

(1,561 words)

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## Afterword

### Noticing, Revealing

The "we" in this Afterword join the authors in this book and append our work to their work and to all teachers who want to use contemporary art in their classrooms. When we think about learning through and about contemporary art, we believe there is unlimited potential for contributing goodness to the world. We choose to believe that all people can connect with others to share minds and hearts in ways that lessen alienation and aggression.

As art educators, we do not feel that it is our primary mission to teach what artworks came before or contemporaneously with the one we happen to be examining. Historians do this. We rather affect learning about art while also learning about ourselves and one another toward building caring communities: "Their views are different than mine." "My position is a minority position." "I learned something from her." "I might not always be right." "I can benefit from the views of others." "I can now better understand the bases for our differences."

As art educators, we believe inviting ordinary viewers to engage in describing and interpreting art is a contribution we can make. We think opening interpretative thought to

all is especially appropriate for contemporary art. Because contemporary art is new, works have not yet accrued conventional scholarly interpretations. Contemporary art is of our time, of the world in which we live, accessible through our experiences in living on planet Earth. We believe ordinary viewers of the art of our time are well enough equipped to engage directly with it and to make meaning of it for themselves and their fellow viewers.

In our work as art educators, we feel troubled if participants leave a viewing experience of art having only learned conventional understandings fashioned by experts but without sufficient opportunity to find personally significant meanings.

While working in professional development at the Dallas Museum of Art, we witnessed meaning making of this kind. *Ventilator* by Olafur Eliasson, 1997, is a mobile sculpture consisting simply of an ordinary, round, electric fan suspended by its power cord from high overhead in a large interior space of the museum. The fan moves in seemingly haphazard, arching patterns depending on invisible air currents. One person wrote about the piece in a memorable way: "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. This is a sad installation." Through this viewer's words we can experience the artwork differently and read an incidence of being vulnerably human.

We were part of another example of what we were striving for during a professional development session in the Netherlands whose general purpose was learning ways to engage children, teens, adults, and senior citizens in meaningful conversations

about contemporary works of art.<sup>1</sup> We used *The Carpet Told Me*, a video-loop by Dutch artist Jeroen Kooijmans, 2007, that serenely displays an oriental carpet strangely floating on a pond, with ambient sounds of local nature, to be looked at for an endurance decided by the viewer.

The discussion began by first grounding ourselves in the artwork through the teens describing aloud what each noticed when carefully looking. The teens then engaged in interpretive thoughts, seeking to articulate what the work expresses. They first explored how and why the carpet was floating on a calm rural pond. They then suggested that the artwork mirrored contemporary Dutch society that was experiencing immigration into the Netherlands from the Middle East. They noted social and personal conflicts arising from the influx of people and that some blamed the newly arrived for social problems in Amsterdam. One teen, Ali, identified the piece as "a metaphor for immigration in the Netherlands," and when asked, explained metaphor. Ali also noted, "Amsterdam has more nationalities than New York" and expressed pride in "Dutch progressivism, for Dutch tolerance of others." Max contributed ideas about immigration and assimilation and segregation.

About thirty minutes into the discussion, the teens wrote individual paragraphs in response to the question: "Have you ever felt like the carpet?" They voluntarily read them aloud. Thomas wrote, "My nationalism is strong but I am not a Nazi. ... Integration is important or else it's all going to crash." Remen revealed his recent shock when reading a social studies textbook that positions him as a "foreigner" because his father is Latin American. Most poignantly, another teen wrote, "I feel like I am the carpet in my family," revealing some of what it might be like to live with autism.

This conversation reinforced notions that we perceive and think differently, that noticing and interpreting out loud in a group is more enriching than having a single perspective, that an artwork can sustain different viewpoints, and that there is value in communal participation. We set a pace for conversations that allows participants to speak, listen, and connect. Hurrying prohibits self-reflection and sufficient self-quieting to hear the views of others.

As art educators, we intentionally assume an attitude of acceptance of what the artworld exhibits as worth seeing, ignoring topics of whether a piece is "art" or matches our personal preferences for art. The teens reinforced our trust that contemporary art is interesting, that people who experience contemporary art are interesting, and that through it we can learn about others as well art. We continue to engage viewers in interpreting the art of our times and explicitly encourage personal understandings by closing most sessions with time to answer questions like these: "What does this work mean to you?" "How might it affect your life?" "Does it alter your worldview?" "Does it change your view of others?" "Does it alter how you see yourself?" We invite viewers to make their private meanings public, believing that individual and idiosyncratic understandings of an artwork and its relation to self, others, and the world can contribute to building caring communities based on noticing and revealing. We continue to be awed by how much we learn about artworks, people, and life.

We share some common influences with other contributors to this book. Our inspirational sources are eclectic and include John Dewey (1934) who shifted us from the material art object to experiences of the object. Nelson Goodman (1968) taught us that art uniquely contributes to knowledge. Roland Barthes (1972) showed the analytic power of

distinguishing between denotations and connotations. Arthur Danto (1983) put interpretation above all other critical procedures. Umberto Eco (1992) encourages over interpretation rather than under interpretation. Maria Montessori (1995) believed education could not be effective unless it helped the student to open to life. Carl Rogers (1961) asked that we become aware of ourselves experiencing an experience, and of whom it was said, "Roger's voice—warm, enthusiastic, confident, concerned...a man trying patiently, but with all the resources at his command, to hear others and himself" (Kramer, 1995, p. xiv). Caleb Gattegno (1987) told teachers to focus on how people learn and use that knowledge to become more aware of themselves and their students. bell hooks (1994) asserts that communal learning depends on our interest in others: "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8). Pema Chödrön (1997) encourages people to open to every experience as if that experience is one's teacher. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that "The collective is made of the individual, and the individual is made of the collective, and each and every individual has a direct effect on the collective consciousness" (p. 56). Anaïs Nin (1969) encourages developing a personal relationship with oneself as a way to grow relationships with others: "The value of the personal relationship to all things is that it creates intimacy...and intimacy creates understanding...and understanding creates love" (p. 109). We think it is important to consciously bring these authors' thoughts with us to professional development experiences with art. This harmony of voices becomes a guiding foundation for allowing self-discovery, which is the epiphany of learning, and the

possibility to join and benefit each other in processes of relating, understanding, and creating love and peace.

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