

## *Chapter Fifteen*

# **Taking It Personally**

## *Coming to Know Oneself and Others Through Interpretations of Art*

Terry Barrett

This is a personal narrative about my many years of teaching people to respond to works of art. During a long and enjoyable career, I have been facilitating learning about and through art by discussing it with people of different ages, races, ethnicities, classes, creeds, and abilities gathered together in art museums, community centers, and classrooms. I have been most interested in encouraging people not so much to judge whether and how an artwork is good or not, but rather to seek interpretations of what an artwork might be expressing to viewers in a diverse society. Eventually I learned that interpretations of art based on personal experiences articulated by people with differences could contribute vivid knowledge about our complex world and the people who live in it. I have found that sharing personal responses and understandings of art can help to create communities of people who empathically understand one another and thus contribute to a more peaceful world.

### UNDER CONSTRUCTION

During my early years of teaching, I was concerned with obtaining interpretations that were more “right” than not. I was not looking for *the* right interpretation of an artwork because I do not believe there is one, but I was looking for interpretations that made sense in themselves, that fit the work being interpreted, that brought insight to it, and that could be defended with evidence. I felt tensions between objectivity and subjectivity. I sought inter-

pretations that were "objective," by which I mean articulations that enlightened us about *the object*, the artwork that was under scrutiny. I was suspect of interpretations that were "too subjective," by which I mean those interpretations that told us more about *the subject*, the interpreter, than about the artwork we were interpreting.

I would usually, but not always, begin with questions about what people actually saw in a work concerning: namely, its subject matter and form. We would name subject matter with specificity and note what was particular or peculiar about it. If implied narrative content was present in the work, we would attempt to decipher possible story lines. Once we had identified the subject matter, we would tell what we knew contextually about such subject matter in the world. Rene Magritte, for example, was Belgian and made many of his paintings in Europe during World War II. I might have asked how that information might contribute to understandings of his work. Or, I might have said that William Wegman, for example, often uses dogs in his photographs. So during the conversation, I might gather information from pet owners about how their knowledge and attitudes about pets affected their responses to the photographs, and we might compare their reactions to the reactions of those who did not have pets. Barbara Kruger appropriates common idioms but alters them. For instance, in one of her pieces, she changes "Your wish is my command" to "Your every wish is their command." In this case, we might explore the origin of the first phrase, and we might discuss the denotations and connotations of both phrases in a quest for implications and meanings.

When we attended to form in a work, if viewers noted texture, I would acknowledge texture if I also saw it in the work, but might also have suggested that most works of art have texture (or color or directional force), so I might further ask, "How does this particular texture (or color or directional force) affect the expression or meaning of this particular work of art?" Then I might ask the viewers to begin to articulate how subject matter and form interacted to contribute to some kind of meaning, however vague that meaning might be. Attention to formal considerations in isolation from expressive content was insufficient for me.

At that time in my career, during discussions, I would monitor descriptive observations and interpretive speculations according to what I considered pertinent information to the piece we were discussing. I would silently compare what was being said to what I thought the image to be centrally about, and I gently encouraged and discouraged responses that did not further what I considered to be enlightening about the artwork. I consciously did not reinforce interpretive suggestions that seemed too idiosyncratic to the individual and too removed from the artwork. My sense of pertinence was grounded in my prior study of the work as articulated by artists, critics, and

historians, or my logical and intuitive sense of what the work seemed to be about based on my general knowledge and involvement with art.

One goal I had during discussions was to encourage individual, informed, interpretive conjectures that were grounded in the artwork and its historical context. Another related goal I had was to arrive at interpretations that were more or less consistent with conventional interpretations that had been derived by the people with expertise in the art we were discussing: artists, critics, and historians. In my teaching, I attempted to make clear that some interpretations are better informed and more carefully reasoned than other interpretations. I tried to bring the group toward consensus based on what the majority of us thought the artwork to be about. When assessing such interpretive sessions, I was dissatisfied if we emerged with too many competing interpretations or a notion that anything that was said about a work of art was justifiable. I believed then and I still believe, as did Umberto Eco (1992), that artworks have rights (p. 84). I also believe that artworks themselves silently set a range of interpretations that are tolerable. We cannot responsibly say just “any ol’ thing” about art.

In part because of these beliefs, in my early years I put more weight on reasoned interpretations. Later, feelings also became guides to interpretation. Listening to one’s feelings can be an important prompt toward finding meaning, but inchoate feelings need to be given words if they are to contribute to insights that might be shared with others.

With time and experience I have become more interested in multiple interpretations of the same work, rather than consensually singular interpretations, but I still seek interpretations that are grounded in the work or knowledge about the work. Multiple interpretations, when sensible, enlighten others and me about different facets and implications of a work. I continue these critical and pedagogical practices today but with shifting emphases. As I accumulate years of reflective teaching and living, I continue to soften to the human plight, and I nurture a growing sense of awe about the mysteries of life and death. When teaching responsiveness to works of art, I am now focusing my energy on gaining insights into life, not just into art, through investigations of artworks, and especially through developing an awareness of a work’s significance for a person’s life. As I age, I tend to encourage people to investigate their own life stories and how their constructed narratives about their lives influence their interpretations of works of art. I increasingly and explicitly encourage viewers of art to make connections between artworks and their lives and to share these connections with others in ways that might alleviate alienation, lessen loneliness, and build connections and communities that support individual growth toward the betterment of the world in general. I agree with May (1999) that considering how varying biographical narratives influence interpretations is important multicultural work.

## EVOLVING EXPECTATIONS

Currently I worry about responses to art that are “too objective,” and I am less worried about responses that I had formerly considered “too subjective.” Here is an example of a response to art that I obtained earlier in my career that I now think is too objective. A 9-year-old boy wrote his response to Magritte’s paintings after he and his fourth grade classmates viewed about a dozen of Magritte’s paintings for about 40 minutes. Magritte was new to them. As a culminating activity, I asked the students to individually and quietly write a paragraph that responded to the following prompt: “The world of Magritte . . .” I wanted the children to arrive at some insights about the artist’s worldview as evidenced in his paintings. The young boy wrote:

Magritte’s mind is about things in common. He likes views out of a building or a 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. Some of his art is a little fantasy, like in terms of how it looks. But most of his art looks realistic. (personal communication, 1988)

First, I remain very pleased with the boy’s writing. He correctly identified strategies that Magritte used. The boy’s observations are clearly in line with more sophisticated analyses by art experts. He contributed to knowledge about the paintings for his classmates. However, I now wish I had asked him to go further. After my initial request that sought objective information, I wish I had also asked him about personal connections that he may have had with the artist’s view of the world: “Have you ever had experiences like the ones Magritte painted?”

Here is an example of a more recent response to an artwork that is, in my opinion, too subjective. It does not inform us about the artwork. *The Carpet Told Me* is a video work of continuous duration, made in 2007 by Jeroen Kooijmans, a Dutch artist. In the piece, a Persian carpet floats on a pond of water surrounded by reeds, accompanied by ambient sounds of the immediate natural environment. I showed the work to a group of about 15 elderly Dutch citizens from an assisted-living facility in Amsterdam, and asked them to they describe what they noticed before they offered interpretive inferences: “I see a carpet floating on water that doesn’t sink”; “I hear a goat bleating in the background”; “I see clouds reflected in the water”; “I see the carpet moving a little bit.” Unexpectedly, however, one elderly woman, sitting in a wheel chair, said “I see my husband and me making love on the carpet when we were 40.” The group was silent for a moment and then broke into good-natured laughter and gently teased the woman. She just smiled silently. We continued with the discussion, and the group came up with interesting and insightful comments concerning tensions between the integra-

tion and segregation of the large numbers of people who have in recent years been arriving in Holland from the Middle East. Toward the end of the discussion, the same woman repeated her lovemaking story. It was all she could see or wanted to see. In my view, hers is not a good interpretation of the piece: it lacks correspondence to what is in the video. Nevertheless, her revelation was a touching moment of loss and remembrance, an insight into the life of an old woman. Although her story did not add to our understanding of the artwork, it did add to our understanding of life.

## OBTAINING PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS

Most of the interpretations quoted in this chapter are presented as they were given to me—spontaneous and unrevised responses to prompts that I gave to viewers. Most of them were written following a group discussion of the works of art under consideration. The discussions often took place in museum settings in front of the original works or in classrooms and community centers, using high quality reproductions in print format in brightly lit rooms, or using projectors in dimmed rooms. When using reproductions, I selected works that reproduced with a high degree of fidelity to the originals.

Typically, the discussion format for these discussions consisted of answering aloud two basic questions: “What do you see?” and “What’s it about?” We treated each question separately and took turns orally responding to the questions. Then after people spoke, I asked them to quietly and individually write a paragraph or more about what the artworks mean to them: “Does this work have personal meaning for you?” After about 10 to 15 minutes of writing, I would ask if someone would read what they had written. Usually someone would read, and then another, and another. On many occasions, everyone would read. When I sensed that writers were reluctant to read, I sometimes collected the writings and read all of them aloud to the group without identifying the writers. We paused in silence after a reading. We did not comment on the readings. After someone read, I would simply say “thank you,” and then ask if another would read. I think silent listening is a respectful way of handling personal revelations. I did not pressure people to read their writings aloud or to turn them in to me.

The size of the groups would vary from about 7 to 25 members. I determined the length of the discussions based on what different groups are accustomed to: Generally, the total length of the session was an hour to an hour and a half, which included time for looking and responding out loud, quietly writing, voluntarily reading, and listening without responding except to offer sincere thanks. At the end of the sessions, I would ask if anyone was willing to give me what they had written, informing them that I might present their

writings in other contexts. Most people turned in what they wrote; they seemed to be proud of their writings and pleased to share them.

Through time and experience, I have found that the act of quietly writing interpretations offers some distinct advantages over having viewers spontaneously speak their thoughts aloud. Time for writing allows viewers to be thoughtful, reflective, and reflexive. When they see what they have written on a piece of paper, they have occasion to refine or revise it. Everyone has equal time to respond, and the shy are not dominated by the vociferous.

I have collected viewers' interpretations over many years. Some are richer than others, and they are offered here. Examples follow of individuals' interpretations that demonstrate both an understanding of artworks that are based on careful observation of the artworks, and interpretations that, perhaps more importantly, contribute to knowledge about people and the lives they live. I fondly think of these interpretations as appreciations of life through art. I have organized sample interpretations according to three themes I saw emerging in the responses I have collected: interpretations that are about knowing and sharing self, discomfort, and death and dying.

### On Knowing and Sharing Self

*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 a museum.<sup>1</sup> The fan moves in seemingly haphazard, yet circular patterns depending on invisible air currents in the space. In this setting, about 20 docents interacted with the piece for about 10 minutes. Then, in 10 minutes of silent, private writing, the docents responded to my request of them to write personal responses to *Ventilator* that related to their lives. I gave them this prompt: "Can you relate this work to anything in your personal life?" After they had written, I collected the writings from those who volunteered them, and, withholding the identities of the writers, I read the responses to the group. One woman wrote a response that is one of my favorites because of its raw revelation of an aspect of the human condition that I believe many have experienced:

*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 keep a sense of accomplishment. (personal communication, 2008)

I think the woman's sentences contribute to understanding in several ways. First, she successfully articulated the intention of the piece as a constantly and erratically moving force with unpredictable direction. She drew a direct parallel between the piece and her life, revealing honest self-awareness about

having “no direction of her own.” Her observations were grounded in her experience of the artwork and life, and her understanding of the piece added to our knowledge of both. In expressing herself this way, she allowed all of us to critically assess responses to under-acknowledged forces in our own lives.

After viewing and making oral observations about a dozen of René Magritte’s paintings with a group of about 15 docents, one woman wrote this paragraph about his paintings and read it aloud to her fellow docents:

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 place yourself in the picture. (personal communication, 1999)

Like the observer of *Ventilator*, this woman also grounded her personal response in knowledge of Magritte’s work, mentioning some dominant motifs in his paintings: isolated individuals behind interior walls and curtains, stoically viewing the world rather than acting in it. Thus, she contributed insight about the artworks. She also acknowledged her less-than-active role in her own life, providing a chance for the other participants to empathize with her difficult situation of being widowed, and she expressed inspirational motivation to make changes in her life, which could have prompted us to make changes in our own lives.

A younger woman college student in her early 20s, about the age of the female subject in Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Swing* (1768), who was in a college classroom with about 20 other students, commented on the flirtatious scene that the artist rendered. She aptly articulated the eroticism of the depiction, pointing out the male lover’s opportunistic point-of-view. Her words delightfully animated the artist’s strokes on the canvas. She wrote,

Rococo bliss at its best. Cheeky, frivolous, and just plain fun. The painting oozes romance. She glides through the air on her tufted swing. Her lover sprawled at her feet awaits another glimpse of her creamy white thighs beneath froth of ruffle and lace. Even the garden cherubs steal a glance at the peach confection floating past. . . . It is everything I am not but wish I could be. (personal communication, 2012)

Like the elderly docents who wrote about *Ventilator* and Magritte’s paintings, this college student writing about *The Swing* shared acute self-knowledge. She expressed awareness and acceptance of the painting’s depiction of desire, and also her own sexuality and libidinous limitations. She provided the rest of us an opportunity to do the same.

An unidentified published author described a non-objective abstract painting by Roberto Sebastian Echaurren Matta, *Untitled* (1911), this way:

Strange shapes inhabit this fantastical, amorphous landscape. Visions from a dark imagination dart spontaneously across the picture surface and beyond, like electrical currents. They seem to resist any polar attraction to direct them into a semblance of compositional unity or rhythm. (as cited in Phaidon, 1994, p. 309)

A college student in a class of about 20 took the painting personally, writing:

Matta's work reminds me of me. It reminds me of the way that my mind works. The image is jumbled and erratic like my mind. My thoughts race by, often jutting into other thoughts and ideas. I am constantly trying to find a balance between positive and negative thoughts . . . There are thousands of images, ideas, and thoughts racing through my mind at any moment, but I am still able to find composure and a destination. I am finding my way. (personal communication, 2012)

The student's association with the painting aptly offers a parallel commentary to the anonymous author cited above in Phaidon (1994). Both of them captured the energy of the painting. Her writing also personified the painting for herself and her classmates while offering insights into her mind as well as the work of art.

### On Discomfort

Artworks are sometimes made to be confrontational: Kara Walker's work, for example, confronts us with the antebellum American South by using grotesque stereotypes of slaves and masters to narrate sadism and romance, oppression and liberation. Other artists' works are whimsical, imminently inviting, and without the explicit political goals that Walker's work includes, such as William Wegman's photographs and videos in which his dogs delightfully engage in anthropomorphic enactments of human behaviors, allowing viewers to see human behaviors in humorous and quirky ways. Any artwork can provoke discomfort in a viewer, and such discomfort, when carefully considered, can yield discovery of a discomforted self, and such discomfort can sometimes motivate the viewer to work toward change.

One of Wegman's Polaroid photographs, *Dusted* (1982), shows his dog, Man Ray, in a submissive "stay" position while he endures a heavy white floury substance falling on him from above. The dog could easily step away from the pouring flour and shake it off, but he does not. When I showed a sixth grade class the photograph, a boy promptly said, "Snow. Cocaine." Additionally, when I showed the photograph to a class of college students, one offered this insight and admission: "Although a weight is always on my



shoulders, and the substance is heavy and weighing me down, I can't leave the spot or I will be out of my comfort zone." I think both reactions are responsive to the image and, although they were articulated at different times and in different spaces, each compliments the other. I think the image is about addiction.

The artist Man Ray made a photograph of a woman's bare back and transformed it into a violin. The work is called *Violin of Ingres* (1924). This iconic image is conventionally interpreted as a variation on the familiar theme of woman as sexual instrument to be played. A college student in a group of about 20 followed the common interpretation of the image and added a personal connection:

She is a symbol of my life. She is naked and bare. I have nothing to protect or to shield myself with and am exposed to the dangers and obstacles of life. She is an instrument that produces beautiful and sophisticated music that can only be created when the musician allows it. She has no control of her fate much like the feeling that I've always had over my life. My life has always been at the hands of my parents. I fear that if I were to take control, they will abandon me and I will be forgotten. But I know my potential and the wonderful things I have made in the past. So I will keep playing the music, but this time, I will create it by my own hands. I will create my own fate. I have control. (personal communication, 2008)

In 1947, Rufino Tamayo made a painting he called *Children Playing with Fire*. It shows two children, in silhouette, dancing with abandon in front of a raging fire. A college student about to begin a career as an art teacher wrote this in response to the painting:

I am scared of destroying children. I am passionate about teaching but it is like "playing with fire." Teaching is a gamble. I fear I won't be able to get through to the students or I will teach them all the wrong things. The dark figures in the painting represent challenges like diversity, language barriers, socioeconomic differences, learning disabilities, behavior issues, and being a first-year teacher. (personal communication, 2012)

In response to a relief sculpture made by Meret Oppenheim in 1936 called *My Nurse*, a female college student described the sculpture and interpreted what it likely meant to the artist, and offered a personal conclusion:

Two high heels on a silver platter. Shaped like an ovary. Tied and dressed like a roast chicken. "My" in the title implies possession and domination. Oppenheim is saying something about the objectification of women. I cannot speak for her but I understand this artwork because I am an object in my society. (personal communication, 2011)

This student's interpretation articulated for me, and for her classmates, the otherwise unaccounted for discomfort Oppenheim's sculpture strongly suggests.

Two college students from my classes offered contrasting responses to Kara Walker's major exhibition, "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," which began touring the United States in 2007.<sup>2</sup> As part of a course assignment, the students visited the exhibition on their own, wrote responses, and read them aloud in class. One student wrote:

I went to the exhibit with an open mind, interested to find out what it was that offended so many people. I did my best not to be offended. Not only was I offended, I was disgusted. I can appreciate someone's struggle with racism. I can appreciate someone expressing things they have experienced. Call me stupid but I don't understand. Call me a prude but I actually felt dirty after leaving the exhibit. Why is it necessary to show two silhouettes of men giving each other head? I can honestly say I wanted to understand. I felt like she was trying to speak for what long-gone oppressed ancestors have endured. I am all of that. I know the romantic ideal of the South isn't what really happened. My ancestors were Florida crackers. They were very poor people who lived off of what they grew. You don't see me showing them giving each other blowjobs, do you? What was so appealing about the exhibit that everyone else loved? Am I the sheltered redneck that cannot comprehend good art when I see it? (as cited in Barrett, 2012, pp. 180–181)

A different student admitted discomfort of a different kind: her lack of knowledge of how she, a white person, could speak about race with her black friend.

I viewed Kara Walker's work with my friend and colleague who happens to be African American. That statement I just typed, "happens to be African American," reeks of the same awkward I-am-so-white feeling I experienced as I stepped into Walker's exhibition. My feelings about being there with my friend were as ambiguous, shameful, and humorous as Walker's silhouettes. I wanted to ask my friend what she thought about the flat, demanding cuts in front of us, but couldn't bring myself to. Should I apologize? Should I try to laugh with her? Should I run out the front doors and back to my hometown in Pennsylvania where the only black people I ever knew were on TV? I was ashamed of myself and embarrassed that I didn't know how to relate to my friend or to the work in front of me.

I kept telling myself I couldn't relate to Walker's work. None of my ancestors bore such terrible atrocities and discrimination, so to a white girl, the flat contrast and nightmarish fairytale imagery was terrifying and hilarious in a much different way than it would be to a black girl. I can't say how because I wasn't brave enough to ask. The next step is to ask. What's the worst that could happen? Kara Walker has already shown me the worst of it, so now it's a matter of moving away from the wall to ask my friend about what she thinks of our American history. (as cited in Barrett, 2012, pp. 182–183)

Both responses are clear in meaning. Both contribute to conversations about Walker's work. I admire the honesty of the first and her courage to read aloud what was a minority opinion in an art class. She expressed her anger effectively and in an environment psychologically and pedagogically constructed for expressing different points of view. She opened possibilities for others to question or object to Walker's work. I suggested that she not characterize herself with a clichéd and negative stereotype for white people, "cracker," and she later showed me an encyclopedia entry on a group of early settlers who made their living by herding cattle in Florida, and who take pride in their heritage and identity as Florida Crackers. I also admire the honesty of the second, who openly broached a topic sensitive in American society, that of race, especially in a racially mixed group. She made explicit space for such conversations to begin in a spirit of concern for healing some part of the wounds of history and culture.

I agree with May and Sleeter (2010), because I, too, found that allowing and encouraging people to make references to their life experiences in their interpretations opens spaces to begin discussions on issues of race, racism, and other topics we tend to evade. The opening of that space allows people to empathize with others even while they implicate them in the issues. Without such intimate connections, people can remain removed from difficult topics. As I have learned through years of interacting with a variety of students and other museum-goers, when people are encouraged or allowed to assume and maintain aesthetic distance in relationship to a work of art, they do not have to identify and critically investigate their places of discomfort. As these women demonstrated, opening a conversation around an area of discomfort can add layers of meaning to a piece of art work as well as to a person's life.

## On Death and Dying

This final set of interpretive responses to works of art is more somber in tone and content than the previous sets. The writers of these interpretations were unflinching in their realizations and revelations. I believe the writings were healing for the writers, and I think these writers also enabled their listeners and readers to explore what they otherwise might neglect, their own deaths and the deaths of their loved ones.

A young woman in a college art education class turned in this anonymously written response to a film-still from Larry Clark's movie, *Kids* (1995):

I was date-raped. Shortly after I saw the movie *Kids*. I freaked out thinking maybe I was HIV-positive like this girl in the movie. I was too scared to go get tested and I contemplated suicide daily. After three months I finally got tested. I already had the pills I was going to overdose with spread out on my kitchen

counter. This is the first time I put this story in print and it takes a lot out of me to share it. (personal communication, 2012)

Eerie silence followed when I read this statement in class. The admission added stark reality to a fictional image. It impressed us and made real the possibility that these things do occur, even in our immediate community.

When a different college student saw Alberto Burri's *Sacking and Red* (1954), she interpreted it in relation to her loss of her grandmother. *Sacking and Red* is a two-dimensional, non-representational work on canvas made of torn burlap, glue, and red vinyl.

*Sacco* really speaks to me at this time in my life. This has been a rougher quarter than usual due to the death of my grandmother, as well as some other things in my life. It has felt at times as though things are falling apart, or that I have lost control in my life, and all around me are ripped and shredded pieces, leftover from tragedy and sadness. In the end, all I can do, as any human being does, is stitch together the remnants, and make something new from all the fragmented parts of life. In the end, something beautiful can come of it, which is what Burri has done with his torn pieces of cloth. (personal communication, 2012)

A high school English teacher wrote this response to paintings by Magritte. Her perspective is informed by her newly learned knowledge that Magritte, when a teenager, supposedly saw his mother's body in a river in which she had drowned herself. The teacher reflected on the loss of her own mother and the tragedy of suicide for those who live with its consequences. Magritte's paintings to which she refers in this writing show birds hovering high over unprotected nests.

René Magritte's maternal and protective images speak to me regarding the loss of my mother. Her death was not obviously self-imposed—so it was not suicide—but her choice to smoke for 45 out of 59 years of life was destructive to her health. Magritte creates a bird that looms, hovers, and appears to want to protect vulnerable new life. That mother-like bird figure can't protect, however, and is forced to witness the young in precarious situations without being able to control, nurture, or comfort them. The mother bird is watching the young but they are unaware of her presence. This is tragic in and of itself, but to me, the most tragedy lies in the mother's choice to leave a life in which she could interact, touch, and embrace her children. (personal communication, 1996)

Three women on different occasions responded to a highly imaginative and creatively manipulated photograph made by Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin: *Two Eggs* (2002). In the enigmatic photograph, a woman holds an egg in each hand. Both hands are her right hands. One egg is solid in a transparent hand, and the other egg is transparent in a solid hand. The woman

holding the eggs seems to be contemplating the solid egg in her transparent hand. The first woman viewer, aged 60 at the time, responded to the presence and absence of the eggs: “I’ve recently experienced the loss of my husband. In *Two Eggs* I see the loss of time, or time to do or say something not done, and the passing of time not regained” (personal communication, 2008).

Similarly, though written in a totally different group, a wife who was giving care to her husband who had terminal cancer wrote this about *Two Eggs*:

I can see the present. I can see the situation 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 is 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? (personal communication, 2008)

Still later, upon seeing the same photograph, a mother, aged 56, who had lost her 28-year-old son, reminisced:

Egg. Living. Solid. Strong.  
 Egg. Fragile. Flexible. Fragmented. Surreal.  
 This picture reminds me of when Michael died.  
 There was two of me. A strong, solid, emotional me, and a surreal,  
 not-real-feeling me. I look at the two right hands and remember life was not  
 symmetrical or balanced. (personal communication, 2008)

Lastly, an elderly woman of 94, who lived in an assisted-living retirement home, serenely and joyfully contemplated her late years while looking at a photograph of an ancient stone covered with moss and a strand of ivy, a piece created by Steven Althouse entitled *Brick and Ivy* (2003). She wrote:

This makes me realize the fragility of our life spans—also impresses me about the durability of the stone contrasted with the ivy and 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.<sup>3</sup> (personal communication, 2008)

These last interpretive responses to works of art demonstrate that some people courageously live their lives consciously aware of death, deaths of their loved ones as well as their own impending deaths. Their thoughts on death and dying open spaces for such conversations about under-discussed topics and under-served people, namely those with infirmities and advanced age and those who offer care to them. These shared thoughts on death and dying inspired by works of art can enable all of us to live with sharpened senses of the preciousness of the present and courage concerning the future.

## Finally

I think it is important when considering these quoted interpretive responses to works of art to remember that these brief writings are not entries into private diaries. Although such personal journaling may be a valuable undertaking, I think the responses quoted here are even more valuable because they are shared within a group, and here again in print, becoming part of an on-going dialogue about art and life. When shared, they provide insight into works of art, but also, and perhaps more importantly, knowledge of how other human beings experience the world. Some of the responses allow me to realize I am not as alone as I had previously thought. Others of the responses cause me to see another human being's experience that is different from mine, and to allow that such a difference might broaden my worldview.

Interpretations of art and life that vary because of gender, age, race, religion, or other cultural factors are okay; they should be supported and encouraged in museums and classrooms. Differences serve as reminders that all people do not universally share a single worldview. When differences occur, they can be expressed in a calm and thoughtful manner. Through sensitive, empathetic awareness of one another's beliefs, thoughts, and feelings in response to life through art, people can provide knowledge of the complexities of the world and of one another, and contribute to peaceful harmony.

## NOTES

1. A documentary video of *Ventilator* installed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City is available on-line: Olafur Eliasson's Ventilator MoMA 1. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAPDXxdmh0Q>, retrieved on October 29, 2013.
2. At the time of this writing, November 4, 2013, the Walker Art Center offered an informative essay, reproductions, and podcasts about this exhibition at <http://www.walkerart.org/calendar/2007/kara-walker-my-complement-my-enemy-my-oppress>.
3. For a fuller account of interpreting art with the ill and the elderly, see Rancour and Barrett (2011).

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