

Judges' Commentary on "A Trip Through Perspective"

by

Shannon Kulig

**"A Trip Through Perspective" received the First Place Award
in the 2011-12 Composition Program Writing Contest**

In "A Trip Through Perspective," Shannon Kulig engages Walker Percy's and John Berger's challenge to recover the "it" experience, the sense of awe, the illusion of a genuine "first encounter" when looking at a famous painting on display in a museum. Deftly, and with a good dose of healthy irreverence, Kulig designs a "how to guide," the very kind of educational package Percy is critical of, to show how 21st century museum visitors can actually be led to "discover for [themselves]" how to see and what to see in a work of art whose aura supposedly can no longer quicken the passive gaze of so many consumers filing in front of it (12).

Because of the inventive ways in which Kulig re-imagines the boundaries of the essay genre—her piece looks and reads like an essay with footnotes and commentary, but also like a museum visitor's guide and a textbook—it is difficult to provide a succinct summary of it. This difficulty—one that would engage Percy's and Berger's attention—demonstrates that there are ways of teaching that resist "packaging," their efficacy depending on learners' unforeseeable and unpredictable contributions to and participations in the learning process. Both explicitly and implicitly, this is the admirable point about education that Kulig makes.

On p. 3 of her guide, a brief section titled “perspectives” provides museum visitors with an explanation of what’s expected of them. If they want to experience the “it” of a painting they need to become aware of their assumptions about what it takes to visit a museum. To expose their hidden assumptions, Kulig (tongue-in-cheek) designs a schematic quiz—one question, one answer which is read as indicative of the “type” of viewer each visitor is: The Discoverer, the Expert, the Collector, the Tour Guide, the Student, the Tourist, the Artist. Each type gets one page in the guide. Each type is directly addressed by a narrator who, on the basis of the answers to the quiz, describes how each will “typically” experience the tour. Behind each description loom large Percy’s and Berger’s assumptions, whose potential for stereotyping Kulig dissects. Each section then concludes with encouraging advice suggesting that each visitor type has indeed the potential to recover the “it experience.”

In the last of a series of endnotes, which provide a stunning running metacommentary on the guide, she writes:

Percy and Berger make it clear that instruction leads one down a path that might as well have you attached to a leash, able to see only the periphery the walker allows. In this way, the men contradict the very means by which they instruct (a book or essay format). This contradiction makes me believe there is not a possibility the human

race can regain sovereignty without any instruction. . . . Reading this guide will not provoke a further loss of sovereignty. It is my utmost hope that you gain ways to recover the sovereignty so easily lost. (12-13)

Although it is clear that Kulig is quite at home in a museum, that she knows how to navigate its space, and how to point to illuminating angle(s) of vision to re-discover the “it” of a painting; although it is clear, in other words, that she is fluent in the discourse of art history and criticism—that she is an expert—she does not “play” the expert. She certainly knows her stuff, but she remains graceful, thoughtful, and non-judgmental throughout.