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# Is What You See What You Get? A Postmodern Approach to Understanding Works of Art

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The contemporary approach to art education focuses on content that is derived from a broad range of the visual arts with an emphasis on what can be learned from works of art. This is a significant departure from earlier aesthetic approaches which led to purely formalist criticism in the classroom. Based on the work of Arthur Danto, the author proposes that teachers develop student abilities to go beyond the visual level of artworks and enable them to gain access to the complexity of meanings that works of art possess. To exemplify this practice, an analysis of Adrian Piper's work entitled *I Embody* is presented.

"Looking at art is a tricky business these days. Once time-honored methods and supposed truths are falling by the wayside" (Kissick, 1991, p. 16). We now question the very concept of art and its role in our pluralistic society. Modernist traditions of form, aesthetic value, and the autonomy of meaning in art have come under question. Many postmodern artists and critics "have come to believe that the construction of meaning is the major issue of today's art" (Risatti, 1990, p. 10). Following suit, contemporary art educators have attempted to reform their approach to curriculum development, creating a broader, more comprehensive study of art. One of the fundamental assumptions of discipline-based art education (DBAE) is that content for study can be derived from a broad range of the visual arts with an emphasis on what can be learned from works of art. As students learn to interact with works of art, refining their perceptions and responses, they become able to gain access to the powerful meanings and messages. In light of a discipline-based approach, should art educators re-examine beliefs and practices that focus on aesthetic experience as a foundation for interpretation of works of art?

Past practices in art education have often valued the study of art for its aesthetic qualities and ability to induce aesthetic experience (Smith, 1986). These practices were based on modernist theories of aesthetic experience posited by philosophers such as John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934) and Monroe Beardsley in *The Aesthetic Point of View* (1982). Such theories focused on distinctive ways of experiencing art objects, such as their emotional impact and the immediate felt relations of order and fulfillment. The qualities of a distinctively aesthetic experience were to be enjoyed for their own sake, unlike the material (signs and symbols) of an intellectual experience. Consequently, much current practice in art education is characterized by describing and analyzing the elements and principles of design and emotive content of artworks. Modernist theories of aesthetic experience are restrictive because they are inadequate for dealing with much contemporary art. The content of postmodern art is different from that of modernism because it deals with issues of content rather than form. Given the nature of contemporary works of art, how

should we explain our responses to works of art? Art educators need a basis for interpretation that provides a better foundation for understanding contemporary works of art. What do teachers need to know in order to foster a better understanding of works of art?

### **Modernist Theories of Aesthetic Experience**

Since the nineteenth century, philosophers have concentrated on theories of the aesthetic, rather than theories of beauty and theories of art. In attempting to define the aesthetic nature and value of art, they have provided insights that formed the basis of interpretation of the arts. Philosophers developed the notion of an aesthetic attitude and argued that any object, artificial or natural, can become an aesthetic object if a viewer takes an aesthetic attitude toward that object. As aesthetic attitude guided “our attention to qualities of art and nature which are ‘aesthetically relevant,’” aesthetic qualities became the focal point of aesthetic experience and the proper object of appreciation (Dickie, 1971, p. 60). Increasingly, theories of the aesthetic and its conditions focused on one’s *experience* rather than one’s understanding of art.

Twentieth century theorists such as Dewey and Beardsley followed in the footsteps of earlier philosophers, developing more fully the concept of aesthetic experience. Both Dewey and Beardsley argued that art’s value lies in its ability to enhance the viewer’s experiences, to engage the human organism in meaningful ways, and thereby to enhance viewer’s lives. Both contended that aesthetic experience differs from ordinary experiences, in that it is more unified, is more coherent, and has a pervasive quality that controls the experience. For Dewey, the essence of art was not in the product or artifact, but in the act of experiencing through creation and perception. Art became the interaction of the living organism with its environment, an interaction that is characteristic of the perceiver as well as the artist. In Beardsley’s view, the aesthetic object had certain formal qualities and relationships which controlled whether the viewer had an aesthetic experience. Beardsley argued that both the aesthetic object and the experience contained characteristics of unity, coherence, and completeness. According to Beardsley, aesthetic experience had no practical purpose; it was to be enjoyed intrinsically. He set aside moral and cognitive aspects as being external to the experience, along with such features as the artist’s intention and emotional effects. Dewey viewed aesthetic experience as a funding of past experiences which built and constituted a new experience. In aesthetic experience our past experiences were extracted and fused with the qualities of the new experience, creating a synthesis of features.

Dewey and Beardsley characterized aesthetic experience in terms of its qualities. According to their modernist theories, there is something immediate, unique, and precious about an aesthetic experience; it can only be felt, immediately experienced, and emotionally intuited; it cannot be described or specifically pointed at. Material or qualities are absorbed and experienced through interaction. There is a formal pattern of inception, development, and fulfillment. Dewey and Beardsley believed that the most important distinction between ordinary experience and aesthetic experience is in the material used by each; in a distinctly aesthetic experience, the emphasis is on qualities. Qualities were to be enjoyed for their own sake, unlike the material (signs and symbols) of an intellectual experience. When experience is controlled by reference to quality then it is an aesthetic experience.

What makes these philosophers especially noteworthy are their exemplary explanations of aesthetic experience and its significance for art. In his own way, each has

defined the nature of aesthetic experience, and each strongly influenced our understanding of art in the field of art education.

### **Modern and Postmodern Art**

The same time period that produced Dewey's and Beardsley's aesthetic theories witnessed a corresponding artistic movement that has come to be known as modernism. Rejecting the past and pursuing innovation in materials and form, modernist artists created their identities by turning inward to concentrate on the self, using their artworks as vehicles for subjective expression. Such artists believed that art existed in and of itself and was purely aesthetic without any function, a philosophy otherwise known as *art for art's sake* (Gablik, 1984). As artists began to focus on change, individuality, and innovative ideas, they produced one style after another. Many moved away from representation to concentrate on line, color, and form in their artworks. These developments in modernism turned attention to the formal qualities of art and aesthetic experience as an end in itself. This revolution against set standards made it difficult to set a single standard by which to judge quality or define art.

During this modernist period, aestheticians attempted to deal with the ever changing objects of art, and a theory known as formalism arose from the belief that formal properties such as line, color, and shape were exclusively important in defining and judging the quality of artworks. Formalists believed that what matters aesthetically are the intrinsic properties of form and that the meaning of each work lies within itself. "Social content—particularly explicit political matter was demoted . . . to irrelevance, as 'sully' the purity or impeding the 'transcendence' of a work" (Piper, 1993, p. 58). According to formalists, works of art were about form, not content, and this became the defining nature of art. But these views were not to last.

Gradually both the art forms and the critical models of the modernist period began to be challenged in postmodern theory and practice. Postmodernism, the term given to the current era, is thought to have originated in the 1970s (Risatti, 1990). While modernism reflected optimism in its explorations of styles and techniques, postmodernism seems to be characterized by an air of skepticism. Issues of aesthetic quality, originality, content, and modes of interpretation occupy the thoughts and practices of the world of art and philosophy. Within the artworld there is pluralism, acknowledging a variety of styles, utilizing pastiche, kitsch, repetition, and appropriation in works of art. In rejecting formalism, postmodern artists rely on allegory, narrative, metaphor, and juxtaposition of unrelated images. They offer art that questions assumptions about beauty, formal relations, originality, and self-expression. Critic Donald Kuspit characterized contemporary art as lacking in morality and spirituality (Heartney, 1987). Thus, the content of postmodern art is significantly different from that of modernism. Artists deal with content such as social and political issues, the marketplace and the art object as a commodity, the art object as a critique of society and culture, and the lack of a standard on which to base quality.

Postmodernism is still evolving, as are its theories of art and criticism. Art has become critical, critiquing both culture and society. It has become necessary to learn the language of the world of art and the critics in order to gain insights into contemporary works of art. The language of modernism was enclosed within the artwork, whereas postmodern art seeks to be understood in the broader context of a dialogue between artwork and society. Today, a work of art might be looked at as a document: what does it have to say?

The art of the present is situated at a crossroads and the tenets of modernist theories such as style, form, or aesthetic sublimity are not the initial concern of artists (Foster, 1985). Contemporary work does not necessarily “bracket art for formal or perceptual experiment, but seeks its affiliations with other practices” (p. 99). According to Foster, artists are attempting to prompt the observer to read meanings and messages in their signs and symbols rather than merely contemplating aesthetic qualities in an art object—a far cry from the aesthetic stance that Dewey and Beardsley described.

As Foster contends, postmodernist art is concerned with the interconnections of power and knowledge, not the purity of artistic mediums. This concern is exemplified in the work of contemporary artists such as Allan McCollum, who concentrates mainly on the art object and how its success is related to social institutions. According to Foster, McCollum’s concern is “the economic manipulation of the art object—its circulation and consumption as a commodity-sign” (p. 104). McCollum has created thousands of surrogate paintings which consist of mat, frame, and blank image as a statement about the public’s desire for control through consumption and the emptiness of this picture fetish. Like other postmodern artists, McCollum has little patience for those of us who ignore the connection between art and the marketplace.

Similarly, issues of sexuality and gender are explicitly explored in much postmodern art. In 1990, Craig Owens observed that in “the modernist period the universalizing aesthetics of form was the claim of art to represent an authentic, coherent vision of the world based on man’s [human beings’] natural sensibilities. In the postmodern period, the aesthetics of form is no longer accepted as universal truth, and any claim to an authentic, coherent vision of the world is now believed to be a cultural construction which postmodernist works of art seek to undermine or deconstruct” (p. 178). Owens discussed the role of gender in modernism and postmodernism, describing how representation is linked to mastery and domination through the “master narrative.” As Owens pointed out, postmodernist work attempts to adopt the stability of that mastering position, particularly with the presence of a definite feminist voice.

Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75), for example, is a work that consists of photographs of storefronts in the Bowery with text relating to inebriety superimposed on the images. The technical crudity of this work is designed to question the validity of both verbal and visual representation. In this sense, Rosler not only “exposes the ‘myths’ of photographic objectivity and transparency,” she also “upsets the (modern) belief in vision as a privileged means of access to certainty and truth” (p. 198). This skeptical attitude toward visual detachment is characteristic of postmodern artists who believe “that vision cannot actually be disinterested or indifferent” (p. 198). Recently many visual artists, particularly feminist artists, have become interested in the issue of representation and sexuality—both masculine and feminine. By showing that vision/sight and representation are linked to patriarchy, feminist artists have sought to expose the hidden means of domination in visual images (Owens, 1990).

Other artists such as Nancy Spero use similarly disruptive, confrontational tactics: “a cinematic stream of broken discourse,” a “creation of a ‘discontinuum’ of images focusing on particular acts of historical violence” (Kuspit, 1990, p. 103). In *Torture of Women* (1976), which consists of sheets of paper 20 inches by 9 feet long, made of 4 units linked together in a mural-continuum, Spero uses “archaic images

of women and quotations of archaic myths of violence against women to create a broadening, archetypal effect" (p. 106). In the work she combines "ancient quotes of repression and torture" with case histories "to show the timelessness of this practice" of torture, and the plight of women as victims of a male ideology (p. 108).

Spero has created an art of ideas; the subject matter is straightforward and crass, creating an anti-aesthetic effect. As Kuspit points out, artists like Spero coerce "the spectator to drop her/his [a]esthetic guard—her/his psychic distance and emotional reserve" (p. 105). The lack of formal unity in her work reminds us "that all art is not transcendental in purpose, and art that is transcendental is more likely to be ideological than critical," suggesting that aesthetic harmony is false to existing reality (p. 104).

In these and other ways, postmodernist artists seek to challenge modernist ideas of the formal and stylistic integrity of the individual work. As Foster (1983) points out, the rubric "anti-aesthetic" is not intended as the negation of art or representation, "but rather as a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them" (p. xv). He further suggests that the very notion of aesthetic experience is being challenged. Like other facets of postmodernism, the " 'anti-aesthetic' also signals a practice. . . that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g., feminist art) or rooted in a vernacular—that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm" (p. xv).

### **Contemporary Art Education**

As notions of art education change, many art educators are beginning to acknowledge the cognitive dimension of art and consequently are questioning what should be taught. What can be learned from and about works of art and how students make connections between this information, their own lives, and the world is a primary aim of contemporary art education. Advocates of a discipline-based approach such as Clark, Day, and Greer (1987), have contended that works of art present us with intricate meanings, and to comprehend such meanings requires developing abilities to explain them. Therefore, one aim of a discipline-based curriculum is to develop students' ability to interpret works of art on a more sophisticated and challenging level. Though DBAE is more an outgrowth of reforms in education than of postmodernism in art, theoretically it could be adapted for explication and interpretation of postmodernist works.

However, current ideology and practice in art education are embedded in contradictions and often appear to vacillate between modernist and postmodernist theories of art. According to Wilson (1988), along with DBAE's new ideological ingredient, DBAE's "intellectual ideals are post- and pre-modernist, while its aesthetic theories and practices are essentially modernist" (p. 64). Evidence of a postmodern approach is more prevalent in the scholarly literature (Clark, Day, & Greer, 1987; Parks, 1989) than in actual practice in the classroom, since formalist theories and practices that characterized the modernist period are still the most popular approach to teaching art.

Many art educators continue to use modernist works of art from which to teach. In many instances the influence of Abstract Expressionism still dominates the content of art teaching and the types of artworks used in the classroom (Parks, 1989). These works and others like them may be so widely used in the classroom because they can be dealt with successfully by using modernist theories as a foundation for understanding. Students are asked to describe the shapes, lines, colors, and other formal elements in a work of art and discuss how this makes the student "feel." Also

in many schools instruction in studio activities is still primarily organized around the concepts of line, shape, value, and color. It appears that the conceptions most art educators hold of how works of art should be interpreted still rely on modernist theories (Smith, 1986). But are modernist practices of interpretation sufficient in a postmodern world?

Abstract Expressionist and Abstract works of art could be dealt with successfully by using modernist theories as a foundation for interpretation. However, the subject matter of contemporary art is often more complex, more puzzling, and does not lend itself to formalist interpretation. For observers of contemporary art, it has become necessary to seek more than an immediate response to the appearance of the work; they seek a myriad of access points and interpretive responses. Changing the approach to interpreting works of art requires a look to other theories of art that enable the viewer to broaden experience and understanding.

### **Postmodern Theory of Interpretation**

A basis for interpretation is provided in Arthur Danto's theory of art presented in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). Danto's theory offers a new account of what constitutes works of art. Unlike modernist theorists, Danto charges that the observer must attend to the non-exhibited qualities of a work. We must look not only at the relationship of elements within the work, but also beyond the object to its historical, rhetorical, and philosophical contexts in order to comprehend its meanings. In this way our interpretation constitutes the work of art.

At the core of Danto's theory is the belief that works of art are *about* something, that they are created to present a view of the world and to affect our attitudes and visions of the world. Danto argues that works of art can be thought of as an externalization of the artist's consciousness, as if we could see the artist's way of seeing, not merely what the artist saw. He insists that we cannot overlook the fact that works of art derive their identities and structure from historical and causal matrices. Their meanings and associations are bound to the cultural framework of the time and assume causal connections with an artistic environment. Thus works of art embody ideas that express an age—the beliefs and attitudes that define a world by those living in that period. It is through the attributes of style and expression that the viewer discovers these ideas.

Danto further argues that artists do not merely assert these facts or ideas in their works; they suggest them in ways intended to transform the way the viewer receives them. In this respect, he contends that art aims at some effect and transformation in our affirmation of the way the world is viewed.

Danto claims the artist's use of rhetoric and metaphor is an attempt to get the viewer to take toward the work an attitude which involves more than recognition of a truth or an idea. Works of art can cause viewers to heighten and confirm convictions or transform their ways of thinking about their convictions.

More importantly, Danto contends that interpretation is puzzling to a person with insufficient knowledge. He acknowledges that at one point in the history of art, there was "a complicity between artist and spectator, in which the latter was to disregard the paint and gape at the Transfiguration, to stand dumb" in front of it (p. 108). However, he argues that this is no longer true. Works of art are about something. They have meanings that can be distinguished from those held by other cultural objects, and this opens up possibilities for talking about them. He suggests that aesthetic understanding is far closer to intellectual action (cognition) than to a mode of sensory stimulation and calls for an aesthetic stance as something that has to be con-

structed. Hence, Danto's theory of art presents a foundation for interpretation that is predicated on our understanding of art being culturally, philosophically, and historically developed. Contemporary works of art demand such an approach.

What does this mean for the classroom teacher and student? First, as teachers we must decide which works of art to select for study. Though pre-modern and modern art are not excluded from this approach to interpretation, we might look particularly to such artists as Hans Haacke, Leon Golub, Spero, Piper, or Cindy Sherman as examples. Typical of the contemporary artworld, these artists confront us with issues that are sometimes difficult to deal with and not always easy to understand. Therefore, if art educators select such works of art to be used in the classroom, they must present them in a more studied context. Not unlike critics, teachers will have to "get into" the work, understand it, before they attempt to explain it (Feldman, 1994). Teachers will not only have to know something about the history of art, but also about the artworld and art theories in order to be able to teach about and from contemporary works of art. Although some art educators do not stress the cognitive aspects of art, others value both the experience (emotive) and understanding of art. A combination of approaches is not mutually exclusive; formalist concerns are just part of interpretation. By combining modern and postmodern interpretations, teachers will include formalist concerns and broaden their interpretations to address adequately the content of postmodern art. As a case in point, we might look to the contemporary artist Adrian Piper. How would we teach about and interpret her works from a modern and postmodern perspective?

### **Postmodern Art**

Adrian Piper works in a variety of media: installation, photographs, charts, photo-text collage, video, drawing, mixed-media, and descriptive language. Piper claims that her work focuses on concepts rather than medium. She views her art as political, conceptual, and moral, primarily focusing on issues of racism, xenophobia, and racial stereotyping. Piper's art pushes the "boundaries of content and form, . . . reinventing the relationship between viewers and art" (Szakacs, 1993, p. 2). She attempts to involve the viewer both psychologically and physically in the "indexical present," the "here and now" of the artwork. According to Berger (1990), she has "shifted the involvement of the spectator; neither artist or (sic) viewer is permitted the usual defensive rationalizations that exempt us from the political responsibility of examining our own racism" (Berger, 1990, p. 95). In this sense the viewer is not a contemplator of the aesthetic, but an active participant in constructing and interpreting the work's messages.

An interpretation of the work *I Embody* (1975) might begin with a description of the work: the data gathering. This is crucial in both a formalist as well as in a postmodern interpretation. The materials Piper uses for this two-dimensional piece consist of an 8" x 10" photograph and oil crayon. The work is a photo-text-drawing, which depicts a partially concealed image of a person's face, possibly male or female, wearing glasses and holding a cigarette. The image of the face is close-up, with eyes staring at the viewer through what appear to be sunglasses. A hand holding the cigarette in front of the mouth, along with shadows, conceals most of the face. In the upper left corner is a white area in which is written, "I embody everything you most hate and fear." The text and the face appear to command equal attention. As we progress through the description of the work—the medium, the text, and possibly the subject matter—we are compelled to interpret what we see. In the popular modernist approach we would attend to the formal elements, our discussion

focusing primarily on the composition, unity, lines, colors, shapes, and principles of design. We might ask such questions as these: What colors has the artist used? What is the texture of the person's hair? What shapes do you see? What does the writing say? Can anyone guess what it means? How is balance achieved in the work? Can you find a focal point? What does it mean? Does this work have a pleasing arrangement of shapes, form? How is unity achieved? What mood or feeling is expressed in the artwork? From these questions students can give and get a description of the work, how the elements and principles of design relate and function in it, and possibly some speculations about the relationships of the image, materials, and subject matter of the work. But unless we carry interpretation beyond this point, we are left to wonder about the image of the person and who is making this statement. Or is it a statement? Or a thought? What is the possible relationship between the person, the cigarette, or the glasses? We can only guess at the significance of the partially concealed face, and wonder how it relates to the text. Does the text overpower the image? And what does the visual ambiguity of the person suggest?

Without contextual information such speculations will be just that, a guessing game as to the meaning of the work. A purely formalist interpretation of Piper's work leaves too much to the students' imagination. A different approach to interpretation offers a *better* understanding and appreciation of this work.

Danto's theory of art as a foundation for interpretation provides insights not possible through formalistic interpretation. External information about the artist's biography and other works of art, and the society and period in which the work was produced, can contribute to a better understanding of the artwork (Barrett, 1993). Admittedly this approach entails more work on the part of teacher and student alike. Teachers will have to present works of art in a more studied context, knowing something about the history of art, the artworld, and art theories which will better enable them to explain the artist's intentions, theories of art the work rejects or internalizes, technique, and style. Students will also have to develop a grounding in art theory and art history and knowledge about the cultural and art historical contexts of the work. Coming to this work with prior knowledge about Piper, about possible art historical references, about politics and the artworld, and about racial stereotyping will assist teachers in guiding students toward a more plausible and complete understanding of *I Embody*.

Research will provide information about Adrian Piper, her lack of a signature style, her influences, and in some cases her intent. There appears to be a consensus among critics that Piper's work demands contextual information or references (Berger, 1990; Johnson, 1990). Her work is noted for its critique of political and social issues, and according to Johnson, Piper wants to focus our attention on racism and "to expose to the viewer his or her own more or less subliminal racism" (1990, p. 156). Piper likes to confront the viewer in the act of viewing, in what she calls the "indexical present." She states that she wants her work to have a "catalytic, confrontational effect" and that it is "designed to put viewers in touch with their fear" (Hayt-Atkins, 1991, p. 51). In this sense, the viewer is required to immediately reflect upon his or her own personal ideas and feelings in relation to Piper's art. But this system of intentions, both literal and metaphorical, will be difficult to understand unless the observer has some knowledge of art history, art theory, culture, and politics. For instance, the person's image, the text, and the mode of presentation are visual allusions which require some background knowledge to decipher.

Our knowledge about Piper herself and the role visual and verbal ambiguity plays in her art contribute to a better understanding of it. Looking at the image of the person we might wonder about gender and ethnic background. We might ask, "who is this person?" If we have knowledge of Piper's personal history we would know she grew up the daughter of light-skinned parents who identified themselves as African. To look at Piper one might assume she is white, but like her parents she identifies herself as African. She often uses this contradiction about herself in her work to suggest messages about racial stereotyping. Piper portraying herself as *anyone* might assist us in understanding the relationship between image and text. If we were to look at her other works we would realize that often she portrays herself in ambiguous roles: either male or female and as black or white. She also uses self-presentation as a way to deal with the idea that "racial difference is nothing but a myth," that there is no connection between looks and ancestry; in all probability we all have African ancestry (Berger, 1990). Thus we soon realize the image portrayed could be Piper as well as you or me. In this sense the identification of structural elements begins to fall into place. Is she expressing pride in her African ancestry, or probing for attitudes toward race? Any information about the artist we bring to this work will assist our interpretation.

From such information we can better understand Piper's use of the image, the text, and their relationship. We would discover that the text is also ambiguous depending on who the observer is. Is the viewer white or black? What are the viewer's attitudes, political position, social status? All of these criteria determine how the text can be interpreted. If we know that Piper likes to infuse conceptual language with the personal and political, then we start to set up a system of intentions (Szakacs, 1993). Upon reading the text, how do we interpret "I" and "you?" Her play on words invites us to wonder who is being referred to: the subject in the work, the viewer, or both? If we know about Piper's penchant for open-ended interpretations, then multiple meanings can be discussed. We can bring in personal histories, social experience, and cultural issues to discuss the connotations of each possible meaning. Consequently, these non-exhibited qualities and associations enable us to better understand Piper's messages.

Additional information about Piper might assist the teacher in encouraging students to go beyond the appearance of the work to discuss its relation to art history and artistic theory. As a young artist, Piper was influenced by the concept of the *avant garde*: pushing boundaries, breaking new ground. Thus Piper developed "a way of making art that embraced equally autobiography, mass media images, text, performance, and social critique" (Szakacs, 1993, p. 2). Her work's visual style is also not an end in itself. She employs the anti-aesthetic, foregoing qualities of beauty, pleasurable experience, and traditional materials. Instead Piper focuses on transforming the viewer through image and dialogue. She attempts to effect an internal political change in the viewer, "independently of—the viewer's abstract aesthetic evaluation of my work" (Piper, 1990, p. 290). Her work prompts us to question our own ideas about social differences. We are also provoked to ask, who me? Piper's art has more than an aesthetic purpose; there is a social, political purpose. Our knowledge of Piper's life and thought combined with a formalist description of her work builds a responsive understanding.

These non-exhibited qualities and associations enable us to better understand Piper's messages. Equipped with information about racial stereotyping, racism, and politics, we can come to understand the title and its implications in the work. We

realize that Piper is confronting the viewer's fears, beliefs, and misconceptions about xenophobia. Interpretation leads us to fitting the puzzle together, to building our responsive understanding to what Piper is expressing. Without such information it would be difficult to put the work together or to feel its power, its "indexical presence." With such information, we can speculate about how we would see the work if we did not know about racial stereotyping or even about Piper herself. From this information we have constructed an interpretation of Piper's work, while developing a theory as to what the work is about, what its subject is. If we come to the work already possessing knowledge that Piper deals with political content over formal concerns, we are that much closer to understanding the subject of the work.

Piper's approach, which provokes the viewer to experience, react, and even to be transformed by the art object, illustrates that viewers need to come to works of art with knowledge of art history, art theory, and a cultural context to see them both as objects with formal properties and as a realm of meaning. It is the interconnections of all the elements, both internal and external, that lead to our understanding of works of art.

### Conclusion

The twentieth century has witnessed a revolution in aesthetic theory and artistic intention. Early 20th century philosophers like Dewey and Beardsley saw the role of art as limited to producing an aesthetic experience, and modernist artists, with their exclusive focus on formal elements, seemed to echo such a philosophical stance. Contemporary artists have explicitly sought to connect their works to the social, political, and historical contexts in which they live. Art educators need to develop methods of interpretation which can address postmodern art.

Arthur Danto has presented a theory of art that can change the way we define, interpret, and respond to works of art. He has provided a definition of art which makes it relevant to cultural, social, philosophical, and historical conditions. As he has argued, we must shift our conceptions of interpretation to a broader, more global approach. In this way we might have a better theory for interpreting works of art and a better foundation for teaching students to understand their meanings.

Danto's theory of art as a foundation for interpretation provides insights not possible with a formalist interpretation. Admittedly this approach entails more work on the part of teacher and student alike. Teachers will have to present works of art in a more studied context, knowing something about the history of art, the artworld, and art theories which will better enable them to explain the artist's intentions, theories of art the work rejects or internalizes, technique, and style. Students will also have to develop a grounding in art theory, art history, and knowledge about the cultural and art historical contexts of the work. But detailed background research will guide students toward a more plausible and complete understanding of contemporary art.

It is possible that students will learn different ways of viewing the world and realize new possibilities through their interpretations. Acquiring insights into the social, cultural, and institutional contexts might also enable them to reflect on and question their own beliefs and values. In this respect, a postmodern approach to art education lays a foundation which provides a better understanding of contemporary art; both in the present and in the future.

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