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Aesthetic Encounters: Contributions to Generalist Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article describes the learning experiences of three pre-service teachers within a university-level course entitled “Aesthetics and Art Criticism for the Classroom.” Discussion is focused on the nature of the meaning-making that emerges from aesthetic encounters and its educational value. Specifically, what can pre-service generalist teachers learn from aesthetic encounters that they may ultimately apply in their own classrooms? For evidence of emergent meaning-making I rely on examination of what I call *aesthetigrams*. These are essentially maps of one’s encounter with an artwork. They provide a basis for reflection on the encounter, for the student and for myself as the instructor, as well as insights into the nature of aesthetic learning.



Mediation

Artist: Gerhard Richter, 1986
320cm x 400 cm, oil on canvas

This paper outlines a largely documentary account of three pre-service teachers' experiences within a university-level course entitled *Aesthetics and Art Criticism for the Classroom*. I am interested in the question of what it is that we learn in encounters with art. While a form of assessment of learning is implied in the question, I am not addressing the assigning of marks (a topic for another paper). Rather, I limit this discussion to the nature of the meaning-making that emerges from aesthetic encounters and its educational

value. That is, what can pre-service generalist¹ teachers learn from aesthetic encounters that they may ultimately apply in their own classrooms? For evidence of emergent meaning-making I rely on examination of what I call aesthetigrams. These are essentially maps of one's encounter with an artwork. They provide a basis for reflection on the encounter, for the student and for myself as the instructor, as well as insights into the nature of aesthetic learning.

Context

In art education today we expect the discipline to include more than studio work. Meaning making in relation to art can be approached from a number of directions, among them, aesthetics and art criticism. For some years now I have taught the above-mentioned course as an elective within the Faculty of Education at McGill University, in Quebec. Thus, most, but not all, of the participants in the course are pre-service elementary generalist teachers. They are not art specialists. Typically, students take the course because they expect to have to teach art, along with most other subjects in the elementary curriculum, there being virtually no art specialists at the elementary level in Quebec's English public schools. They may or may not have taken a studio course or two, but invariably students admit to having had few encounters with art. Thus they worry about the dearth of insights and activities beyond simple studio exercises that they have to offer to their future pupils. The course is intended to address that worry, to build confidence in their abilities to interact with artworks and, on the basis of their awareness of how such interactions unfolded for them, extend that confidence into their own classrooms — to guide their own pupils' searches toward meaning. I emphasize to my students that I am not teaching a "methods" class on how to teach art in the classroom. Inevitably I do introduce ideas that my students might adapt to their own classrooms, but my emphasis is on their own learning, as adults in a university-level course. In the process, of course, I hope to influence their future teaching. Students from the Faculties of music, arts, sciences and social work have also joined the class. As well, pre-service specialists in areas such as physical education and second languages often sign up for the course. Their inclusion helps to broaden perspectives and dialogue beyond the usual concerns of pre-service generalists; and many of the ideas that I bring to the class should be transferable to other areas of the curriculum.

It is also worth noting that the university attracts students from all over the world. Thus, while the majority of our students are white and middle class, there is a notable representation of other ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds within the average class.

¹ The term "generalist" is used in Quebec to define elementary school teachers who teach across the curriculum, as opposed to being specialists in, for example, language instruction or physical education.

However, as is typical in Education classes, females far outnumber the males. In the most recent class of twenty-seven students, three were male.

It is a 400-level (i.e. third-year) course, so I expect substantial work from the students, although there are no pre-requisites. My assumption is that few students will have had any background in the study of aesthetics or art criticism. In fact, while the occasional student has come having studied some art history, virtually all students initially express concern about not having sufficient background for the course. I assure them that their life experience is a sufficient starting point. Despite somewhat varied educational and cultural backgrounds, the students find that the course offers a pretty level playing field in terms of challenges.

I usually teach the course in the spring, as an intensive course. Thus, students are encouraged to devote their energies to this one single course without competing demands from other ones. Typically, we meet twice a week, five hours per day, for a month. The gap between classes provides reading and reflection time. Class size is usually about twenty-five students. I draw the limit at thirty in order to make class discussions, museum visits, and interactions between students and myself manageable. For example, on days between classes I spend considerable time responding via email to individuals' questions, concerns, and assignments. There are extensive readings required², journal responses, class discussions based on the readings and related activities, and numerous excursions to local museums and galleries. I like to include the occasional studio activity to reinforce or introduce gallery shows, but I keep techniques to a minimum. This is not a studio course.

² The following is a typical, but not exhaustive, list of readings:

- Anderson, T. (1993) Defining and structuring art criticism for education. *Studies in Art Education*. 34, (4), 199 – 208.
- Feinstein, H. (1989) The art response guide: How to read art for meaning, a primer for art criticism. *Art Education*. 42, (3), 43 – 53.
- Feldman, E. (1987) *Varieties of visual experience*. 3rd ed. Chapter 16, pp. 471 – 494. New York: Abrams.
- Goodman, Nelson (1994) When is art? In *Art and its significance*. 3rd ed. (Steven David Ross (Ed.) Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press. pp. 238 – 252.
- Greene, M. (1978) Imagination and aesthetic literacy. In *Landscapes of learning*. London & New York: teachers College press. Chapter 13, pp. 185 – 197.
- Jones, R.L. Jr. (1979) Phenomenological balance and aesthetic response. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 13, (1), 93 – 106.
- Lankford, Louis (1984) A phenomenological methodology for art criticism. *Studies in Art education*, 25, (3), 151 – 158.
- Swanger, David (1990). Action on behalf of the arts. In *Essays in aesthetic education*. San Francisco, Ca.: EMText. Chapter 5, pp. 69 – 86.
- White, B. (2000) *Aesthetic encounter components*. Instructor's notes. Pp. 1 – 21.
- White, B. (1998) Aesthetigrams: Mapping aesthetic experiences. *Studies in Art Education*. 39, (40), 321 – 335.
- White, B. (2003) Museum visit guidelines. Instructor's notes. 1 page.
- White, B. & Tompkins, S. (2005) Doing aesthetics: using aesthetigrams to facilitate meaning making. *Arts & Learning Research Journal*, 21, (1), 1 – 36.

Written assignments are intended to be cumulative, with later ones building on earlier ones, with particular attention being paid to awareness of evolution in perceptions. Reference to daily journals provides memory prods.

Perspectives

There may be any number of reasons why one should study art. My reason for teaching aesthetics and art criticism is that they address directly questions of human values. That is, if criticism may be said to be a critique not only of art but, more broadly, of the human condition, then aesthetic encounters bring to initial awareness the values — personal, cultural and societal — prompted by the encounter. For me, then, art education, particularly aesthetic education, is about education in values awareness. Further, I borrow from Swanger (1990) the idea that the epistemology of aesthetic education is empathy. That is, the empathic experiencing of artworks leads us in the direction of values — our own, those of the artist and those represented in her/his artwork. Inevitably, contextual examination also leads us to awareness of cultural values, our own and others. In the increasingly complex and globalized world in which we find ourselves, discussion of human values should surely form an essential part of the school curriculum; and art education, particularly aesthetic education, can play a central role in that examination.

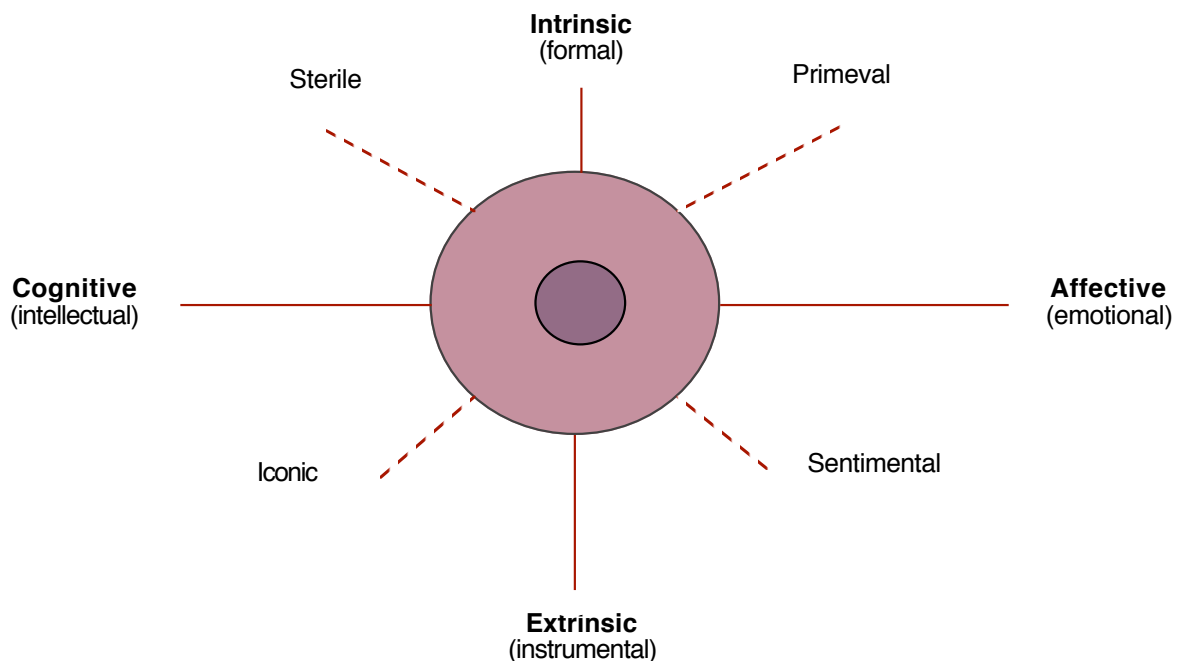
To put it another way, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argues that art

...helps us to construct meanings – not in the abstract sense of producing cognitive interpretations, but by producing personally relevant goals, responses, habits, and values... It gives us an experience that can serve as a benchmark against which the rest of our life can be ordered... a set of priorities for investing our attention, and gives examples of what living for its own sake feels like. (p. 35)

Csikszentmihalyi then argues that aesthetic experiences have at least four dimensions. These include the sensory, the emotional, the cognitive and the transcendent (i.e. the feeling that some kind of personal growth has taken place). He cites a number of his own studies (1992, 1993) that indicate subjects' reports of increased happiness, self-esteem and so forth subsequent to or in conjunction with aesthetic experiences. He concludes by suggesting "... it should not be too difficult to measure children's abilities to sense, feel, and construct meanings" (p.38) Csikszentmihalyi also suggests that we should be able to assess more long-term results, for example, the degree to which aesthetic experiences change a person's life style, increase interest in everyday life, increase empathy and intensity of emotional response, find more meaning in life.

An older study by Jones (1979) makes an interesting parallel to that of Csikszentmihalyi. Jones too suggests four dimensions of aesthetic experience (*Figure 1*), two pairs, or experiential poles, that intersect like the cross hairs on a gun sight: cognitive/affective, and intrinsic/extrinsic. Where Csikszentmihalyi suggests transcendence as the ideal goal, Jones argues for a balance between his four dimensions and a centering of the experience. That is, a move from the periphery of a pole towards the center where the lines meet. Arguably, that centering might be comparable to Csikszentmihalyi's transcendental stage.

*Figure 1: Jones' Model*³



³ Jones's dimensions: The diagram is fairly self-explanatory. For example, the intrinsic pole suggests a formalist stance; the extrinsic pole, an instrumentalist, or use-value one. The cognitive pole suggests a purely intellectual stance; the affective pole, an emotional one. The diagonals in the diagram suggest combinations of the vertical and horizontal poles. For example, the sentimental pole combines affect and instrumentality, such as an emersion in nostalgia for its own sake. The poles that my students have found the most puzzling are the primeval and its opposite, the iconic. The primeval is similar to the sentimental except that, as Jones notes, "the focus is on the emotional rather than the extrinsic" (p.101). If a student were to dwell on an interpretation of a portrait as representing her father, with all the familial baggage, for example, that would be a primeval response. An iconic one, by comparison, would be an interpretation of all male portraits as symbols for father figures. The tendency to see imagery as symbolic is the issue here.

It is probable that the long-term goals to which Csikszentmihalyi refers are the real reasons that most of us become devotees of art. But such goals are beyond the scope of this paper. It is not a longitudinal study.

Within the constraints of a single course I can, however, look for immediate evidence of student steps toward the criteria suggested by Jones and Csikszentmihalyi, in conjunction with their attempts to find and articulate meanings in relation to encounters with art. At the same time, I have reservations about Csikszentmihalyi's concerns for measurement of criteria such as feelings if, by measurement, he means the assigning of marks. That is, while I am in favour of drawing attention to the potential contributions of feelings within an encounter, and I want to be able to document such moments, I am not convinced we should assign a mark to something that is fundamentally non-volitional. The idea seems fraught with problems, not the least of which is an ethical one. Is it right to assign a mark to an affective response, regardless of the nature of that response? Then too, how would I know that a particular image has incited a degree of feeling beyond which a student has gone before? What if the student has already had a comparable experience and the felt response is just right for that student? In any case, how would I know? So, in this case, I am more interested in encouraging personal insight than I am in a quest for standards.

In what follows the reader will see echoes of Csikszentmihalyi's four "dimensions", although I have not included his writings in the course readings. I do, however, include Jones's article in the readings and, after an initial recording of their individual moments of experience, I encourage students to assign their moments to the appropriate quadrants as suggested by Jones. This intermediate step provides students with concrete evidence as to whether their encounters correspond to Jones's definition of a full aesthetic experience. They can then decide whether they need to change or add perspectives or emphases in subsequent encounters.

Methods and Data

As noted above, my inquiry method entails the use of student-designed experiential maps of their individual encounters with artworks (White, 1998; 2005). I have also used aesthetigrams for a self study of one of my own encounters (2007). I call the maps, or diagrams, "aesthetigrams". Aesthetigram is a term I coined in the mid-1990s (White, 1998). As the term suggests, it combines the words "aesthetics" and "diagram". Aesthetigrams are phenomenologically grounded visual representations of experiences-as-experienced. No two are precisely alike and there is no standard layout. I do, however, make a few suggestions. As the reader will see in the examples that follow, each circle or oval represents a single experiential moment. Normally, the ovals vary in size according to the degree of consciousness of the moment. That is, a dominant moment

is large; the smallest circles or ovals represent moments that barely register on the periphery of consciousness; and then there are those in between. (This is not necessarily the case in the first example.) The arrows suggest the direction of influence of one moment upon others. I also recommend to my students that they number the sequence of the moments. Students sometimes forget to do this, and as the reader will see, this makes it more difficult to analyze the encounter. That is, it is difficult to tell where the encounter begins and ends. Even without the sequencing, however, it is possible to get a sense of the range of experiences within an encounter. That range is broken down into categories of experience, denoted by the bold-type headings within the ovals. (Please see the list of Possible Experiential Moments, and the categories into which they are divided, in the End Notes¹.) Students begin the process by writing down brief notes on the individual moments of their encounter as they become aware of them. They then slot their commentary into various categories of “possible experiential moments”. Moments might be intellectually, sensuously or affectively oriented, and so forth. So, for example, focus on a particular colour would be categorized as a “perception” moment; a comment about the quality of a work would be a judgement; awareness of how the work makes one feel would be categorized as a “feeling” moment; and so on. The students and I have developed fifteen categories and over fifty sub-categories over the years. No one ever uses all the categories in any one encounter. During the most recent session I suggested to the class that it would be helpful to colour-code their moments in order to readily differentiate the categories used. The examples I have chosen follow that routine.

The aesthetigrams reproduced here are copies of those submitted as part of the course requirements. The commentary that I quote comes from written submissions that accompany the aesthetigrams, or occasionally, from journal entries that also form part of the course work.

Elsewhere I have written about various students’ responses to different works (1998) or one student’s multiple responses to a single work (2005). In what follows, I describe the efforts of three students to record their experiences with the same artwork. As it happens, all three were white, middle class English-first language⁴ females enrolled in the elementary generalist program. I chose these students, not because they were the best in the class; they were fairly typical. But their mutual choice provided an opportunity to

⁴ While McGill is one of two English language universities in Montreal, approximately 25% of the student body is francophone. As well, McGill University attracts a substantial number of foreign students for whom English is not the first language. Then too there is a sizeable immigrant population in Montreal whose children opt to attend McGill. For this group too English is often not the first language. So while courses are given in English the level of student proficiency in the language is variable. For the three students described in this study, English is their first language, but as the study demonstrates, their vocabularies are not particularly strong.

compare responses — how their responses converge and diverge from one another's as they strive toward meaning.

It is perhaps worth mentioning how the students arrived at their mutual choice. Because most students were unfamiliar with the local museum I wanted their first visit to provide an overview of the kinds of art with which they might potentially interact within this one institution. But I didn't want the visit to result in aimless wandering from gallery to gallery. So I provided the class with a list of artworks, two and three dimensional, according to a number of themes.⁵ The students were to choose one of the themes, and from within that theme, one work on which to concentrate. Each theme had approximately six works listed within that category, so students could see a range of interpretations. Wherever possible I attempted to represent a given theme with works from different periods and cultures. Some works also fit into more than one category. In the case of the three students in this study, their chosen theme was "absence of narrative". (Another theme was "narrative", so absence seemed a reasonable alternative). It is not clear from their writings why these three students chose the work they did except that they were impressed by its size. What became abundantly clear very quickly was that all three were unfamiliar with paintings of this nature.

Below, I introduce an abbreviated version of the second aesthetigram that one of my students, whom I will call Mary, produced (*Figure 2*). It will be sufficient to demonstrate the nature of aesthetigrams. (I am unable to provide her initial aesthetigram due to a loss of some files.)

⁵ Alberto Manguel's (2002) text, *Reading pictures*, provided the initial impetus for the choosing of themes. I borrowed freely from his chapter headings and substituted some of his themes for others that I thought might make the available works at the museum more accessible. The themes I gave to the class were: Image as — story/narrative; absence (of story); riddle; theatre; violence; memory; subversion; philosophy/time; reflection (as in a mirror or as in being thoughtful; Greek mythology; loss and desire; romance/sensuality).

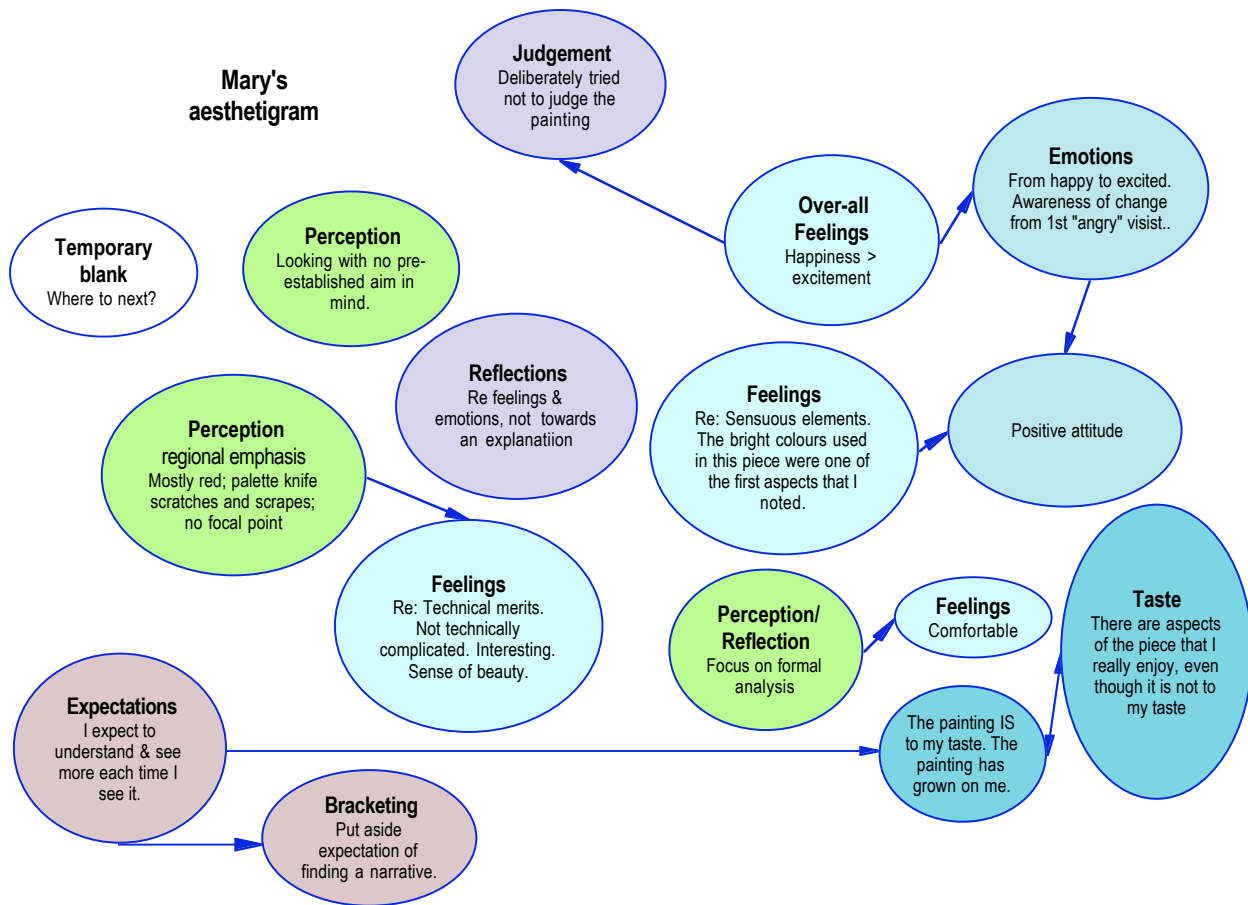


Figure 2. Mary's Aesthetigram

Results and Commentary

In her final report Mary discusses how much impact the work had on her. She states, "This was the first time that I set my eyes on the painting that would change the way I look at art forever". This sounds like the transcendent state of which Csikszentmihalyi speaks. We can see further evidence of the evolution Mary's response to the work cited in a number of the ovals. In "Emotion", for example, she notes that the piece initially made her angry (because she couldn't make sense of it). On subsequent visits the anger turned to a feeling of happiness and an appreciation for a singular type of what she considers to be beauty. In another oval, "Over-all Feelings", Mary cites a move from happiness to excitement. Similarly, in the "Taste" oval, she comments on how she enjoyed the work even though it was not according to her accustomed taste. Interestingly, in the small circle immediately to the left of the large oval in which Mary discusses taste, she decides that the painting is to her taste after all. This decision is in spite of the moment entitled "Judgement", where she declares her attempt to abstain from judgement. Since Mary didn't sequence her moments it is impossible to be sure which came first, the judgement

or the taste moment. My guess is that the attempt at abstention from judgement preceded the other and was not, of course, entirely successful. The attempt would, however, be consistent with discussions in class about the advisability of postponing judgements. What the reference to taste also indicates is Mary's awareness of herself in relation to the work.

At this point it may be helpful to explain how Mary got to this stage in her responses. For example, commenting on her initial encounter with the work, Mary has this to say: "Along with a few classmates I sat down and began to try and analyze and interpret the piece. It took only a few minutes for me to come to one conclusion: I absolutely hated it!" Mary then explains the reasons for her strong reaction. These included the fact that she didn't know the meaning of the word "mediation", which is the title of the work; there was no discernible focal point, nor were there recognizable shapes. Her peers' comments, such as "This is not art", also influenced her mood, which she summed up as "angry".

To her credit, Mary realized that she had not been very open minded during her initial visit and so decided, after checking an online dictionary definition of the word 'mediation', that she would try again. She notes, "mediation is a type of intervention in which the disputing parties accept the offer of a third party to recommend a solution to their controversy". Mary's visit to the dictionary provides a whole other perspective. Now, for the first time, she sees that the painting is a diptych, that is, two canvases side by side, and that the separate canvases create a line down the middle, "to mediate the chaos of the painting". The line provides a focal point and a certain comfort level. About her second visit Mary comments, "It seemed as if during my first viewing of the painting I was looking at it through a dirty window. After revisiting 'Mediation' it seemed as though I was finally standing in front of it with a clear view." Mary goes on to explain that, where initially she had seen only "wild colours and a mish mash of paint not visually appealing", this time around she appreciates how the painting's lines, bright colours and texture do achieve a unity of sorts.

These comments suggest an evolution in Mary's thinking about art, perhaps surprising, considering her background. Mary notes in her final assignment that she had attended an arts-focused high school and had concentrated on visual art. As a result, Mary felt confident about her art skills and background in art history upon registering for this course. It was certainly not my purpose to shake that confidence, but I did want people to question their assumptions about art. Mary's commentary indicates that she did so and that she found the exercise ultimately rewarding. In terms of Jones's model, Mary demonstrates a fairly even distribution of moments over the four quadrants and thus, ultimately, a reasonably full aesthetic experience.

Let us now compare Mary’s encounters with those of Sally (*Figure 3*). Sally comments that our course provided her with her very first visit to a museum and that she had never tried to analyze art before. So perhaps it is not surprising that Sally is one of those whom Mary overheard pronouncing that the Richter painting was “not art”, and, “What was it doing in a museum?” Despite this initial response Sally decided to return to the Richter painting after touring other paintings in the museum even though, or perhaps because, she didn’t “get it”. She felt compelled to return to it. Below is a copy of her first aesthetigram. The uniform colour across the whole aesthetigram (my inclusion) indicates the singular focus of Sally’s encounter; that is, she has restricted herself to addressing the elements of design. Unlike Mary, Sally has used letters to indicate the sequence of her moments, and numbers to suggest the relative impact. The numbers also correspond to the size of the circles. The numbers are an unnecessary step, as the circles provide a visual recording of the impact; but here Sally follows the directives I laid out in an earlier publication that I had provided as part of the course readings. I’m learning to simplify.

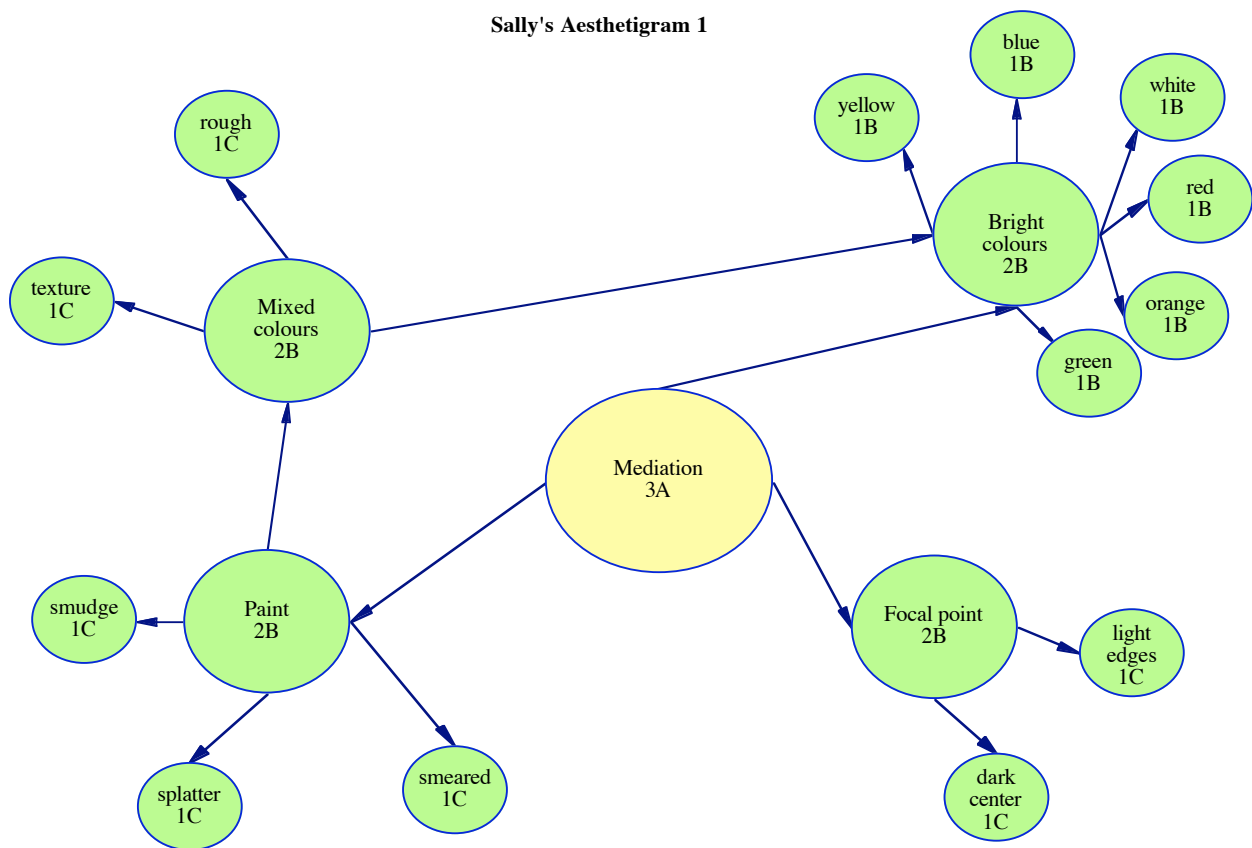


Figure 3. Sally’s Aesthetigram 1

Discussion

Although her most dominant moment (3A) is recorded, she doesn't state what the moment consisted of. My question for her was, "How would you classify it? E.g. Shock? Puzzlement?" What is apparent is that Sally restricted her attention largely to the quality of the paint, with virtually no attempt to interpret the work. Unlike Mary's initial viewing, however, Sally does discern a focal point. She notes, " I realized that the way the colours are arranged creates a focal point in the middle of the canvas ... the edges of the painting are lighter than the center. But this was as far as Sally could go without some help. So she turned to the Internet to see what she could find. In addition to some historical background on the painter, Sally gained an insight that seemed to give her permission to be puzzled. She says, "Richter does not give out much information with his paintings ... Richter likes his audiences to guess what they think the painting is about ..." On the basis of that implied permission, Sally returned for a second visit to the painting. Below is her second aesthetigram (*Figure 4*).

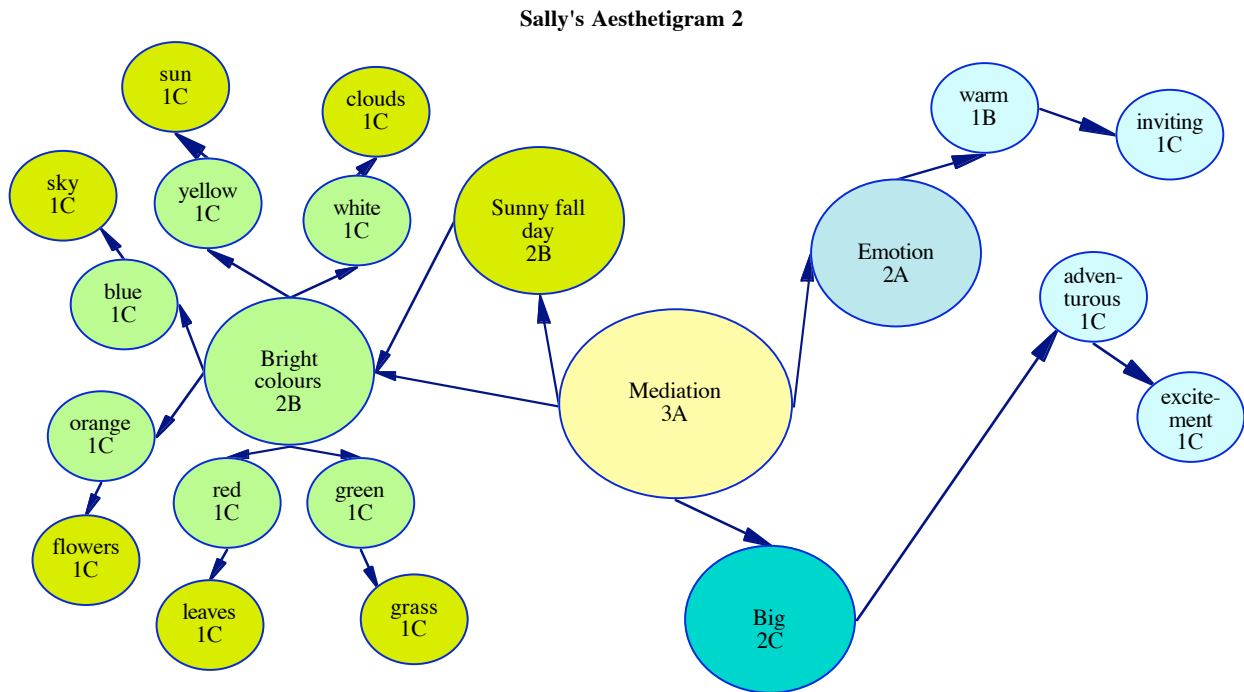


Figure 4. Sally's Aesthetigram 2

It is clear from Sally's second aesthetigram that she is still focusing on the colours, but now is inclined to interpret them in terms of the natural world. Sally also acknowledges a positive emotional response. Her "Big 2C" moment is somewhere in between. That is, it is a focus on a physical attribute of the work, akin to her attention to colours. But it is also freighted with affect; that is, the size excites her. She still hasn't defined her large 3A moment. When I asked about that, she said that it represented the gestalt of the whole experience.

What is a little surprising is that Sally has used the title of the painting to represent that gestalt, and yet she has not addressed the significance of the title in its potential to add meaning to the encounter. She notes, "I was trying to figure out what the painting could mean according to the title. When I couldn't come up with anything I just decided to let my imagination run wild ... The painting is so big that it led me to feel adventurous ...". What qualifies as adventurous for one person isn't necessarily so for another. In Sally's case, adventure consists of the interpretation of colours. Each such interpretation could be a 'seeing as' moment. i.e. The category of 'seeing as' denotes a willingness/predilection to translate the visual entity into something else.

It is not clear from Sally's commentary whether she knew the definition of the term 'mediation'. I suspect she did not because there is no mention of conflict or resolution in her commentary. In fact, Sally notes that she finds the painting to represent happiness, due to the bright colours and the autumn associations she makes with them. For Sally, this is a big step from her initial response, albeit one that does not take her as far as Mary's efforts did. In terms of Jones's model, Sally's responses are restricted largely to the quadrant bounded by the formal and emotional lines of the cross hairs. In terms of cognitive contribution to the encounter, even Sally's foray into biographical data on the artist does not result in analytic insights. On the contrary, the information seems to give her permission to engage her sentiment, for example, for a "sunny fall day". To find the balance that Jones recommends, Sally would have to find a strategy to more fully engage the cognitive component.

Let us turn now to the responses of a third student, Julie. Like her two classmates, Julie didn't like the painting either upon first encountering it. Words she used to describe her response are: overwhelming, uncertainty, confused, stressed. She sums up her first visit by saying, "... it was just too unfamiliar to me". Below is her aesthetigram of that first encounter (*Figure 5*). Unlike her classmates, Julie has made little attempt to equate the size of her moments to their relative impact. Rather, the size is dictated largely by the amount of commentary, and we are unable to tell the sequence of moments. As we can see, the moments consist of three main categories.

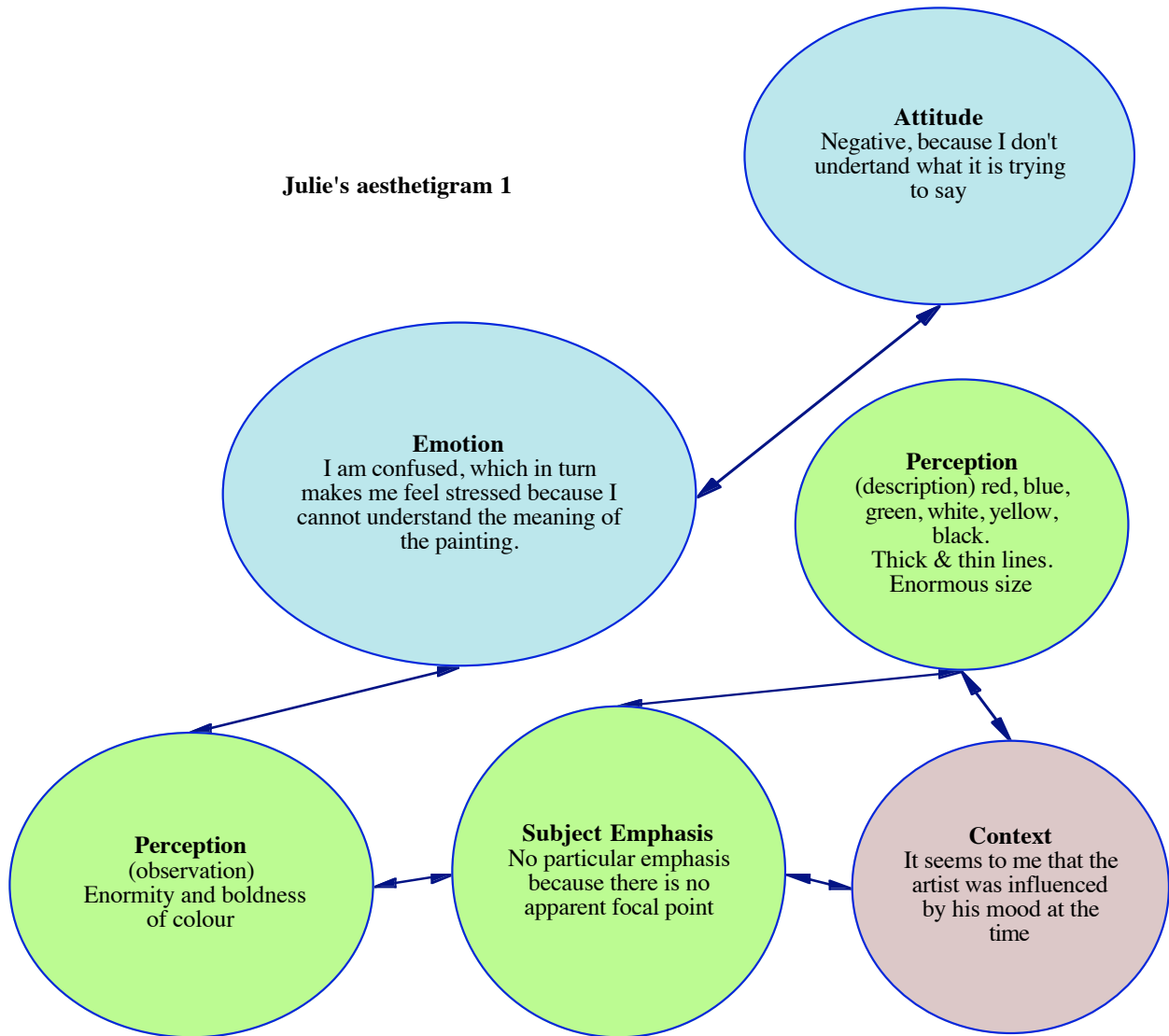


Figure 5. Julie's Aesthetigram 1

Like Sally, Julie notes the bright colours, particularly the red, which, to her suggests anger. However, Julie admits that someone else might find the red's brightness to suggest cheerfulness. Although I recommend that students start their encounters by silently looking and paying attention to their responses, I also encourage them to share their responses after a while. Since Sally and Julie were seated side by side it is likely that they exchanged viewpoints and that Julie's acknowledgement of a possible alternative response was an outcome of that exchange. Mary, on the other hand, had moved elsewhere so as to not be distracted by their initial denunciation of the painting as being "not art".

Like Mary, Julie decided to look up a definition of the term, mediation. (I continue to be amazed at the paucity of university-level vocabulary). This helped considerably. Julie notes, “I realized it was up to me to decide what I think the ‘conflicting parties’ are in terms of this painting”. She continues, “At this point, I was able to look at it in a new light. I decided that although I still didn’t love the painting, I did, in fact, think it was beautiful”. It is interesting that Julie was able to see beauty in the work while somehow not being attracted to it. Julie alludes to this separation in a further comment about being confused, but justifying her confusion. She says, “I came to the realization that that’s what I think the artist’s intention was” (to depict confusion or conflict). Julie comments that the colours and lines in the painting “gave me the feeling of an argument that was trying to be resolved”. She then proceeds to discuss how those elements conflict with one another. In the conclusion to her paper Julie repeats the fact that learning the meaning of the title enabled her to come to grips with the painting. “I was able to notice aspects that I hadn’t noticed in my previous visit, such as the arguments that were occurring between the colours and lines.

Julie’s emphasis on the relations between the colours and lines, and the significance of those relations in light of the title, is apparent in her next aesthetigram (*Figure 6*). The overlap of the perception and emotion moments is meant to indicate that these moments took place simultaneously and influenced each other. Also of note is her repeated reference to context, her assumption that the painting is the result of a mood that Richter was in at the time of painting.

When we apply Jones’s model to Julie’s final aesthetigram we see that Julie’s experience lies somewhere between that of Mary and Sally. First, her encounter does not contain as many individual moments as Mary’s does. It does, however, extend beyond the quantifying of elements and their nature-oriented, ‘seeing as’ associations that we see in Sally’s work.

Summary and Comparison of Three Students

The first thing that aesthetigrams makes clear is that person’s experience is uniquely her own. That being said, the three students discussed here did share some experiences in common. This is likely to happen where people share reasonably similar educational and cultural backgrounds, as these three students did. Thus, all three began by denigrating the painting and then gradually warming to it. Also, all three realized they needed some help with the context. Only two, Mary and Julie, took the obvious first step of checking the dictionary. What Sally found out about the artist seemed to give her license to free-associate. This activity did not result in a conclusive meaning of the work to Sally,

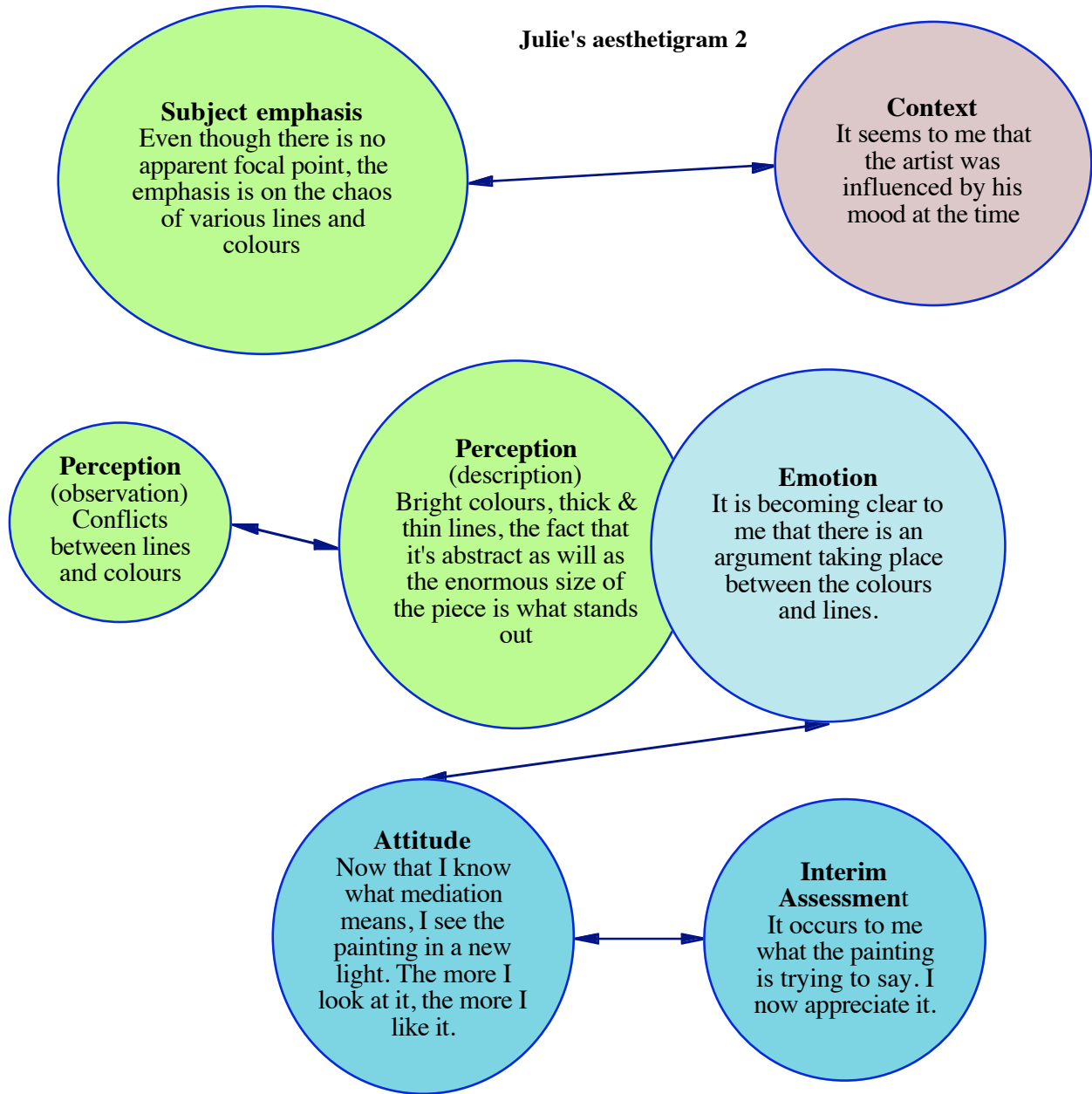


Figure 6. Julie's Aesthetigram 2

although she apparently enjoyed her own inventiveness. Mary and Julie did not indulge in “seeing as” activities at all. Rather, they treated the painting as a mystery to be solved. Their exercise became one of searching for clues. Interestingly, Mary does state that she gave up the search for a narrative. In this regard, she is like Sally who also doesn't expect to find connecting threads. Unlike Sally, Mary expects to see and understand more with each new encounter. Sally is content within her own invented world of nature. Julie, on

the other hand, says that she sees an argument going on. We might interpret that statement as an attempt at narrative. Mary's aesthetigram contains the most, and most varied, moments. Her subsequent discussion is correspondingly richer than that of her two classmates, although Julie comes to similar conclusions about the work.

Educational Significance

Empathy and Other Values

At the beginning of this paper I made a plea for art education as a vehicle for education in empathy and values awareness. I would now like to return to that concern. To begin, a quotation may help establish the parameters of the discussion. Frondizi (1971) states:

In brief, value is a Gestalt quality, the synthesis of objective and subjective contribution, and which exists and has meaning only in concrete human situations. It has a double connection with reality since the value structure springs from empirical qualities, and the object in which it is embodied is part of the reality we live in. But, on the other hand, values cannot be reduced to the empirical qualities that support them, nor to the value objects in which they are embodied. The possibility of new value objects is always open. (p. 169)

When I introduce the topic of values in my classes, students tend to think in rather limited terms, such as goodness or honesty. As Frondizi's explanation makes clear, values cover considerably more territory. Any focused interaction with our world involves our values. They arise spontaneously in response to the situation; and our grasp of the situation is the gestalt of which Frondizi speaks. In a related passage Frondizi uses the examples of a melody and an Ikebana flower arrangement to explain how we strive towards a meaning to the whole of the music, not just the individual notes, or the whole of the flower arrangement and the inter-relatedness of its components, not just the individual flowers. A gestalt is more than the sum of its parts; and it involves an awareness of one's subjective input in conjunction with an awareness of the object of attention, the value carrier.

With these considerations in mind, let us now return to my students. I will choose just one to make my case. Mary provides a convenient example.

The gestalt quality is evident in Mary's initial response to *Mediation*. She was aware of the painting and of her interaction with it. But anger was not the value. Feelings are not values. Anger was merely the emotional result, the symptom of an underlying value that dictated what she defined as art. That value, of course, was the result of her previously

accumulated experiences of art, and *Mediation* didn't fit. The lack of fit was Mary's value judgement and, simultaneously, her gestalt.

To her credit, Mary did not let the matter rest there. Mary's comment about Richtler's painting changing the way she looks at art shows a self-awareness that emerged as a result of her interactions with the work. As her aesthetigram clearly indicates, Mary did reflect on her changing responses. In doing so, she learned something about herself — her capacity to be flexible in her thinking and attitudes, for example. Flexibility is a value, and like all values, it can be either nurtured or discouraged once one is aware of it. When she began the course Mary was not aware of the narrowness of her definition of art. And in her initial agreement with her classmates that what she was looking at was not art, we could say that she was inflexible. If she had maintained that inflexibility, further encounters would have been unrewarding; she would have remained angry and alienated. Instead, Mary made a determined effort to be open-minded and to persevere.

The necessity for an open-minded attitude was something of an ongoing sermon to which I subjected the class. Again, open-mindedness is a value, one that I believe the class adopted most, if not all, of the time. I am not in a position to know whether Mary was temperamentally inclined towards open-mindedness and flexibility, or not. But what is important is that Mary became aware of her adoption of these values. Her commentary indicates that she did. Encounters with art don't necessarily change values, but I maintain that they can bring them to the forefront of consciousness. That consciousness provides the potential for increased understanding — of oneself in relation to the topic that triggers the awareness. Further, I suggest that once a value is in play it is not confined to, in this case, consideration of artworks. It is likely to operate outside that realm as well. As the quotation above suggests, "the possibility of new value objects is always open". This possibility brings me to the topic of mediation and the place of empathy within education.

In our course, class discussions always followed museum visits. Ultimately, the topic of mediation arose. Quebec has the dubious distinction of being the strike capital of Canada, including teacher strikes. Most of the time these strikes have required the services of a mediator to settle the dispute. Because of three students' interactions with *Mediation* the class as a whole has a better appreciation of the role of a mediator and the turmoil within which a mediator works. That appreciation arose out of the three students' capacities, particularly Mary's and Julie's, to empathize with the painting and the goals of the artist. Empathy with the work allowed them to experience mediation in a visceral, albeit metaphorical, sense, to the extent that they understood the meaning of the term. And as a result of those initial empathic efforts the whole class learned something about the society of which they are members.

If open-mindedness is key to initial considerations of artworks, particularly unfamiliar works, it is empathy that propels the open-mindedness along pathways that converge with the artist's intent. Just as one must make an effort to be open-minded, so too does empathic behavior require a similar mental focus. Open-mindedness without empathy is unlikely to result in real insights. This became obvious to my students fairly quickly. If they attempted a quick survey of a gallery, no real dialogue between themselves and the works took place. Empathy requires, in part, a singularly undivided attention.

The lesson from Sally, of course, is that to be fully empathic one must use all the information available. Despite her willingness to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the work, and her dutiful attention to details within it, Sally missed an important piece of the context. This, despite her best intentions, led her to a kind of circling around the topic without arriving at a substantial meaning. Fully empathic learning is a reliving of another's experience. As such, it can be a powerful educational experience. The cautionary note is that such learning must fully embrace the content; that content includes context.

Conclusions

In this short overview I have tried to show how the aesthetigram provides issues for further reflection, as a self-learning tool for the student and as a guide for me as the teacher. If we had had time, it is apparent that there are questions that I could have raised that might further extend the students' understandings. I would, for example, have liked to explore further the relation between affect, cognition, and values awareness that the work of all three students indicated. Since the title of the work is *Mediation*, for example, to what extent do they see themselves as potential mediators in their future classrooms? Nonetheless, it should be evident how far each has come in understanding and embracing a difficult artwork. Their experiences seem to corroborate Young's (2001) contention that the kind of knowledge that encounters with art engender is singular in nature. That is, each dialogue between artworks and ourselves has the potential to provide an understanding of a particular situation, one in which we learn as much about ourselves and our relation to the world (our values) as about the work. Such understanding is not bounded by general theory (as in the sciences) but is unique and pertains to the moment. In a similar vein Silvey (2003/2004) discusses musical knowledge acquired through "direct perception of a specific entity" (p.111). And Carroll (2002) argues for acknowledgement of the learning that takes place during such direct perceptions. Such learning, he insists, is not reliant upon new information. Rather, it is learning that makes connections between the current perception and previous experiences, encapsulates them, and helps us to build upon and clarify the meanings of the combined experiences. So while it may be argued that the dictionary definition of mediation was new information,

the definition provided the students with a context with which they did have some familiarity. Subsequent “direct perception” provided an enhancement of that familiarity through a singular act of clarification. That clarification is learning.

In Mary’s case, direct perception was supported by more extensive studio and art history background than the other two students had. Arguably, this background enabled her to accommodate Richtler’s work more easily, to arrive at a fuller interpretation than her peers did, although, as we have seen, not without some struggle.

Despite her lack of art background Julie managed to arrive at a similar meaning for the painting. Again, the dictionary played an obvious role. This suggests that, while careful looking is important, so too is the ability to bring other resources into play, in this case, linguistic context. That is, while Csiksenmihalyi downplays cognitive interpretations in the construction of aesthetic meaning, there are obviously occasions where these are important. Much postmodern work would seem to demand this component.

Sally’s aesthetigrams show her experiences being limited to an itemizing of colours, and associations to those colours based on nature. She ignores the possibilities for extended meaning that attention to the title would have provided her. Obviously I need to make sure my students take full advantage of the information offered to them as well as to make sure they understand that information.

On the topic of context, Julie’s insistence that the painting is the result of the artist’s mood indicates an assumption about art, that it is the result of affective responses to one’s world. Julie’s stance suggests an implied definition of art that she brings to her encounters, that is, that art is essentially the result of an emotional outpouring. It does not occur to Julie that, being a large painting, it is unlikely that the work was done during a single session. If it wasn’t, how likely is it that Richtler’s mood would remain unchanged from one time to the next? In other words, Julie’s comment betrays a romantic notion of how art is conceived and executed. This suggests that I probably ought to have included a problem-solving studio exercise in the course, just to give students a reminder of the intellectual side of the equation. Perhaps too, I could spend some time discussing the intellectual nature of much artistic endeavour, from Renaissance perspectival issues, to Duchamp’s readymades, to Barbara Kruger’s installations.

With these examples I have tried to show the potential for self-teaching that the aesthetigrams provide, as well as points for me as the instructor to address. Some of those points don’t become evident until the end of the course. In that case they serve as a reminder of issues for me to address in subsequent sessions of the course. Ideally, however, I should pick up on these clues as the course evolves. Thus the interim

assignments are as important as the final ones, both for me as the instructor and for the students in their role as self-teachers. I believe the course also provides a model for pre-service teachers that they may eventually adapt to their particular teaching situations.

In our increasingly complex world, issues of empathy and a consideration of values are of primary educational importance. We need to address what it means to be a human being in all our variability, frailties and potential. I argue that aesthetic encounters provide an ideal source of experiences with which to engage these issues. At the same time we must be able to point to significant learning and assess it with reasonable consistency without succumbing to a “standards” mentality. Aesthetigrams may well offer a viable strategy to address these issues.

Endnote

Below is an evolving list of possible experiential moments that I provide in order to help students place their individual response-moments into categories of experience. The idea is to reassure students that, whatever their responses to a given work may be, those responses should be acknowledged. Further, all responses can be fitted into one category or another. Obviously, no one could record all the categories and sub-categories. The vco boxes on the left stand for viewer/context/object. I recommend that students consider how their individual moments are weighted in relation to these three perspectives. This can be done by simply penciling in the appropriate box(es). Like the Jones (1979) model, this exercise prompts the students to work towards a balance of perspectives. The double lines on the extreme left can be used to remind the student of the sequence of experiential moments and their relative impact, i.e. strong, medium or slight.

Perception:

Rating

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---------------|---|-----|---|
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | I | Observation: - a looking without particular aim or emphasis - a detached visual 'tour' of the artwork. |
| v | c | o | | | | |
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | II | Description: - a tendency to itemize or identify features of the work. This may be further subdivided into - |
| v | c | o | | | | |
| | | | Selectivity – | | | |
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | (a) | Regional Emphasis, i.e. based on the phenomenally objective field - number of colours, shapes, specific items, etc. |
| v | c | o | | | | |
| | | | And/Or | | | |
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | (b) | Subjective Emphasis, e.g. personally favourite colour, topic, etc. |
| v | c | o | | | | |
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | III | Generalization of Form - a tendency to synthesize, i.e. to look for that which makes the art seem unified. |
| v | c | o | | | | |
| — — | <table border="1"><tr><td>v</td><td>c</td><td>o</td></tr></table> | v | c | o | IV | Other Considerations? |
| v | c | o | | | | |

Feelings
re :

(You do not need to have a precise word to define your feeling, just a sense that this is where your attention is focused.)

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|--|
| — — | v c o | I Sensuous Elements: i.e. the affective quality of colour, line, balance, pattern - any visible content |
| — — | v c o | II Technical Merits, i.e. how influenced are you by the technical virtuosity, or lack of it? |
| — — | v c o | III Generic Expressive Significance: Here, your assumption is that others will interpret the image as you do, or should do so. |
| — — | v c o | IV Subjective Expressive Significance: Here, you acknowledge an idiosyncratic response for: |
| — — | v c o | (a) a particular colour or topic, etc. |
| — — | v c o | Or
(b) an overall feeling regardless of your inability to pinpoint the cause(s) or to attach a precise label to the feeling. |
| — — | v c o | V Other Considerations? |

Emotion:

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|--|
| — — | v c o | I A sub-category of Feelings , those to which a <u>single precise term</u> may be attached, e.g. happy, sad, embarrassment, anger, etc. |
| — — | v c o | Or
II A sub-category of Feelings to which a <u>combination of terms</u> may be attached, such as attraction <i>and</i> repulsion, anger <i>and</i> admiration, etc. |
| — — | v c o | III Other Considerations? |

Attitude

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|--------------------|
| — — | v c o | I Positive |
| — — | v c o | II Negative |
| — — | v c o | III Indifferent |

Bracketing

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|--|
| — — | v c o | I Awareness of the need to momentarily put aside a particular idea or feeling, in respect to any or all of the three categories (viewer, context, object) in order not to impede further open-minded investigation. |
|-----|-----------|--|

Taste:

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|---|
| — — | v c o | I A general, or habitual, preference for certain types of imagery, topics, styles, |
|-----|-----------|---|

etc. over others.

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II A random preference - can be an arbitrary choice particular to this image.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Other Considerations?

Memory:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I Associations to previous occasions in your life, connected to art, e.g. biography of the artist, anecdotes, schools of painting - not specifically comparative.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II Associations to artworks, actual locations, occasions, etc. - i.e. specifically comparative.
- —

v	c	o
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 III Associations not connected to art, e.g. religious ideologies, political stances, personal reminiscence or recollection.
- —

v	c	o
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 IV Other Considerations?

Daydreams:

- —

v	c	o
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 Not quite memories; more an empathic state of imaginative reverie induced by the encounter, a kind of becoming one with the work.

Seeing As:

- —

v	c	o
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 I An imagining of the object in another colour, shape, location, etc. - essentially a comparative act between what is presented and what could be.

Or
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II An interpretation that goes beyond the surface of the imagery to what it stands for or suggests.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Other Considerations?

Expectations:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I An imagining of the object/event beforehand - essentially a comparative act between what you anticipate and what you have encountered before. I.E. An object-oriented expectation.

Or
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II An anticipation of your response to the object/event. i.e. A self-oriented expectation.
- —

v	c	o
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 III Other Considerations?

Explanation/Inquiry:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I You treat the image like a puzzle or symbol(s) to be decoded or problem to be resolved - essentially a positive reaction.
- —

v	c	o
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 II Your dominant sense is one of puzzlement, lack of access to the "secret" - essentially a negative reaction.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Other Considerations?

Reflection re: i.e. deliberate critical activity, a questioning of:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I The overall affective nature of the work.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II Specific Content
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Formal Quality(ies) - line, balance, pattern, etc.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 IV Technical Merits, i.e. how important are they?
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 V Assumed Generic Meaning
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 VI Personal Meaning/Significance, a private context
And/Or
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 VII - In relation to the artist's society (context)
And/Or
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 VIII - In relation to your own society (context)
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 IX Other considerations?

Knowledge/Content — Intellectual stances:-

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I Does your knowledge of art history, biology, biography, for example, dominate your response?
Or
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 II Does your awareness of a lack of contextual knowledge frustrate your attempts at interaction with the work?
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Other Considerations?

Judgment:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 I Initial, spontaneous response.
- —

v	c	o
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 II Interim assessments - a questioning or verification of initial response, or a change of mind, perhaps a gradual evolution.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 III Tentative closure assessment.

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 IV Adamant closure assessment.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 V Deliberate abstention from judgment.

Additional Moments:

- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 For example, a temporary "blank" or rest.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 A tendency to involve other senses.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 Associations to (seeing as) e.g. "black as hell", "heavenly".
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 Post-encounter reflections.
- —

v	c	o
---	---	---

 Anything else?

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