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Studies Invited Lecture: About Art Interpretation for Art Education

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Over the years I have come to believe that the most important thing I do as an art educator is to involve people in the interpretation of art. This article is based on and furthers a set of principles I wrote to guide people in interpretive endeavors in a chapter on interpretation in *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (1994a) and then in an article for art teachers (1994b). I began this investigation of interpretation in years prior when attempting to discover and articulate how photographic images mean (1977, 1986,1990,1997a), and then broadened my thinking and writing to include criticism of art (1989, 1992) and images in popular visual culture (1991).

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My thoughts on interpretation are very much influenced by the writings of aestheticians, art critics, literary theorists, art and photography historians, and art educators concerned with meaning in art. Although my research on art interpretation draws heavily upon the thinking of scholars, equally importantly, it is informed and tempered by years of multi-faceted experiences in interpretive thinking and teaching. I am able to build and test interpretive theory in practice by serving, for many years now, as an Art Critic-in-Education[1] in which capacity I engage children and adults in schools and community centers[2] in talk about art. The artifacts we examine are usually modern or contemporary,[3] and sometimes controversial (Barrett and Rab, 1990). We also examine the art that the students themselves make, and these occasions are the subject of *Talking About Student Art* (1997b) a book that derives from an active interest in conducting, studying, and improving studio critiques for college art students, especially by increasing attention paid to interpretation of their work.[4] I am able to test ideas on teaching interpretation with populations of adults and children and museum educators in art museums.[5] Solitary interpretive experiences include writing and editing art criticism for regional publications and occasionally curating an art exhibition. So, these are principles that work in practice. This is the set published in 1994:

Artworks have "aboutness" and demand interpretation.

Responsible interpretations present the artwork in its best rather than in its weakest light.

Interpretations are arguments.

Interpretations are persuasive.

[1] Since 1986 I am serving the Ohio Arts Council as an Art Critic-in-Education and in this capacity engage classes of pre-kindergarten and elementary, middle, and high school, public and private, rural, urban, and suburban, in interactive discussions about contemporary art throughout Ohio, and in Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, and Washington.

[2] I work with groups of adults, such as members of camera clubs, water-color societies, and arts councils; young adults in after-school art clubs, and senior citizens in group homes. We discuss both art that the participants in the discussions make, and work by artists in whom they are interested.

No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork and there can be different, competing, and contradictory interpretations of the same artwork.

Some interpretations are better than others.

Interpretations imply a world-view.

Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter.

Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative.

Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.

Feelings are guides to interpretations.

An interpretation of an artwork need not match the artist's intent for the artwork.

The objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists.

All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.

All art is in part about other art.

Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavor and the community is eventually self-corrective.

Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own.

These principles are meant to account for both contemporary and historical works, to guide art critical and art historical interpretation. I've formulated the principles for art educators of all types to use with learners of all ages. The set of principles is eclectic, and some of the principles are drawn from theories that resist one another. The principles are meant to be complementary and not contradictory. The set is meant to be comprehensive but not exhaustive. Their number can be expanded or contracted. The principles and positions they assume purposely avoid extreme positions on contested topics of interpretation. Although the principles are asserted authoritatively, they are tentative and open to revision.[6]

This present article adds three new principles to the previous set:

- To interpret a work of art is to respond to it.
- Interpreting art is an endeavor that is both individual and personal, and communal and shared.
- Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations.

This expanded set of principles does not constitute a method of interpretation. I am resisting offering a method for interpreting art. There are already many educational methods for engaging students in art interpretation. Methods for teaching art interpretation offer advantages. They simplify complex material and make it manageable for teachers and

[3]Artists' work we examine includes that made by Richard Avedon, Romare Bearden, Deborah Butterfield, Edward Hopper, Barbara Kruger, Jacob Lawrence, Annie Leibovitz, René Magritte, Robert Mapplethorpe, Picasso, Sean Scully, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Cindy Sherman, Jerry Uelsmann, and William Wegman. We also critically consider everyday artifacts from visual culture such as cereal boxes, teddy bears, TV commercials, magazine ads, Hollywood movies, and printed tee shirts.

[4]In addition to conducting studio critiques in my own studio and art education classes, I occasionally serve as a visiting art critic to institutions such as Ball State University, and University of Central Arkansas, Colorado State University, University of Georgia, and Moore College of Art and Design. In these situations I work directly with MFA students in their individual studios, groups of art studio faculty, as well as students and professors of art education, conducting critiques and leading discussions about improving critiques in the teaching of art. I've written two articles specifically about studio critiques at the college level (Barrett 1988, 2000).

students to understand and to use. Methods also have disadvantages. As George Geahigan (e.g., 1975) has been making clear for a long time, methods for art criticism can overly simplify complex material. Teachers who rely on methods without sufficient understanding of the principles behind those methods are likely to teach students simplistic, incomplete, and inaccurate information. Reliance on method can result in misconceptions and misunderstandings, what Sam Short (1995) has written about as "reductive bias." Such misunderstandings are often masked by the false security that following a method can provide.

Principles, rather than methods, challenge us to comprehend complex material and to resist oversimplifying it when we teach. Knowledge of principles allows us to reintroduce the complexity of art discourse that some methods may have eliminated. Principles respect our abilities to creatively and spontaneously invent a variety of methods that work for us and for our students in our own unique learning environments. They allow us to reduce monotony for ourselves and for our students that can result from reliance on a method. They help us keep teaching and learning fresh.

To Interpret a Work of Art is to Respond to It

A work of art is an expressive object made by a person, and unlike a tree or a rock, for example, it is always about something (Danto, 1981). Thus, unlike trees and rocks, artworks call for interpretations. In the words of Noël Carroll (1997) it is "a standard characteristic of artworks...that they often come with features that are unusual, puzzling, initially mysterious or disconcerting, or with features whose portents are far from obvious" (p. 307). Works of art present us with views of the world and experience that can provide us with insights, information, and knowledge (Goodman, 1976, 1978), but we can only access these through interpretation.

To interpret is to respond in thoughts and feelings and actions to what we see and experience, and to make further sense of our responses by putting them into words. When we look at a work of art we think and feel, move closer to it and back from it, squint and frown, laugh or sigh or cry, blurt out something to someone or to no one. By carefully telling or writing what we see and feel and think and do when looking at a work of art, we build an understanding by articulating in language what might otherwise remain only incipient, muddled, fragmented, and disconnected to our lives. When writing or telling about what we see and what we experience in the presence of an artwork, we build meaning, we do not merely report it. Marcia Siegel, a dance critic, says, "words are an instrument for thinking" (in Meltzer 1979, p. 55).

To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a work of art to what else we have seen and experienced. Richard Rorty says that "reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what

[5]Museum sites include the Akron Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the UCLA/Hammer Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Contemporary Art Center of Cincinnati, the Columbus Museum of Art, the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Center for Creative Photography, and the Foto Instituut in Rotterdam.

[6]I am purposely avoiding some contested topics about interpretation, such as whether artworks are autonomous of interpretations, whether artworks are altered by their interpretations, whether artworks exist independently of interpretations, and whether artworks are objects fully constituted independently of interpretation. I believe we can effectively proceed in teaching learners to interpret works of art while professional philosophers continue to mull these issues (e.g., Krausz, 1993).

have you, and then seeing what happens" (Rorty, 1992, p. 105). *Texts* refers to paintings as well as poems. *Seeing what happens* means examining what connections we can make between a painting, a dance, or a poem and relevant experiences of books we have read, pictures we have seen, music we have heard, emotions we have felt in situations we have lived or heard about from others. Some of these connections are meaningful and worth pursuing toward greater knowledge and insight about the artwork, the world, and ourselves. Other connections are less worthy and we simply let them fade away.

To interpret is to make something meaningful for ourselves and then, usually, to tell another what we think. In telling our interpretation we hear it in our own words, and we have the opportunity to obtain responses from others about what we see, think, and feel. Others' responses to our interpretations may be confirming or confounding. When their responses are confirming, we are reassured in our understanding; when their responses are confounding, we are given opportunity to further explore our interpretation or to elicit differing interpretive thoughts from the ones we have confounded. Telling is valuable for others as well as for ourselves. In successfully telling our interpretation to another, we enlarge that person's understanding of the artwork, the world, as we know it, and ourselves.

To interpret a work from a time and place other than our own, we must first recognize and acknowledge that it is of another time and from another place. When interpreting art of the historical past, we seek to recover what it may have meant to the people who saw it in its time. We permit historical facts and cultural knowledge to guide our interpretive search and to constrain our interpretive conjectures. With art and artifacts of another culture, we learn how those objects functioned in that culture. History and culture put limits on what a work of art might be about. We attempt to make old and distant art and artifacts meaningful for ourselves in the present. We can see what knowledge and beliefs and attitudes we share with that culture and how we differ from it.

Interpreting Art is an Endeavor that is both Individual and Personal, and Communal and Shared

We can think of acts of interpreting as having two poles, one personal and individual, and the other communal and shared.[7] An individual and personal interpretation is one that has meaning to me and for my life. I may have formulated it for myself, or received it from another and accepted it or modified it. A communal and shared interpretation is an understanding or explanation of a work of art that is held by a group of individuals with shared interests. Communal understandings are passed onto us as common knowledge in history of art textbooks and in standard introductory lectures.

[7] My knowledge and views of the importance of the role of community in interpreting works of art was largely intuitive and implicit, and became more explicit in my thinking after reading Michael Parsons on community in *How We Understand Art* (1987).

Personal Interpretations

Some aestheticians position themselves closer to personal interpretations than to communal understandings. In the phenomenological tradition, Gadamer, for example, believes that all interpretation necessitates an act of appropriation. That is, for Gadamer, the purpose of interpretation is to make the artwork "one's own" (in Bontekoe, 1988, p. 162).

Interpreting for personal meaning is also part of the pragmatist tradition. Richard Rorty (1992), for example, believes that there should be no difference between interpreting a work and using it to better one's life. For Rorty (1992), a meaningful interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one's priorities and to change one's life.

The requests that we appropriate a work of art to make it our own, and that we allow a work of art to change our life, are daunting. However, some actual examples drawn from teaching experiences make these requests more tangible and less intimidating.

Children can make personal what they see and experience. My wife Susan provides us with a compelling example of a young boy in her Montessori class who was able to personally enmesh himself in experience prior to making interpretive artifacts about his experience.[8] She says,

> I took my 3rd grade class to the beach for lessons in botany and zoology. One boy was especially fond of the sea. He drew many pictures of the sea. I had art books in the classroom—my college art history texts as well as contemporary books of art. He loved to look at art of the sea. He was an excellent swimmer. I watched him for more than a half-hour do this: he laid down at shore break. His body was limp. He relaxed and let his body do as the sea did. Like a jellyfish caught at shoreline, he moved as ebb and tide. It was one of the most graceful and peaceful movements I have ever seen. I asked him later to tell me about it: he said he watched the water and wanted to feel it, to be it, to draw it, and to write a story about it.

Alisha, a second-grader,[9] wrote this personal interpretive response to an expressionistic painting of a large monkey sitting in a rain forest, *The Mandrill* by Oscar Kokoschka. Alisha's paragraph seems to me to be an example of interpretive appropriation.

> I liked *The Mandrill.* Because... it felt like I was in the jungle and I could hear the birds chirping. And I could hear it moving. I liked the purple on his fingers. And I could smell the fruit he was eating. I could hear the waterfall coming down. I thought it was neat. It looked like the artist painted it fast and a little bit slow. The mandrill looked neat because it looked like I was like right there with him. I just felt like I could see what he was eating. And I could eat with him. I just like it so very, very, very, very much!

A museum docent provides us with an example of an interpretation that caused her to change her priorities in life. She is an elderly widow

[8] Center for Education, Bradenton, Florida, 1984.

[9] Devonshire Elementary School, Columbus Public Schools, Columbus, Ohio, Melissa Webber, host teacher.

who participated in a workshop on art interpretation.[10] We used the paintings of René Magritte. After looking at many Magritte paintings with her fellow docents, the woman wrote this paragraph:

> Magritte's works often seem to be of someone looking in on life from the outside, not as a participant. As a widow, I often feel that way. It's sometimes hard to make myself participate. It's often simpler to stay inside, behind walls, behind a curtain—isolated. Life should not be a picture you view. You must put yourself in the picture.

It is not just children and docents who are willing and able to make artworks personally meaningful. Richard Schiff (1996), an art historian, notes that many recent art historians are shifting from archival or biographical methods to more emphatically subjectivized, autobiographical methods. They are reflecting on what the experience of an artist's work means to them, the authors. When interpreting Manet's painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, Griselda Pollock (1996), for example, seeks to find what the painting means to her, as a woman and a feminist, a hundred years after it was painted.

Within art discourse and art education, I think we are more comfortable with communal interpretations than with personal interpretations. We strive to have our students understand art as the community of scholars understands it. This is certainly the *modus operandi* of art history classes, the thrust of many discipline-based lessons in art education, and what is usually specified in standards and measured in tests.

Communal Interpretations

The Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2000) offers a clear example of a communal interpretation of the work of Magritte:

> Magritte, René (-François-Ghislain). Belgian artist, one of the most prominent Surrealist painters whose bizarre flights of fancy blended horror, peril, comedy, and mystery. His works were characterized by particular symbols—the female torso, the bourgeois "little man," the bowler hat, the castle, the rock, the window, and others.

This entry on Magritte is a succinctly articulated, comprehensive, two-sentence interpretation likely synthesized from volumes of scholarly Magritte interpretations.

Interpreters of young age can also offer communal interpretations. The following is a communal interpretation of Magritte's work by Luke, a 9-year-old. He wrote it after participating in a group-discussion about paintings by Magritte that I facilitated with him and his classmates.[11]

> Magritte's mind is about things in common. He likes views out of a building or house. He likes perspectives. He likes to have round objects in his paintings. Optical illusions are another thing he puts in his art. He likes to make you think about his paintings. One piece of evidence of that are his titles. He does not give titles that really give any clues. Some of his art is a little fantasy, like in terms of how it looks. But most of his art looks realistic.

[10] Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1999.

[11] Duxberry Park, Columbus Public Schools, Columbus, Ohio, host teacher Terri Post.

Luke's statement provides evidence of a communal interpretation, and not a personal interpretation. He synthesized the interpretation from insights and observations he gained from hearing his classmates talk about Magritte's paintings, as well as from his own insights and observations.

As a teacher, I can see that Luke's communal interpretation is in line with scholarly communal interpretation. Luke and his 9-year-old peers have noted things in Magritte's work consistent with those features the Britannica scholar has noted. As a teacher, I am reassured that I am not leading the community of 9-year-old interpreters away from a broader and deeper communal understanding the art community holds about Magritte.

Seeking Balance Between the Personal and Communal

An interpretation that is wholly individual and personal runs the risk of being overly idiosyncratic or too personal. An interpretation that is too personal is one that does not shed any light on the object that is being interpreted. If one heard the interpretation and saw the object being interpreted, one would not be able to see relevant connections between the interpretation and the artwork. Such an overly personal interpretation may reveal a lot about how and what the interpreter thinks but it fails to reveal anything about the art object being interpreted. Thus, although Paul Ricoeur upholds Gadamer's sense of appropriation—that to interpret an artwork is to make it one's own—Ricoeur adds the requirement that the artwork *has an existence of its own*, and must be *understood* as well as appropriated (in Bontekoe, 1988, p. 162).

An interpretation that is wholly communal runs the risk of irrelevance to the individual interpreter. If the individual viewer receives an interpretation that has no bearing on his or her life, knowledge, and experience, it is not a meaningful interpretation for that viewer. No matter how accurate it may be, it ought not to count as an interpretation for that viewer at all.

Shared communal interpretations and individual personal interpretations are not mutually exclusive ideas. An interpretation that is both individual and communal is an understanding of a work of art that is personally meaningful to the interpreter and relevant to his or her life. It is also an interpretation that is meaningful to the community of interpreters who are interested in that work of art because it sheds light on the artwork.

Personal, individual interpretations can and should be informed by knowledge of the artwork from other persons and sources. In the literature there are interpretive insights about the works of Kokoschka and Magritte. The artists themselves have written and talked about their work, and art historians, curators, critics, and philosophers have provided us with interpretive insights into those works. Luke, for example, in his interpretation of Magritte's paintings touches upon the ambiguity of the paintings. Michel Foucault's (1983) short book, *This Is Not a Pipe*, on Magritte's painting of the same title is largely about Magritte's use of ambiguity. If I were a skilled enough teacher, I could help Luke and his

fellow 9-year-olds broaden their thinking about Magritte by telling them about some of Foucault's ideas about the same paintings they are looking at. Then the 9-year-olds would benefit from the larger community. Through this community they have opportunities to expand and deepen their individual interpretations and understandings of art and life. If scholars could hear the 9-year-olds, perhaps they might think about things they had previously not considered.

This principle does not privilege the personal over the communal or the communal over the personal. Nor does it necessarily encourage a sequence of moving from personal to communal, or communal to personal. As a teacher, I can show artworks and ask the viewers what these images mean to them. I could also show the same artworks, provide communal knowledge of those artworks, and then ask what the artworks might mean to them personally. The widow who interpreted Magritte began with a communal investigation and concluded with a personal interpretation that was very meaningful to her. I am seeking a balance between the two, a harmony between personal and communal understandings.

Artworks Attract Multiple Interpretations and it is not the Goal of Interpretation to Arrive at Single, Grand, Unified, Composite Interpretations

The view here is that the aim of interpretation is not to obtain the single right interpretation, even though some theorists hold this to be so (e.g., Beardlsey, 1970; Hirsch, 1967). Rather, in the view of other theorists, (e.g., Eaton, 1988; Krausz, 1993; Margolis, 1995; Davies, 1995) this principle holds that there can be more than one admissible interpretation. Davies argues that the goal of interpretation is not a grand composite unity of all individual interpretations. Differing interpretations of the same work of art can stand along side each other and attract our attention to different features of the work. One interpretation shows us *this* aspect of the work of art, while another shows us *that* aspect. If we only had the one interpretation, we would miss the insight that the other interpretation provides.

This principle encourages a diversity of interpretations from a number of viewers and from a number of points of view. It values an artwork as a rich repository of expression that allows for a rich variety of responses. One critic presents an interpretation that contributes to another critic's previous interpretation. Both of their interpretations enrich our understanding of the work of art. They also enrich our appreciation of the responding interpretive mind.

Children as well as professional critics and historians can provide us with multiple insights into single works of art. Following are a variety of different interpretations of two works of art by Sandy Skoglund, a contemporary artist who builds installations and photographs them. In classroom

settings, a group of learners[12] examined about six images made by Skoglund (1998), among them, *The Green House*, 1990, and *Fox Games*, 1989 (see Skoglund reproduction). *The Green House* is a living room environment in which everything is covered with grass. It contains many dogs, blue and green, and a man and woman in the background sitting in easy chairs. *Fox Games* is a restaurant setting in which many foxes romp about. Toward the rear wall of the dining room, a waiter attends to a seated couple.

As a group, the children made observations of what they saw. Then I asked the students to individually write a paragraph about the image. I asked them to assume the point of view of a person, animal, or object in the picture and to write about the picture using first person singular. The assignment asks them to appropriate the image through fictional writing.

The Green House from the point of view of the seated woman:

I just finished clipping the walls and sweeping up the clippings. Now I have to feed 19 blue dogs and 8 green dogs. No, I've already done that. How about if I mow the carpet? No, I've already done that. I've got it. I'll clip the lamps. No, I've already done that. I'll clip the picture frames. No, I've already done that. I think I'll just stay where I am and go to sleep. Darn that dog fur!" – Andrea, 4th grade

The Green House from the point of view of one of the dogs:

I feel like I'm in jail, and I don't like being the blue dog. I want to be a brown or black dog. How do these people live in this house? Everything is closed, no windows, no food. No one is happy. These two people don't have feelings for us. One day, trust me, I'm going to get out of here. – Hana, 5th grade

The Green House from the point of view of one of the dogs:

I am resigned to the environment. While my buddies are so excited about the outside life they have spotted, I know that whatever it is, it is only passing and we must continue on without masters. There is no out, only the slow, long days of waiting. I am annoyed with their enthusiasm. I find it pathetic; their hopefulness for life—sad—better not to love, not to be aware—if all life promises is this place. See those around me who have already disappeared. Alive, but invisible. Is this my fate? – Ms. Carnes, elementary teacher

I believe these three different perspectives on *The Green House* enlarge our understanding of the image. Andrea gives us insight into the obsessive nature of Skoglund's artmaking. Hana points out the claustrophobia of the depicted space. Ms. Carnes helps us notice the lonely alienation of all who are in the situation. Here is another example of an interpretive perspective about *Fox Games.*

Fox Games from the point of view of the waiter:

Did she really say what I think she said? "Waiter, there's a red hair in my soup!" I've been a waiter in this restaurant for more than twenty years —I would never serve soup with a hair in it. We have

[12] Roosevelt Elementary School, Euclid City Schools, Euclid, Ohio, Linda Duvall and Kitty Rose, host teachers.

Sandy Skoglund, *Fox Games*, photograph, 1989. Permission of the artist.

the cleanest dining room in the city! I'm a professional, and we just received a five-star rating!

"Waiter, this looks like an animal hair! Bring me another bowl of soup!"

Of course, I have sensed some strange feeling in the dining room lately. Why do these vases keep falling over? I better make this couple happy... Tips haven't been very good lately. – Timothy, undergraduate Art History major[13]

Timothy's writing indirectly and engagingly examines the deep division of the two groups, the foxes and the people, even though they occupy the same space. The people are unaware of the foxes and the foxes ignore the people. Imagine the insights we could gain if we had the time to hear 20 different points of view offered by that classroom full of interpreters. In a fourth-grade classroom, one girl pointed out in her writing, from the point of view of an offended fox, that the woman is wearing a fur stole. All of these interpretations by students and teachers are consistent with and expand interpretations of Skoglund's work offered by published critics (e.g., Rosenblum, 1998; Squiers, 1998).

Multiple Interpretations and Controversial Art

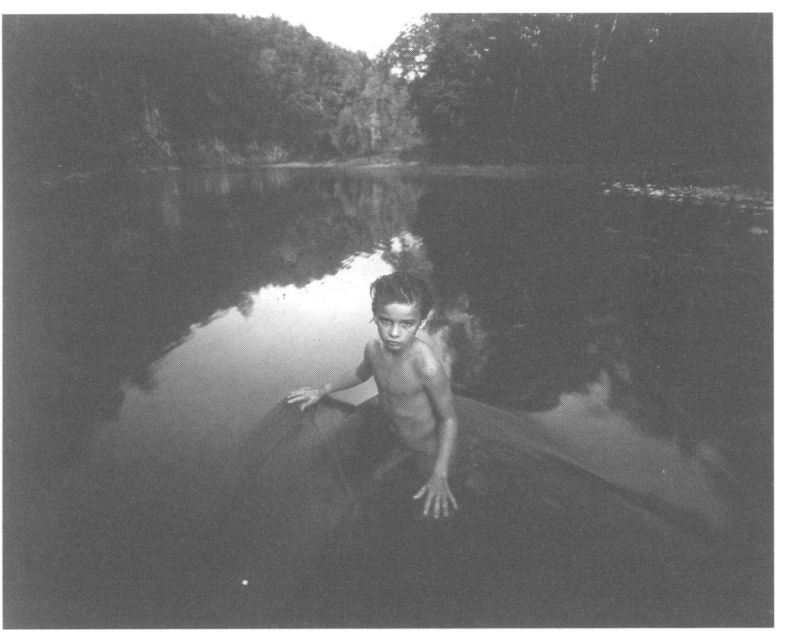
Following are more examples of multiple interpretations written by a class of sixth graders[14] about work that is the subject of controversy, Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* (1992). Mann's work is both a book and photographs in art exhibitions. Her subject matter is her children. (See Sally Mann reproduction.) Some adults find the book objectionable because of its portrayal of child nudity, and they have picketed bookstores selling the

[13] *Writing Art Criticism*, The Department of Art Education, The Ohio State University.

[14] Forest Park, Euclid City Schools, Euclid, Ohio, Jann Gallagher, host teacher, 1993.

book and books of photographs with nude children photographed by Jock Sturges (1991, 1994). I chose to show the Mann photographs from *Immediate Family* to sixth-graders because the sixth-graders are about the same age as the subjects in the photographs. The whole group of sixth-graders examined the photographs, and then they looked at the pictures in smaller groups, and eventually wrote brief essays individually. I posed this interpretive question to guide the sixth-graders' writing: "What do Sally Mann's photographs show the world about children?" As you will read, Mann's photographs are not controversial for these sixth-graders. I believe that what these sixth-graders have written about Mann's *Immediate Family* could inform the larger adult community and the debate about the images.

> I think that Sally Mann tries to show the world many things about children. First, I think that she tries to show people that children just want to grow up. She also tries to show people that children have pride in themselves, they are not ashamed of what they do. They are not ashamed of their bodies.
>
> She also wants to show people that children are curious. They want to get all they can out of life. She also shows how much energy children have—they really want to get in and do things instead of just sitting back and watching. She shows us that each child is an individual. They really want to just be themselves.



Sally Mann, *The Last Time Emmett Modeled Naked*, photograph, 1987.

Last, but not least, Sally Mann shows that children are people too! They aren't just little things that sit on the couch and watch TV. They are real living things that want to get involved and learn. – Vickie

The book, *Immediate Family*, shows the life of Sally Mann's family and what they like to do. This book had pictures mostly of her kids. Usually the children had little or no clothing on. Her kids' names are Emmett, Jessie and Virginia.

Sally's family enjoyed hunting. Through the pictures I know they hunt crabs and deer. It also looks like they own chickens and dogs.

The pictures are mostly taken in the summer because the children don't have much clothing on. They live in Virginia, so it is not hot all year long. Some pictures were probably taken in the fall, because one picture has a dead deer in it and deer hunting season is in the fall. The leaves are also falling off the trees.

Some of the pictures showed someone hurt. One picture showed Emmett with a bleeding nose. Another picture showed a child with stitches. The last one shows a girl with a swollen eye.

In a few pictures the children are playing by water. Sometimes they are on the beach. Other times they are on a boat or in the water.

I enjoyed this book. I thought the pictures were well shot. The only two things I didn't like were the pictures that involved blood and the pictures where the children weren't wearing any clothes.– Amy

Sally Mann's photographs tell the world that children are very playful at heart, yet very serious. A few photographs tell how some children grow up way too fast. In a majority of the photographs, the children had clothes on but in some they didn't. This shows that children don't think it matters if you have clothes on or not. It's what's inside that counts. Some of the photographs also tell the world that even through play children work very hard. But some photographs were disgusting like the ones showing dead animals.

Sally Mann works very hard to show the world that children are just kids. Let them grow up at their own pace, but don't let them be babies forever. Kids can be kids. Give them a chance! – Susan

In the fall of 1999 many people were divided in their responses to Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, the work utilizing elephant dung, shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art as part of the 'Sensation' show, and made controversial by the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani. Earlier in that decade we had controversies over the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. In most cases, talk about these works divided the community and increased rancor. Art that is controversial, for whatever reasons, however, need not divide a community. Multiple interpretations of the work, and why it is offensive to some and not to others, can unify a community rather than splinter it.

The following are written responses to Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a large color photograph of a white plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. Collectively, the writings exemplify a range of personal responses to the controversial artwork that broaden a communal understanding of the artwork and the individuals responding to it. The respondents are adults: teachers at a summer workshop on the arts and curriculum,[15] and people attending an art appreciation class at the Columbus Museum of Art,[16] in 1991 when the work was the topic of controversy. Their responses are to the question: "Does *Piss Christ* have a place in society?" The participants first wrote their responses privately and I collected them and read them aloud before initiating a group discussion.

[15]Arts Unlimited!, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1991.

[16]Learning to Look Deeper, The Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, 1991.

I do not feel *Piss Christ* has a place in our society! For one, I think the so-called artist has a very sick mind to think of urine as an art form. The U. S. is in majority of being of Christian faith. *Piss Christ* demoralizes and insults our beliefs and morals we have, as Christians, learned over time. – Anonymous school teacher

If art is a freedom of expression, without censorship, then it has a place. Those who wish to view it, or experience it, may do so and those who are offended may choose to reject it as art at all. – Anonymous school teacher

Any image has a place in society as long as choice is the determining element in who views the image—choice to make an image, choice to view or not to view an image. – Anonymous school teacher

Piss Christ has a place in society, strictly because we are a free society. However, I would hope that the value system in our society and the dictates of good taste would cause them not to be seen in very many places. – Anonymous school teacher

Yes—artists should have freedom to create and express ideas. Viewers have the freedom to look and admire or not look. Those who are interested in artistic endeavors have a responsibility to understand before making a judgment. – Anonymous adult, Columbus Museum of Art

This piece is highly offensive to me. I don't like people who denigrate things that are important to me. However, artists have a responsibility to help us see things in a new light, from a perspective that we may not otherwise recognize. Therefore, as much as I personally do not like this piece, I am forced to conclude that it does have a place in society. – Ms. Converse, Columbus Museum of Art

One positive consequence of controversial images is the very debate and discussion they engender. The church continues to play too large a role in secular life. This image can initiate dialogue. – Mr. Walsh, Columbus Museum of Art

It may not be logically possible for one to accept all interpretations about an artwork such as Serrano's if those interpretations are mutually

exclusive. We could, however, listen to contradictory interpretations so that we come to sympathetically understand the beliefs of the interpreters and how they position themselves in the world. Mayor Giuliani seemed to purposely divide the community with his inflammatory remarks about Ofili's painting, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, setting group against group, and pitting individual against individual, presumably for political motives in hopes of garnering votes for an upcoming election. Discussions I've led about Serrano's *Piss Christ*, however, unified local communities of inquirers by encouraging individuals to honestly speak their minds about the image, and by encouraging all to listen carefully to one another and the range of responses the image generated. We engaged in a discussion with respect for one another and came away with knowledge of all our diverse beliefs and increased tolerance of our differences. By speaking our minds, we reduced fear that comes from feeling powerless. By listening to the views of others, we reduced fear that comes from ignorance.

Individual interpretations can broaden the community's understanding of a work of art. Those individual interpretations can also broaden our knowledge of one another. Communal interpretations can inform individual interpretations, causing individual interpreters to reflect more, consider further. A multiplicity of interpretations can unify rather than divide a group of individuals, helping them form a community of understanding, a community that values diverse beliefs about art and life.

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