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Tammy Ostrander

College of St. Scholastica, tostrand@css.edu

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TAMMY OSTRANDER

The Evolution of Aesthetic Response in Honors Students

TAMMY OSTRANDER

COLLEGE OF ST. SCHOLASTICA

In many college courses, the goal of teaching is to convey content so that the students in the course can become literate in a certain discipline. In such courses, the students learn information with which to answer questions appropriate to the field of study. In a course on the arts, however, the goal may not be answering the questions, but asking them. Due to the philosophical nature of the question ‘What is Art?’ for example, faculty members teaching a course on the arts need to realize that students may never fully grasp the concept of what art is. A nonetheless worthy outcome of such a course, though, might be a meaningful evolution of intellectual thought regarding the question. Put another way, a course on the arts perhaps ought not teach *answers* to questions like ‘What is Art’ so much as teach such (ultimately unanswerable) *questions themselves* that prod us to think about art and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complicated philosophy of aesthetics.

The following essay includes observations about student willingness and ability to query the nature of art. The material provided arose from various events that occurred in an Honors course entitled “The Arts” at The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN, in which the students examined a number of arts, both performing and non-performing, attended a wide range of artistic events, and continually asked the question, “What is art?”

They May not Know It, but They do Have Some Ideas about What Art Is

The second day of The Arts class, the students and two Honors faculty members embarked on the first of several expeditions to find art. This first trip was to the most logical place: an art museum. Luckily, the class was granted a wonderful guide in the actual curator of the museum. He had organized the museum’s current exposition of works dealing with nature. As the curator led us through the museum, the group was unbearably quiet and cautious. The first sign of life came when the curator was enthusiastically engaged in discussing a piece that looked like a square foot of dried grass wrapped in duct tape. A student finally piped up with, “What makes this art? It’s just a bunch of hay in duct tape!” The curator then discussed the artist’s intention and personal connection to the field from which the grass came. The student remained doubtful, but quiet.

Near the end of the tour, the curator led the weary students to a room that contained large pieces of artwork. We passed by a number of boxes of grass, but

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having had one lengthy explanation regarding grass artwork, the students avoided the piece. Instead, their focus was drawn to a large net that covered one entire wall of the museum. Dried red roses were delicately hanging from the net. Another of the braver students again ventured forth to engage the curator in discussion. “When did the artist come here to set this piece up? It must have taken her hours.” “Oh, the artist never came here,” the curator replied. “She sent us instructions and the staff set it up.” The floodwaters broke forth. The students highly resented the fact that a piece of art the artist didn’t touch was included in the exposition.

The museum experience as a whole demonstrated that the students had been generally indiscriminate in accepting a thing as being art. They arrived comfortable with the idea that a piece might be art even if they didn’t like it or didn’t understand it. But the grass/duct tape encounter produced the first signs of aesthetic inquiry in them because the piece itself challenged their innate notions of art. It was neither attractive nor intellectual; it demonstrated no unique skill or insightful vision. At this point in time, the students were truly novices in addressing the question ‘What is Art?’ With no information to serve as a basis for their debates, they were unable to involve themselves in any intellectual discussion of what constituted a piece of art in general and why this specific piece may or may not have been art.

Luckily, the dried rose/net encounter identified one area in which the students were able to be a bit more discriminating about art. They suddenly realized that they did have at least one unconscious notion about art; they clearly believed that there was something special about the touch of the artist, that art involved the idea AND the actual physical process of creation. Interestingly, this first criterion they established to answer the question ‘What is Art?’ didn’t deal with an actual piece of art; it dealt instead with the artist.

One of the frustrations about teaching a class on the arts is that students are generally hesitant to make judgments when there are no clear criteria for making them. There are no obvious correct or incorrect answers to the question ‘What is Art?’ Most honors students are used to knowing the right answer. So, asking a student if a thing is art or not usually results in the affirmative: “If the artist meant it to be art, then it’s art.” If there are no clear guidelines about what makes something “art,” then everything must be art.

Although most students seem to hold steadfastly to the relativist position that anything can be art, at the very heart of it they do have some elementary notions about what constitutes art and what does not. In this instance, what became evident in the dried rose/net interaction is that the students believed that if the artist had not created the work with her own hands, it wasn’t really art.

The general hesitance to consider that a thing might not be art was a constant challenge throughout the course. Students were much more comfortable believing that everything was art; considering the difficulty of defining art, it was, without doubt, the safe and easy answer. In planning to teach a course on the arts or with

¹ The textbook used in The Arts course, *The Humanities Through the Arts*, F. David Martin and Lee A. Jacobus, eds., included discussion sections dealing with public art and values.

artistic components, teachers should be prepared for this reticence. One counter-strategy is to discuss whether there is “good art” and “bad art.” If this distinction can be made, then the next step of “actual art” and “non-art” might follow.

Variations on “I don’t know if it’s art, but I know what I like” OR “You can lead a horse to art, but you can’t make him like it.”

At the end of The Arts course, each student was asked to deliver a Marginal Art presentation in which a particular activity—graffiti, quilting, window displays, tattoos—was examined to determine if it was indeed “art.” The goal of the assignment was to force students to establish criteria for art by which a piece could be measured. The students had been considering the nature of art for fifteen weeks. They had interviewed a variety of artists; they had reflected upon numerous works of art. They had read essays from Aristotle, Kant, Hume, and others on the nature of aesthetics. The naïve scholars who had ventured into that museum the second day of class now had a whole arsenal of personal experiences with art augmented by a semester of philosophical discussions about the nature of art.

One student selected cooking as his marginal art. Among the many items he prepared were two versions of a chocolate mousse: one was made with heavy cream and cocoa; the other was simply Cool Whip mixed with chocolate syrup. After a wonderful presentation in which the student discussed the need for an audience, the aesthetic influence of the food on the senses, and the special talent of the artist, he allowed the students to sample the food he had brought. Most students preferred the Cool Whip mixture.

At this juncture, the students could understand intellectually that there were differences at least among *levels* of art. Some of the more sophisticated thinkers had developed some criteria for judging art. Depending on those criteria, the cream and cocoa mousse might arguably have been the higher or finer art form. However, just because the students understood that something might be more artful on an intellectual level, that didn’t mean they necessarily liked it better or even appreciated it more.

When we attended that initial museum tour, the curator told us that, on average, a museum patron will look at a piece of art for about seven seconds before moving on. Even once a student comes to understand art on an intellectual level, emotional satisfaction does not automatically follow. Keep in mind that, for any arts class, theory and practice are two very different things. If a student is able to develop an intellectual understanding of art and a set of criteria for judging it, the class has indeed been successful for that person, for that is a remarkable achievement. To hope for the additional emotional appreciation of a work might be too much to ask for in a mere semester.

An Intellectual Expedition Takes a Turn

About a month into the course and after they had gotten to know each other a

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little better, the students went on another expedition: a sculpture tour. They were each provided with a map of various sculpture locations in town that included a picture of the sculpture, its title, its creator, and a brief description of it. After their artful encounters and at a pre-established time, they had to meet me at a local restaurant. I had reserved a huge table and ordered food.

I could hear them the moment they hit the room. They were excited; they were animated. When they saw me, they were positively bubbling. "This was so much fun," one cried. Once we all got settled, I asked, "So what was your favorite?" I couldn't believe their unanimous choice: they identified a piece that looked like a giant metallic pi. "Why did you like that one," I asked, trying to hide my mystification. "Because Brad and Meghan jumped on it and looked like surfers!"

For the next 30 minutes, they recounted which sculptures were the best for climbing. They definitely knew which fountains they preferred playing in the most.

If the goal is for students to develop an aesthetic sensibility, taking students out of the classroom is extremely helpful. First, the students realize that art exists in many more places than a gallery or theatre. They broaden their thinking about what constitutes artistic creation. For example, by moving into the city to view art, they begin to realize that buildings are another art form. Second, they learn that artistic considerations affect decisions made well beyond the traditional art settings of museums and performance venues. Good city (and campus) planners, for example, consider artistry in making decisions about what is built, how and where something is built, and what materials are used. Third, this new education then allows the students to embrace the notion that choices about art inherently involve individual and civic values. Although a thorough discussion of the interaction between artistic choices and values is well beyond the scope of this article, acknowledging that the question 'What is Art?' is value-laden provides an important component of the discussion.¹ Fourth, students realize that art is public and that we are all consumers of art even if we never go to a museum or performance.

In addition to the value of off-campus activities in helping students query the nature of art, taking students off campus together assists them in creating connections with each other and reminds us all that students learn a great deal when forced to engage in intellectual activities outside of the classroom. Although their initial positive evaluations of the sculpture tour experience were based primarily on *social* standards, encouraging social interactions about intellectual topics helps to create a community of learners. The outing also taught the students a thing or two about what behaviors and even attire are expected of people at various cultural sites and events. Finally (and relatedly), since all Honors faculty members had standing invitations to all events the Arts class attended and many did indeed join us, our students got to see their professors in the act of enjoying themselves culturally!

A student who had taken The Arts course three years ago recently asked me if I was going to teach it again. "I don't know," I replied. "Do you think I should?" Her response was, "It was the only class I've had in three years that took me off campus."

If a Singer Performs in the Woods, but Nobody Hears Her... OR Best Bets for Discussion

After seeing all kinds of art, embarking on all kinds of outings, listening to all sorts of artists, reading all types of philosophical positions on art, and discussing them all *ad tedium*, we found that the class routinely returned to the same central questions about the nature of art. For a last task in the course, the students created the following list of AEIOU's for enriching the question 'What is Art?'

Artist

- Must we know or understand the artist's intention in creating a work of art? If a person does not *intend* for a work to be art, can it still be art? Conversely, if something *is* intended to be art, is it necessarily art?
- Is the artist responsible solely for the *idea* of the piece, but not the actual *creation* of it? Are the "hands" of the artist unique?

Audience

- Must a piece have an audience before it can be considered art? If a piece is never seen or performed, can it still be art?

Engagement

- Must a work arouse us in some emotional or intellectual way?
- Must a work be beautiful?

Intellectual Component

- Must a piece of art have an intellectual component, or can it merely be decorative?
- Must it have a didactic or moral purpose?

Originality

- Must a work present a fresh voice or new technique to be considered art?
- If a person without artistic skill or training can make a piece by following a set of instructions (the dried rose/net piece or a quilt, for example), can the piece be art?

Utility

- If something has primarily a utilitarian purpose (e.g. furniture or food), can it be art?

Ultimately, The Arts course focused more on learning to ask good questions than on answering them. Many students left the course still somewhat unsure about the question of art, but their level of sophistication in discussing what is ultimately an unanswerable question was most certainly greater. They did not all agree on the various answers offered to the questions cited above, but they did end with a better appreciation for the complexities of aesthetic inquiry. I am hoping the course created a foundation for what will become a lifelong intellectual investigation.

The author may be contacted at:

Honors Program
College of St. Scholastica
1200 Kenwood Avenue
Duluth, MN 55811
e-mail: tostrand@css.edu