual literacy can be fostered in art museums.

The presented volume is edited by Lode Vermeersch (KU Leuven, Belgium), Ernst Wagner (Academy of Fine Arts Munich, Germany), Rainer Wenrich (Catholic University Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, Germany) and was coordinated by Janina Horn (Catholic University Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, Germany).

² http://envil.eu/competition-structure-model/
The editors and coordinator would like to thank all the contributors for their efforts and passion. We were delighted to receive contributions from museums from many different countries around the world. This made it possible to give readers of the book deep and diverse insight into how elements of visual literacy can be embedded in processes of curation and mediation.

We are very grateful to Christina Schlereth for her expertise in translation and proofreading, Charmaine Zammit for proofreading the final manuscript and Alexandra Wilken for her constant support in handling the publication project. We would like to expressly thank our cooperation partners for having faith in our project. We would also like to thank Josef Kirmeier, Director of the Center for Museum Education and founding partner of the Bavarian Museum Academy, and Wolfgang Thiel, Director of the Center for Research Funding of the Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, for their generous financial support.

Lode Vermeersch, Ernst Wagner, Rainer Wenrich and Janina Horn Leuven / Munich / Eichstaett, October 2019
What Is Seeing?

Every morning, we open our eyes and start seeing. Our eyes do their job, although “job” may seem an exaggeration for what they actually do. They seem so passive. By opening our eyelids, we give light the opportunity to make its way through our retina. Just as our ears don’t really have to make an effort to detect decibels, it doesn’t seem hard work for our eyes to detect light. Light is automatically projected against the back of our eyeballs, and because these rays of light were previously reflected off the objects around us, the back of our eyes is the film screen for agile, colorful patterns. The result is a reflection of reality, similar to the way Plato’s cave gave a reflection of the world. From the back of our eyeballs (the so-called “blind spot”) the visual impulses make their way to our brains, where the stimuli are processed, and we become aware of what we are seeing. The latter is important. The word ‘aware’ comes from the Greek ‘horan’, which means ‘to see’. So you could say that in that awareness, the real seeing happens. It is at this point that the interpretation of the visual data takes place. Light is distinguished from dark, round from square, green from red, and tables from chairs. This all happens fast and feels very natural. In fact, the direct meaning of most of what we see seems to be apparent. It is mostly a matter of recognition. We link what we see to what we have already seen in the past. So seeing does not consist of separate moments in time, it is an ongoing process.

Although in cognitive terms this process is a highly complex mental analysis (Mirzoeff, 2015), the result of this seemingly limited physical effort is self-evident to most of us, because we do it so often and rely on it every day and throughout the day. At the same time, when you think about it, it is a very strange phenomenon. Two small balls in our heads are capable of capturing anything – large or small – in our environment, as long as it is within reach – but not necessarily within an arm’s reach (Berger, 1973). If you think about it, you might quickly conclude that it is pure magic. If we are far away, we can see a complete pyramid at a glance, and even a whole galaxy of stars, while if we are close enough, we can even discern a flea, and with the help of a microscope, we can even see an atom. We can see depth, space, color, movement, composition, etc. Through our eyes, we literally bring the outside world inside, or at least the visual character of that world. We don’t “pull” the world in, it’s
mostly “pushed” in, in the same way that light falls through a window without that window having to make any effort. All we have to do is open our eyes, and although eyes consist of muscles, keeping them open and focused is not as tiresome as climbing stairs or holding our breath. Seeing is not the most physically exhausting activity. Perhaps it is even the other way around: it’s because we get tired (our body and mind) that we can no longer keep our eyes open. It is only then that seeing becomes an actual physical effort. Think of someone driving home late at night, barely able to keep their eyes open. So seeing happens by itself, almost automatically. That is why it is impossible for us to not see when our eyes are open.

At the same time, our ability to see can leave us profoundly disappointed. We can only look in one direction at a time, when we focus on something in the far distance, we don’t get a clear view of what is close by, our eyes miss a lot of details, we can barely see in the dark. If we stand too close to a pyramid, we don’t see the pyramid at all; if we stand too far from the flea, we will not notice it is there. We can only detect light within the wavelengths of 400 to 700 nanometers. So we miss out on various possibilities in that respect. Compared to eagles, with their excellent long-distance vision, we humans are almost blind. Owls laugh at us for the trouble we have seeing at night. Our vision is also very limited in a symbolic sense. We have to rely on the visual information regarding the exterior of things, animals and people. That is why, fortunately, you cannot see what I am thinking or how I feel. You can only see what lies within the random terrain of the visible, and that is not very much. As Alva Noë (2015) observed: we can simply blot out whole buildings, or even the moon, with a thumb! So our visual capacity, like the capacity of all our other senses, is powerful but at the same time very limited. No wonder the British poet William Blake was disappointed and wrote “The Eye of Man, a little narrow orb, closed up & dark, Scarcely beholding the Great Light” (Blake et al., 2008).

The Making of Images: A Confusing Doubling of Reality

The capacity to “duplicate” or reflect the world doesn’t only belong to our eyes (in combination with our brains). That realization came when humans saw their own shadows for the first time, or discovered their mirror image in the ripples of the water surface. These first images were also projections, admittedly, although not projections of light in the eyeballs, rather projections outside our bodies onto a piece of material or an objective carrier. This ability to duplicate reality was enhanced when humans no longer only encountered re-
flections or projections by accident, but also started to make them themselves, in the sand and on rocks, walls, wood, canvas, paper and screen. The external material image, as an extra or artificial reality, was born. In terms of human evolution, this was an interesting and decisive moment, not so much because the images made were so artificial and therefore outside of reality, but precisely because they were (and are) strongly related to reality. Just think of the animals depicted in the Lascaux and Altamira cave paintings.

Images created by humans – whether they are cave paintings or polaroid snapshots – offer us a specific view on reality, but of course images do not coincide with reality. It is the experience of reality that is recreated or reproduced in the image (Berger, 1973). This referential element gave these man-made images an interesting symbolic potential. An image can refer to an event, a feeling, an object, an idea, etc. and how we experience those things. It is almost never a mere imitation, let alone a perfect imitation of reality (as the shadows in Plato’s cave), but a reference to an experience of reality that is already there or has already happened. It is a mimesis, not an imitation, because it depicts an experience of reality without trying to be that reality. This implies that images, like words, do not derive their meaning solely from their similarity with an existing reality (Boehm, 1994). It also implies that, in contrast to the specific light projections in our eyeballs, man-made images can be shared. People can share images with others, but one can also share images with his or her future self. No wonder, then, that since the cave paintings in Lascaux and Altamira, the possibility of making artificial images oneself prompted a quantum leap in the cultural development of mankind. The possibility to make images facilitated communication (e.g. to share decisions), provided an individual and a collective external memory, created the possibility to make the invisible or absent visible and thus “present” in an almost magical way, created the capacity to capture or even “freeze” time or movement, strengthened feelings of community (collective worship or incantation), etc. At the same time, images created by humans also caused controversy, misunderstanding and prejudice, especially due to their referral or symbolic qualities. The iconophobes in the Byzantium of the eighth and ninth centuries feared that popular devotion would no longer be able to distinguish between the images themselves and the persons depicted (Peters, 1996). Even to this day, the relationship between an image and the person, situation or thoughts depicted sometimes remains troubled, not only in the case of religious devotion and idolatry, but also in the case of, for example, aversion (what are we allowed to show of someone on social media and what not?), privacy, humor and mockery – think, for example, of the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo. The confusing references to reality or the creation of a new reality altogether, which artificial or man-made images
accomplished, made dealing with them complex and sometimes highly sensitive. All the more so since over the centuries it has become increasingly clear that not every image works in the same way. Images sometimes have different meanings for different people. They can even have different meanings for the same person. While for others, that same image may have no meaning whatsoever. Naturally, meaning is in the eye of the beholder, but of course also in the image itself. In fact, some images deliberately challenge the process of meaning-making. Take for instance a work of art, preferably a very recent one. That work of art does not necessarily copy a specific reality or a concrete aspect of that reality (a building, a face, a dream, an idea, a fear, etc.), it does not even have to refer to it vaguely, it also has the possibility to refer primarily or only to itself (as a work of art) or to be nothing more than the vague blueprint of the individual life experience or individual feelings of the artist – things that will never be known by or shared with the person looking at the artistic image. Some artists even go out of their way to make no references at all, and explicitly refuse or even contradict any meaning given by the viewer. They deliberately confound the construction of meaning (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). They create images that refuse to function as images.

As we can see, in addition to the purely physical act of opening our eyes and interpreting the light projections in our eyeballs, seeing images has become a cultural act. What we mean by cultural here is not merely relying on the capacity of physically seeing which is determined biologically (i.e. not being blind), rather the capacity of constructing and attaching meaning, which is something that we, as humans, build up throughout our lives. Looking at images is therefore also an application and a constant adaptation of a mental model. By cultural we also refer to the “web of meaning” (Geertz, 1973) that we constantly build up, not as a purely individual matter, but as an act that is influenced by or even dependent on the people around us, the time, place and visual culture in which we live. It is also reflected in the competences, beliefs and feelings that we construct through our upbringing, such as feelings of power or powerlessness, creative talents, daily habits, codes, conventions and frames of reference, etc. This brings many variables into play. More than a passive window on reality, dealing with created images is therefore also a spontaneous and learned choice for a certain perspective. That perspective can be taught and cultivated. With a nod to the title of the iconic book by John Berger (1973), we could conclude: there are different ways of seeing.
Visual Literacy: What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Gaining understanding and insight into these different ways of seeing is exactly what visual literacy is all about. There are very few books on the subject of visual literacy, visual culture or media studies that do not draw the reader’s attention to the fact that we live in an age in which a vast amount of images are produced and shared. Since the advent of the internet, digital cameras and cameras in smartphones, the increase in the amount of photos taken each year is mind-boggling. We are talking about one trillion photos taken every year. Every two minutes, Americans alone take more photographs than were made in the entire 19th century (Mirzoeff, 2015). Consequently, images are everywhere. Not only in books, churches or museums, but also on the streets, in waiting rooms, in the metro to work, on television in the evening after a busy working day. We are constantly exposed to images: in the newspaper, via digital media (on various formats), on television and on billboards. As such, Bamford claims that “visual images are becoming the predominant form of communication across a range of learning and teaching resources, delivered across a range of formats.” (Bamford, 2003) When I watch my teenage children and their intense use of image-driven apps like Snapchat and Instagram, it is hard for me to disagree. Images surround us. Sometimes these are static images, while often also moving images. Sometimes they go hand-in-hand with sound and written text, sometimes they do not. But they all demand attention, all the time. And we give them attention, sometimes even more than we want to, or would like to admit.

Of course, we rarely think about all the images we make and see every day, we simply don’t have the time for that. The constant stream of images has become a kind of fast food in front of our eyes: often made quickly, undoubtedly quickly chosen and consumed, and above all quickly digested. And then forgotten. And as is the case with fast food, our handling of the many images that reach us remains quite superficial. In other words, not only has the quantity of images changed drastically, the quality of our interaction with them has also changed. This implies that we sometimes remain blind to what some images can tell us (about the world and about ourselves), we simply miss their message, function, aesthetics and context. At the same time, they impoverish our ways of seeing, in the same way that fast food narrows down our culinary taste. We no longer really think about selection, taste, interpretation, combinations, context, and so on. As a result, we can’t really grasp and use much of the possibilities that images have, perhaps even less so now than back in the days of cave paintings. Moreover, this also means that important questions relating to images sometimes remain unanswered. I am referring here to issues such as
privacy (which images can be shown to whom?), ownership (who is the owner of the image that is widely shared on the internet?), manipulation (how are images changed and what are they changed for?), plagiarism (which images can be used and changed and under what conditions?), power (who makes the algorithm that determines which images are shown on social media?), identity (what do the images that I share say about who I am?), etc.

When John Debes introduced the term ‘visual literacy’ in 1969, and Donis A. Dondis wrote his *A Primer of Visual Literacy* a few years later, the aspect of meaning in particular was emphasized: our visual capability implies creating meaning and sharing meaning. As such, the term ‘visual literacy’ is – still today – a very good one, as it emphasizes the analogy with other types of literacy, such as written literacy. In both cases, literacy relates to an understanding of visually perceptible information and the experience which both causes it and is caused by it. An important part of this is the question of the extent to which – as an individual or as a community – we give the same text or the same image a similar meaning, and whether there is even a universal meaning. The notion of ‘literacy’ also refers to the assumption that meaning is the result of an implicit system of underlying rules (i.e. words, grammar, syntax, semantics) that we can recognize and apply when we see a text or an image. So the creation of meaning is a matter of “receiving” (the outside world comes in through the retina), but also a matter of “constructing” meaning (we attach something of ourselves to what we see, including the application of codes and rules of literacy).

I realize that such a delineation of the concept of visual literacy still remains very broad and, well, vague. Since the work of Debes in the late 1960s, ‘visual literacy’ has evolved into a specific domain of research and a related body of knowledge. An important aspect of this is still focused on the question of what visual literacy exactly is, and what makes someone a visually literate person. Both academics (including Debes, Ausburn & Ausburn, Freedman, Moore & Dwyer, Sinatra, Bamford, etc.) and organizations (including IVLA, ENViL, etc.) have tried to define the term over the past 50 years but sometimes words fall short. Or, as Petterson (1989) points out, it is difficult to put into words a concept that is not just about words. We can therefore say that visual literacy is a highly developed field of study and practice; it is also a poorly-defined field, with a highly fluid definition.

Anyone who brings together the existing definitions of visual literacy will still be able to recognize in them a number of recurring elements. Here are some of them:

- More than the physical act of acquiring visual information, visual literacy is always about handling man-made images, both artistic and non-artistic im-
Importance and Expectation

ages, both the sensory modality of images as the symbolic modality of images (Levie, 1978). The concept of visual literacy thus refers to each person’s individual ability to attach meaning to images he or she perceives and to their ability to skillfully deal with those images and their meaning (Levie, 1978). Equally, the concept refers to a collective and social act of handling images: the way we handle images in a small group (e.g. a Facebook group), in a group of like-minded persons (e.g. the use of images to express a particular religious belief or philosophy), in a nation or state or system (e.g. the use of images to express a sense of nationhood). That is why the analogy with textual literacy is so interesting. The meaning of words is not embedded in the letters or in the knowledge of the individual reader, but in the codes, agreements and social habits that “stick” to those words when they are read. Collective meaning works by the grace of convention. This is an essential characteristic of language, any language (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011).

- At the same time, many researchers rightly point out that words are of a totally different order than images. Their nature, form and system differ to such an extent that verbal literacy and visual literacy are unrelated. Visual literacy is not a language theory of pictures (Goodman, 1968).

- Since visual literacy is largely based on conventions and agreements – and is therefore not a matter of purely individual preference – many visual literacy skills are learnable and teachable (Avgerinou, 2003). In the case of textual information, we think it is normal for someone to teach us how to deal with text and how to understand text, but this is also true in the case of visuals. Even though we are confronted with an array of images from an early age (this also applies to textual information, by the way), learning to handle them skillfully is not a process of mere spontaneous development. People can learn it, and they also have to learn it – and keep doing so. After all, our collective way of looking is always in evolution. Oil paintings dominated our ways of seeing for several centuries, but this changed when the camera was invented over 130 years ago (Berger, 1973). This will keep on changing, thanks to inventions such as the internet, smartphones, 3D glasses, etc. Our ways of seeing are evolving and our visual education must evolve as well.

- What exactly can be learned or should be learned in education is difficult to pin down. Visual literacy does not refer to one particular way of dealing with images, but to a whole set of skills. Depending on the source you consult, one or more of these skills may include: communicating with images (visual language, visual communication), understanding images (thinking, understanding, interpreting), being able to think with and about images.
(visual thinking), expressing oneself through images (visual expression, image making), gathering knowledge and learning through images (visual learning), evaluating images (art appreciation and critique), etc.

This amalgam of skills is not easily distinguishable from other sensory skills – and perhaps it shouldn’t be. The boundaries between the visual system and other systems are permeable. For example, visual literacy touches on a number of points with textual, verbal and oral literacy, but also on sensory models related to smelling, tasting, hearing, etc. So it is always a matter of ‘intermediality’ (Lapp et al., 1999). Even in his original definition, John Debes (1969) referred to the “integration of other sensory experiences”. Visual literacy is therefore never only about the visual, and even the so-called visual media are never only about vision, but they involve all the senses (Mitchell, 1994).

Theoretical Approaches to Visual Literacy

What makes the field of visual literacy even more complex is that it can be studied in different scientific disciplines. The field of visual literacy consists of a “rich mélange of viewpoints” (Moriarty, 1994). Without aiming to be exhaustive, we present here some of the theoretical traditions and perspectives in the field of visual literacy.

The domain of visual literacy traditionally relies to a large extent on the insights from art and (graphic/information) design studies. This academic discipline has a strong focus on the formalistic elements of images and is mainly concerned with the formal analysis of images. How does an image work and which components make it work? To answer these questions, the principles of design are studied. Specific attention is paid to formal elements such as shape, color, line, textures, composition, etc. In other words, this theoretical approach is all about the presentational perspective and the aspects of images that are more or less objective. Formalism is the preferred method from this point of view.

Art and design studies focus on art and design, and that is also the case for academics in the disciplines of art/design history, art philosophy and iconology. They focus on the role and interpretation of images in a certain time and place, based on societal and historical information. In historical aesthetics the main aim is to investigate the meaning of a work in the context in which it was created. The impact of historical research on the current debate of visual literacy is rather limited.
That is somewhat different for media studies and communication sciences. They, too, have a significant interest in the visual, especially in the function of images in society today, for instance in popular media and social media. This perspective mainly examines how certain events and ideas are portrayed and therefore how information in and about society is visualized. This also relates to a more cultural approach to images – to be found in visual anthropology, visual studies, visual culture studies, and cultural studies. There, images are interpreted against the backdrop of societal and cultural issues such as gender, globalization, politics, propaganda, etc., to name but a few. These disciplines also have a strong interest in how images represent or question cultural, sociological, political and ideological tendencies in the world. In contrast to art and design studies and the art historical perspective, there is also a strong interest in non-artistic and everyday images. This approach frames the use of visuals as a social practice par excellence.

This brings us to the hard-to-define field of semiotics, the theory of signs. Semiotics is a methodology that focuses on the meaning of images in terms of what they refer to (as symbols, signs or icons). Semiotics is primarily focused on what determines the meaning of images, which is not just a matter of the information transmitted by the image itself (form and object), but is always a question of receiver and context. Semiotics asserts that images, as elements of human culture, must be understood and will always be understood in relation to time, place, narrative, in other words in the structure in which they are embedded. Like a spoken language, a visual language is therefore a very living thing, something without one ultimate correct meaning. As previously mentioned, an image may have a certain meaning for a certain person, but at the same time it can have a totally different meaning for another person. But meanings can also change depending on the situation. A different situation can lead to a different connotation and a different interpretation altogether.

While semiotics emphasizes the importance of the subjectivity of the receiver and the context, hermeneutics emphasizes the fact that the interpretation of images is (or should be) primarily based on information in the image itself. The act of interpreting therefore implies the close reading of images, similar to the way (ancient) texts are studied, also taking into account information on the “author” of the images. Unlike semiotics, the tradition of hermeneutics relies primarily on reading texts and the tradition of text interpretation. Neither semiotics nor hermeneutics are concerned with the search for an essence (the ultimate meaning), but with finding a basis for common awareness and action. Both semiotics and hermeneutics are also closely related to the field of linguistics and the study of language, literature and rhetoric.
There is also a more psychological approach to the act of seeing and the domain of visual literacy. This approach stresses the fact that seeing is something of the individual and collective mind as much as it is something of the eyes. So within the realm of visual literacy, psychologists generally focus on how the eyes work in combination with how people think. How do we store visual information and how do we retrieve information? How does our thinking make sense of what our eyes see? Gestalt psychologists in particular are keen to provide answers to these questions. But the cognitive and neuropsychological approaches are also gaining in popularity. The link between man-made images and human thinking is an intriguing question. It is also of considerable importance for (cognitive) learning theories. The perspective of education and learning, including educational technology and instructional design, is the final major approach we will cover here, and it is perhaps the most overarching one, as it relies on theoretical and practical components of all the above-mentioned disciplines. The key question here is: how do we learn and teach the visual? Perhaps this question touches on the work of art museums in the most direct way.

In this range of theoretical approaches to visual literacy, it is hard to select the most influential or “parent disciplines”. Perhaps this is not even possible, since the various disciplinary domains demonstrate significant overlap. Furthermore, we question whether it is even necessary, since it is exactly these different theoretical viewpoints that give the field of visual literacy (VL) such a dynamic profile. Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011, p. 3) state: “The interaction among divergent opinions, the challenge of an open-ended discourse concerning the nature as well as the practical expressions of the concept, the flexibility to acquire different standpoints in order to try their theoretical validity and viability within diverse settings, the activation and application of different research paradigms with the view to enlighten our understanding of what might constitute the concept, have kept the process of searching the theoretical basis as well as the raison d’être of VL so lively and intellectually stimulating” (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011, p. 3).

**Why Visual Literacy in Art Museums?**

The importance of the visual is self-evident for an art museum. Looking (at art) and thereby experiencing art is what an art museum is all about. A good museum invites you to look, stimulates the visual curiosity, gives you visual satisfaction, allows the visual to merge with other forms of sensoriality, offers frameworks for the act of seeing, knowledge for interpreting and appreciating