

Aesthetics Unto Art: Reaching Disinterested Post-Adolescents

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Lately, teaching about art in high school and college involves at least one problem over and above those variously identified in the schools. By the time today's students emerge from adolescence, they discover themselves in a world where virtually anything can be art, but not everything is. When and/or if they indeed consider the category "art" at all, questions such as "What is 'art' anyway?" and "Why should I care?" are immediately available; and if we have not succeeded by then in providing these students with at least the seeds of meaningful relationships with art, healthy adolescent skepticism can turn into dismissive post-adolescent cynicism about the whole affair.

It seems problematic, then, that most of our current conversation about improving art education concerns itself with how best to do so in the primary schools, with relatively little attention paid to how we might tend to it later. For until art education in the schools becomes more generally and lastingly effective, certain art courses in high school and virtually all nonprofessional ones in college are a) in most instances the last organized exposures to art that students are likely to have, and b) perforce remedial.

Authors of traditional art appreciation textbooks who have sought to characterize the category "art" have typically (and justifiably) done so in terms of vague pseudo-philosophical and/or Lowenfeldian generalities.¹ To today's disinterested post-adolescent, however, such responses are ever less effective. Raised in a cultural environment increasingly characterized by de-contextualized, ostensibly unrelated, largely undifferentiated bits of externalized information, most post-adolescents have lately been found, perhaps not surprisingly, to be concrete operational thinkers. For them, seemingly discrete "infobits" are perhaps particularly appropriate elements of thought; but traditional philosophic-emotional abstractions are not. If we want to teach today's secondary and post-secondary students well about art, we need to develop new ways to talk about it, that they'll be more likely to "get."

A Post-Structural pragmatist aesthetic, reduced to absolute basics, has proven an uniquely effective cornerstone from which to do this. Not only does it speak, in ways to which such students readily relate, about what the word "art" might be taken to mean; it also offers a rationale for why they should bother, and implies an effective methodology for discussing individual artworks, when they do. Just three hours of lecturing about such an aesthetic, early in an otherwise standard fifteen-week art appreciation course, has produced truly striking improvements in the personal, generative understandings of art garnered by the undergraduates in such courses.² It should do the same for high school students.

The Post-Structural Point(s)

Structuralism proposed that in any given situation, the significance of any given element is purely a function of its relationships to every other element in that situation. As humans, say the Structuralists, we make pragmatic sense of our world(s) by "structuring" *perceived* elements of them into *conceived* relationships, by which we can attribute meaning to things. As long as our ideas of how those perceived phenomena relate (and mean) "work," in getting us through our days, they are taken as operational "understandings" ... until in time those that continue to "work" tend to be experienced as givens, as "the way things are." We have been thus "structuring" our experience ever since we evolved *as* humans. Some of the understandings we have constructed have prevailed since; others have been changed or been replaced over time; we all develop and/or refine new, idiosyncratic ones daily.

Three points follow from this Structural description: a) As far at least as we can empirically tell, we are thus constantly "making up" our world as we understand it—indeed doing so is what it is to *be* human; b) As a result, we humans—apparently uniquely—experience virtually everything in our purview as "sign," as significant of the likely presence of other things that are understood as part of the same "structure" (a headache, for instance, can never be "just" a headache for us, as presumably one is for our Golden Retriever— for us, it's inevitably a "sign" which, when related to appropriate others, may signify illness or stress, etc.); and c) dealing thus with signs and structures is what allows us to ascribe meaning to things.

A Problem (?) and its Pragmatic Solution(s)

We all "make sense" of our lives in this relational, relativistic way, say the Structuralists, and insofar as art is part of our lives, that's how we make sense of *it*. In that fundamental regard, then, art is not different from anything else, and so questions about the distinctive nature of category are moot—an obvious quandary for art educators. There seem to be two, mutually complementary, ways out of it.

If we wish to continue our discussion of ‘art’ per se, we can delimit our subject by “structuring in” the old Formalist idea that art be understood, by definition, as significant activity engaged in purely in its own terms, without reference to external concerns, and purely for the sake of doing so (artists’ descriptions of their optimum experiences in making art tend, by the way, to bear this out). This sets it apart from all the other, purposeful “structuring” we do in the name of getting something *else* communicated or accomplished. And/or, we can accept the idea that art *is* no different at base than any other human endeavor, in which case we can proceed, as various pragmatist aestheticians have lately suggested,³ to the aestheticization of society-at-large, approaching all our structuring on the same basis that has traditionally been reserved for the making of “art.”

Implications for Teaching About Art

If we, as humans, take everything we notice (on any perceptual or cognitive level) as “sign”, and if structuring signs relative to one another in the name of making sense (and usually, of furthering some other end) is what we do, and if art is the structuring of signs relative to one another purely in their own terms and purely for the sake of doing so, then art is understandable as the paradigmatic human activity. That makes involvement with art a good idea, as one can learn more about the experience of being human, more directly, if one does “have art” from time to time. Further, art thus becomes less foreign to the experience of disinterested non-artists, and so, more accessible.

And, the intimidating (for many) idea that art contains preexistent “meanings” that the “appreciator” is obligated to “decode,” is eliminated, in this description. The art part of a thing just “is,” and meaning is to be *made* of it, rather than *found in* it. If whatever we can notice (read: see, feel, learn, understand, etc.) in our experience of an artwork is pure “sign,” without external reference, and “means” only by virtue of its relationship to everything else we notice there, then our “appreciation” of art becomes precisely like the process by which the artist created the work in the first place: we must experience it as thoroughly as we can, notice what we notice, and relate those things in ways that make sense. The supposed risk of getting art “wrong” is supplanted by the opportunity/obligation to creatively “structure” one’s understanding of it in as multifaceted and “beautiful” a manner as one can. (Such interpretations rarely diverge much from “accepted” ones — but they feel, to students, more their own, and less “received.”) Appreciating art thus literally becomes a creative/artistic process itself ... and can even, dare we say it, be fun.

Post-adolescent would-be art appreciators, today, really do “get” this epistemological description. Its relatively objective, empirical orientation appeals in ways that seem appropriate to disillusioned “Generation Xers” in a post-Modern “information age,” and its emphasis on the manipulation of discrete, clearly identifiable “signs” seems perfectly suited to their concrete operational cognitive style. On its basis they relate to art in personal, generative ways that result not only in fresh and insightful term papers but also, to hear them tell it, in clearer, more creative thinking about their lives in general. We need that.

References

- Granger, C. R. (1990). Restructuring Introductory Biology according to the learning cycle instructional strategy. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 27(3), 267-85.
- Shipps, S. W. (1994). *Last impressions? Aesthetic theory and outcomes in 'Art 101.'* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Shusterman, R. (1992). *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Notes

1. See for instance Granger, Charles R., “*Restructuring Introductory Biology According to the Learning Cycle Instructional Strategy*,” FIPSE and Missouri University/St. Louis College of Arts and Sciences (1986); Adey, Philip, and Michael Shayer,(1990, March). “Accelerating the development of formal thinking in middle and high school students,” *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 27(3) 267-85; etc.
2. Shipps, Stephen W. (1994). *Last impressions? Aesthetic theory and outcomes in 'Art 101.'* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard Graduate School of Education.
3. For a clear discussion of approaches to this issue, see Shusterman, Richard, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art* (Cambridge, MA, Blackwell, 1992).