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8. AESTHETICS, CONVERSATIONS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

When teaching art, I find it difficult, counter-intuitive, unnatural, and repressive *not* to engage in aesthetics. For example, while facilitating a studio critique of symbolic ceramic self-portraits with high school students that they had made (Barrett, 1997, pp. 72–77), we were actively examining Marik's sculpture, addressing what we thought it might be expressing. In the midst of the conversation, Marik blurted out, "You're wrong!" Silence followed. Then the students, Marik, and I became engaged in a stimulating conversation about whether the artist who made a work of art determines the meaning that can be inferred about that work of art. The students spontaneously and enthusiastically argued philosophical positions regarding meaning and works of art. Marik maintained that only he knew the meaning of the work and that it meant nothing because he did not mean it to mean anything: "I just did it for a grade!" The other students argued that the work contained clues to meaning, whether or not Marik wanted it to, and just as they found meaning in the music they listened to, they were also able to find meaning in the object that Marik made. I was able to reinforce the students in their thinking by complimenting them with knowledge that they were contributing to an ongoing philosophical argument among professional scholars who write about art and meaning. I was able to tell Marik that some scholars agree with his position that an artwork means what the artist meant it to mean (e.g., Hirsch, 1980; Kimball, 2004), and I was able to inform the students opposing Marik's position that most scholars today agree with their position (e.g., Barthes, 1970; Fish, 1980). We honored Marik's minority voice by taking it seriously, and we concluded amicably with the majority opinion that artworks allow interpretations that the artist cannot control.

When working with art or when living life, it is rare and odd *not* to engage in philosophical thoughts and discussions about what one is doing and its significance in the whole of things. People learning about art want to know why some things are honored as art and others are not. Their biggest questions are "so what" questions: "What does art have to do with anything?" "Why is it important?" The following offers answers to these questions by providing examples of excerpts from conversations by learners from young to old, in a variety of school, museum, and community settings. It explores many uses of the term *aesthetics*, and positions 'aesthetics' as an active engagement in philosophical discussions about art and life. Such discussions usually begin quite naturally and spontaneously by people looking at and wondering about works of art and items of popular

T. Costantino and B. White (eds.),
Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century, 123–142.

visual culture, what they express, and issues about life they give rise to. The chapter embraces philosophy as a "quest for improvement" articulated by Richard Shusterman (2009):

> If philosophy seeks primarily to preserve, cultivate, and perfect human life, this quest for improvement has at least two parallel dimensions: First, there is the person's own inner self-realization, a desire to achieve a certain unity and integrity of character, expressed in harmony with oneself and with others. But a purely personal inner state is not enough for pragmatist philosophy. It requires some external expression in the realm of action, a certain excellence in the conduct of life, the ability to dignify and improve the world through one's practical efforts and exemplary life, which implies a concern for the lives of others in the larger social and natural fabric that inevitably shapes any individual. (p. 22)

I argue, with the support of recorded examples, that when people talk openly about artifacts we learn about ourselves, each other, and our different and similar responses to the same artifacts and to life. By listening to one another, we learn about each other, and we can create communities of understanding. Through communities of understanding we can reduce fear of others and contribute to peace in the world.

CONCEPTS OF AESTHETICS

Aesthetics in art discourse is a complex concept, and the term *aesthetics* is used in a variety of ways. Western aesthetics has historically encompassed discussions of beauty and art, claims about a distinct type of experience art engenders, namely an "aesthetic experience" that one may or ought to have in the presence of art or some natural phenomena, and other concepts such as taste, aesthetic value, judgments, and relations among art and lived experience.

When Western philosophers use "aesthetics," they are usually referring to philosophy of art in general, or to someone's philosophy of art, such as Plato's, Immanuel Kant's, or Hegel's. Philosophies of art are qualified and seriously modified by larger philosophic orientations, and are then characterized, for example, as Marxist aesthetics, feminist aesthetics, or pragmatist aesthetics. Too infrequently, in my view, "aesthetics" is used to refer to laypeople's personal philosophies of art. Laypeople have general worldviews articulated to greater and lesser extents, and these too affect their personal philosophies of art, and these could be beneficially examined within art education.

Since the advent of postmodernism, many theorists influenced especially by French writers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and those they have influenced, are more likely to use the term *art theory* rather than *aesthetics*. Contemporary art departments are likely to offer seminars in "art theory" while philosophy departments tend to offer courses in "aesthetics." The themes treated in such courses often overlap, but their reading lists are often distinct.[1]

Scholars of art education most comfortable in Western philosophical thinking about art are likely to refer to "aesthetics" or "philosophy of art," and cite philosophers under the umbrella of those terms. Scholars of art education invested in multicultural art education are rightfully adamant about including sources beyond the West and include philosophies of art from around the world, using philosophers such as Anderson (2004). Scholars of art education engaged in visual cultural studies are more likely to refer to "theory" than "aesthetics," and cite scholars associated with "theory."[2]

In North America since the last third of the 20th century, art teachers have been encouraged to include in their art curricula various articulations of "aesthetics" by art educators (such as Barkan, 1966; Clark, Day, & Greer, 1987; Hagaman, 1988; Lankford, 1992; Parsons & Blocker, 1993; Russell, 1991; Stewart, 1997). How the concept of aesthetics and the term *aesthetics* are understood and used by art teachers, however, vary greatly from art room to art room. In many art rooms, "aesthetics" is unfortunately reduced to a simplistic awareness of "the elements of art" (e.g., point, line, shape, texture, color, etc.) too infrequently combined with "the principles of design" (e.g., unity and variety, balance, directional force, center of interest, etc.). These concepts have been active through Western art history, used by the Ancient Greeks, were rearticulated and adjusted by David Hume (1757), given renewed emphasis by art educator Arthur Wesley Dow (1899), were further reinforced by studio professors influenced by the New York artworld and Formalism as espoused by Clement Greenberg in the 1950s and after, and were adopted by art professors (e.g., Ocvirk, 1960) who impressed "elements and principles" on future art teachers in college studio classes.

Elements and principles can be helpful in making works of art and analyzing those works of art to discover what they might mean and how they carry meanings. Too often, however, some art teachers (and museum educators) stop with the identification of elements, ignore principles, frequently confuse the two, and fail to use either heuristically to construct meanings of artworks or implications about life the artworks suggest or assert. Those using elements and principles intelligently would benefit by adding to them knowledge of postmodern strategies for making and discussing art (Gude, 2004; Barrett, 2006/2007).

"Aesthetics" is also frequently used to refer to sensual qualities. Art educator Paul Duncum (2008), for example, uses "aesthetics" exclusively in its ordinary language meaning of sensory qualities. In this sense, medical professionals, for example, may ask that a "calming aesthetic" be designed for doctors' offices and hospital rooms.

"Aesthetics" is also used to refer to artistic taste, or to an artist's style or approach to art, as in "Murakami's consumerist pop aesthetic." Artists talk of "my aesthetic" and "your aesthetic" when referring to their stylistic and cognitive approaches to artmaking.

Western philosophies of art and "aesthetic experience" have overlapped since the eighteenth century. One necessary condition of experiencing something aesthetically is to view it with an attitude of "disinterest," as developed by philosophers such as William Shaftesbury, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer,

and in the twentieth century by Clive Bell, Edward Bullough, Monroe Beardsley, and Jerome Stolnitz.[3] Aesthetic attitude theories conceive of aesthetic experience as an "episode of exceptional elevation wholly beyond our ordinary understanding of empirical reality" (Honderich, 1995, p. 8). According to such theorists, an aesthetic attitude, which is necessary to attain an aesthetic experience, must be independent of any utilitarian, economic, moral, or personal motivation.

Developments in art over the last hundred years such as Dadaism, found art, happenings, installations, Pop Art, Fluxus, performance art, technological art, art of social protest, and conceptual art have challenged traditional notions of aesthetic experience. In his rejection of aesthetic experience, George Dickey (1997) asserts, "aesthetic experience has a sharp edge that severs the referential relation to the world beyond it" (p. 147). According to recent philosophers such as Dickie, Arthur Danto, and Richard Eldridge (2003), traditional aesthetic response theories "tame" art "to an idle plaything of empty pleasure" (Eldridge, 2003, p. 60). Many contemporary theorists see the philosophical claim that "art is a thing of pleasure" to be a way of simultaneously "misunderstanding, devaluing, and repressing the real cognitive, political, and spiritual insights (or wit) that art may have to offer." Eldridge argues that artists "work for the sake of ideas and insight, not absorption in form" and not for "escapist pleasure" (2003, pp. 60–61).[4]

Some art teachers (e.g., The Getty, 1995) and many art students from elementary through higher education equate having an "aesthetic experience" or seeing aesthetic aspects of things with the whole of aesthetics. Many art teachers and students also conflate experiencing something aesthetically with that thing being a work of art. Thus, they designate sunsets and flowers as works of art, and assert that "everything is art," whereas philosophers cite conditions for something to be considered a "work of art," such as basic requirements that to be an artwork, perhaps the item should be intended to be art, falls within an established category of art, communicates complex meanings, invites cognitive and emotional involvement of an audience, and so on (Davies, 2006).

Socially critical aesthetic theories, including feminism, multiculturalism, Orientalism, postcolonialism, and queer theory merge aesthetic and ethical concerns, and reject the notion that one ought to "distance" oneself in the face of art. These theories consider all art to be subject to moral concerns and political concerns. To ignore the social content of art that is expressly made as political is to miss its point (Barrett, 2007).

All works of art, and other physical things, have form, but (fortunately) fewer and fewer thinkers embrace Greenbergian Formalism, which limits art to an entity unto itself, free and distinct from political and moral concerns and implications, and is of worth only because of a vague but essential requirement that it have "significant form." Experiencing things and events aesthetically can be profoundly human and life enhancing (Shusterman, 1997); however, experiencing some things aesthetically, such as poverty and suffering, is inappropriate (Sontag, 1977). Scholars (e.g. Carlson, 2005) engaged in environmental aesthetics, for example, want viewers to be aware of the degrading effects of the environment that may cause "beautiful" sunsets.

The proper place for considerations within art education of aesthetics in any or all of its senses is currently contested. For example, as Michael Parsons (2005) makes clear, some art educators place aesthetic experience centrally (e.g., Eisner, 2002), and some toward the side (e.g., Efland, 2002). Art education scholars promoting visual culture studies are not in agreement with how or if aesthetics should play a role in that discourse: some include aesthetic experience as an important part (e.g., Freedman, 2003) and others want to eliminate it from visual culture studies (e.g., Tavin, 2007). Generally, whether, how, and what aspects of aesthetics, in any of its senses, should be positioned in art education remains unresolved in the literature of art education, as seen in this present book.

What follows are examples of aesthetics in action: that is, philosophical conversations among groups of people of various ages in different situations about art and life. I facilitated the conversations and collected written material from the conversationalists that they wrote while in hour-long sessions in which we looked at, talked about, and wrote about works of art. The conversations are primarily motivated by a desire to construct meanings concerning self, the world, and others through looking at, and talking and writing about works of art.

FROM AESTHETIC PREFERENCES TO VALUES

Those without opportunities to philosophically consider art and value, tend to confuse personal preferences or aesthetic taste with judgments of art. If they "like it" it's "art" and if they don't "like it," it's not "art." Some insist that if they do not like something called art, neither should others. Many people, young and old, easily slip into relativism regarding art: "It's art for you but not for me," while simultaneously holding firm to political and moral and scientific positions they think appropriate for all people.

Socially, individuals and groups of people are discriminated against because of their aesthetic preferences, by what they wear or how they paint their houses or decorate their spaces. The social consequences of aesthetic preferences can become dangerously racist when members of empowered groups demean the different aesthetic preferences of minority groups. Luis Jiménez, an artist of Mexican descent, for example, intentionally used what many Anglos considered garish colors and surfaces and tacky subject matter to challenge the privileging of Anglo taste.

Students could be taught that personal and cultural aesthetic preferences are natural, that we all have them, that we can better know ourselves through knowledge of our own preferences, and that we can better know others through their preferences. We all get to like what we like, but we can become more aware of the origins of our preferences.

Young students readily identify what they prefer. A first grader wrote to me after an hour of his and his classmates' looking at and talking about various depictions of animals in art: "Thank you for coming to show us the pictures. We liked all the pictures. We really liked the picture with the deer and the picture with the monkey." Young children can also be taught at an early age to tell about what

they see, say what they think, and very importantly be taught to listen to what others say: "When we see more pictures, we will look carefully to see the hidden things. We will use our words to tell about what we see. We will be good listeners!" (First grader, Devonshire Elementary, Columbus, Ohio, 1997). Without listening, there are no conversations, just monologues.

Knowledge of preferences can lead to informed appreciation of art. A second-grader intelligently expressed her preference for Oskar Kokoschka's *The Mandrill*, an expressionistic painting of an animal in a jungle, painted in 1926:

> I liked the Mandrill. Because when he showed it to us it felt like I was in the jungle and I could here the birds chirping. And I could here it moving. I liked the purple on his fingers. And I could smell the fruit he was eating. I could here the waterfall coming down. I thought it was neat. It looked like the artist did 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!!!!!!!! (Alisha Bare, second grade, Devonshire Elementary, Columbus, Ohio, 1997)

Alisha is clearly enthused about experiencing *The Mandrill*. This is rewarding in itself, to her as a student and to me as a teacher. She also, however, offers details about what she "likes," although she is not at a cognitive state where she can distinguish between her likes and her values because they clearly overlap (Parsons, 1987). I think of preferences as psychological reports about what one likes, based on personal idiosyncrasies, and values to be positions thoughtfully considered, arrived at through reason, and able to be defended.

Two college art students explicitly distinguish among their personal preferences and their values in the following two statements written in a course on contemporary art theory after viewing sexually explicit images made by Robert Mapplethorpe:

> While personally I'd prefer not to see some of the images, I only speak for myself, and this is a personal preference. I don't feel like the images should be banned and face legal action. I feel that offense taken by works of art is relative and varies from person to person. What type of art people prefer to look at is a personal decision. (College art student, senior, University of North Texas, 2008)

> My moral-, legal-, preference-issues aside, I feel that the images created a cohesive whole, and the concept of explicitly displaying the human body and the social and sexual taboos surrounding it was very clear and well executed. In addition, I feel that even the pieces I personally prefer not to see bring to light a world that is too often unexposed. (College art student, senior, University of North Texas, 2008)

High school students are also capable of distinguishing between preferences and values as shown in the following journal excerpts written by students after seeing the "The Perfect Moment" exhibition in Cincinnati after it had been temporarily

closed by the sheriff. The X, Y, Z Portfolio contains some of the artist's most sadomasochistic and sexually graphic images:

> ...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. ...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, senior, high school student, in Barrett & Rab, 1990, p. X)

Thus, learners of all ages can become aware of their preferences, very fluid at an early age, and learners of older ages can be taught to move from statements of personal preferences to articulations of what they value and what they think should be valuable to others, as demonstrated by students writing about Mapplethorpe's photographs. The following are criteria, written in the Judaic tradition of Biblical commandments, formulated by high school and college students in art criticism exercises.

> Good art shall express something.
> Good art shall not be made in haste.
> Good art shall have some content.
> Good art shall mean something to the artist.
> Good art shall include original thought.
> Good art shall make you feel something. (Robin, sophomore, Yellow Springs High School, Ohio, 1997)

> Good art often scares those who are afraid to think for themselves.
> Good art should please the artist if it doesn't please anyone else. (Laddie, sophomore, Yellow Springs High School, Ohio, 1997)

> Good art shall evoke questions.
> Good art shall allow many interpretations.
> Good art shall excite and interest the viewer.
> Good art shall be relatable to many on different levels. (Aggie Gledhill, college art education student, The Ohio State University, 1993)

> Good art shall not harm the environment.
> Good art shall further the viewer's knowledge, understanding, or beliefs on a topic. (Shelley Abraham, college art education student, junior, The Ohio State University, 1993)

> A good photograph should not contribute to violence.
> A good photograph should not contribute to the degradation of women or people of color.
> A good photograph should not expose a person's vulnerability without the consent of the person. (Paula DiMarco, Art Education graduate student, The Ohio State University, 1997)

After the learners articulated their criteria, they then applied them to artworks to see if their criteria were helpful to them in forming judgments, tested them against a range of artifacts, and then revised them accordingly if they found them to be too vague, too specific, too broad, or too difficult to apply to more than a single work of art. They can continue this exercise throughout their lives.

AESTHETICS AND SELF

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in the Hegelian philosophical tradition, asserts that responding to art is a mode of self-understanding:

> Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it. (In Barrett, 2003, p. 221)

Gadamer argues, "the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (1998, p. 93). In a parallel thought, Richard Rorty, from within recent Pragmatism, argues that there should be no difference between appreciating a work and using it to better one's life and to rearrange one's priorities. "Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work" (in Barrett, 2003, p. 221).

After individual examinations and participation in observations by a group of art teachers of an installation by Sandy Skoglund called *Fox Games,* one participant imagined herself to be one particular fox in the piece, and wrote as if she were the fox.

> I am in the crowd and yet alone. Many in this crowd are interacting with each other frolicking and dancing around with each other and no one is even aware of my presence, let alone inviting me to be a part of this group. My basic needs are there–food, light, and other living beings and yet I sit here in quiet isolation mattering to no one. (Middle school art teacher, Tennessee Art Academy, 1994)

Ventilator, by Olafur Eliasson, is an installation piece, an electric fan hanging from a high ceiling by an electric cord, which allows it to freely fly through the air in arcs over the heads of visitors, towards them and away from them, according to the air current altered by the visitor. During a workshop for docents examining an Eliasson exhibition, one museum docent wrote this about *Ventilator*:

> The ventilator is like my personality—no direction of its own—moved by the whims and wishes of others, sometimes noisily and sometimes quietly, but never stopping. Always responding to people, events, tasks, and my own inner drive to please, appease, keep peace, keep up appearances, and a sense of accomplishment. (Art museum guide, Dallas Museum of Art, 2008)

After a discussion about paintings made be René Magritte, another docent, at another time in a different museum, wrote:

> 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 into the picture. (Art museum guide, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1999)

Figure 1. Exhibition poster. (Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas)

Two women reflected on their experiences of seeing Kara Walker's exhibition, "My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," which depicts, from an African American artist's point-of-view, stereotypical and unflattering sexual and scatological silhouettes of slaves and their masters in the antebellum South. The women offered these thoughts:

> I had never been aware of myself as a white girl in an art museum before. Those incredibly aware feelings are usually reserved for the Fiesta grocery store or when I'm driving through the wrong side of town, but this exhibition made it perfectly clear to me that I was as white as the gallery walls, since I could laugh but not relate. (Art education graduate student, University of North Texas, 2008)

> My experience with Kara Walker's exhibition was one of great uneasiness. As a woman, it was difficult to gaze upon the silhouettes of women being treated with violence, betrayal, and disregard. As a mother, it was painful to watch her puppet animation depictions of harm coming to young children. As a white American it caused me to pause at those moments when my own silhouette was projected on the wall along side plantation masters who beat, raped, and stripped African American people of their dignity. I couldn't figure out where my own subjectivity was positioned. I appreciated the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful dialogue—a purposeful 'reading' of Walker's text, but I left with questions and a sense that my journey to know African America is unfinished. (Art education graduate student, University of North Texas, 2008)

If we accept that writing is thinking and discovering through writing, and not a mere regurgitation of knowledge already in one's possession (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), then these five women learned important things about themselves by thinking philosophically about their responses to works of art. Their written insights also imply that they want to change how they live. As Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) correctly asserts, "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery. Many writers in the humanities have known this all along" (p. 967).

AESTHETICS AND LIFE

Artists provide us with ways of knowing the world that would otherwise be inaccessible to us (Goodman, 1968). Such a claim is a major contribution to cognitive aesthetics made by philosophers holding expressionist and cognitivist theories of art, such as Leo Tolstoy, Benedetto Croce, R. G. Collingwood, Suzanne Langer, John Dewey, Nelson Goodman, and Arthur Danto. Philosopher Cynthia Freeland succinctly articulates cognitivist principles of art this way:

> (1) Artworks stimulate cognitive activity that may teach us about the world... (2) The cognitive activity they stimulate is part and parcel of their functioning as artworks. (3) As a result of this stimulation, we learn from artworks: we acquire fresh knowledge, our beliefs are refined, and our understanding is deepened. (4) What we learn in this manner constitutes one of the main reasons we enjoy and value artworks in the first place. (in Barrett, 2008, p. 59)

In the following three quotations, three members of a college community, after viewing and discussing a dozen reproductions of paintings by René Magritte, wrote the following comments. None of them were previously familiar with Magritte's work and none of them had specialized in the study of art. Inspired by Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), I asked them to start with the writing prompt of "The world of Magritte...":

> The world of Magritte begins as something we see everyday. A mundane window, a ledge, a landscape, but he imagines more. Things are not as they seem. Something is a little "off." Does he see people or just characters?

> Can they see him? Does he walk through this world and dream in it? What we do know: it's a buttoned-up, straight-laced, detached place. Luckily, he has the occasional giant apple to mix things up. (Haley Sigler, Professor of Education, Washington and Lee University, 2007)

> The world of Magritte is mystical and imaginative. He combines the Real and unreal in his paintings to create dream-like images. Magritte seems to have an eye for what the rest of us cannot see, and in doing so, emits a somber, quiet, peaceful, yet almost eerie mood. Observers of his art get caught up in his dream world, and find themselves desperately trying to make meaning of the paintings. Magritte always seems to be an observer of his world, with repetitive ledges and windows, and this gives the feeling of being an outsider looking in. (Lindsey, junior, politics major, Washington and Lee University, 2007)

> The world of Magritte is a simple one. He uses everyday objects to introduce a sense of mystery and strangeness into a rather plain world. He is a minimalist, and his world contains only the necessary colors and objects. Yet, by altering one object, he alters the simplicity and normalcy of his world. (Kim Poissant, Anthropology major, Washington and Lee University, 2007)

Children in fourth and fifth grades were also able to reconstruct aspects of how Magritte characterized the world.

> I can see that when he makes his painting it's like a puzzle. It is like a mystery that you have to find what he put in. I think that his pictures are real pure like pure water. I think he sees two halves, the first is bright and colorful and the second is dreary but okay. (Charkeeta, fourth grade, Duxberry Park School, Columbus, Ohio, 1990)

A sixth grader in another school wrote:

> Magritte's world is full of optical illusions and weird happenings. Most of his paintings have a way you should look at them to understand them. His paintings have things that he would only see in real life. I think all his paintings are very imaginative and creative. I love trying to figure out what he's trying to say. Magritte's art makes you want to see more of it and try to make your own. (Jessica Gahl, sixth grade, Sands Montessori Public School, Cincinnati, 1990)

A high school senior in a private college-prep school wrote:

> In the world of Magritte there are boundaries both definite and indefinite. In almost every painting we viewed there was a wall or a window that seemed to prevent entry to the outer world, and that outer world was so deep, almost boundary-less but not quite. (Alexis, senior, Hathaway Brown School, Cleveland, 1990)

Another senior in a public high school observed:

> The world of Magritte is a world of imagination and creativity. The world of Magritte is a world where nature is important. The world of Magritte is a world where the mind is the key to understanding. The world of Magritte is not only these things but a world expressing ideas the way that comes easiest and simplest to a person. (Joe Hall, freshman, Colonel White High School, Dayton, 1991)

William Wegman is a serious artist who makes humorous paintings, videos, and is especially well known for his photographs of his weimaraners, frequently posed in anthropomorphic costumes and situations. His works are easy to enjoy and also easy to misread as mere entertainment. I am interested to know if Wegman's work provides people with insights into life. They do. A teacher in a workshop wrote the following astute paragraph:

> William Wegman's photographs of his weimaraners create an uncomfortable sense of exploitation similar to photographs of nude women in men's magazines or Richard Avedon's photographs in his American West series. The obedient subject endures costumes, eye coverings, uncomfortable positions, and long poses for the amusement of the photographer and his audience. Wegman's 'love' of his dog is similar to a possessive male's 'love' of his woman. (Art teacher, Institute for Visual Art Education, Cincinnati, 1991)

The following statements are quoted from brief writings spontaneously written by individual high school students in an auditorium after they had seen and discussed about twenty of Wegman's photographs during an hour-long session. I asked the students, "What are these photographs about?"

> These pictures are about society, life and the crazy things that go on in life. He's always portraying humans. (Michael Klein, high school student, 1992)

> About mankind in general and humor in life, some just for humor. (High school student, 1992)

> About weird things that people do but to get people to realize that he puts dogs in the place of people. (High school student, 1992)

> He uses dogs to represent people. (High school student, 1992)

> Shows human society and cultures. (High school student, 1992)

> Uses dogs to show human strangeness. (High school student, 1992)

> Shows daily life for a human but a dog in place makes you notice. (High school student, 1992)

> He is showing us a different way to look at ourselves–dogs reflect humans. (Lisa Brown, high school student, 1992)

Based on the evidence of these selected comments, many of the high school students understood Wegman's work to be offering insights about life, and more specifically, about human behavior through the artist's use of dogs.

KNOWING OTHERS THROUGH AESTHETICS

Concomitant with greater self-knowledge and resulting appreciation of the changing self, one can also come to better know and appreciate others by hearing others' interpretations. The individual conversationalists cited in this chapter voluntarily read aloud their writings to the whole group. To hear others' interpretations provides the possibility of learning about those interpreters as well as the work: How others think, what they notice, what they value and why, and their views of the world (Barrett, 2007).

Margaret Wheatley (2002), a social activist and consultant to organizations, asserts:

> Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change–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 ...I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. (p. 3)

In consort with Wheatley, I believe that social change can be fostered through philosophical talk about life in response to works of art. For example, in 1989, Andre Serrano submerged a plastic crucifix in his urine and photographed it, making the infamous artwork he called *Piss Christ* during the time of Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition, "The Perfect Moment," when politicians were debating whether to continue to fund the National Endowment for the Arts. There was much hateful rancor in the air at the time concerning "controversial art." *Piss Christ* prompted Senator Jesse Helms, on the floor of the United States Senate, to call the artist "a jerk."[5]

These occurrences were opportunities to apply philosophical thinking to works of art that were being discussed with more heat than light. While teaching a group of adults in a series of Saturday morning classes in Ohio at the Columbus Museum of Art, "Learning to Look at Art," we openly discussed the image by Serrano by answering the question of whether *Piss Christ* ought to exist in society:

> Yes—artists should have freedom to create and express ideas. Viewers have a 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, 1991)

> No, I think we should be broad-minded to a point in accepting and being open to this type of work, but I think using body waste, especially in context with the religious figure is too degrading. The artist is like a naughty child

> seeing how much he can get away with. I also think the art world is like a baby sitter, too willing to accept what is created without thought of good taste. (Anonymous, 1991)
>
> 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 make us (help us?) to see things in a 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. (Nancy Converse, 1991)
>
> One positive consequence of controversial images is the very debate and discussion they engender. The church continues to play a too-large role in secular life (e.g., choice, divorce). This image can initiate dialogue. (J. Walsh, 1991)

A group of classroom teachers, art teachers, and principals participating in "Arts Unlimited!" at Bowling Green State University in Ohio made such comments as these:

> *Piss Christ* does not have a place in society. I appreciated the photograph before I found out the way it was produced. Christian art can be displayed in other ways that would be more beneficial to society. During this day and age religion could and should be strengthened not weakened. (Anonymous, 1991)
>
> I do not feel *Piss Christ* has a place in our society! For one, I think the so-called artist has a very thick 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, 1991)
>
> 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, 1991)
>
> 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, 1991)
>
> *Piss Christ* has a place in society, strictly because we are a free society. 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, 1991)

Many philosophical issues are contained in these quotations, and more philosophical discussion ensued about them after group members read them aloud to the whole group, such as notions of freedom of expression in a democratic society, the role of religion in a secular society, and issues of freedom and constraint for artists in a democratic society. These quotations are in consort with

Rorty's belief that, as Rothstein (2007) wrote in Rorty's obituary: "the importance of democracy is that it creates a liberal society in which rival truth claims can compete and accommodate each other" (p. B3).

What we learned in these conversations is that persons of a generally homogenous group can hold very different positions regarding the same work of art. This was revealing to us. We did not have consensus. We disagreed with one another. We learned that we did not all think alike. We also learned that we could talk passionately about the work in a reasoned way and listen to one another's positions without interrupting one another, talking over one another, raising our voices, or calling each other names. We talked and listened to each other with attitudes of respect. We came to know each other better and accept our differences without walking away from each other in anger. We did not feel the need to censor thoughts or the image.

CARING ABOUT OTHERS THROUGH AESTHETICS

Figure 2. Stephen Althouse, Brick and Ivy, photograph, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

The following three paragraphs are spontaneous writings by men and women living in a senior citizens' home in Columbus, Ohio about the photograph *Brick and Ivy* by Stephen Althouse after a discussion of six of his images similar to it. Writers voluntarily read their readings to the whole group of about fifteen people.

> *Brick and Ivy* meant to me the 'everlasting' solidarity of the rock with what looked like years of fossils tucked into crannies in the rock; then the ivy symbolizes if not 'life everlasting' at least the beings, earth's inhabitants (me included), that in some form keep on living. (Barb Austin, age 80, First Community Village, 2008)

> In these days, in my 80s, I am deeply involved in questions of life's meaning in the largest possible context. How do I find my place in the Cosmos? And how do I find language for the deepest of all issues? There is something ineffable in experience with Ultimate Reality that is perhaps more mystery than objective phenomenon. So the brick and ivy represent the permanent and the temporary, the Cosmo's and the living, nature and human nature. And they are inevitably interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. Related integrally—integrity personified. (Greg, age 84, First Community Village, 2008)

> *Brick and Ivy* made me realize the fragility of our life spans. It also impresses me with the durability (stone brick) contrasted with the ivy (changing life cycles). The human spirit's ability to withstand and overcome some of life's trials as well as the blessings—as expressed by the light as well as the dark—sunshine—shadow—hope and despair—optimism versus pessimism. The overall feeling is one of antiquity and eternal life. (Lila Brewer, age 94, First Community Village, 2008)

Following the discussion, one man who was initially resistant and sat in the back so he could escape should he choose to, stayed for the entire hour and afterward said, "I was negative about this art. I learned a lot. I was narrow, closed-minded. But I saw new things. It started the creative juices going. I had a good time just looking, and the people had such different reactions."

These paragraphs are shared here for two reasons: to exemplify philosophical thinking about life through art, and through the quality of the writing, all unedited first drafts, to counter ageism in the United States. The writing of Barb, Greg, and Lila, in their eighties and nineties, is comparable to that of college students and their professors.

The last set of quotations exemplify thinking through art about life by adults living with and dying of cancer, and their caregivers, generated in voluntary group conversations of about eight people at the Wellness Community in Columbus, Ohio, an institution that offers free support to patients and their caregivers. We discussed *Two Eggs,* a manipulated photograph by Rimma Gerlovina & Valeriy Gerlovin made in 2003 that shows a woman holding an egg in each of her hands. One egg appears solid and real and the other appears weightless and unreal.

> This image reminds me of chemotherapy. I remember sitting in my chair in our living room, hours on end, thinking about whatever I was thinking. Some call it "mindful meditation." I let thoughts come and go; fears, hopes, doubts. Hours passed. My mind functioned well enough that I did not know what was happening to my body. I felt sadness over the medications I was taking into my body. Sometime I only had energy to sit and wonder. I gave myself over to chemotherapy, but I held onto my thoughts, wondering about life and if there is an afterlife, wondering about the meaning of my being on earth. In these meditative states, I maintained optimism and I see this work as optimistic. (Male, 63, treated for cancer, 2008)

> I can see the present. I can see the situation (solid egg) we're in and what it looks like. But is that what the future really holds? The doctors predict death soon. But on the other "hand" maybe there's hope. Maybe I can imagine another future, a more positive future. Which one is real? Which can happen? Is there anything I can do to help? (Joan Wintermantel, caregiver to husband with cancer, 2008)
>
> I see two versions of reality; which is true? Can I really change my body through meditation? Can I really cure myself? If I think the right thoughts will I kill off the cancer cells? If I think the wrong thoughts, will I aid the cancer cells? (Male, age 63, treated for cancer, 2008)

These patients and caregivers were engaged in the "Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well" (Wheatly, 2002, p. 3). The quoted paragraphs answer Wheatley's rhetorical questions with positive answers: "What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us? About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children?" (p. 3).

CONCLUSION

Aesthetics is a usefully complex concept. The term *aesthetics* is used in a variety of ways to refer to preferences, taste, sensual qualities, artistic values, and theories of art expression and knowledge. Works of art give rise to conversations of import concerning the world, the self, and others. When conversations of art are carefully and caringly facilitated, people of different ages and in different places of life can come to understand themselves, seek to change themselves, better know others who agree and disagree with them, and speak openly and respectfully to one another about important issues. When this happens, communities of understanding are formed. When communities of understanding are formed, peace in the world increases.

NOTES

1. Oxford's *Companion to Aesthetics* (Levinson, 2003), for example, includes writings on Anglo-American aesthetics by authors such as Philip Alperson, Malcolm Budd, Noël Carroll, Ted Cohen, Mary Devereaux, and others, while Blackwell's *Art in Theory* (Harrison & Wood, 2003) includes writings by Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Barthes, Baudrillard, Foucault, Jameson, Said, and others.
2. These distinctions, however, are cursory, and many scholars of art education use a variety of sources from a variety of schools of thought.
3. For overviews of theories of aesthetic experience, see relevant entries in the *Encyclopedia of aesthetics* (1998). New York: Oxford. See also any of a number of anthologies of aesthetic philosophy such as those edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer (1998), Peter Kivy (2004), and David Goldblatt & Lee Brown (2005).
4. For an overview of the contested concept of aesthetic experience, see Richard Shusterman (1997), a current Pragmatist philosopher who is aware of the concept's limitations but who argues for its relevance. See also Gary Iseminger's (2003) discussion of the strengths and weakness of the concept, which includes overviews of current debates between Shusterman, Dickie, and other contemporary theorists.

[5] Senator Jesse Helms, Congressional Record, Senate, May 18, 1989, "Comments on Andres Serrano by Members of the United States Senate," http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_r7.html, retrieved on January 8, 2009.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Articulate your philosophy of art. Consider how it does or could influence your professional practice.

2. Share your experiences in art education with "aesthetics in action." Have philosophical conversations about art and life occurred in your teaching? If not, why not? If so, how did participants react? Could you have been a more effective facilitator of such discussions? How?
3. Think of recent examples of "controversial art." Develop prompts for writing about and discussing these works to facilitate reflection, interpretation. Discuss beneficial or detrimental effects of such art for society.
4. Discuss the possibilities of this statement from the chapter:

   > When conversations of art are carefully and caringly facilitated, people of different ages and in different places of life can come to understand themselves, seek to change themselves, better know others who agree and disagree with them, and speak openly and respectfully to one another about important issues. When this happens, communities of understanding are formed. When communities of understanding are formed, peace in the world increases.

5. What are the characteristics of a careful and caring discussion about art?

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