

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF AESTHETICS (1985)

MARGARET P. BATTIN

EDITOR'S NOTE:

One of the most provocative aspects of discipline-based art education is its claim to involve aesthetics as a source of content for curriculum even in the elementary grades. To some art educators the prospect of teaching philosophical and abstract aesthetics to school children seems unfeasible if not also unwise. In fact, as Margaret Battin points out in her paper, given at a 1985 conference on the rationale for discipline-based art education, aesthetics' heady metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological questions about the nature of art and how it is valued are not usually of much concern to the average art viewer or even to many practising artists. Yet she maintains that even young children can practice forms of aesthetic inquiry, by creating puzzles and games which challenge them to think about what they see and perhaps try and suggest why visual forms are as they are. Battin uses a case study approach to describe a simple interaction in which children are asked to formulate answers to what is in fact an aesthetic conundrum. When the student explores the issues raised by the question he or she "is doing precisely what full-grown, adult aestheticians with Ph.D.s and university appointments do." Battin also shows how the problem might be elaborated for older or more sophisticated students. In putting forth an entirely realistic and feasible prospect for aesthetics to be included as a source of content in DBAE Battin has faced head-on one of the thorniest challenges which has been faced by advocates of the new paradigm. Margaret Battin is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah.

SOURCE: "What Can Aesthetics Contribute to a Young Person's Ability to Understand and Value Art?" Paper delivered at the Getty Seminar on the Discipline-Based Art Education Monograph, Scottsdale, Arizona, November 1985.

The most tempting answer to the question posed as the topic for these remarks -- "what can aesthetics contribute to a young person's ability to understand and value art?" -- is "nothing", or, at least, "embarrassingly little". Aesthetics, after all, is a field of *philosophy*, and hence a field dedicated to the analysis of abstract, foundational questions rarely raised in everyday life. The concerns of aesthetics include metaphysical questions about the ontology of art, epistemological questions about valuational judgments in art, and ethical questions about the intersection of aesthetic and other values. But, as we all know, you can live your life, and you can furthermore enjoy and contribute to the arts, without any formal examination of questions like these. It is hardly necessary to initiate oneself in the arcane disputes of aesthetics to view an exhibit, enjoy a recital, paint a canvas, or compose poetry. Indeed, most artlovers and practising artists have comparably little acquaintance with the formal discipline of aesthetics, and most show little interest in acquiring it. But if these things are true for adults, they may seem to be even more true for children, whose skills in the appreciation and production of the arts are only beginning to develop.

Furthermore, not only do children seem to have little immediate appreciation for the kinds of abstract discussions aestheticians indulge in, if they can understand these discussions at all, but they display remarkably little tolerance for adult pedantry. To attempt to wedge aesthetics into the already congested curriculum of the ordinary elementary or high school might seem to provide kids with one more reason for disenchantment with the educational world. Indeed, to impose the study of aesthetics upon children whose opportunities for seeing and making art are already limited might seem gratuitously cruel.

But there is a way to introduce aesthetic inquiry to children in a form that avoids these difficulties. While children dislike pedantry, they do like puzzles and problems, especially ones that make them think, and they are perfectly willing to think about puzzles about art. Here's one:

Al Meinbart paints a portrait of art dealer Daffodil Glurt. The resulting canvas is a single solid color, chartreuse. Meinbart hangs the canvas in the Museum of Modern Art, labelled, "Portrait of Daffodil Glurt". Daffodil is not amused. But has she actually been insulted?

Now the sly thing about a puzzle-case like this, of course, is that the puzzles in it are all aesthetic ones. Has Daffodil Glurt actually been insulted by Meinbart's all-chartreuse portrait? If so, how? The answer depends in part on whether nonobjective art can

make assertions (e.g., "Daffodil Glurt is a prissy, sour woman") or not, and if so, how we can know what these assertions are. It may seem that a solid color patch cannot portray or say anything. On the other hand, if it can say something, for instance that Daffodil is prissy and sour, why couldn't it equally well say that she is a woman with the bursting energies of early spring, like yellow-green forsythia buds just as they break into bloom. Or that she has the intoxicating pungent sweetness of a certain liqueur. And so on. Children are wizards at inventing things a solid patch of chartreuse might say, but in doing so they also see that it is difficult to say which one is right, or for that matter whether a solid patch of chartreuse says anything at all. At best, they may say, viewers may have varying emotional reactions to the alleged portrait, depending on whether they like the color chartreuse and how their moods are running that day, but these have nothing to do with any alleged claim about Daffodil Glurt that the artist might have made.

When a child explores these issues, he is doing precisely what full-grown, adult aestheticians with Ph.D.s. and university appointments do, although of course full-grown aestheticians for the most part do it with an elaborate conceptual apparatus of abstract terminology. But the issues are the same: is art assertoric in character? What truthvalue can be assigned nonverbal utterances? Are nonverbal presentations like paintings *utterances* at all? What characteristics must a work have to count as a *portrait*? To what degree are the aesthetic characteristics of a work a function of the perceptual and conceptual characteristics of the viewer? (This is the old "is beauty in the eye of the beholder?" issue.) Are there objective meaning-correlates for at least certain kinds of visual perceptions? What about the semiotic functions of art? What limits are there to the expressions of artists, or does the value of art override other considerations of social rights and utilities? And so on. Both children, at least with the help of a stimulating teacher, and full-grown aestheticians can extend the range of questions provoked by this simple puzzle-case nearly indefinitely, though children of course do it with a less ornate vocabulary and a lucky innocence of the academic literature.

Even quite young children are sensitive to aesthetic issues, though the puzzle-cases which elicit them must be revised to interest younger minds. A second-grader, for instance, may have little antecedent interest in professional artists or art dealers, and never have heard of the Museum of Modern Art, but will respond to a case put like this:

One day your teacher says she's going to draw a picture of you. She takes a sheet of paper and covers the whole thing with chartreuse crayon, you know, that yukky yellow-green color,

and then she tacks it up on the board saying, "This is a picture of Billy G." Would you be mad?

On the other hand, very much older children, including college students and professors, often find such issues compelling when cast in the language of rights and obligations, or as issues at law:

Al Meinbart paints the solid-chartreuse portrait of Daffodil Glurt and hangs it in the Museum of Modern Art. Have Daffodil's rights been violated? Ought she be able to sue for defamation of character? For violation of contract in sitting for a *portrait*?

Both children and adults also respond to actual cases, such as the real one on which the Daffodil case is based:

In 1957, the abstract expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt painted a portrait of Paris art dealer Iris Clert. The portrait is black on black, and it is titled "Portrait of Iris Clert." Clert was flattered. Should she have been?

But in all these versions of the problem, the underlying questions are the same: what can a picture say, and what features must it have in order to say something? How can we tell what a picture says? Does a portrait have to look like -- even slightly like -- the person it's a portrait of? What limits are there, if any, to what art may say? And so on. These questions, like the general questions of aesthetics -- what is art? How can we tell good art from bad art? What is the function or purpose of art? What is the value of art for society? and so on -- are all questions which can be posed in a way that is engaging for children as well as adults. Of course, aesthetics as a discipline is often a good deal more successful in posing questions than in reaching answers, and the child's simple world may be disturbed by leading him to ask questions he cannot answer, but this discomfort is part of what we consider genuine education. After all, it is just this sort of questioning which may, ultimately, have profound effect on the way in which an adult person views, creates, and values art.