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T.A.B.U.L.A. Method of Looking at Challenging Contemporary Artworks

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Adapted from *Ways of Looking: How to Experience Contemporary Art* by Ossian Ward

tabula rasa l'täbyðolə 'räsə, 'ræzəl noun (pl. **tabulae rasae** l'täbyðolē 'räsē, 'ræzēl)

an absence of preconceived ideas or predetermined goals; a clean slate

ORIGIN Latin, literally '**scraped tablet**,' denoting a tablet with the writing erased.

Contemporary art is not always easy to define or put into categories.

Rules, classifications and art movements don't always apply.

Art can be anything, anywhere, it can even be anyone.

You might pass by it on the street and never realize it.

So how do you talk about it? How do you understand it? How do you respond to it?

One idea is the *tabula rasa* approach... **T.A.B.U.L.A.** stands for:

Time: just hold on, don't turn your back yet. Stay there for a few minutes before deciding the work is not for you. Take 5 deep inhales and exhales. Stay with the work. Watch it. Notice details. Look closely. Take notes or draw the artwork in your sketchbook. Walk around it if you can. Give yourself time to experience.

Association: find an entry point, look for the tone, story, theme or image that strikes a chord with you. What associations do you have with the materials, references, images, colors, sounds, or shapes of this artwork? What does it remind you of? Write down your associations that come to mind.

Background: the title, personal history of the artist or short description of a piece should enable you to understand and appreciate it better. What information about the artist's history and intention can you learn from the label, museum/gallery educational materials, museum/gallery website or further research (e.g. artist's website)?

Understand: by this stage you might have a better understanding of the work. What is your understanding of the artist's message in this artwork? What feelings, story, or experience does that artwork create for you?

Look again: everyone deserves a second chance. Find something that you did not notice the first time you looked at the work. What does this newly-noticed detail add to your understanding?

Assessment: this is where you're allowed to be subjective and form your own opinion about a work. Now that you've spent time with the artwork, researched the artist, and explored your associations: What is your analysis, opinion, or assessment of the artwork?



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