

## **The Kennedys, Lightbulbs, and Brownies, or ‘How I learned to stop worrying and love Art’**

I spent a couple of weekends ago on Martha’s Vineyard, if you can believe it. I was flown out as a computer consultant on this really incredibly cool project, an elementary school curriculum that is called VTS, Visual Thinking Strategies.

Now, I am completely obsessed by this program, and was ever since I first heard about it. Educators learn this curriculum – you stand in front of your class and present to them a slide projection of a work of art, usually a painting or a photograph. “What is going on in this picture?” you ask. Then your students raise their hands, and you call on them, and they tell you. When they say “It looks like a party” or “It looks like they’re gambling” you rephrase their statement, instantly giving them acknowledgement, *the teacher is repeating what I said so it must have had some worth*, and then you might add a new ‘vocabulary’ word along with your rephrase. Then you say, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

Your students learn to discuss and explain their thoughts through presentation of visual evidence – “I see cards, and that’s what makes me think they are gambling.” (Interesting, the jump from seeing cards to *gambling*, right?) And every child can participate. Everyone is on equal footing. To watch a VTS session is to watch a group of kids interacting with their teacher as you never, ever have seen before. Everyone knows the right answer, everyone can raise their hand. Coming from someone who has been terrified of museums for her whole life, this is so empowering – *I can look at art too and not be wrong!*

I had an incredible time on Martha’s Vineyard – I expected to be completely glitzed-out by the affluence of the Kennedys’ neighbors, but was very surprised; people dress very understated, at least where I was, on the Vineyard. Houses are small and old and charming. There are trees and hills everywhere. People wear comfortable clothes, drive good hard-working cars, and devise programs that will save the world.

Meanwhile I am back and I think about VTS, the creation of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine. I am lucky enough to have a manual and notice that the University of Illinois is thanked in its pages, so perhaps some educators around here are familiar with VTS. The program is based on Ms. Housen’s vast amounts of research; she studied movements and reactions of museum visitors and listened to their thoughts about the art. She developed a way of encoding viewer responses into categories like ‘observations,’ ‘associations,’ ‘preferences,’ ‘comparisons.’ Within the domains there are subdivisions; quoting her, there is a difference between “I like the painting because purple is my favorite color” and “I like the painting because purple is an interesting unifying color.”

Adding up scores from her codes, she divides viewers into 5 stages; “each represents a different way of making sense about a work of art.” To read about this fascinating research, you must go to <http://www.vue.org> and read the papers in the downloads

section, because I am not even a novice about explaining this and am almost already over my allotted amount of words. Quickly, Stage 1s weave concrete statements about the work of art into a narrative, "*It's a party*", Stage 2 is apparently where most of the population is, we know we're supposed to see some ambiguity in a work of art, and our social, moral, and conventional values become a framework for how we feel about the art. Stage 3 sounded irritating to me; you know a bit too much about the art, and you use your library of knowledge to categorize it; you understand it like book knowledge. A Stage 2 could exhibit some Stage 3 or 4 characteristics; there are transitional stages. I kind of feel like Stages 4 and 5 are beyond my comprehension at this time, and possibly the person explaining this stuff to me did too. But Ms. Housen herself told me that every stage is wonderful; it's not a thing about obtaining the highest ranking. I guess it's another one of those things like martial arts or eating an ice-cream sundae; the journey is more important than the endpoint. You must savor each moment as you learn more about art.

Now, I'm one of those type A personalities, so back home again from Martha's Vineyard, back in Real Life, I walked around the Museum of Contemporary Art to see the Dan Flavin Lightbulb Exhibit, and I thought about where I stood and how I walked around each group of fluorescent lights. Am I having Stage 3 thoughts now? Am I moving up? How would a Stage 5 view this lightbulb? Can a person know what Stage they're in, or is it like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle? Would a Stage 3 eat a brownie in the Museum Café? I did that, and my husband and his brother, who have been attending museums since they were babies with their parents and are probably in Stage 4, did not buy anything. If you're higher than Stage 2, I'll bet you probably never, ever shop at the Museum Gift Shop.

Can I finish my MFA thesis and still be a Stage 2? How can I get back to Stage 1?