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Private Perceptions, Public Reflections: Aesthetic Encounters As Vehicles For Shared Meaning Making

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Abstract

This paper begins with a brief discussion of aesthetic theory, especially as it relates to art education. Then, to see how theory may apply to practice, it describes an investigation into the manner in which encounters with artworks unfold, how meanings are constructed and values articulated, based on the study of four volunteers' interactions with two artworks that lend themselves to variable responses, especially in regard to social and cultural issues. The study relies on participant mapping of the individual moments of their encounters and their subsequent reflections on the experience.

Introduction

The research I describe here emerges from continuing reflections on an undergraduate course I have taught for a number of years (White, 2007; White & Tompkins, 1998)[i]. Because few in that course have backgrounds in art, one of my goals is to develop in the students a degree of self-confidence in their capacities to interact with artworks and to reflect on those interactions. That is the practical, or applied, side of the course.

The theoretical side addresses the nature of aesthetics, its relation to art criticism, and implications for education. We examine varying perspectives on these related topics within current art education literature, and the pedagogical implications of the differing emphases. The students then attempt to test theory through attention to their own practice—first, by tracking their own responses to artworks, then, by reflecting and commenting on their experiences. The latter step becomes a form of art criticism, which, in turn, becomes a commentary on aesthetically inspired meaning making. At its best, the writing lends itself to insights into personal, social, and cultural values[ii] that the interactions elicit.

In this paper I provide a brief overview of some aesthetic theory, with its conflicting perspectives, as an introduction to and rationale for the directions I take in my work; then I show one example of a tracked encounter with an artwork, followed by examples of the reflective writings of participants' responses. I conclude with some observations on the process and implications for wider practice.

In a departure from my earlier research, in this study I work with four non-student volunteers. They are older than my usual university-based research subjects, and are people who enjoy and are active participants in one or more areas of the arts. My rationale for looking beyond my usual subject base was to see what possibly different perspectives this group might have to offer on processes of aesthetically inspired meaning making. What educational insights might an informal setting have to offer?

Theoretical Framework

The Place of Aesthetics within Art Education

There is a substantial body of literature that suggests a sustained interest in aesthetic education over the decades, especially since the advent of Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE), at which time aesthetics was designated as one of four sub-disciplines within art education (Broudy, 1987; Eisner, 1988; Smith, 1989; Wilson, 1997). While DBAE has evolved and, some would argue, been supplanted by alternative directions such as visual culture (Duncum, 2001), aesthetics remains a focus in art education (Barrett, 2010, 2004, 2003; Duncum, 2007; Parsons, 2002; Shusterman, 2006). As Shusterman (2006) notes, "…The idea of the aesthetic as a distinctive mode of perception or dimension of experience [is] currently experiencing a

strong revival in aesthetic theory" (p. 240). However, the discourse varies widely and, although an acknowledged part of art education, aesthetics remains a contested and controversial topic (Barrett, 2010; Duncum, 2007; jagodzinski, 1981; Shusterman, 2006; Tavin, 2007). Reasons for the controversy stem from differing views on educational emphasis.

Roger Scruton (*Britannica Online Encyclopedia*) notes that there have been three main approaches to the study of aesthetics. These may be classified under the following headings: (a) aesthetic concepts (b) aesthetic experience (c) aesthetic objects. My interest is best defined by Scruton's description of the second orientation, that is, the study of experiences that people undergo in encounters with particular images. As Scruton argues, "It is, after all, to experience that we must turn if we are to understand the value of the aesthetic realm—our reason for engaging with it, studying it, and adding to it" (p. 2). To date, descriptions of what constitutes aesthetic experience vary considerably.

Perspectives on Aesthetic Experience

Dewey's (1958) (first published in 1934) *Art as experience* still features prominently in contemporary discussions of aesthetics. The key feature of Dewey's "aesthetic experience" is his notion of *an* experience. That is, Dewey differentiates between continuous, daily, practical but frequently inchoate experiences and *an* experience, which is distinguished by its sense of unity and fulfillment. "…It is a consummation and not a cessation" (p.35). And while Dewey does discuss art, he also sees *an* experience as being achievable through eating a meal, playing chess, chatting, or campaigning politically (p. 34). In short, it seems as if any human activity might conceivably provide an aesthetic experience.

A considerable number of writers have expressed reservations about Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience. The *Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy* cites numerous examples of early critics of Dewey's position (Aldrich,1944; Cohen, 1977; Gotshalk,1964; Hofstadter,1965; Mattern, 1999; Mayeroff, 1963; Romanell,1949). Generally, they question whether Dewey's definition really differentiates between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience.

More recently, to address that question, Carroll (2001) discusses four concepts of aesthetic experience. These are, briefly: the traditional—a largely Kantian-inspired account that requires a belief in the notion of disinterested intrinsic pleasure; the pragmatic—a Deweyan-inspired focus on the internal, structural "content" of the experience—e.g. rhythm, or unity—rather than on Kantian "belief;" the allegorical—largely Marxist and utopian in its search for a new world order; and Carroll's own account—the deflationary.

Carroll points to the contributions and limitations of each of the first three as justification for attention to his own. He then boils down (deflates) the contributing features of the first three accounts to two of his own, namely, design appreciation—e.g. shape, colour (i.e. ontological conditions)—and *aesthesis*, which he interprets as "expressive quality"—e.g. elegance (i.e. psychological conditions). Carroll argues that attention to his two foci does not lead to generalization, an accusation he levels at the pragmatic approach. Rather, he acknowledges that there may well be other "art-appropriate" responses, such as moral indignation, that one would not necessarily consider to be aesthetic. That is, Carroll reminds the reader that the aesthetic is not confined to theories of art and therefore not all experiences of art are necessarily aesthetic. Those that are can be delimited to his two foci and can be identified by attention to one or the other, or both.

Like Carroll, Shusterman (2002) relies on just two foci, in his case, surface and depth. The first— surface—is similar to Carroll's design appreciation, except Shusterman emphasizes the immediacy of the experience; Carroll would probably argue that design appreciation might be immediate but could involve duration as well. The two writers part company more distinctly on their second foci, however. Where Carroll's is qualitatively oriented (a focus on elegance, for example), Shusterman's is contextually so. It demands a distancing of oneself from the sensuous immediacy of the image in an effort to arrive at a mediated critical judgement. Thus for Shusterman aesthetically engendered meanings may extend "to underlying cultural traditions, social structures, and economic forces whose constellation and transformations provide the framework that enables the work to be created and understood as having the kind of artistic identity and features we ascribe to it" (p. 2). Such contextual inclusiveness does seem to enlarge the definition of aesthetic experience beyond Carroll's parameters, and be more aligned with Dewey's; but Shusterman goes beyond Dewey too in his political inclusiveness in regard to art.

Johnson (2007) broadens the definition still further: "…Aesthetics becomes the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning" (p. x). If that is the case, then the experiences with artworks that my particiants undergo can all be classified as "aesthetic." At the same time, the distinctions cited by Carroll and Shusterman provide some categories into which the data might be divided. That is, as the data in this paper will show, encounters with art can be quite variable. It remains to be seen how closely those in this study conform to the critieria discussed above.

Art Criticism

I turn now to the topic of art criticism. Shusterman (2003) draws attention to one characteristic of aesthetic experience that, while providing a substantial part of the impact of the occasion, is also an educational challenge. He notes "…The immediacy of aesthetic

experience is in itself mute and evanescent" (p. 406). To compensate for that immediacy Shusterman argues:

> …Aesthetic experience [needs to] be filled out or anchored by discursive critical means that make our experiences more effectively communicable, durable and powerful by grounding them in socially legitimated practices. . . .In short, criticism is needed not simply to sharpen perception, but to provide the social preconditions and practices necessary for proper appreciation. (pp. 406-407)

Carroll (2001) is more specific about types of art criticism and the role they play. He distinguishes between two types—interpretive and demonstrative. The former has a semiotic dimension and results in a message, that is, what the image means. The purpose of the latter is to promote aesthetic experience, "…to call attention to the variables that make aesthetic experience possible" (p. 42). The two may well operate in collaborative fashion. Carroll emphasizes; however, "…Little effort has been spent in evolving vocabularies for discussing and conceptualizing aesthetic experience" (p. 43). My project addresses that challenge insofar as I attend to both initial experiences and subsequent commentary upon them; that is, I address the semiotic (interpretive) and the phenomenological (demonstrative) variables and dimensions of aesthetic experiences.

Methodology

The literature reviewed above suggests that responses to the question of what constitutes aesthetic experience vary considerably. Depending on the perspective one takes, this would also affect the range and focus of emergent meanings. While this study puts a strong emphasis on the use of perceptual skills (*aesthesis*) and a capacity to articulate that which is seen, felt, and considered (art criticism), it uses the above theories only as a reference point in regard to what the participants actually experience. My research is qualitative and phenomenologically inspired. My work borrows substantially from Husserl's (1931, 1964, 1971, 1973, 1977) quest to understand processes of knowledge acquisition while taking into account the vicissitudes of human consciousness. While I do not strive towards Husserl's "ideal essence," I am influenced by his notions of intentionality and attention to multi-layered experience. Husserl's (1931) view of the link between intentionality and meaning making is apparent:

> …It is its [intentionality's] essential nature to harbour in itself a 'meaning' of some sort, it may be many meanings, and on the ground of this gift of meaning, and in harmony therewith, to develop further phases which through it become themselves 'meaningful.' (p. 27)

Where art criticism enters my project I veer more toward a hermeneutic and ontological stance (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1927/1996, 1971). A handful of other art educators are also phenomenologically oriented, and I borrow from their practice (Jones, 1979; Lankford, 1984; Shusterman, 2008).

In short, my multi-step task is to draw participants' attention to the individual moments of their encounters, to have them record their encounters as fully and accurately as possible, and ultimately describe, in the form of experientially oriented art criticism, the emergent meanings. The limitations of this approach are that the onus is on the participant to be as attuned as possible to the layered details of the experience, and their personal meaning and significance, and to be capable of articulating those findings. The benefits rest in the possibilities inherent in rich description; I get to know particularities of participants' aesthetic encounters that would not be available through a quantitative study. Obviously the results are not replicable.

Method

To initiate the project I use what I call aesthetigrams (White, 2007; White & Tompkins, 1998). An aesthetigram is a mapping process designed to visually represent a specific experience of aesthetically mediated meaning making and the discrete moments that contributed to it. Thus, aesthetigrams provide a concrete record of what is usually a relatively fleeting, evanescent experience. Participants accompany their aesthetigrams with supporting explanatory writing. The latter ultimately evolves into a form of art criticism that focuses on the quality of the experience, the reciprocal nature of the encounter.

To prepare for the making of aesthetigrams, participants take brief notes while looking at a work. In their notes I ask them to focus on their moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings. That is, I am not after a written description of the work, but of their experience of the work—a phenomenological orientation. Inevitably, of course, some descriptive features ensue; the emerging portrait, however, is of the person in interaction with the work, the dialogue between artwork and viewer.

The next step is to attempt to allocate the individual moments of experience into categories of experience. The point of the categories is to enable participants to see the patterns of their encounters. Are they analytically inclined, for example, or reliant upon feelings? Are judgements dictated by pre-established tastes? Once one becomes aware of one's predilections, it is possible to attempt to enlarge upon encounter practices? I provide a fairly extensive list of possible experiential categories that my students and I have developed over the years[iii]. Thus participants see that, for example, one moment they may have focused on a particular colour or object; this may then have triggered a memory of some occasion, or

prompted a comparison to another work. These are different categories—perceptions, memories, comparisons. Once participants have designated categories for their various encounter moments, they proceed to design their aesthetigrams. The visual records show the twists and turns of their individual encounters—their ways of being with the works— to which they can return for reflection and a resource for ensuing critiques.

This is the routine I followed for this study. To initiate it I provided my volunteers with two images, 8 ½ x 11-inch reproductions of the originals. The first image is a painting by Martha Teles entitled *The Gift.* The other image is Catherine Opie's photograph *Self Portrait Nursing* (See Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. *The Gift*

Figure 2. *Self-portrait Nursing*

The two images have in common the depiction of a child. My hope was that as the participants focused on one image and then the other, the works would elicit responses that not only captured essential features of the works but that would also evoke values-related responses. Since the narratives of the two works are substantially different from one another I was hoping to elicit differing insights. The reader will see how my expectations were met.

The Participants

Before I describe the encounters, here is a brief portrait of my volunteers: Tessie, aged 39, is a professional writer. Her preferred medium is poetry although she looks favorably upon any paying freelance project. She is also active in educational community projects. Ben, aged 52,

also a writer of poetry, is currently completing his Ph.D. in Education and teaching part time at the university level. Sam, aged 54, is a professional musician and also enjoys doing photography. Winnie, aged 65, is a retired civil servant who, earlier in life trained as an educator and now sometimes does volunteer work in educational settings. She has also developed an interest in painting in recent years.

The Encounters

Tessie

What follows are a few samples of their efforts. Their viewing times were, on average, 15 – 20 minutes. Their responses, as will become apparent, took considerably longer. I will begin with, and limit the aesthetigram examples to one, Tessie's, the most detailed of the lot (See figure 3). Tessie noticed 28 separate moments in her encounter with *The Gift*, too many to depict individually, on a legible scale, on an 8 ½ x 11 inch paper. Thus she indicates similar moments by number, for example, moments that were affectively (feeling) oriented, as 3, 9, 10, 24, 28, all within one oval. On occasion Tessie has super-imposed a rectangle on top of an oval to help remind her of some details of that moment. Tessie has also included some lines and arrows to show where one moment influenced another. She has also tried to indicate the relative impact of each moment through the size of her ovals. Of course, where she combines several moments into one oval, this becomes impractical; so Tessie has relied, in these cases, on letters, "a" being a really impactful moment through to "d," a moment that would have barely registered on her consciousness. I suggested that she limit herself to depicting four sizes so as to not make the exercise interminable.

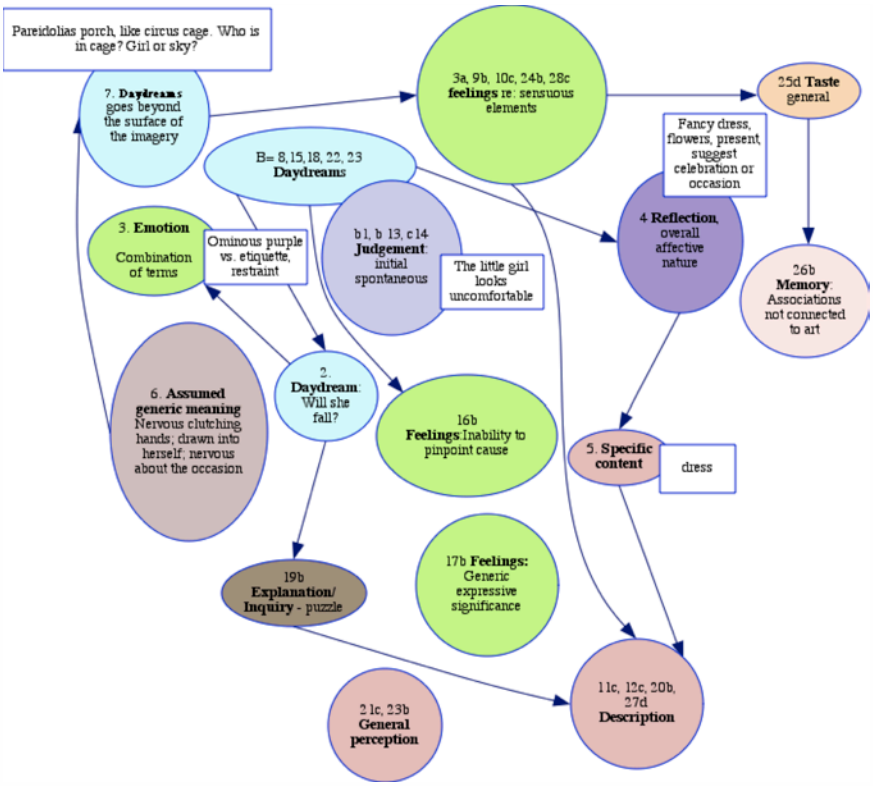

Figure 3. Tessie's aesthetigram of *The Gift*.

I now introduce Tessie's initial text that accompanied her aesthetigram.

The little girl looks uncomfortable. The window looks like she could fall backwards out of it. Ominous purple Emotion—bruised v. particular—propriety, etiquette, the fancy dress, ornamented chair with flowers like a celebration with the present. What is the occasion? Like a communion dress, nervous clutching hands—drawn into herself—nervous about occasion or gift. Checkerboard blue and white porch railing like a circus cage for lions holding the precarious freedom of Blue sky—who is in the cage? Girl or sky? She looks like she could fly away, if she was not so constrained by dress and gift and chair, the red ribbon on gift and shoes and flowers, reds and purples and blues, slim legged big seated chair and pudgy limbs of girl—the chair is too big and she looks like her body is too big for her little head and she is small in a too big chubby body, a too big chair. What is in there, in that gift-wrapped package, something with claws, something that crawls. It makes me feel lonely and disturbed—the purple like sorcery, an enchantment, how long has she been sitting there alone? Is it a gift or a punishment? A festival? Flowers—against the blue sky—looks festive with gold bars of gilded cage. But she looks like a dressed-up animal placed on display, she looks small faced, holding it in. Not like herself, like an energetic little girl would be, receiving a gift she anticipated with glee. Her hands are tied like the bow on the box is tied—do not open me—she is wrapped up like the gift—decorated, maybe only meant to be a picture of herself—a precious gift, without freedom of movement, posed and still. Where children are quick moving, she seems very still, the picture feels silent, ominous, not moving. I like seeing the texture of the canvas through the purple paint. She looks, because of the exotic flowers and the colour of the sky perhaps, the tile, in contrast with her v. English clothes and the sort of Victorian chair, like she is in a 'foreign country'—not where she comes from, or where her parents come from, reminds me a little of Mexico. The doorway out of the dark room, the light seems to shine into the room from the door at the 'back' of the room.

Tessie followed the above commentary with a shorter, more deliberately evocative response:

Fear was outside time, it paralyzed not just her hands and feet but the moment, the blue sky, the sick funereal scent of the lilies on the chair behind her back. All of these waxy moments stretched and sealed inside her small head. Stay that way forever, stuck on the chair, wondering where everyone has gone. Her fever made her head grow numb, her body seemed to swell, she wasn't supposed to tell, something, what? She wasn't supposed to know, but she had forgotten. Sometimes the package seemed to crawl along the floor.

Then too, Tessie wrote a poem-in-progress, a few lines of which are:
there's no one here
in the shadows
to be kind

Those lines pretty well capture Tessie's overall impression of the work. Her pattern of meaning making would appear to be akin to a kind of fireworks—a main light source, with regular offshoots in different directions. That is, she begins with a spontaneous reaction/judgement, makes forays into perceptions, daydreams, feelings and reflections. These reinforce her judgements to which she returns twice more, and then her moments burst out again. Tessie appears to trust her affective instincts to assist her meaning making. As we see in her aesthetigram, Tessie's affective responses predominate (denoted by the colour green); and her daydream moments (in blue) tend to be closely linked to those of feeling and emotion. These inform her initial and subsequent judgements. However, Tessie balances these moments with those of reflection and repeated checking of details.

Winnie:

Interesting chair and room. Evokes childhood memories of waiting and waiting. . .and Good-Girl behavior; don't dirty your white dress, sit in the approved upright position.
The chair dominates the painting and evokes the loneliness of childhood where everything and everyone seems bigger than you.
There seems to be a reference to older paintings when the children were painted to look like dressed-up adults.
The light from the window enhances the colours of the walls and floor, which seem to have an abstract quality to them. If the chair and the child were not in the painting, it might still work.
The flower garland has a garden-like quality to it and provides a halo or frame for the child, providing some warmth in what might otherwise seem austere.
The red shoes evoke the Wizard of Oz and Dorothy or perhaps at least a contrast to the somber colours, providing some gaiety
The present seems remote or far from the girl, again eliciting sadness.

Winnie begins with memory associations, negative ones. Such memories are inevitably infused with affect. Thus her initial response intuits that something is amiss in the image. Winnie then balances those initial moments with a more intellectually inclined observation about traditional paintings of children—dressed to look like adults. She maintains this analytic focus through further looking at details of the painting. In turn, these prompt another act of comparison, this time to the story, *Wizard of Oz,* as opposed to her own childhood, although obviously the story has connections to her childhood as well. Ultimately, the accumulated responses direct Winnie back returns to her emotional focus. Winnie's approach to meaning

making in this case, like Tessie's, begins and ends with an affective emphasis. But where Tessie's hold on the affective component remains throughout, with counterbalancing moments emerging from that core, Winnie moves from affect to intellect and finally back to affect, in a kind of seesaw motion, with the fulcrum of the seesaw not really centered. Ultimately, in this instance, it tends to favour the affective side.

Ben:

What is beyond the window/balcony?
Something funereal about it
The flowers, the dimmed lighting
Like sitting in mourning by the coffin—the gift?
The formality of the arrangement
The girl seems constrained—ill at ease—uncomfortable
Chair too big—feet don't touch the floor
Formality also speaks to something closer to a funeral than a birthday.
The gift at the foot of the chair on the floor
it seems not for her—too far to reach
afraid?
The misty/vague exterior— but bright in contrast to the dim undefined interior
The chair seems to belong to the exterior
The blue of the seat echoes the lighter blue of the exterior, the blue tiles of the balcony the reds/oranges of the flowers chimes with the orangy/red of the balcony railing
But the rest of the chair— the legs, the back under the flowers, echoes the darker colours that frame the doorway
The gift is as isolated as the girl even tho' they seem to belong together
white crossed by red of ribbon/shoes
The blue on the edges of light in from the door connects again with the pale blue of the exterior as if the girl occupies a space that has intruded on, or been liberated from, the darkness of the interior.

Ben's patterns of meaning making are different from Tessie's and Winnie's. His are predominantly analytical. For example, he begins with a question based on an initial specific perception, and then makes a judgement. Ben proceeds to justify his judgement with further perceptions. These lead to a further, supporting judgement, further perceptions and accompanying justifications, and again, a judgement. Ben concludes with a sentence that combines his perceptions and judgement. His meaning-making pattern in this instance is methodical, coolly observant, like a detective picking up clues. It is apparent that Ben finds the contradictions in the image culminate in a negative message, but unlike Tessie and Winnie, he appears to be less affectively involved.

Sam:
purply small child and gift

outside is where?
Arbour chair
The door is the back of the chair

So empty, inside and outside. Small and empty, small girl and gift in an emptiness looking out into emptiness but not looking out, looking in, maybe furtively, at the, if not empty, small present. Present in the emptiness with your back to the emptiness, the bright but empty outside

Framed – doorway
Framed—arbour framing girl
Floor meets wall, door meets chair

Light—mysterious light, white light facing girl
White, purple, blue and girl
Flowers and present have red

Will she feel better when she's opened the gift?
Why is she in this emptiness on a blue cushion on chair that's too big with an empty back garlanded?

Can that chair walk, or bend down like a camel to let the little girl open her present

I feel sad for her
Expectation skewed
Should be nice but it's all
A little 'croche' (crooked)
Her legs move out
Her hands hold in
Contain in the frame
Blue tiles diamond
Blue doorframe blue tiles
Red barrier before empty
Sea sky—Seurat blue-ish

Sam begins with perceptions, which lead to questions, and then to interpretations. These become intermingled with further perceptions, more questions, and then an emotional response. That response colours his following judgement—should be nice, but it's skewed.

Sam then concludes his interaction with further perceptions of an evocative nature, somewhat dream-like, as we saw in Tessie's example. So, like the others in our investigation, Sam's patterns of meaning making are unique to him, although all participants arrive at similar conclusions. Sam starts out somewhat like Ben, simply recording a perception, then, like Winnie, moving to questions. He then repeats this sequence before declaring an emotional response. In this regard Sam is quite unlike Ben, who largely holds affect in abeyance. Sam's pattern is also unlike Winnie's and Tessie's in that he only comes to affect gradually. Interestingly, Sam's judgement moment follows immediately upon his affect-oriented moment. The judgement seems to prompt the final evocative observations with references to the doorframe with which he began his encounter. I am tempted to suggest it is his musical background that prompts the rhythm of his encounter: perception, question, interpretation, perception question, emotional response. These build to: judgement, and recapitulated perceptions—a return to the theme.

Values Analysis on *The Gift*:

With all the commentary in place I began a process of highlighting what I considered to be value-laden words and phrases. I then attempted to break these down into categories. In the table below I have placed the implied values in the left column and phrases gleaned from the participants' comments. It is apparent that all four participants found the work to be unsettling. The details they focused on contributed to their sense of unease. In short, we may say that all participants felt that this is not the way to treat a child, certainly not the way a child would celebrate an important occasion. Curiously, no one questioned the nature of the occasion; but the general consensus was that the image disturbed them. It did not correspond with their views on what a normal, happy childhood should look like. All participants allude to the sense of a lack of freedom, of choice. Hence their overall discomfort with the image.

Table 1.

Contradiction	Bright but empty; should be nice but it's not; gift not for her; children dressed as adults; gift or punishment; still child versus normal child behavior; apparent celebration but funereal atmosphere
Space & time as negative factors	How long, sitting there alone; timeless fear; out-of-reach (remote) present; empty inside and outside
Skewed Celebration	Gift not for her; hands tied like the bow on the box; sitting there alone; furtively; mysterious
Discomfort/Constraint	Propriety, etiquette, chair too big, children like dressed-up adults; constrained, ill-at-ease; circus cage; pudgy body
Threatening	Ominous purple; bruised; nervous clutching hands; everything and everyone bigger than you
Child as ornament	Wrapped up like the gift, decorated; good-girl behavior
Fears	Waiting and waiting; what is in the package
Loneliness/Solitude	Lonely and disturbed; no one here; loneliness of childhood

It is perhaps necessary to emphasize that the participants read the above values in the work. They did not, for example, feel personally threatened, fearful, or lonely. They did; however, sense qualities of threat, fear and loneliness in the image. Sam's comment pretty well sums up the group's response: "Should be nice but it's all a little 'croche' (crooked)." This left the participants feeling a little sad. But that feeling is not a value; it's an emotional symptom, a response to an underlying value, which may be summarized as: This is not a way to treat a child.

Commentaries on *Self Portrait Nursing*

Tessie:

Birth a male child,
heavy with life,
your life, now his
feed this fair-haired monster
feed him your life
this burden, larger
than the ones heaped upon you,
you don't believe it.
you carve the label in your own skin
like a banner for the rainbow parade,
reclaiming the word, holding the babe,
nursing the sun
before he was born,
a blue star, a spiral,
a myth of transformation,
inscribed on the arms supporting him.
Hang tapestry to situate the tale,
lend a familiar thread to follow,
labyrinthine and cruel, necessary,
crawling backwards, breaking all the rules,
Why else would you do that, but for love?

Tessie's commentary is like a conversation, an empathic interaction with the individual portrayed. A mother herself, Tessie is drawn to the portrayal of the physical and emotional demands a child puts on a mother's life—"feed him your life." Tessie also recognizes the further demands that Opie's affiliation to the gay community puts upon her—"a banner for the rainbow parade." Then there is her acknowledgement of Opie's strength in "nursing the sun" and "breaking all the rules." Tessie then moves to a consideration of how the formal arrangements in the photograph combine with the contextual, how the red tapestry "situate[s]

the tale" and "lend[s] a familiar thread to follow"—a thread that acknowledges the gutsy life Opie leads. Finally, Tessie's concluding line is almost a benediction and an endorsement: "Why else would you do that, but for love?"

It is apparent that Tessie's interactions with the image combine an emotional response with an awareness of contextual and formal (compositional) considerations. Hers is a positive response that accepts the artist for who she is and what she represents. That is, Tessie acknowledges Opie's instincts for motherhood and love, and her penchant for a kind of in-your-face self-awareness.

Tessie's mode of interaction is a little different from what we saw in her first encounter, but with strong parallels. For example, where, in her first encounter, Tessie specifically remarks on certain items in the image, in this second example, the majority of her moments are what we might consider to be a reverie-based, affectively oriented. These are, nonetheless, supported by what was obviously careful looking; but the looking is largely implied, less frequently overtly stated.

Subsequent to the initial exercise, Tessie sent me some post-encounter reflections:

> *After considering these pictures together, the little girl in 'The Gift' and the mother in 'Opie' begin to bear a striking resemblance. My reactions to the second picture were stronger, it provoked more pronounced judgements and statements. Over the next few days the little girl stays with me, I read novels and think the character looks like her, (notably Harriet in the* Little Friend *by Donna Tartt), the painting is still making me think, but not so much the photograph.*

Winnie:

Not your traditional idea of Mother with Child.
Why are they totally naked? Is she more interested in showing off her tattoo?
The photo appears cool even though there has been some attempt to provide warmth by hanging a red cloth in the background.
Is this art or just a photo?
Is this a spoof on Madonna or Mother and child paintings?
What makes this work original? The size of the mother? The look of the mother?
They are engaged, both child and mother seem to be looking at one another.
Is this a comment on lesbian , transgender, transsexual…the new lingo of the 21st century?
Who is the photographer and where was the photo taken? Some attempt to make it appear artistic seems to have been made. It seems that someone is attempting to make a formal portrait but somehow it does not seem to have worked. Is it because it challenges our

stereotypes? I feel like there should be a Harley Davidson in the background, not this tapestry-like curtain of another era.
Was this taken with a camera phone as a lark?
It seems to be less offensive the longer you look at it.
Provocative, not prissy.

As the reader can see, this is quite a different response. Like Tessie, Winnie acknowledges the mother and child theme right away. But where Tessie focuses on what it is like to be a mother and subsequently addresses the topic of social norms, Winnie moves directly to the latter. Where Tessie is accepting, Winnie is alienated—"Why are they naked?" She questions Opie's motives in taking the photograph—"showing off?" Her initial questions lead Winnie to further questions that imply her definitions of art, which have to do with concepts of originality, seriousness of intent, whether a photograph can be considered art. These are the kinds of questions that frequently arise in my classes, and they indicate not only bewilderment about the world of art but also a sense of being excluded, not being "in" on the game. And the game extends beyond questions of art into life styles and their expression—"the new lingo of the 21st century." Interestingly, Tessie did not raise any of these questions about art. The implication here is that she accepted the photograph as a legitimate artistic statement, which she could take seriously.

Like Tessie, Winnie is aware of the apparent contradictions in the image, as she says, "Not your typical Mother with Child." But where Tessie is content to interact with the image as it is, Winnie is uncomfortable with the contradictions she sees. She makes the somewhat humorous suggestion that the work would be more coherent with a Harley Davidson in the background. Still, by the end of her commentary, Winnie appears to be slowly warming up to the work, or at least to be "less offended."

Winnie's mode of interaction tends to be largely reflective, intellectually oriented. She begins with a judgement, asks questions, and intersperses these with acts of looking that don't, in the end, answer her questions. At first glance, Winnie's second encounter may seem quite unlike the patterns of meaning making evident in her first. But her first observation, "not your typical mother and child," implies memories of other, more traditional images. So in this respect both encounters begin with memories; and both images elicit negative responses. In the first encounter these responses have to do with her own childhood; in the second, they are more directed at the photograph. Having established her position, Winnie's manner of operation is similar to that in her first encounter; she looks and questions, and ultimately reflects on her affective stance.

It is worth noting that in an email accompanying her commentary Winnie mentions that she spent only ten or fifteen minutes with each work. This is a little less time than the others

spent. So perhaps, given another five minutes or so, Winnie would have been a little more accepting, since she seems to have been moving in that direction. At this stage, however, it seems clear that Winnie doesn't really appreciate being provoked. Skepticism is her dominant mode.

Ben:

Title resonant of 1960's sitcom Andy Griffith, and the Ron Howard character
Background drapery design echoes tattoos
Woman's look seems less than maternal
-possibly neutral, possibly hint of resentment
-the scarification "pervert" clashes with the scene, tho' perhaps not with her glance
But there is also something else about her look
not exactly gentle—resignation
but the look at least seems softer somehow than the rigidity and size of her hands
-not exactly cradling the child, is she?
-more workmanlike— the hands seem to speak of a job that has to be done
Something odd about the woman's nose and ear
both seem damaged, roughed up.
Hard to see if child's eyes are open or not, but I have a sense that the child is looking up at the woman with a look that returns pretty much the woman's look— a somewhat moderated neutrality shading into resentment.

The first point to be made is that I should have been more careful to ensure that my participants had the correct information. That is, Tessie took responsibility for passing along the images to her fellow participants; and I had neglected to give her the correct title to the Opie photograph (Self Portrait Nursing). I just called it the Opie image, which, in turn, she named Opie. So Ben's immediate response is to the name, which he connects with an old television series—a reasonable connection in the circumstances, but one I hadn't anticipated.

Ben then concentrates on the physical features of the image, for example, the relation between the design in the drapery and Opie's tattoo. Tessie too, juxtaposes observations of tattoo and drapery, but where hers are laden with symbolism, Ben's are more formalistic. Ben continues his analysis. Where Tessie sees love, Ben sees possible resentment, and he ties that in with Opie's scarification. Ben then looks again, this time interpreting Opie's expression as being one of resignation. However, he notes how such an interpretation is at least a little at odds with Opie's "workmanlike" hands. That is, her physical strength doesn't seem to fit with the idea of resignation. After some further references to Opie's physicality Ben returns to the idea of resentment. Thus Ben's mode of interaction appears to be a methodical looking, conjecturing, looking and conjecturing— somewhat akin to his detective mode he employs

with the Teles image. His personal position relative to the image is less apparent than it is with Tessie and Winnie, more of a cool detachment.

Sam:

Contest? Pull
Warrior
Another chair with figures on it of a different proportion.
Even the baby looks big in this chair. baby looks like a boy.
boy baby
expectations
Textured background
The blue is the tattoo
Masculine hair cut
unadorned by make up
adorned by needle
Are those scars on her breasts?
A cutter?
Cut your breasts and use them later in life to feed—To breastfeed
I think of breast and feed before I see the photo because of title. I think of the compelling images both words conjure. I think of the words then I see the photo and the direction is tattoos diagonally down to the right, diagonally down breast then even more diagonal pull by the baby whose blond hair is in the same diagonal direction.
The chair supports and doesn't engulf. The wing of the chair, the black bat wing,
The ruddy face, that baby is not newborn but she bore him. Bears him.
She bear
Blond boy bear
Her arms symmetrical holding him, feeding him, in a fetal pose held against a belly; he came from her past present and future; he curled out of her past and looks up at his everything and she looks at hers, holds him holds her world, the world in the present.

Sam begins with a question (contest?) and an allocation or judgement (warrior) that implies a correspondence with Winnie's observation that this is not your typical mother and child image. Alone among the four participants at the time of their initial encounters, Sam then makes a comparison to the Teles painting, noting how proportion affects our readings of the works. Then, with a return exclusively to the Opie photograph, Sam continues his form-based observations until he arrives at questions. These lead to Sam's musings on terminology reinforced by further looking, a kind of double-checking. This leads to further word play, from verb to noun, with "bear," and finally, to a kind of reverie similar to that which we saw in Tessie's commentary. This last step results in a reflection, a soliloquy on the nature of time.

Thus Sam's mode of interaction appears to be a sequence of reflective response, comparison to other work, focused observation, more questions, more observations, and finally, further, quite evocative reflection. The pattern parallels his earlier encounter.

Values Analysis on *Self Portrait Nursing*

As I did with comments in regard to the first image, I again highlighted words and phrases that seemed to suggest underlying values. The following chart is a tentative exploration of those values. Some phrases seem to belong to more than one category as Table 2 indicates.

Table 2.

Societal expectations	This burden, larger than the ones heaped upon you; Provocative, not prissy; less than maternal; expectations; resentment; resignation; Is this art?
Personal oppositional stance	You don't believe it; breaking all the rules; labyrinthine and cruel
Love	but for love
Tradition	workmanlike; expectations
Stereotypes	Masculine; she bear; blond boy bear; challenges our stereotypes
Scepticism	Is this a spoof; Is this a comment?
Playfulness	bear

Again, the chart indicates that the image calls into question peoples' understanding and acceptance of societal norms. It is apparent, for example, that Opie endorses a life style adopted by a marginalized community, and that the participants recognize the disparity between that and societal norms. Whether we agree or not with Ben's perception of resentment, we know that mothers are supposed to love their children, but some do not. In contrast to Ben, Tessie does see love in the image. Winnie, on the other hand, is skeptical about the authenticity of the whole enterprise. She does, however, acknowledge that the image challenges her concepts of normalcy, both societal and artistic. Implied in her responses is a desire for reassurance, for normalcy. Sam's play on the word 'bear' raises questions of notions of feminine beauty and, at the same time, healthy boyhood. There is, further, an implied appreciation of playfulness in Sam's manipulation of the word that counters the serious tones of the other participants.

Conclusions

What I have attempted here is an exploration of four peoples' responses to two images that, at first glance, have little in common. How do the participants make meaning on the basis of their interactions with the two images? What the analyses show is that, regardless of their idiosyncratic approaches to meaning making, the participant responses ultimately converge

around certain values. Expectations of society emerge—specifically, that we love our children and treat them appropriately. In Teles' *The Gift*, that expectation is not met, thus leading to unease on the part of the participants. Opie's *Self Portrait Nursing* likewise raises questions of appropriate child-rearing, albeit questions different from those that the Teles work raises. In the latter case, Tessie and Sam find the image to exude positive notes, Winnie is skeptical, and Ben has reservations about the mother and child relationship. In other words, the participants' gestalt responses are not as uniform as they are in the case of the Teles painting. Despite the apparent blatancy of Opie's imagery, it prompts variable meanings.

It may be that such variability is the result of insufficient interaction. For example, in my regular classes I have students revisit their chosen artworks, usually three times. At some point most resort to research on the work and/or the artist before their final encounter. The repeated visits, coupled with research, generally enrich their looking and their commentary. In an empirically oriented study, Lachapelle (2010) reaches similar conclusions, that is, that the more time one spends with a work, the more one gets out of it. Here, however, I made no such demands on my volunteers, so it is difficult to know if further acquaintance with the images would have dramatically altered anyone's viewpoints. I am not trying to suggest that they should all have had the same responses, although, given their similar cultural backgrounds, some similarities in responses are likely. We saw this particularly in the case of the Teles painting. Despite the odd juxtapositions in *The Gift*, the message is more-straight forward, thus enabling an easier consensus. The photograph, on the other hand, touches on so many contemporary societal issues that differing responses are more likely. The responses of the four participants seem to bear that out. In my judgement, their responses to the Opie work are, for the most part, richer than those for the Teles painting. This may be because the latter was, in effect, a warm-up for the former. Further studies need to be done on the educational challenges inherent in the introduction of progressively difficult works.

In terms of the theories that I introduced at the beginning of this paper, I have demonstrated that, in keeping with Scruton's recommendations, it is possible to analyze experience. It is fair to ask, however, whether the participant commentaries reflect aesthetic experiences or not. Certainly they do in terms of Johnson's (2007) criteria; and Tessie's ekphrasic response to Opie's photograph, in particular, suggests the consummation that Dewey highlights as indicative of aesthetic experience. Sam's concluding statement too suggests a consummation. On the other hand, Winnie's and Ben's responses to the same work suggest more of a cessation than consummation. However, these two people's responses are certainly not devoid of meaning; and so, according to Johnson, their responses were likewise aesthetic. But this inclusiveness seems to beg for some kind of distinction making. A few examples may suffice to make the point. Thus, Ben's cool detachment does seem to correspond to a Kantian disinterest, which differs from the interactions of the other participants. All of the participants engaged, at various points in their encounters, with Carroll's (2001) concept of design

appreciation (or Shusterman's (2002)"surface"), but much less to his focus on expressive quality. Would Winnie's indignant, somewhat cynical response to *Self Portrait Nursing* qualify as an aesthetic response? Not according to Carroll, but probably according to Shusterman. She does, after all, address cultural traditions in her response.

What these examples indicate is that aesthetic theory is still open to debate. On the other hand, the participants' work certainly demonstrates the capacity for the imagery to foster meaningful engagement and a basis for dialogue.

The routines that the participants followed to arrive at their particular meanings show that the protocol works, even in an informal setting; there is a self-teaching element to the process insofar as the aesthetigrams encourage reflection and analysis. The resulting participant commentaries provide an invitation to dialogue across age levels and educational settings. Of course, in this study the participants were mature, highly self-motivated people. But variations on the routines should be possible within classrooms, at various levels. I extend the invitation to anyone willing to pursue the experiment.

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Endnotes

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[i] The course is titled *Aesthetics and Art Criticism for the Classroom.* It is a senior-level academic undergraduate course designed primarily for pre-service teachers, although students from other Faculties are also welcome.

[ii] For the purposes of this paper I define "value" as a qualitative, non-volitional and spontaneous response to a given object or event. Our personal, social, and cultural histories dictate our values and we adopt them, willingly or otherwise.

[iii] Categories developed to date include: perceptions, feelings, emotions, attitude, taste, memory, daydream/reverie, seeing as, interpretation, comparison, expectation, explanation/inquiry, reflection, bracketing, knowledge/content, judgement, additional moments (e.g. post-encounter reflections). Each category may have several sub-categories, e.g. perceptions might entail a general scanning or a very localized focus. Thus participants have over fifty possible categories/sub-categories to choose from. No one ever experiences all categories; indeed, the experiencing of one might necessitate exclusion of another, e.g. judgement vs. refusal to judge. The challenge for participants is to match their individual moments to particular categories. On occasion, this has led to the need to establish another category.

Image Credits

Catherine Opie
Self Portrait / Nursing
2004
C-print
40 x 32 inches (101.6 x 81.3 cm)
Edition of 8, 2 AP
Image courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Catherine Opie.

Martha Teles
Le cadeau (translation: The gift)
1980
Oil on canvas
46.5 x 38.2 cm
Image courtesy of the estate of Martha Teles.

About the Author

Boyd White is Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, McGill University. Early in his career Dr. White was a printmaker, painter, and art educator. Currently his key teaching and research interests are in the areas of philosophy and art education, particularly on the topic of aesthetics and art criticism. Dr. White is the author of numerous journal articles, has chapters in various texts, among them, *ReVisions: Readings in Canadian Art Teacher Education (3rd ed)*, *Starting with*….(3rd ed) and *What works: Innovative strategies for teaching art*. Recently, he has published two texts: *Aesthetics Primer* (2009), Peter Lang Publishing, and *Aesthetics Education for the 21st Century,* co-edited with Tracie Costantino, (2010), Sense Publishers. He serves as a reviewer for a number of journals and educational research organizations.

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