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IT'S BETTER NOT TO KNOW ABOUT
A WORK OF ART BEFORE ENCOUNTERING IT

A Term Paper

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MUS 700: Methods of Music Research and Writing

by

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Introduction:

As a composer and musician, I had many experiences of music, as a student in university, workshops, master classes. I also collaborated with many musicians, ensembles and festivals in Iran, Germany, Greece, Italy, Romanian, Argentina, Brazil, and the US. Finally, as a director and supervisor of Dream House Ensemble in Tehran, I coordinated some events, exhibitions and festivals, and we had plenty of great performance of contemporary music by famous composers such as John Cage, Karl Heinz Stockhausen, Philip Glass, La Monte Yong, Terry Reilly, Christian Wolff and recently some great Iranian composers. All of these were not enough for me, but I want to speak more about experiencing the experiences. That was powerful to me, and I always think about basic music questions, such as why and how.

While we want to encounter some simple, basic but significant questions, then we will ask ourselves what is wrong with us? We do not think that is an effective use of time! I can work or anything instead of killing time, but I could not afford stopping this questioning process. Therefore, I started writing, without any previous and serious experiences, at least in music I have not. I remember well that one of my friends raised a prominent issue in our class: he read two short poems for us, one of them was from Ahmad Shamlou's¹ works, and another one was his poems, our master and others of my friends told their opinions. As we can assume that mainly positive points were for Shamlou works and weakness points were for his work, and he told us I am so sorry I lied, actually I had to, because I wanted to prove my assumption: the work I read first wasn't for Shamlou, and that was the most impressive thing for me throughout our class in that's time, Because it made me think more and more, over and over, deciding and finally writing those kinds of questions, maybe can be helpful! maybe? Without a doubt would be helpful... and many of the same ideas that I had since that time so far... for checking plenty of talented artists' works, especially in the modern era. This paper will argue that experiencing art without context enhances appreciation and emotional response by allowing individuals to engage with the work on a personal level, free from preconceived

¹ Ahmad Shamlou (Iranian contemporary poet, writer, and journalist).

notions and external influences. This direct encounter fosters a more profound emotional connection and allows for diverse interpretations, enriching the viewer's experience.

An overview of the **definition of art:**

When you want to know about this important subject, you have many choices, such as referring to your experiences in the past regardless of your favorite, all things that you have seen, heard, touched and finally felt, in your school, or anywhere, and the others one that is a some basic principle ideas and definition in some reference books, and as you know there are plenty of these. In general, I am impressed by some simple definition like something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas, feelings or the real art consists of seven elements: line, shape, space, value, form, texture, and color.

But starting in the twentieth century many things changed. Art was not exception therefore art was changing not quickly but gradually, throughout history there are so many disagreements, between the intellectuals and some different persons, interested in preserving the classical tradition, interested in modernity, especially in the twentieth century.

Defining the concept: and encountering art without prior knowledge some value of fresh perspectives.

As you know there are many typical ways people approach art, such as reading reviews, understanding the artist's background, or knowing the historical context, these methods often provide a framework for interpretation. But now I am going to definition of encountering art without prior knowledge:

What is the definition of "encountering art without prior knowledge" as engaging with a work of art in a spontaneous, unmediated way? "Encountering art without prior knowledge" refers to experiencing a work of art without any previous notions, background information, or external context. This spontaneous, immediate engagement allows viewers to connect with the artwork on a personal level, relying just on their immediate emotional and sensory responses. This approach encourages a more genuine interaction, where interpretations are shaped by individual perspectives and feelings rather than informed critiques or historical context. It emphasizes the power of art to evoke reactions and provoke thought purely through its visual or

auditory elements, this means experiencing the piece only based on one's immediate emotional, sensory, and intellectual responses, without external influences.

As an art lover, I experienced the importance of significant first impressions, which can be powerful and impactful. Without previous notions, individuals may experience a more valid and authentic reaction, allowing for personal connections and interpretations that are uniquely their own, and maybe for you will be interesting if I would say that there are some important psychological aspects, Psychological insights mention which suggest that unfiltered encounters can make stronger emotional reactions and personal meaning. Psychological insights reveal how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors interact in complex ways.

The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance:²

Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person experiences mental discomfort due to holding two contradictory beliefs or engaging in behavior that conflicts with their values. For instance, if someone values health but regularly eats junk food, the resulting tension might lead them to change their beliefs, such as rationalizing their choices or their behavior (eating healthier). This internal struggle often motivates individuals to seek alignment between their actions and beliefs, which can lead to personal growth and deeper self-awareness.

Emotional Engagement:³

Emotional engagement refers to the level of emotional involvement one has with a person, experience, or concept. Unfiltered encounters like honest conversations or raw, authentic experiences can evoke stronger emotional reactions because they pass top layers, allowing for genuine connection. When people engage deeply, they often experience more empathy, connection, and understanding, which can lead to more significant personal meaning. These moments tend to stick with us, influencing our perspectives and decisions.

Sensory Engagement⁴ can lead to a deeper appreciation of the work itself. When we are talking about touching, we know sensory engagement is crucial when approaching art, especially for those without

² Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston: Illinois, Row, Peterson and Company, 1957). Festinger is an American social psychologist.

³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995). Goleman is an American psychologist.

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Berger is an English art critic.

extensive background knowledge. Engaging with art through sight, sound, and touch allows viewers to connect on an emotional and intuitive level, sight draws attention to colors, shapes, and composition, encouraging personal interpretations and feelings. Sound, whether from the ambiance of the space or an audio guide, can enhance the mood and context of a piece. Touch, when applicable, can create a physical connection, deepening the experience.

For getting better understanding I want to mention one of my personal memories that is the examples of uninformed encounters, I remember one day my friends and I were at cafe in Tehran. While we were talking that we were able to realize one different style music that was playing, I personally was really impressed by that one, then I asked by the manager of the cafe and he told me that is a one less heard music by Beethoven,⁵ titled: *Three Equals* (for four trombones). I can say it boldly is one of the greatest music in all Beethoven's works and also that in all romantic works, because private space and many others technically matter is totally different with all romantic music, there are many reasons for proving why this music it different with many Beethoven's works and many romantic's works, but many times we can just hear, touch, feel and finally enjoy.

An approach centered on open mindedness and discovery encourages individuals to engage with experiences without notions. By setting aside expectations, viewers can fully immerse themselves in the present moment, allowing them to notice elegant details and emotions that might be missed otherwise. This openness fosters curiosity and encourages exploration, leading to richer, more elegant understandings. As a result, individuals can develop a deeper appreciation for the complexity of their experiences and the perspectives of others, enhancing both personal growth and empathy. And let me tell you an important relevant example that I remember from not too long ago.

I remember about eight years ago, one of my family members, who was not familiar with any type of serious music and totally series art. She explained me: [one day I passed by Valiasr Street like many normal days, but this time I saw and felt and heard all new materials, which I have never experienced before that, to be honest at first I was thinking I am sleep after that I got scared and finally gradually I was receiving many

⁵ Ludwig van Beethoven, giant German nineteenth-century composer.

experiences which before that I did not have at all well actually in that day was an inspiring installation events by Iranian artists], And maybe for you will be surprisingly after this events she became art lover and many times she participated in some artistic events.

An example of how encountering art without prior knowledge allows for an unfiltered emotional response:

I am going to elaborate one unforgettable memory for myself, an important remarkable example of my experiences about how encountering art without prior knowledge allows for an unfiltered emotional response. As I remember perfectly on February 22, 2019. That was the third performance of Dream House Ensemble, my friends and I performed six impression Lamont Young's 6 works at the Gallery No.14, Tehran.

We never explained of details of works; we just announced that tonight all works are by Lamont Young, because not explaining the simplistic are two principal theory of Lamont Young's mind, and we did it, the effect of one of the works on audiences for me at least that was really clear, entitled Composition No. 6.⁶ That was the challenge action and reaction with the audiences, without any notation or anything else, the sound and performances created by act and interact between musician and the audiences. I remember that was a fascinating moment for all of us in ensemble also and the audience gained amazing experiences for all works especially this one.

The Subjectivity of Art: Art is subjective by nature, and individual experiences shape how they understand and interpret it. Personal responses can resonate more deeply than established critiques. Diversity of perspectives in contemporary art embraces a wide range of voices and backgrounds. Personal interpretations reflect diverse cultural and social contexts, enriching the conversation around the work. Engagement and Interaction, Viewers are encouraged to actively engage with art rather than passively receive expert analysis.

This interaction fosters a personal connection and a sense of ownership over one's interpretation.

Another one is evolving contexts: As society changes, so do the meanings of artworks. Personal

⁶ Composition No.6 (1960).

interpretations can evolve alongside cultural shifts, making them relevant and impactful in new ways.⁷ Democratization of Art, the rise of social media and digital platforms has democratized art discourse, allowing anyone to share their thoughts and interpretations, challenging the authority of traditional experts. Overall, personal interpretation enriches the dialogue around contemporary art, emphasizing the value of individual experiences in understanding and appreciating creative.⁸

Let me introduce two of the twenty century artists and philosophers, they emphasize personal experience: **Tracey Emin.**⁹ Known for her autobiographical approach, Emin often draws on her own life experiences, emotions, and memories. Her pieces, such as *My Bed*, reflect intimate aspects of her life, inviting viewers to engage with her personal narrative. By sharing her vulnerabilities, Emin encourages audiences to interpret her work through their own experiences, making her art deeply relatable and impactful.¹⁰

Brian Donnelly,¹¹ who integrates elements of his own life and experiences into his work, blending pop culture with themes of nostalgia, identity, and consumerism. His characters often reflect personal emotions and social commentary, inviting viewers to connect their own experiences with his visual narratives. Through his large-scale sculptures and street art, KAWS creates an accessible dialogue that resonates on both personal and cultural levels.¹²

One contemporary philosopher who emphasizes personal experience is **Martha Nussbaum.** Her work often focuses on the role of emotions and personal narratives in ethics and moral philosophy.

Nussbaum argues for the importance of individual experiences in understanding justice and compassion, particularly in her writings on capabilities and human development.¹³

⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Berger is an English art critic.

⁸ Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). Paul is an American writer.

⁹ Tracey Emin (An English contemporary artist).

¹⁰ Interview with the *Guardian* (2018).

¹¹ Brian Donnelly (American artist and designer).

¹² The *New York Times* Interview (2019).

¹³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Nussbaum is an American philosopher.

Another example is **Judith Butler**, who explores how personal identity and experiences shape social and political structures, especially in the context of gender and sexuality.¹⁴ Both philosophers highlight the significance of lived experience in shaping philosophical discourse.

Reduction of bias: how preconceptions can limit engagement with the artwork, and some examples from different art forms (visual art, literature).

Individual experiences negative or limiting past experiences may lead individuals to reject or misinterpret works that touch on certain themes. An Art Historical Canon, focusing solely on well-known artists can marginalize diverse voices, preventing appreciation of innovative or unconventional pieces. Genre Bias, Preconceived ideas about "high" versus "low" art can restrict engagement with works that do not fit traditional categories. Viewers often approach abstract pieces of visual art with a preconceived notion that art must represent something recognizable. This bias can lead to frustration or dismissal, missing the emotional or conceptual depth that abstract works offer. In literature, readers might overlook genres like romance or young adult fiction, considering them less "serious" than literary fiction. This bias can limit their exposure to engaging narratives and valuable themes present in these works. In music, the debate between Classical and Popular Music continues. Some listeners may dismiss popular genres like hip-hop or pop as less sophisticated compared to classical music. This bias can prevent them from recognizing the artistry, lyrical depth, and cultural significance of these genres.

Additionally non-western music preconceived notions about what constitutes "music" can lead to a lack of appreciation for non-Western styles, such as Indian classical or African drumming, limiting understanding of their cultural contexts and unique structures. In each art form, biases can hinder the appreciation and understanding of works, emphasizing the importance of approaching art with an open mind to fully engage with and appreciate diverse expressions.

Encouraging exploration: how does a lack of prior knowledge encourage viewers to explore art more deeply and personally?¹⁵

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Butler is an American philosopher.

¹⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934). Dewey is an American philosopher and psychologist.

Lack of prior knowledge can enhance the art-viewing experience by inviting viewers to engage more freely and personally with the work. Without preconceived notions or expectations, they are more likely to rely on their own emotions and interpretations. This openness fosters a deeper exploration of themes, colors, and textures, allowing for unique personal connections that might otherwise be overshadowed by academic analysis. It transforms art into a shared journey of discovery, where every viewer's perspective enriches the collective experience. Referring to some contemporary paintings, knowing background information might decrease the unique experience.

A: "Untitled (Black on Grey)" ¹⁶ by Mark Rothko, Understanding the artist's intent and tragic history can shift focus from the immediate emotional response elicited by the colors.



"Untitled (Black on Grey)" by Mark Rothko.

¹⁶ Mark Rothko (American abstract painter).

B: *"The Two Fridas"* (1939) by Frida Kahlo.¹⁷ While context can enrich understanding, knowing too much about Kahlo's life might overshadow the viewer's personal interpretations of the duality presented in the painting.



***"The Two Fridas"* (1939) by Frida Kahlo.**

C: *"Composition VII"* (1913) by Wassily Kandinsky.¹⁸ The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings can complicate the viewer's spontaneous emotional response to the vibrant colors and forms.

¹⁷ Frida Kahlo (Mexican painter).

¹⁸ Wassily Kandinsky (Russian painter and art theorist).



"Composition VII" (1913) by Wassily Kandinsky.

Exploring contemporary electroacoustic works can indeed be a multi-layered experience, where knowing certain background information might alter the listener's perception. Here are a few important master pieces that shows this idea:

A: Imaginary Landscape No. 4 ¹⁹ by John Cage.²⁰ Understanding Cage's philosophies on chance and indeterminacy can shift how one listens to the piece. The mix of recorded sounds, radio broadcasts, and live performers emphasizes randomness, which might be less impactful if approached purely as a musical composition.

B: "**Poème Electronique**"²¹ by **Edgard Varèse**.²² Knowledge of the context in which this piece was created specifically, its debut at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair can add layers of meaning. The integration

¹⁹ "Imaginary Landscape No. 4", For 24 performers on 12 radios and conductor, 1051.

²⁰ John Cage (American composer).

²¹ Poème électronique (1958).

²² Edgard Varèse (French composer).

of electronic sounds with architectural space was groundbreaking and knowing this enhances the appreciation of its innovative spirit.

C: "**Sileno**"²³ by **Sofia Gubaidulina**,²⁴ this piece uses silence as a crucial component. Understanding Gubaidulina's spiritual background and her views on the relationship between sound and silence can deepen the listener's engagement with the work, as it invites reflection rather than mere auditory enjoyment.

D: "**I Am Sitting in a Room**"²⁵ by **Alvin Lucier**,²⁶ Familiarity with Lucier's exploration of acoustic feedback and the way the environment shapes sound could influence how one interprets the gradual transformation of his voice. Knowing that it is an experiment with space and resonance changes the focus from the narrative to the process itself.

E: "**Music for Airports**"²⁷ by **Brian Eno**.²⁸ His recognized intention to create an ambient atmosphere designed for a specific environment alters the listening experience. Understanding his philosophy about music as a background rather than a focal point can lead to a different appreciation of its subtleties.

9. Include contrasting examples: Referring to some contemporary painting works, knowing background information might help increase for understanding better concept.

A: **Mark Bradford**:²⁹ His large-scale abstract works often incorporate materials like paper and found objects, reflecting his background in community activism and addressing themes of urban life, race, and identity.

B: **Julie Mehretu**:³⁰ Known for her large-scale, abstract maps that blend geographical and historical elements, Mehretu's works explore themes of globalization, migration, and cultural intersection.

²³ "Silenzio" (1991) five pieces for bayan, violin & cello.

²⁴ Sofia Gubaidulina (Russian composer).

²⁵ "I Am Sitting in a Room" (1969).

²⁶ Alvin Lucier (American Composer).

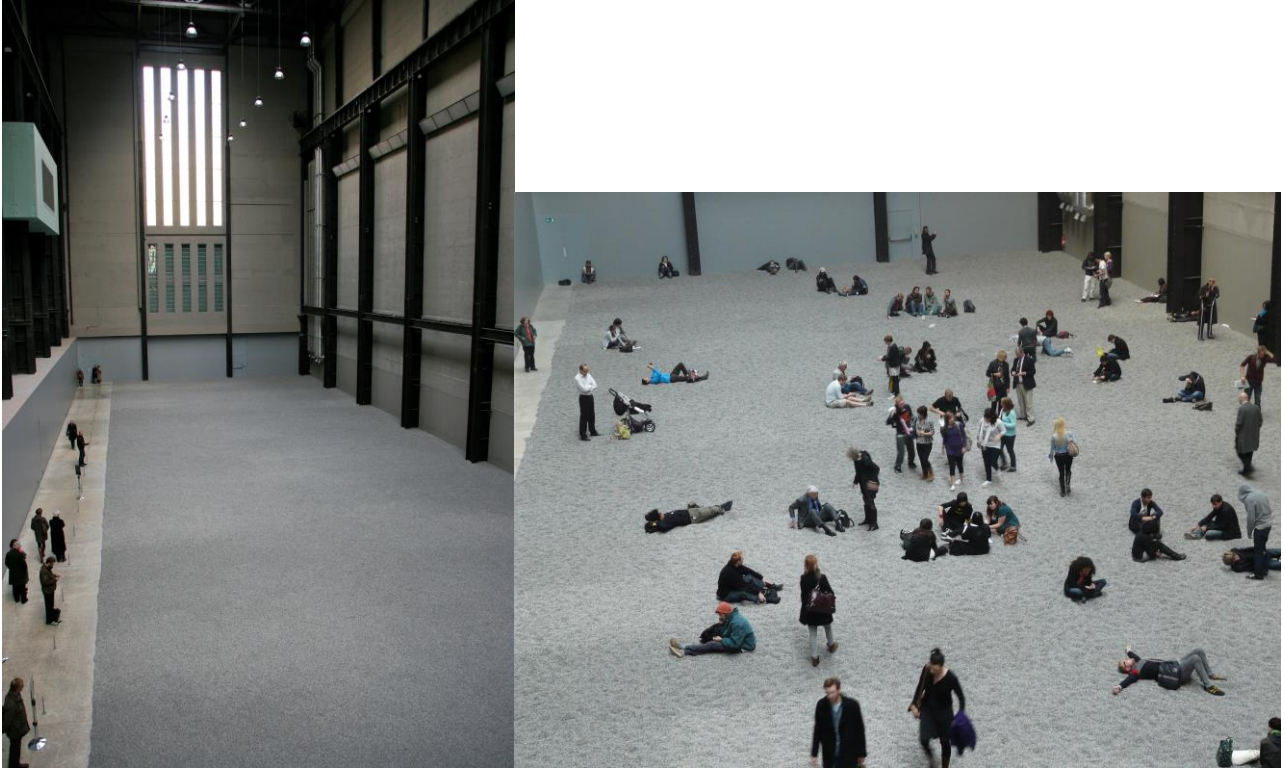
²⁷ "Music for Airports" (1978).

²⁸ Brian Eno (English musician, songwriter, record producer and visual artist).

²⁹ Mark Bradford (American visual artist).

³⁰ Julie Mehretu (Ethiopian American contemporary visual artist).

C: **Ai Weiwei:**³¹ A Chinese artist and activist, Ai's works often critique government policies and human rights abuses. Pieces like "Sunflower Seeds" (2011) which consists of millions of handmade porcelain seeds, comment on mass production and individualism.



"Sunflower Seeds" (2011) by Ai Weiwei.

³¹ Ai Weiwei (Chinese contemporary artist).

A: **"Williams Mix"**³² by **John Cage**, Background Information: This is one of Cage's early forays into tape music, utilizing a variety of recorded sounds. It was commissioned for a radio program and is notable for its use of chance operations in the arrangement of sounds.

Listening Experience: Familiarity with Cage's philosophies, particularly his ideas about chance and indeterminacy, allows listeners to approach "Williams Mix" as an exploration of sound rather than a traditional musical composition. Understanding the methods behind its creation can lead to a greater appreciation of its structure and unpredictability.

B. **"The Birds"**³³ by **Kathy Hinde**, this work incorporates field recordings of bird calls and environmental sounds, reflecting Hinde's interest in nature and the impact of urbanization on wildlife. The composition often plays with the notion of transience and memory.



The Birds by Kathy Hinde.

³² "Williams Mix" (1952) Electroacoustic composition.

³³ "The Birds" (2014) by Kathy Hinde (England audiovisual artist)

Listening Experience: Knowing Hinde's motivations and her environmental concerns can deepen the listener's engagement with the piece. Recognizing the ecological context prompts reflections on human impact on nature, enhancing the emotional depth of the experience.

C. "**Études de bruits**"³⁴ by **Pierre Schaeffer**, He is known as one of the pioneers of music concrète, and "Études de bruits" consists of recordings of everyday sounds manipulated in numerous ways. It was a significant step in redefining music and sound art.

Listening Experience: Understanding Schaeffer's experimental approach and his philosophical inquiries into what constitutes music can reshape how listeners interpret the sounds. Knowing that these recordings challenge traditional notions of melody and harmony encourages a more open-minded approach to the auditory experience.

Counterarguments: In the continuation of Robert Hughes arguments, I must add to them. He argued that knowing the historical, cultural. And the social context surrounding a piece of art enhances both appreciation and comprehension. He believed that art does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it reflects the time and place it was created in. For example, Hughes often discussed how the political and social climates influenced artists like **Francisco Goya**³⁵ and the Impressionists, highlighting that understanding these contexts can deepen our emotional and intellectual engagement with their work. By acknowledging the broader narrative surrounding art, viewers can gain insight into the artist's intentions, social critiques, and the work's lasting significance. This layered understanding enriches the viewer's experience and appreciation of art.

Encountering art without prior knowledge can be beneficial because it encourages personal interpretation and emotional response. This unfiltered experience allows viewers to connect with the artwork on an instinctual level, increasing a sense of spontaneity and authenticity. It can also spark curiosity, prompting questions and exploration that deepen one's engagement with art over time. This approach

³⁴ "Études de bruits" (1948) by Pierre Schaeffer (French composer).

³⁵ Francisco Goya (Spanish romantic painter).

promotes individual creativity and appreciation, making art feel more accessible and relatable.³⁶ Art education and curation are deeply interconnected fields that significantly influence how art is created, understood, and appreciated. For Implications for Art Education.

We must use critical thinking skills. That is the art education encourages students to develop critical thinking by analyzing artworks, understanding context, and exploring different interpretations. Additionally cultural awareness is so important incorporating diverse art forms and histories fosters a broader understanding of global cultures, promoting inclusivity and empathy. Interdisciplinary connections: art education can integrate with subjects like history, science, and literature, enhancing students' overall learning experiences.³⁷

Creative problem solving through hands-on projects and experimentation, students learn to approach problems creatively, a skill valuable in many fields. and, technology integration, with digital tools becoming prevalent, art education can embrace new media, teaching students about contemporary practices and evolving art forms. in this way community engagement is super important, collaborations with local artists and organizations can enhance learning and create a sense of community ownership over art.

A little bit more about implications for curation: in storytelling curators play a vital role in shaping narratives around art, guiding viewers through the historical and cultural significance of pieces. Their creative diversity and representation, curators are responsible for ensuring that exhibitions reflect a diverse range of voices, promoting underrepresented artists and communities. Educational Programming: Curators can develop educational initiatives that accompany exhibitions, providing deeper context and fostering public engagement, Digital curation is another one, the rise of online platforms means curators must adapt to virtual environments, creating accessible experiences for broader audiences.³⁸

³⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Berger is an English art critic.

³⁷ Terry Barrett, *Talking about student art* (New York: Davis Puns, 1991). Barrett Is an American art critic.

³⁸ Hyunjoo Byeon and Carson Chan, *Curating Research Paperback* (London: Del Appel, 2015). Byeon is a German Korean writer, and Carson Chan is a Director of the Emilio Ambasz Institute.

And now let me say that my personal exploration about Implications for art education, curation.

I am going to start with the cultural contemporary practice rich artistic traditions in my country. Iran has a profound artistic heritage that includes calligraphy, miniature painting, and traditional crafts. Integrating these traditions with contemporary practices can enrich art education and curation. The fusion of styles will help a lot. Encouraging artists to blend traditional techniques with modern themes can foster innovative expressions that resonate with both local and global audiences.

Political and Social Context, art educators and curators often work within a complex political landscape. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting freedom of expression while respecting local regulations, art as Resistance, many artists use their work to address social and political issues. Education programs can help students critically engage with these themes, emphasizing the role of art in societal change. access and inclusivity that means community engagement, curators can play a vital role in involving local communities in exhibitions, making art more accessible and relevant to everyday lives.³⁹ Focusing on underrepresented voices, there is a need to highlight marginalized groups in Iranian society, including women and ethnic minorities, in both educational curricula and curated exhibitions. Digital Innovation and global connectivity, utilizing technology, digital platforms can bridge gaps in access to art education and curation, especially in remote areas.

Online exhibitions and virtual workshops can expand reach and engagement. The global Dialogue means connecting Iranian artists and curators with international peers can foster cultural exchange and collaboration, enriching local practices while highlighting Iranian art on the world stage. art education pedagogy is one of the practical method, critical Thinking, and Creativity: emphasizing critical thinking in art education encourages students to analyze their own work and the socio-political contexts surrounding art production.

³⁹ Therese M. Quinn, *Art, and Social Justice Education* (Illinois Chicago: MUSE, 2011). M. Quinn is a Professor and Director Museum and Exhibition Studies.

The conclusion:

The implications for art education and curation in Tehran are shaped by a rich cultural heritage, a complex socio-political landscape, and emerging global trends. By fostering inclusivity, encouraging critical engagement, leveraging technology, and emphasizing ethical practices, art educators and curators in Iran can cultivate a vibrant and responsive art scene that resonates both locally and globally.

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