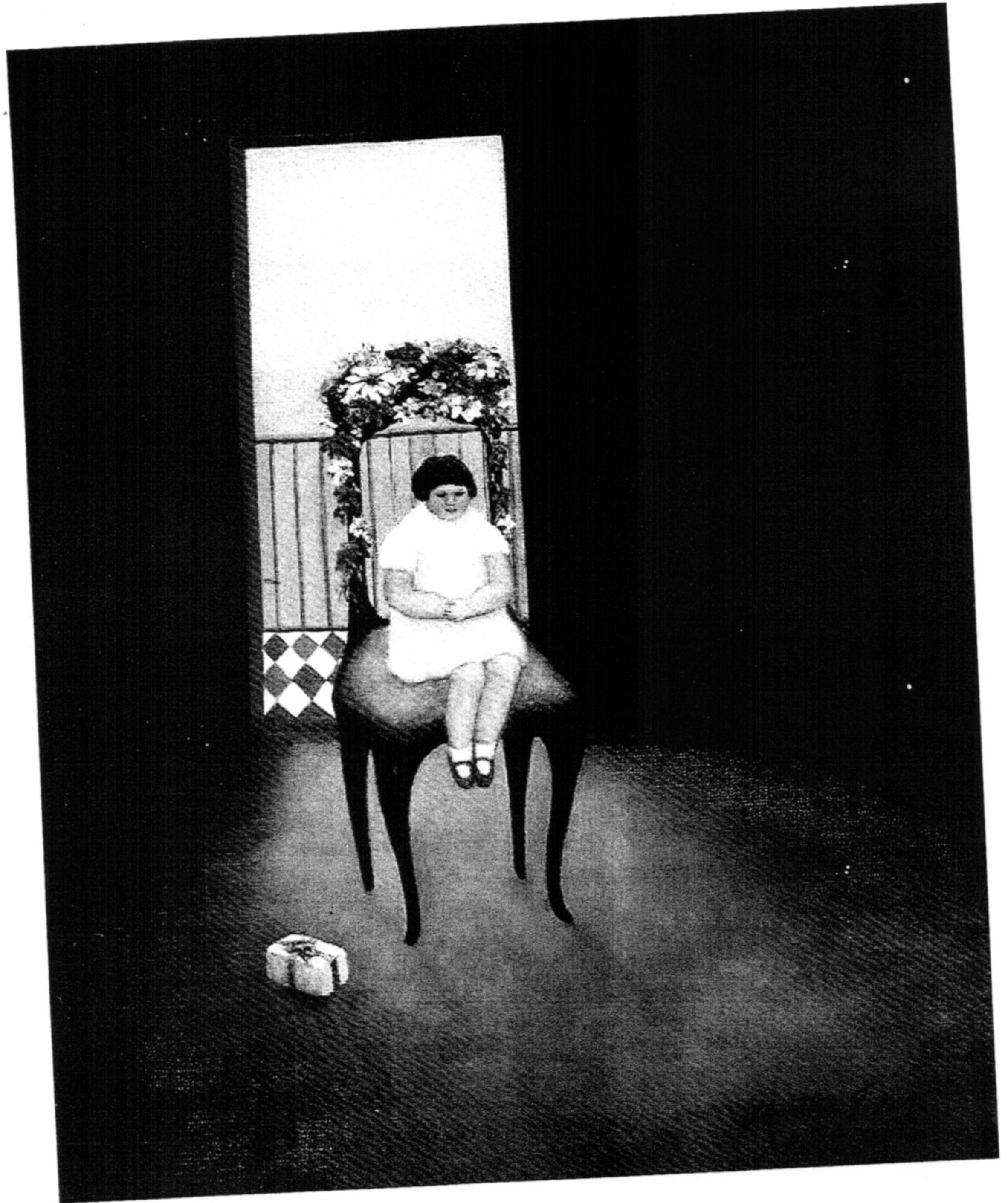
CHAPTER 2

Art Education and Human Values



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Introduction

A generation ago the late Louis Arnaud Reid (1976) stated, "… the arts have as one chief source of their importance their endlessly new revelation of new values and new relationships of values, each art having its own reservoir of resources" (p. 21). This chapter looks at Reid's assertion and its applicability to the aesthetic response component of art education. In the process I will also say a few words about the role of the elements and principles of design within aesthetic response.

My students are pre-service elementary generalist teachers, but their experiences echo what I have tried with children. [illegible] things are consistent, no matter what our ages. So let me begin with a little anecdote about a university class exercise. [illegible]wards I will put the exercise into context through a discussion about its various components and their theoretical [illegible]pinnings.

An Example

[illegible] the beginning of term I often show a reproduction of [illegible] give students about a minute to look at the work [illegible] down a word or phrase that the work suggests to [illegible] tell them that I am not looking for a factual term [illegible] green, or dark. Rather, I want to know their response [illegible]ur, setting, or whatever has captured their [illegible] When I ask the students to share their responses [illegible] find that there is substantial correspondence, [illegible] wording might be slightly different. For [illegible] painting I use frequently is called The Gift, [illegible] Teles. It features, centrally in the composition, a [illegible] seated on a large chair. Her feet dangle well above [illegible] has on a white dress, and there are flowers [illegible] the back of her chair. Behind, and therefore [illegible] child, is an open doorway, a balcony, and a [illegible] beyond. By one leg of the chair, well out of [illegible] child, is a small rectangular package, with a [illegible] apparently the gift to which the title refers.

[illegible] sense of material comfort that the work [illegible] dissonance: The separateness between [illegible] colour contrast between the child and [illegible] room's interior, the distance between [illegible] gift. There are a number of other odd [illegible] numerous to mention here.

Responses to the work result in terms such as lonely, sad, oppressive, frightening, bizarre, trapped, waiting. As the students volunteer their words and phrases I ask them to point to somethi[ng] in the image that contributed to their response. It is at this point that they begin to identify specific features of the dissonance.

What quickly becomes apparent to the class is that each word means something a little, or occasionally, a lot different from the others. But even when one student's response is quite different, th[e] class is usually able to see why the individual responded in that wa[y]. For example, one word that is suggested occasionally is "spoiled". This response is so at odds with the others that the class is usually quite disconcerted. But when I ask the student to point to the features that prompted her response, she offers the signs of mater[ial] prosperity—impeccable clothing, a somewhat overweight child flowers; even the dominant eggplant-like colour suggests a richne[ss]. So this student can defend her choice of word. But the students al[so] quickly realize that each term, by itself, is an over-simplification of the work; that is, when they see the combination of words they begin to grasp the potential of the image to provide multiple but related responses that coalesce into a larger, though ambiguous, meaning. This is what Swanger [illegible] suggests by the phrase "op[en] form". The work "… affords a variety of interpretations, even one[s] that may contradict each other, and resists unequivocal judgment" (p.95).

The Gift [illegible] Teles 1980

[illegible]

experientially rich or poor they are. Suffice to say that if one's life experiences have a narrow horizon, his/her relations with the world will not be as richly layered, significant, or valuable as those of someone more broadly experienced.

(ii) Local and regional properties: an application of values. As I mentioned earlier, students are able to point to specific properties of the Teles painting—the colours, proportion of child in relation to chair, distortions in perspective, and so forth. Curtler (2000) notes that these descriptors are called "local properties". All students can see them. They are fact-based entities.

In concert with the local properties are regional properties. It is these that, according to Curtler, define the value. The dissonance I mentioned earlier is an example of a regional quality. Unlike a local quality it cannot be pointed to directly, but the designation can be justified through reference to the local properties. As Curtler says, local properties "anchor" regional ones (p.11). This is a reciprocal relationship in which each property, local and regional, helps to support, clarify, and define the other.

The terms my students used to describe the painting—sad, oppressive, and so forth—denote the regional qualities. Curtler is correct in pointing out that valuations, as feelings, are not values; and words like "sad" do suggest a feeling. But it is important to keep in mind that the viewing of the image did not make my students sad. They just recognised the value quality—sadness. Sadness was a dormant quality, awaiting recognition brought about through the interaction (relation) between viewer and image.

While Curtler argues that the regional properties are the values, we can go one step further. When my students point to sadness, oppression, loneliness in the painting, I agree that they have identified a human quality. But I also suggest that these initial values point to others. The reason that the image depicts oppression or loneliness is that it also suggests what is not there, but should be—human sociability, justice and related values. Curtler insists that values must be experienced, not inferred (p.11). But the power of artworks often rests in our ability to experience what is not there as well as what is.[3]

In such instances the local features, the value-carriers, provide a dormant value-field, the potentiality for value awareness. The regional features emerge when we bring our world contexts (our understanding of, for example, loneliness) to bear on the local features. At that moment th value-field becomes no longer dormant; the field actively contains a value of which we are conscious. But it is not simply a matter of saying, for example, "The work is about loneliness." Underlying that recognition is a simultaneo acknowledgement that one values sociability. The need for human contact is the value counterpart of the value "solitu So in our example, the student must not only empathize w the girl in the painting; the student must also be able to se the image as a metaphor—for desirable sociability, justice for children, the importance of human attention relative tc material goods, or some such comparable interpretation. T ability to form the metaphor is a fundamentally imaginativ and, as Swanger suggests, reciprocal act that requires input from both the individual participant and, in this case, the painting. *The Gift* is the title of the painting, but the real subject matter is the metaphoric interpretation. And it is th value.

We can summarize this section now with the following definition: Values are qualities that acknowledge describe, and correspond to the regional properties of objects and events. In turn, these regional properties ma be metaphors for larger issues. The regional properties correspond to the local properties of the thing/event itself.

(b) Feelings

Now let us look at the relation of feelings to values, an the educational implications of that relationship. Feelings are not values, but feelings are symptomatic of values. The existence indicates values that one already holds. For exam if my students have empathy for the girl in the painting, th is the result of their value judgements, that this is not an appropriate way to treat a child. Each judgement is a resul values already formed by prior experiences that we bring t bear on the current moment in a spontaneous, that is, non volitional, act of comparison. Such acts of comparison resu in the simultaneous experience of a particular feeling. In sh feelings are values-laden responses to a given situation.

It is for this reason that Reid (1976) can make the clai "It is when we come to the world of values that the vital importance not only of feeling but of its cultivation and education is seen" (p.15). Reid then, not only draws attent to the essential connections between values and the arts, h also emphasizes the direct contribution of feelings to the educational equation.

thinking. At the time, the concept was an appropriate strategy for understanding emerging modernist art. Over the past century art teachers gradually conflated the terms into the elements and principles *of art*. As Gude (2004) and others have pointed out, this conflation implies universality, one that the diversity of art forms across cultures and eras does not support. Still, for some people, attention to an element such as line, or an organizational feature such as rhythm might provide an initial toehold upon which to build an interaction with certain works (not all works). We might also argue they are what make up the local properties of which Curtler speaks. But as we have seen, for students to arrive at a value designation such as loneliness or injustice, they must synthesize the impact of a number of these local properties. So, yes, students must recognize a colour or line and how and why it is used. More importantly, they must see how such features are inter-related holistically into the meaning of the work. Meaning is seldom, if ever, dependent upon a single feature acting alone. To focus on one design element or organizational strategy would be to fall into the formalist trap and forego possibilities of meaning making.

This does not mean that a teacher can't show a Van Gogh drawing for the sake of its line; but if she talks only about the line as line, without discussing how it contributes to the feeling of the landscape, then the teacher misses the point as to why we find the work significant. That is, it's not just about line as an example of line, but about a particular landscape and Van Gogh's interpretation of it, as well as about a tradition of European drawing, Van Gogh's participation in that tradition and extension of it. In other words, Van Gogh's drawing is an encapsulation of western culture to that time, as distilled through the artist's personal life and temperament. Then too, our capacity for engagement with the drawing depends on our own history that we bring to bear on the moment—our familiarity with the work, comparisons to other works, our own attempts at drawing, and a host of other influences, many of which we are likely not even aware.

In short, preoccupation with physical properties alone cannot provide an aesthetic experience. What such preoccupation provides is size, shape, manner of execution, and the like. It might even provide an awareness of the unity of the whole. But without attention to feeling, context (one's own and that of the work at the time of its making), synthesis, and potential for meaning, then we lose the significance of the work to us. We lose the value.

So it is that current art educators such as Gude (2004, 2007), Duncum (2010) and others have taken the phrase, elements and principles, and turned it on its postmodern head. If Dow's focus was appropriate to the beginnings of the twentieth century, we must acknowledge that the world has changed since then. Therefore it seems reasonable that the foci of art education should reflect those changes. Gude (2004) notes: "A basic tenet of all postmodern theory is a suspicion of totalizing discourses and grand narratives—the belief that there is one right way to organize and understand things" (p. 13). So, in place of Dow's elements and principles, Gude suggests we adopt more postmodern concerns that she has noted in contemporary art practice. In her 2004 article, she consolidates these practices into eight categories, or 'principles', for example, appropriation and juxtaposition. To that list Gude (2007) has more recently added "principles of possibility", to address "…from the students' point of view, imagining what important ideas about the uses and making of art we want the students to remember as significant" (p.2). She suggests, among other considerations, playing, encountering difference, and forming the self.

Like Gude, Duncum (2010) is anxious to move educators away from a reliance on the modernist elements and principles. Thus, in his turn, Duncum has proposed his own list of seven principles, influenced by his focus on visual culture. The first of these is power.

> Power is the key principle because most of the other principles intersect with issues of power… all images involve an assertion of ideas, values, and beliefs that serve the interests of those for whom they are made—political, social, and economic—and audiences, in their turn, exercise the power of interpretation. (p. 6)

Duncum then fills in his list with what he considers to be starting points for others to build on—ideology, seduction, representation, and so forth.

What Gude and Duncum have in common, apart from their rejection of the modernist elements and principles, is a reliance on attention to context in the development of alternative perspectives. It is clear that the concept of elements and principles has taken on new roles, perspectives and possibilities for art education.

Summary

My main argument has been that human values—individual, cultural and societal—may be, and should be, a central focus of art education. I have said that attention to values is an appropriate and timely concern in education today, and that art education is ideally suited to address the

issues. The reasons I have cited have to do with the nature of value itself, the interconnectedness between people and things, (fundamentally an imaginative, empathic act), associated feelings, the essentiality of concrete distinction-making to current educational practice, and the importance of taking context into consideration. I have suggested that all of these features can be addressed efficiently in art education, especially in that part of it that deals specifically with aesthetic response.

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Notes

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Baumgarten, in his unfinished text *Aesthetica* (1750, 1758) departed from the Greek usage of the term "aesthetic" so that it became a judgement according to the senses—emphasis on *judgement*. Ultimately this orientation led to a focus on taste and implied standards of taste. But preferences in taste are culture-bound, and art teachers have no mandate to dictate taste. Baumgarten's point of view is understandable insofar as his conceived world was smaller than ours is today, and Euro-centered. Our world is increasingly pluralistic and complex. To insist on a more correct taste is to place on a lower rung of the cultural-hierarchy ladder those who choose otherwise. There would appear to be little justification or need for such a stance in a democratic, pluralistic society. Amore profitable line of inquiry, from an educational perspective, is to search out the distinguishable features.

Similarly, Kant's (1790/1957) bias in favour of mind over body led him away from the early Greek orientation. Perhaps Kant's most controversial idea is his notion of a disinterested interaction with art, that is, an interaction devoid of the features discussed by Buck-Morss and Nussbaum and reliant solely on rationality. Most art educators today would argue that this notion does not conform to our experiences with art.

Darian Leader (2002), in his text, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, reinforces this point with his anecdote about the crowds who came to see where the Mona Lisa used to hang after it was stolen in 1911.