

Interactive Touring in Art Museums: Constructing Meanings and Creating Communities of Understanding

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This article quotes adult visitors to museums who have constructed their own interpretations of works of art when encouraged to do so by an art educator who facilitates group discussions rather than imparts historical information and interpretations formulated by scholars. The article provides examples of individuals making personal meanings of works of art. When visitors share their individual understandings of artworks with their touring group, they see artworks in unique ways, learn that their own way of seeing a work is not the only way, come to know the diversity of human reactions to the work of art and to life, and thereby aid the building of communities of understanding.

Educational Presuppositions

This article is situated within postmodern views of art education in museums, aligned with the views of museum educational theory and practice of Juliet Moore Tapia and Susan Hazelroth Barrett (2003). Dana Carlisle Kletchka (2007) adeptly summarizes the importance of their theory and practice:

Moore Tapia and Hazelroth Barrett discuss three projects at the Ringling Museum of Art that exemplify postmodern educational practice in the art museum by rejecting master narratives or singular interpretations of artworks, listening and responding to the voices and contributions of community members, sharing curatorial authority ... The authors contend that the adaptation of postmodern practices not only offers multiple roles for visitors in the museum, but may indeed change the role of museum educators. (p. 114)

The positions in this article are also situated under the umbrella of constructivist education (Hein, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill,

1999). It supports a paradigm shift from museums as *the* authoritative interpreters of works of art bestowed on passive visitors to a constructivist educational position that encourages visitors to build their own understandings of what they see in ways personally relevant to their lives. It is in agreement with museum educator Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) fundamental observation that there is an essential difference in the way the word 'interpretation' is used in constructivist educational theory and how it is too often used in art museums. In her view, interpretation should be "the mental process an individual uses to construct meaning from experience; you are the interpreter for yourself. Interpretation is the process of constructing meaning. Interpretation is part of the process of understanding." In too many museums, however, interpretation is "a process that is undertaken on behalf of someone else" (p. 143). As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) asserts, too often in museums interpretation is something that is done *for* the visitor, or *to* the visitor: "The implicit model of communicating with the public is that of the transmission of objective bodies of authoritative acts to passive receivers" (p. 143).

If we educators want to impose on museum visitors the views of experts about works of art, we can use electronic means and let them hear the experts themselves. Visitors to the Metropolitan Museum, for example, may hear an audio guide in any of five languages narrated by Philippe de Montebello, and get the views of the director who has overseen the collection for the past 30 years. Increasingly, museums list phone numbers by artworks so that viewers, should they choose, can use their cell phones to hear curators and other experts

talk about the pieces. Why would museum educators try to match or simulate Montebello's and other authorities' eloquence and scholarship when visitors can hear them directly?

Rather than museum guides passing on to viewers interpretations by scholarly authorities, this article provides examples from actual museum practices that do not position museum visitors as a "passive, homogeneous mass of people, 'the general public', but... as individuals with their own particular needs, preferred learning styles, and social and cultural agendas. The main characteristic of these individual museum visitors is that they make sense of things their own ways" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 67).

This article supports goals for museum education articulated by art educator Elliot Eisner (2007) who wants "productive diversity" and "productive idiosyncrasy" in the museum (p. 425). As excellent museum educators, Eisner argues, we no more want one right interpretation of a work of art than an excellent art teacher would want "drawings of 30 yellow ducks sitting in the middle of each paper" (p. 425).

The positions articulated in this article are consonant with educationally progressive art historians who are teaching art survey and art appreciation courses that de-emphasize traditional master narratives of stylistic influences and developments in favor of learning outcomes such as students developing

the ability to think and observe holistically or synergistically; to apprehend meanings hidden behind or within outer appearances; to expand and refine the range of one's feeling life; to cultivate the capacity to think qualitatively as well as quantitatively; to be able to think in images ("imagination"); to articulate relationships between emotions and unique visual elements or compositions; to explain how reaction to images affects human motivations; and other abilities that might generally be termed "visual literacy." (David Adams, 2007, p. 13)

What follows are examples of actual practices in museums in the recent past,

examples of what museum educators Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee (2007) are calling for in museums of the future:

Visitors come to the museum to learn about art through gallery conversations during which they actively take part in a form of interpretive play that animates, and in a sense performs, works of art as visitors look at them and talk about them. When the play is successful, it is full of energy and passion. The museum galleries become active places where ideas are freely exchanged, where hermeneutic improvisation and experimentation are encouraged and valued. (p. 12)

Three Interpretations of *Yosemite Valley*

In 1998, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), under the sponsorship of museum educator Jennifer Siegenthaler, I gathered a group of about 20 adults in a gallery of 19th century American art. They were grade school classroom teachers, in various stages of their careers, with very little formal education about art or art education. I asked them to individually select any painting hanging in the gallery that particularly caught their attention. I asked them to assume the stance of something or someone in the painting and to inform us about the painting by writing about it from the imaginary point of view they chose. Two women chose William Keith's *Yosemite Valley*, and while in front of the painting, quietly wrote about the painting. The writing activity took about 15-20 minutes, after which visi-

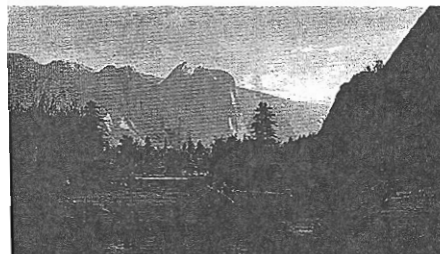


Figure 1. William Keith, *Yosemite Valley*, oil on canvas, 40 by 72 inches, 1875, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.71.115).

tors voluntarily read their writings about the paintings they chose to the whole group.

Luci's view. One visitor wrote as if she were the tallest mountain in the middle of the painting. This is the unedited first draft of what she wrote in the museum:

I am the mountain.
The end of the day is near
I've been soaking up the
sun and heat.
I rise above the valley
buzzing with life
trees—insects—people—animals
Life unfolds before me
every day
with thousands of new stories
to be told
some begin and some end—
but I will be here tomorrow.
My beginning is not so easily
understood: the geographic
accident
that created me
—That violence haunts me—
It is what will destroy me
someday
And I will wait for it patiently.
Who will witness the end
of my story?—Luci Perez,¹ 1998

Debbie's view. Debbie imagined herself as the woman on a horse next to the man on the horse in the lower left foreground of the painting. She imagined what the woman rider was thinking:

It's so hot outside. My horse probably wants a drink. The mountains are so beautiful. Stephen says it's like God's land, untouched by man's hand. He sees majesty in everything. Every time he sees something pretty he says we have to stop and sketch it. He *even* wanted to sketch the savages! He says they have a special raw innocence about them. He said they are more pure than us. I just laughed. They are not more pure than me. I don't know where he gets these ideas sometimes. He wasn't like this before we got married. Mother says he's got a screw loose now, and that we should stay home instead of gallivanting around the country. She says it's not ladylike to be cavorting with those

savages, to eat outside and to sleep in the dirt. I'm beginning to think she's right, but what can I do? Stephen is so set in his ways, and his is always right. He fancies himself a pioneer. He says America is the last frontier and we have to chronicle it. All's I can think about is how awful it is to wash in the river, and to wear these dirty clothes, and how I miss toilet paper, Stephen says we're just like Thoreau, whoever he is.—Debbie, 1998

The Museum's view. The following is the full text about the painting presented by an anonymous writer for Museum visitors:

In the autumn of 1872 Keith made the acquaintance of John Muir when he explored the hills beyond Yosemite with the naturalist. *Yosemite Valley* was a product of a later trip in 1875. A dramatic, composed image, it was painted in the artist's studio specifically as an exhibition piece. It portrays a commanding view of Cathedral Rocks, which are in the valley along a bend in the Merced River. Nothing obstructs the panoramic view. A bit of the river bank is included as a repoussoir to lead the viewer into the scene. The towering trees are arranged on the sides to permit an open vista of the cliffs. The addition of the riders, while suggesting a narrative, was also essential to the composition. Even the pile of dead tree trunks in the center of the painting was arranged so that the large logs would link the two sides of the painting.

Keith created many such epic paintings during the period between his two European trips, and many of these were criticized as too artificial. Although the general appearance of this version might give the impression of a standard picturesque composition, Keith avoided the tight, linear painting style associated with the Düsseldorf school. He also escaped the pervasive grays of such German landscapes by infusing the background of *Yosemite Valley* with an array of soft, opalescent hues.—(LACMA Collections Online, 2007)

Luci's and Debbie's writings exemplify many of the objectives of constructivist learning already stated. First and foremost, they did not act as passive receivers of pre-

determined interpretations, but constructed meanings, and they “made sense of things in their own way” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 143). By variously choosing free-form verse and narrative fiction, the two visitors engaged in “interpretive play” and “hermeneutic improvisation and experimentation” that “animates” the works with the visitors’ “energy and passion” (Burnham & Kai Lee, 2007, 12); and they selected their own preferred learning styles (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 143). The two writings exemplify Eisner’s (2007) desired “productive diversity” and “productive idiosyncrasy” in the museum (425). I believe Luci and Debbie also exemplify each of Adams’s (2007, p. 13) learning outcomes for learning in art history survey and appreciation courses. The two views of the visitors offer significant contrasts to the Museum’s articulated view of *Yosemite Valley*, which meet few if any constructivist objectives set forth here.

Moreover, neither Luci nor Debbie needed the Museum’s text to direct their meaning making. They were able to offer understandings of the painting through their own direct perceptions, lived experiences, and imaginations. In her free verse, Luci “explored the hills beyond Yosemite,” the “commanding view of Cathedral Rocks,” and the “panoramic view” (LACMA, 2007) but through the imagined living spirit of a mountain itself. Debbie did not need the Museum to tell her that the riders suggested a narrative: She constructed a narrative for us. The Museum’s narrative that the painting utilizes “a repoussoir,” that it might be “too artificial” or “a standard picturesque composition,” and that it diverges from “the Düsseldorf school” and “pervasive grays of such German landscapes” (LACMA, 2007) might have discouraged Luci and Debbie from constructing the meanings they have provided us.

Social Presuppositions

Constructivist approaches to meaning making with groups of museum visitors in the presence of works of art allow for the realization of the social goal of hosting meaningful conversations towards change. Inter-

national social activist Margaret Wheatley (2002) explains:

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—12
personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel, and we listen to what others see and feel. (p. 3)

The approaches to museum education in this article embrace what educator Sally Gradle (2007) refers to as “participatory epistemology” that includes “awareness of other world views, other ways of thinking that are creatively and qualitatively different from one’s own” (p. 1503).

My positions are in sympathy with Mike Ross’s (2007) that “as a touchstone realm of human experience the domain of art holds unique potential as an entry point to a powerful pathway of discovery that can lead individuals to an inspiring sense of our collective humanity” (p. 758). This social thinking is also in line with the guiding hypothesis of empirical research conducted by museums educators Scott Paris and Melissa Mercer (2002) “that visitors search for features of their personal lives, both actual and imagined selves, during their explorations of objects and museums, and their searches may lead to confirming, disconfirming, or elaborating understanding of their own identities” (p. 402).

More Examples of Viewer-Constructed Meanings in Museums

The following strategy asks viewers to put into words what they see in a work of art. A viewer names *one* thing—“I see bars”—and the next viewer names another thing—“I see stripes”—until everyone has spoken (or passed). I challenge the touring group to make as many rounds of individual observations as we can. These are some examples of what one group of adults saw in Sean Scully’s *Dark Light*: “bars, stripes, strips, rectangles, contrast, layers, weight, white, blue, black, gray, orange, squares,

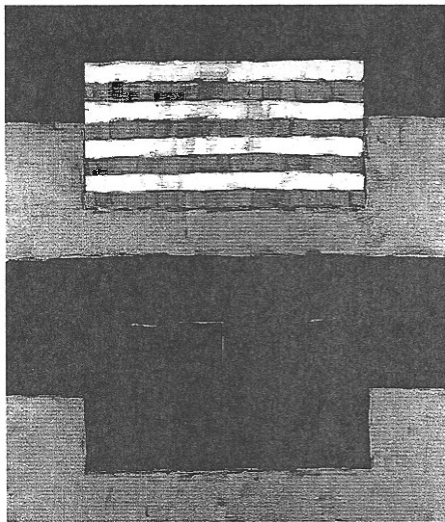


Figure 2. Sean Scully, *Dark Light*, oil on canvas, 96 by 84 inches, 1998.

lines, positive space, negative space, edges, light, background, foreground, paint, brushstrokes ...”

Next we take turns saying in single simple sentences one thing we think of when we see what we notice: “When I see the rectangle of stripes at the top of the painting, I think of a flag.” We thought of “a flag, a quilt, a patch, a rug, a mat, a piano, a beach blanket, cake layers, a playing field, a game board, textile, wallpaper, a prison, a jail, a window, doors, blinders, fence, barriers, blockages, blockades, redemption, savior, religion, betrayal, family...” Some viewers thought of oppositional pairs, including “church and carnival, heaven and hell, tomorrow and today, day and night, war and peace, outside and inside.”

For closure on this painting, I asked the viewers to write a short paragraph of what the painting meant to them. Both of these writings are unedited first drafts written in about 10 minutes. Both writers voluntarily read their thoughts to the group. One person wrote:

There is a big gulf, a large, swallowing void between two solid strips upon which stand rectangles. I interpret the rectangles as my husband and me, and we are separated drastically by our spiri-

tual beliefs. We are in a static “stand-off” position, and will not/cannot be united in this one area. We “agree to disagree.”—Anonymous, 2004

Another wrote:

I begin thinking of the role of myself as an American...I reference countries because of the use of geometric “flag-like” shapes. ...more specifically as the Arab and Christian world, religious and non-religious world, good vs. evil (NOT tying good or evil to one side or the other.)... The upper rectangle represents a chance to bring about peace and cooperation in the world. The lower image is a result of the “close-minded” choice I could make as an American that could bring about death, destruction, and loss of life. I believe that the American culture emphasizes things being good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, left vs. right. ...opposites don’t matter and aren’t relevant when it comes to the destruction of the world.—Jacob, 2004

Lest these comments about strife between a husband and wife, and peace and cooperation in the world, seem too far removed from this nonobjective painting, consider that, unbeknown to these two viewers, Scully has said that masculinity and femi-

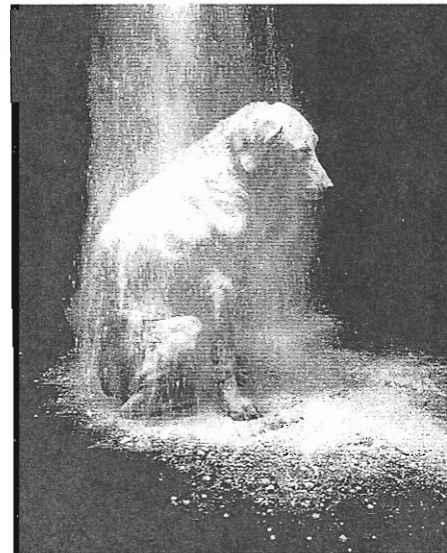


Figure 3. William Wegman, *Dusted*, color Polaroid photograph, 1982 in *Funney/Strange*, Wexner Centers for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2007.

nity are embedded in all of his works, confrontations with "good and evil" are also embedded in his work, and that his paintings are "connected to an intensity of empathy and identification with human life" (cited in Barrett, 2003, pp. 100-102).

A group of about 25 college freshmen and sophomores and I toured William Wegman's traveling exhibition, *Funney/Strange*, a retrospective exhibition of drawings, paintings, and photographs. During our hour together, we took a quick overview of the exhibition, and then discussed five images. At the end of the session, I invited the students to pick one of the five works that was most meaningful to them and to write about it. Some of the students selected *Dusted*, and wrote:

It makes me think of longing, perseverance, and waiting patiently. Maybe longing for something out of reach or waiting patiently for something you really want." (Meaghan Campbell, 2007)

When I see this, I feel rather sad. This dog looks distressed and saddened like the world is collapsing or raining down on him. Yet he still has a glow to him like a light from heaven. (Jodi Osborne, 2007)

I believe you should follow your dreams and no one should tell you you can't do something. A weight is always on your shoulders. The substance is heavy and weighing you down. You can't leave the spot or you will be out of your comfort zone. (Anonymous, 2007)

Dusted makes me angry. ...It actually inspires an emotion. I worry about the dog's well-being and how the owners are treating it. I feel a need to help it and protect it. (David Leighty, 2007)

Dusted leaves me with questions. It relates to sooo many things in my life. You will be pulled ways you know aren't right, and will you be able to step away and look at your decisions? What is weighing you down and why are you bothered by it? (Jenn Whicker, 2007)

Examples of Building Communities of Understanding in Touring Groups

In 1991, when Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment* was the rage in Cincinnati, Sharon Rab, a high school English teacher invited me to her school to help prepare students to see the exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center. The students attended the prep session and the visit to the exhibition voluntarily as part of an after-school art club. They were 18 years old and did not need parental consent to attend. At their school, I showed them some very explicit reproductions of what they might see in the show. We briefly discussed these in a 45 minute session, primarily describing what we saw. We then drove into the city. A museum educator gave us a tour, with a proselytizing monologue about the positive value of Mapplethorpe's work. Afterwards we had fast food together and then drove back to the school and dispersed. The students wrote their responses to the experiences in journals and allowed Ms. Rab and me to quote them for an article (Barrett & Rab, 1990).

I had the hardest time with the X, Y, Z Portfolio. I agree that it is an important part of the exhibit, but these were the pictures I found most offending. On the same note, however, I didn't feel threatened. The subjects weren't violent and Mapplethorpe isn't trying to lure anyone into his lifestyle through his work. He's only presenting his lifestyle, a documentary of the times. Why should I close my eyes to reality? And what right do I have to impose my morals on anyone else? I guess that's the root of the controversy. (Brian, 1991)

At 18, I feel as though I've formed a solid set of values about sex. I've either read about or seen any form of sex on T.V. and in magazines, so any curiosity or fear concerning sex has been cleared away through my knowledge. I've had close relationships with girls for the past couple of years and I'd like to think that my most recent relationship is based on common respect and compassion for each other before being based on sex. I'm sure homosexuality, sadomasochism, incest, rape,

biracial relationships, and any other kind of widely unaccepted sexual behavior exists all across America as well as in Cincinnati. To deny its existence is an injustice... Perhaps this was "The Perfect Moment" to bring this subject matter, the convergence of both sexes, the convergence of painful and pleasurable sexual experiences, and the convergence of races into mainstream America. (J. D., 1991)

Brian's and J. D.'s responses are typical of the 12. The students expressed appreciation for being able to preview some of the photographs in advance of going to the center; they expressed support they felt from one another in a confrontational exhibition and tour; some objected to the preachy tone of the museum educator; all found some photographs difficult; all expressed gratitude that they saw the exhibition; and all acknowledged the support of their peers.

The experience helped foster community in different ways. Ms. Rab told me that she and her art club members became closer because of the event and because of their writings and sharing of their writings. The students all expressed a better and more sympathetic understanding of the practices of some gay men because of the exhibition. This was a very positive accomplishment considering the hatred that was being expressed by some on the airways and in the streets in front of the center in Cincinnati at the time of the exhibition.

The following quotations are examples of building community by undergraduate art education majors. We did this exercise with *The Art Book* (1997), an inexpensive paperback with 500 color reproductions of paintings from medieval to modern times. The book served us as an ersatz museum. I asked the students, all of whom had a copy of the book, to pick one work of art that was personally meaningful to them and to tell us why. (I have successfully replicated this exercise in museums but have not collected writing samples.)

One student wrote about Roberto Sebastian Echaurren Matta's *Untitled* (oil on canvas, 51 by 76 inches, 1950):

Matta's work reminds me of me. It reminds me of the way that my mind works. The image is jumbled and erratic like my mind. My thoughts race by often jutting into other thoughts and ideas. I am constantly trying to find a balance between positive and negative thoughts. There are thousands of images, ideas, and thoughts racing through my mind at any moment but I am still able to find composure and a destination. Like the image, I have found my way. (Racheal, 2006)

Kathryn found personal meaning in a nonobjective collage, Alberto Burri, *Sacco*, (burlap, linen, oil, and gold paint on board, 13 by 15 inches, 1954). She wrote:

Alberto Burri's *Sacco* really speaks to me at this time in my life. This has been a rougher quarter than usual for me due to the death of my grandmother, as well as some other things going on in my life. And it has felt at times as though things are falling apart or I have lost control in my life, and all around me are these ripped and shredded pieces, leftover from tragedy and sadness. But in the end, all I can do, as any human being does, is stitch together the remnants, and make something new from all the fragmented parts of life. In the end, something beautiful can come of it, which is what Burri has done with these torn pieces of cloth. (Kathryn, 2006)

Kristin wrote about Thomas Cole's *Scene from Last of the Mohicans* (oil on canvas, 25 by 35 inches, 1827):

Cole's painting captures the breathtaking beauty of creation. The artist's use of light and shadows creates a cheerful yet calm and relaxed mood. The smallness of the people and the bigness of the landscape reminds me of how small my problems are compared to the rest of the world, and that I need to take time to rest and soak in the beauty that I believe God has blessed us with rather than getting so caught up in the here-and-now rush of life. The painting reminds me of peace, rest, worship, beauty, power, and surrender.—Kristin Inkrott, 2006

Through these writings, we learned about one another, as well as about works of art. In the final evaluations of the course

many students expressed a new closeness among their classmates. I think this single assignment helped us build a caring community of learners.

Suggested Procedures to Facilitate Group Discussions

The following suggestions are learned through a lot of experience. I find them very helpful in facilitating open dialogues with visitors, young and old, within museums.

- Concentrate on being an excellent facilitator rather than an expert on art.
- Situate the group so that everyone can see the work and can hear one another.
- If you ask a question do not answer it yourself. Give time for the group to consider the question. *Wait* for an answer. If no one answers, call on someone.
- Allow only one person to speak at a time. Ask the group if they have heard the speaker; if not, ask the speaker to reiterate more loudly. Depending on the speaker, sometimes you will need to parrot the speaker.
- Be thankful for comments and reinforce speakers' comments (even if you don't like what they say): Encourage responsiveness.
- Discourage side-conversations: They distract the group. Kindly ask the speakers who are only talking to one another to share their insights with the whole group.
- Stay out of the conversation except to further it: If the discussion is seriously stalled, add a bit of information but only if needed.
- If someone asks you a "good" question about the artwork under discussion, redirect the question to the whole group; if the question isn't pertinent, ask the questioner to give her or his best answer, and then move on.
- Redirect speakers who raise rhetorical questions to reiterate them as statements. Instead of pursuing questions such as "What if the artist...", "Well,

suppose that...", ask the speaker to reformulate the question as a statement about what she or he sees, thinks, or feels.

- If someone says something "wrong," let it go unless he or she persists with it, then politely slide away from it and redirect the discussion.
- Allow time for the group to come to some tentative conclusions before moving to another artwork.
- Before the tour ends, allow some time for tentative closure by letting individuals articulate what was most meaningful to them during the tour, and why.

Conclusions

This kind of interactive touring is not for everyone, every time, everywhere. It might not fit some tour guide's personalities, teaching styles, or cognitive strengths. This constructivist approach to responding to works of art might also frustrate some museum visitors who crave a single voice of authority and the "right answer" about a work of art (and life).

This approach to museum education, however, has potential to aid museum visitors in what art educator Rita Irwin (2007) calls "plumbing the depths of being fully alive." The visitor interpretations quoted in this article show evidence of people "filled with feeling completely alive, being at one with the universe while experiencing joy, compassion, mindfulness, and a sense of awe for the mystery that abounds" (p. 1401).

When individuals interpret a work of art, they gain understanding of the work, of the world through the work, and perhaps a new appreciation for art, life, and their own power of thought and feeling. When individuals share their interpretations with a touring group, they are "giving the gift of self" to others (Shields in Irwin, 2007, p. 1402). By means of these "gifts," we in the group have the opportunity to understand in a unique way the artwork, the interpreter, and life through the interpreter's world view. Interpreting individuals can become

a temporary community that helps alleviate the isolation many of us experience in modern living. Museum education of this kind may present museum visitors with the realization that community, including the world community, depends on a diversity of views for healthful living.

Endnotes

¹Visitors' writings are reprinted with the visitors' permissions. Some chose to use first and last names, others chose first names only, and some chose to be anonymous.

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