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1-1-2005

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Considering the Nature of the Aesthetic through an Imaginary Letter Exchange

Margaret Macintyre Latta
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Dear Reader:

I propose to consider the nature of aesthetics through the perspectives of three contemporaries of early 20th century England (Virginia Woolf, 1882-1941, Clive Bell, 1881-1964, and Sylvia Gosse, 1881-1968), with claim to an intimate understanding of the *aesthetic*. This is an imaginative journey of my own making. I find imagination makes empathy possible.[1] Imagination allows me to put aside my definitions and distinctions regarding the aesthetic, and give credence to alternative perspectives. Aesthetics is an elusive entity that is used indiscriminately to capture a felt dimension of lived experience. Superficially the aesthetic is a term often used to mean simple beauty, referring to the harmonious, pleasant, or seductive look of a form/object. This is a consideration void of the meaning(s) or significance(s) of a form/object. In fact, too often in everyday discourse this superficial application of the aesthetic seems to be the primary meaning attached to this term. Despite the thick traditions associated with aesthetics, most of us use the term without a full and personal comprehension of the meaning(s) to which we wish to refer with our use. Imaginative possibilities beckon louder.

As I enter into the thinking of Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and Sylvia Gosse, I begin to sketch a picture of turn of the century England. The year, 1897, marked Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The world witnessed the pomp and power of the British Empire.[2] Britain was admired as a manufacturing nation, as merchant, freight carrier, and banker. The lingering image of the Victorian as that of a stern faced industrialist, a cautious, hardworking figure, the corner stone of the social structure that was Victorian England, was changing. The turn of the century saw the abandonment of this solemnity by the rich. A greater exuberance existed. The Victorians indulged their taste for the extravagant and different. The art world (largely supported and populated by the upper classes) reflected this excitement and newfound energy.[3] Artists sought new directions, forms, and content. In part this was a reflection of a

growing consciousness of the individual's subjective environment as evidenced in a variety of psychological theories being proposed (Freud) and concepts of political organizations undergoing radical change (social reform, women's vote). This new attitude was not the privilege of the majority, though; the indelible class structure of Victorian England persisted and endured.

Within this turn of the century milieu, I find Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and Sylvia Gosse sharing a like upbringing, belonging to a powerful cultural stratum of upper middle class England. Their lives were rich in privilege and opportunity. They were well educated, serious about their endeavors, and had the time, money, and desire to pursue their interests. Each was passionate in their beliefs and spent their lives consumed by these passions.

Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell were principal figures in the "Bloomsbury Group," named for a district in Holborn, London, England that became the main intellectual and culture center of London. In Bloomsbury writers and artists met and pursued the thoughts and questions of the day.[4] There existed an enviable vital connection between literature, arts and society at large. The outbreak of war was festering and smoldering in the background providing a backdrop for debate, eliciting contradictory values, roles, and expectations. I envision a meeting place of lively debate and youthful passion.

Virginia Woolf ventured boldly into this milieu as a novelist and critic. Her "stream of consciousness" writing style provided invaluable insights into her own life and concomitantly life experiences of women at the turn of the twentieth century.[5] In an extended essay "A Room of One's Own" she ponders the distinctive struggle of the woman artist. This essay both conveys personal convictions and maps out the terrain of a feminist aesthetic.[6] Typifying her many public speaking requests, she shared this essay at a women's college lecture at Cambridge University. As a respected member of the "Bloomsbury Group," Virginia Woolf developed a friendship with Clive Bell. Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Stephen, met Clive Bell through Bloomsbury and later married him. Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell were thus closely connected through family and Bloomsbury.

Clive Bell attended Cambridge University where he held "The Midnight Society" meetings in his room.[7] Through these discussion meetings, his interest in serious writing bloomed. His interest in art criticism developed later after spending time in Paris attending art school. His marriage to Vanessa Stephen placed him at the center of the Bloomsbury Group and widened his interest in the fine arts, as Vanessa was a respected painter. Clive became a renowned art critic. His most popular book *Art*, 1914, placed Bell at the forefront of the modern art movement.[8] Published at a time of political flux and uncertainty, Bell's writing offered some security. To be told that some values were beyond change and were untouchable was reassuring to a nation poised on the brink of war.

Sylvia Gosse was a painter whose work deserves to be known to a wider community.[9] She studied painting seriously all of her life. As a young woman she attended art school in France. Later she came home to London to the Royal Academy

for further study. Walter Richard Sickert was an acquaintance through her family. Sickert became a leader among the young British painters and his studio in Camden Town became the gathering place for progressive artists and critics. In 1913 they merged into the London Group, which continued for many years as a forum for experiment and discussion. Sickert respected Sylvia's work and asked Sylvia to be a co-principal with him of an art school. Her artwork and teaching were her life and passion and she led a reserved life committed to these pursuits. Sylvia maintained a presence in the arts community through a strong and opinionated voice. Interestingly, the Council of the Society of Painters and Etchers found her portrait of *Naked Women* extremely objectionable and would not elect her to membership.[10]

I believe it is highly likely that Sylvia Gosse knew of and met Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell on numerous occasions. I assume this, as I attempt to embody the lives and contexts of these contemporaries discussing aesthetics through a letter exchange much as I imagine was typical in Bloomsbury, 1914.[11] I allow each perspective to take charge of the movement of thought, becoming fuller, more complex. Considering these voices from the past deepen and transform my understandings of the aesthetic as I enter into the conversational letter exchange alongside Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and Sylvia Gosse. I invite you into this conversational letter exchange too.

—Margaret Macintyre Latta

Dear Mr. Bell,

I have read with interest your writing *Art* in which you coin the term *significant form* to explain your Kantian view of the art object as an end in itself.[12] I have allowed this term to wander in and out of my mind in an effort to comprehend. As I walk through the British Museum (which feels more like a sterile laboratory) I realize you are asking me to strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth.[13] I observe a student writing copiously, no doubt following a precise formula for art appreciation. The speed and flurry of his pen assures me he is extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so.[14] It is inconceivable to me to so distinctly separate self from art form. The control and certainty offered by a pattern or formula is imposed on the art object. What about the artist? What do I know of him? (I need not mention that to find women artists here is a feat unto its own). The art form as freed from its context is an impossibility to me. I cannot put aside my subjective understandings. I do not distance myself from the forms. They call to me. Thoughts, memories, emotions surface. I have no desire to force reality into a preconceived order. The sincerity and uniqueness of each art form would be ignored. The creator's experience negated. The art appreciator's experience denied. With your emphasis on form over content you are decontextualizing and objectifying artwork. It becomes an applied exercise that divorces the self from participation. Clive, have you forgotten your passion for painting? Take a moment to glance back at those early works you painted in Paris in 1903. Be honest. The embeddedness and contextual relations surely you cannot deny. Forgive my

indignation, but perhaps you should be writing about significant experience rather than significant form.

Regards,

—Miss Virginia Woolf (1914)

Dear Miss Woolf,

You entirely miss the point of my aesthetic hypothesis. It is precisely because of my passion for art and *clear thinking abilities* that I can elaborate a plausible theory of aesthetics. Works of art have an *essential quality* that distinguishes them from all other objects or things. Art works elicit an *aesthetic emotion* that directs the viewer to this quality, which I call *significant form*. The artist combines lines, color, shapes, and textures in ways that stir our aesthetic emotions. I am not asking you to deny your subjectivity. Quite the contrary, my aesthetic hypothesis is premised on personal experience. Emotional response to works of art is necessary. Only then can you begin to look for the essential quality that evokes this. Perhaps you are confusing art works with what I call *descriptive painting*, that is paintings that convey information, tell stories, illustrations, etc. According to my hypothesis they are not works of art. They leave untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their form but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us. The Italian Futurists exemplify this. Art and politics simply should not mix. It is not possible to be a Futurist in thought and action and yet remain an artist. Primitive art works best exemplify significant form. They encourage you to be moved by the arrangement and combinations of line, shapes, colors, and textures. There is no accurate representation to confuse and mask the creation of form. I often do not notice the representative part of a painting. My concern and involvement is with lines and colors, their relations and quantities and qualities; from these I win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than can be given by the description of fact and ideas. Erase from your mind preconceived notions and assumptions about art and human interests. Let the artwork carry you to a world with emotion of its own. You need to acquaint yourself with the elements/principles of art. It is indisputable that this is a matter of taste and refinement. It demands a discerning spectator.[15]

Regards,

—Mr. Clive Bell (1914)

Dear Miss Woolf and Mr. Bell,

I so enjoy these opportunities to converse and gain new insights. Your eloquent thoughts cause me to agree at times with Miss Woolf's words and yet at other times Mr. Bell's words ring so true to me. I was reminded of these contradictions today as I was coming down the Bourne at Hastings when I saw something that delighted me: a line of washing billowing in the wind... every article airborne and dancing merrily. What a beautiful sight! I make sense of the world through my contact with it. My sensibilities are the sources of my consciousness. Perception is exploration via the

senses requiring sustained attention to the qualities of an object or situation. Because I feel that I observe with meanings and values brought to perception by prior contact with the world, I believe perception to be highly interpretive. This acknowledges that meaning is personal, embodied and constructed. The preparations of the inner conditions through perception, which direct and sustain the art-making endeavor, are predominantly interpretive in nature. The laundry dancing in the wind is an image that struck me and will no doubt find its way into my artwork. It provoked emotion in me that I desire to recapture. I find my art ideas in the ordinary. I hear Mr. Bell saying, "But she is not experiencing art or an aesthetic emotion. Art works do not hang on clothing lines and the emotion may be valid, but it is not aesthetic." My response is to say that I cannot separate my art making from my experiences. They are meshed and inform each other. I like Miss Woolf"s desire to know more about the artist, the context, the content. But, as I find myself absorbed wholly in art making, emphatically attuned to the process, Mr. Bell's term *significant form* makes so much sense to me. I am aware of a dialogue between the medium and myself emerging and evolving. In art making, there is always some element of discovery as I attend to this process. It is because of this that I never know exactly what I will make before I make it. The art product emerges from a thinking, working, constructing, adapting, changing, and building process. Artistic purpose is therefore something to be worked towards, rather that something that is necessarily present at the beginning of the making process. Play is integral. I play and manipulate phenomena and change realities. There is immediacy and immersion in art making. At the same time, though, I cannot easily dismiss that in achieving significant form I am searching for qualities, which show how experience is lived, felt, and understood by me. It is through art making that I express what I have received in the form of perceptions.

I offer these considerations humbly as departure points for furthering this dialogue.[16]

Sincerely,

—Miss Sylvia Gosse (1914)

Dear Sylvia Gosse, Virginia Woolf, and Clive Bell,

Your letter exchange draws attention to differing views on the aesthetic. The distinctions are polarized around what constitutes art, and the nature of the relationship between the artist and the medium and the viewer and the artwork. I attempt to clarify these now.

Clive Bell defines art in terms of formal properties, qualities, and principles. He uses the term *significant form* to refer to the potentially powerful arrangements of these in art forms. Bell contends that significant form is the quality common to all works of visual art and that recognition of its existence allows the work of art to be differentiated from all other things. Quality art meets specific standards established by connoisseurs. Aesthetic meaning is separate from the moral and intellectual.

Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Gosse describe art as being all around us. It is embedded

in the everyday. Always in process, it is revealed in *moments of being.*[17] Art can be objects, but also enactments, concepts and environments. Art and culture, art and nature are interconnected. The art product cannot be separated from the process. They are intimately linked. Aesthetic meaning is connected to the moral and intellectual.

Bell views the artist as master of medium, technique and tools. It is important for the artist to develop a distinctive style that separates him from his fellow artists. The artist begins with a felt emotion. He then aims for the form to express an *ultimate reality*, a universal such as goodness, truth, and beauty.[18] Quality art transcends the maker to stand as pure form.

Woolf and Gosse view artwork as a relationship between the creator and her medium. An artist does not impose knowledge upon the medium but works to make images and medium fit together. "Knowing the artistic medium with all its limitations and potentials will not ensure the ability to make an artistic product. Understanding in artistic making comes not from learning about, but from trying to do; from testing possibilities within the given medium."[19] The maker searches for a successful union between form, idea, and medium by discovering, testing, combining, ordering, abstracting, altering, etc. The process is one of finding a fit between inner understanding and outer form; working at making an appropriate fusion between intention and form. One must not be imposed on the other. Form is important for its potential to shape subject matter into content and suggest possibilities.

Bell asks the viewer of an art piece to adopt a distanced stance. He asks the viewer to put aside all else and examine the form as a thing in itself. This should be an informed, guided response gained through formal education. The ultimate goal is the artwork's success or failure as significant form. Objective language is always used.

Woolf and Gosse desire to understand an artwork's relationship to the viewer rather than define or place it in categories. Responses connect the political, social, religious, moral and economic to the personal.

As a visual artist and educator I have a strong felt sense of the aesthetic in my life and work. My desire to explore the nature of it in more depth arises from my awareness of its presence informing and heightening my sensitivity. I long for the medium of painting. It is in the art making experience that I consciously give myself to the process. It is a "search process" that demands a high intensity of involvement.[20] The search begins with myself—my own personal/historical context. "An artist observes the scene with meanings and values brought to his perception by prior experiences."[21] Thus, the art experience acknowledges and values my individual interpretation and expression. The importance of dialogue throughout the process cannot be overstated. A large part of the search process is the ongoing dialogue generated between the emerging artwork and myself. "The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works."[22] Schon speaks of "reflection in action" and "reflection on action."[23] Reflection in action refers to an intuitive knowing that grows and develops with time and involvement. Reflection on action is a more conscious deliberate effort to construct meaning. It would seem that the art process

requires these reflective dimensions. The art experience encourages me to see the interrelationships of things. It demands attention to the relatedness of elements within a whole. Special demands are made of me—the perception, selection, and organization of qualities and responsiveness to them. It is within these demands that the value and unique contributions of the art experience are found. The art experience is an involving, emerging, evolving process that is always personal and contextual. It stresses the totality of the experience - the many interacting and interconnecting elements that come into play in the creation of and response to art. There is wholeness there. It is my feeling that the complexity and richness of such an experience loses too much in translation if the experience is at all dissected. Maxine Greene talks about "wide-awakeness", referring to involvement in learning; active participation.[24] The art experience demands this. I think art teaches one how to be alive. "Aesthetic experience is a process emerging out of the act itself. Unlike so many other types of human activities the experience that constitutes art does not begin when the inquiry is over - it is not something at the end of a journey, it is part of the journey itself."[25] Dewey speaks of art as being a "live creature"—art as a living experience.[26] I like this sense of the artist living through an experience. "The past absorbed into the present carries on, it presses forward."[27] The artistic search process very much involves, encourages, and respects this coming together of past, present and information for the future.

As Gosse's letter and my experiences of the aesthetic imply, the aesthetic experience can embrace both Bell"s and Woolf"s notions. Aesthetic experience is both immediate and meditative. Bell's thoughts speak to the immediacy of the aesthetic. The intensity I feel as an artist as I combine tools, elements and qualities immerses me in the process. I attend to first impressions more closely, struck and enveloped by this immediacy. Bell provides a means to this attunement by focusing on the qualities of form. Rather than looking for representation, function, or intent, Bell's guide encourages the viewer to set aside needs and interests, to see much deeper and anew. The circularity of his hypothesis facilitates this attunement. A work of art evokes aesthetic emotion; aesthetic emotion equates with the appreciation of significant form in a work of art; and significant form equates with the quality that evokes aesthetic emotion. "In this manner the arts force us to focus on the immediacy of objects and events, on what originally strikes us before it becomes incorporated and ultimately absorbed beyond recognition into a vast network of personal meaning and significance."[28]

Bell does acknowledge that the artist must begin with a problem, a felt difficulty. Thus, that which an artist feels conditions and mediates the artwork. Bell emphatically contends that the artist is in search of significant form firstly, with expression being the vehicle. This insistence on this secondary place for expression is problematic for me. The meditative aspect of aesthetic experience connects perception, expression, and experience in my mind. Encounters with the arts intensify meaning. "Through the continuous seesawing of reflection—action—reflection—action we tie the art object (whether of our own making or that of others) to our deepest needs and interests and to what we know about the world at large. As a result, its meaning

expands, often exponentially in both breadth and depth."[29] The capacity of art to be infused with symbolic significance is a synthesis of the artist's perception, experience and expression.

So while immediacy asks us to attend to relations of lines, shapes, colors and textures, the meditative aspect of art asks us to attend to relations of self and art work. This is an ongoing discourse. It is not contradictory, but rather, interactive. I look not only at the relationships of elements within a work, but also beyond to its historical, rhetorical, and philosophical contexts in order to gain greater meaning. Aesthetic experience requires entry into such a discourse. It is a dialogue of faith. It is a search process that is inquiry guided. As such, it requires openness to possibilities, attentive listening and responding. Belief in this process is essential. I must be sensitive to relations of all kinds, constantly mediating, participating fully in this creating process.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me.

Sincerely,

—Margaret Macintyre Latta (2004)

Dear Reader:

The notion of aesthetic experience can hold strangling preconceptions. Tightly associated with the arts, aesthetic experience is often considered to be the exclusive realm of the artist and/or art connoisseur. The object of attention becomes the aesthetic creation and not aesthetic experience. As such, notions of the aesthetic can be foreign and limiting, confined to vague notions of the beautiful and sublime. Contrary to this, the letter exchange reveals aesthetic experience to be grounded in an ontological reciprocity between self and other(s). While including a sense of the beautiful and sublime, aesthetic experience is more comprehensively active meaning making, creating meaning and concomitantly creating self. Such ongoing reflexivity is what I experience as an art maker. Such ongoing reflexivity is what I experienced through the text of the letter exchange. The letter exchange became a reciprocal medium, realized as an ongoing interchange between self and the thinking of Woolf, Bell, and Gosse, elucidating aesthetic experience. It became a connective medium, precluding meaningful learning. And, it became a transformational medium, enlarging and informing personal understandings. Within the creating process lives aesthetic experience offering direction, a medium, for inquiry and learning of all kinds.

Sincerely,

—Margaret Macintyre Latta

Notes

[1] See M. Greene (1995). *Releasing the Imagination.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications, p.3.

[2] This era in British history is recorded as described by A. O'Day (1979) in *The Edwardian*

Age: Conflict and Stability, 1900-1914,London, UK: Macmillan and by D. Read (1982), *Edwardian England*, London, UK: Croom Helm.

[3] See G. Greer (1979), *The Obstacle Race*, London, UK: Secker and Warbury.

[4] See M. A. Caws (1990) *Women of Bloomsbury*, New York: Routledge and D. B. Turnbaugh (1987) *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart Inc.

[5] See M. A. Caws (1990) *Women of Bloomsbury*, New York: Routledge and D. B. Turnbaugh (1987) *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart Inc.

[6] See V. Woolf (1929) *A Room of One's Own*, New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 38.

[7] See D. B. Turnbaugh (1987) *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart Inc.

[8] See C. Bell (1987) *Art*, Oxford,UK: Oxford University Press (originally published 1914).

[9] See K. Fisher (1975) *Conversations with Sylvia*, London, UK: Charles Skilton Ltd.

[10] See A. Thwaite (1984) *Biography of Edmund Gosse*, London, UK: MacMillan.

[11] The imaginary letters I write between Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell are based on the knowledge that both did exchange letters in 1914 after Clive Bell's *Art* was published. (Nicolson and Trautman, 1976, p. 46). I draw on Virginia Woolf's (1929) writing *A room of one's own* for her thoughts on the aesthetic. Though this work is more strictly a critique of the epistemology of the Western World, I read it for its implied aesthetic. For Clive Bell's (1914) thoughts I rely on his writing in *Art*. And for Sylvia Gosse's thoughts I draw on the writing of Kathleen Fisher (1975), *Conversations with Sylvia*. I acknowledge that the letters are my interpretations of these works.

[12] See C. Bell (1987) *Art*, New York: Capricorn Books, p.18.

[13] See V. Woolf (1929) *A Room of One's Own*, New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 38.

[14] See V. Woolf (1929) *A Room of One's Own*, New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 28.

[15] See C. Bell (1987) *Art*, New York: Capricorn Books.

[16] See K. Fisher (1975) *Conversations with Sylvia*, London, UK: Charles Skilton Ltd.

[17] See J. Donovan (1993) Everyday Use and Moments of Being. In Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Ed's.) *Aesthetics in Feminist perspective*, P.53.

[18] See C. Bell (1987) *Art*, New York: Capricorn Books, p. 82.

[19] See L. Emery (1989) Believing in Artistic Making and Thinking, *Studies in Art Education*, 30(4), pp.242-43.

[20] See L. Emery (1989) Believing in Artistic Making and Thinking, *Studies in Art Education*, 30(4), p.237.

[21] See J. Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience*, New York: Capricorn Books, p. 89.

[22] See J. Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience*, New York: Capricorn Books, p. 48.

[23] See D. Schon (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, London, UK: Jossey-Bass Limited.

[24] See M. Greene (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom*, New York: Teachers College Press.

[25] See E.W. Eisner (1972) *Educating Artistic Vision*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, p. 280.

[26] See J. Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience*, New York: Capricorn Books, p.4.

[27] See J. Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience*, New York: Capricorn Books, p.19.

[28] See P.W. Jackson (1995) If We Took Dewey's Aesthetic Seriously, How would the Arts be Taught? In J. Garrison (Ed.) *The New Scholarship on Dewey*, Boston:Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 197-98.

[29] See P.W. Jackson (1995) If We Took Dewey's Aesthetic Seriously, How would the Arts be Taught? In J. Garrison (Ed.) *The New Scholarship on Dewey*, Boston:Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 196.

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SOURCE: JCT 21 no1 Spr 2005
WN: 0510507253010

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