



BEAUTY: DEEPENING AN UNDERSTANDING OF
CONTEMPORARY ART, ART PRACTICE AND THEORY

by

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Abstract

Beauty has always been seen with an air of veneration, however, the art world of late has adopted a particular disdain towards its complexities. Contemporary art, while ostensibly somewhat abstract, challenges viewers to think dialogically and engage in far ranging topics. Because art is an effective way to cognize our world, it seems vital to look to art for deeper understandings. Artists who embrace beauty as a vehicle for cognition are able to engage those particularly wary of the esoteric nature of contemporary art. Through examining history, philosophy and theory as well as art practice, we reach a deeper understanding of contemporary art.

Research for this thesis probes the following questions: What does a contemporary understanding of beauty entail? Can beauty provide us with a way to navigate contemporary art? And, if so, what does this mean for a postmodern society ridden with various ills ~ can beauty be an antidote?

I would like to dedicate this thesis with much love and admiration
to the memory of my grandmother,
Belva Stephenson,
a truly beautiful human being.
Thank-you for always believing the best in me.

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Introduction

Beauty as a descriptor and quality of art is somewhat out of style. My undergraduate studies in Fine Art's practice and theory revealed that while the quality of beauty is associated with art, in reality it has become somewhat muted and detached. We seem to be less confident embracing its texture. My experience is that this is a direct result of artists feeling an increasing need to substantiate their art with content and commentary. This thesis hopes to place some foundations in the philosophy, history and theory of beauty as well as situating beauty amongst current artistic practice and work. While in some cases contemporary art has renounced beauty, I believe that beauty has in essence not disappeared as an essential ingredient of art, but rather has evolved and been redefined.

With much contemporary art, the emphasis has shifted most generally from an attention to aesthetic quality to that of conceptual quality. With this shift has matriculated many attributes, most notably in the way art has overtly challenged viewers in positive ways to think and dialogue critically. What I am examining and arguing for is not eradication of conceptual art, or art which asks difficult questions, but rather a more regular union of forces with qualities of beauty. It is my understanding that contemporary artists who ardently attend to this balance produce works which not only have aesthetic appeal, but also power for change. It remains true, to my understanding that art which pays heed to aesthetic sensibilities, is more easily

accessible and regularly accessed than work whose focus is elsewhere. Additionally because of art's innate ability to capture us, using it as a vehicle for deeper understanding only seems cogent. I will examine artists who mediate message and commentary through beauty arguably, reaching greater heights than those who perpetuate the cryptic, esoteric myth of contemporary art.

In chapter one I will examine beauty, placing it in a contemporary context. I do not expect to develop unwavering definitions, but I shall aim for generally understandings. Chapter two will examine beauty's philosophy with special attention to seminal philosopher Immanuel Kant, illustrating how some of these frameworks have influenced the nature of art and how we respond to contemporary art. Chapter three proposes avenues for understanding and making meaning from contemporary art. Additionally, I will examine what has been labelled as the contemporary aesthetic divide; that of beauty versus social change. In chapter four I will restrict my discussion to art theory. Using art's history and deeply engrained traditions of aesthetic understanding I will attempt to place beauty amongst modernity and postmodernity. Illustrating theory with artists and work I hope to demonstrate that postmodernism has not recanted beauty but pushed it in a fertile direction. Chapter five will look to beauty's educational implications.

Because of the nebulous and tenuous nature of both beauty and art, I reach no precise or fixed conclusions. I do however, argue for exposure to and an openness

towards looking as attached to best looking practices as our greatest vehicle for
accessing contemporary art.

Chapter One: Reframing Beauty

“Beauty is no quality in things themselves, it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”

~ David Hume

What is beauty and where is its value in contemporary life and art? The word beauty itself is an indiscriminate, horribly cliché ridden word for a constantly evolving and developing concept. Its blanket application and ubiquity essentially functions to devalue, discredit and dilute its original potency thereby leaving very little room for specific qualities to reside. It seems far too broad a concept to provide any breadth of understanding or clarification; however, its need and value still resonates. As a society we crave beauty, yet tend to lack mechanisms to attend to its particularities beyond classically contrived idealism. The concept of beauty has unfortunately developed a negative stigma and today, especially in art, is often viewed as a weak or hackneyed compliment. Recent themes within the art world seem to suggest that much of what we have traditionally labelled as ‘beautiful’ has been marginalized or eliminated altogether. “Beauty”, “beautiful” and “the beautiful”, all saturated with particular associations, are rarely used to describe art in the art world today. With increasingly conceptual work, beauty is viewed as in part devaluing what the artist is attempting to create and do. Monet’s water lilies are now banal and Jana Sterbak’s *Flesh Dress* is hip. Sterbak’s dress comments on sexuality, power and vanity, Monet’s waterlilies in contrast, are mere

renditions of plant life; both nevertheless carry commentary on beauty, however hidden the agenda. Beauty appears to have experienced something of a regressive metamorphosis. Throughout this chapter, I would like to ruminate on beauty and its function in the twenty-first century. I would like to develop a working definition for beauty, and then illustrate this definition by examining beauty's fundamental role in contemporary life and art. While I recognize that beauty exists in various formats, visual, auditory, tactile, dance, nature, etc., I will focus my examination on beauty as it relates to Visual Art.

Culture's definition of beauty has been subject to objectification and reduced to mass media representations of what beauty 'should' look like. The beauty product namebrand *Dove* has recently launched a campaign 'for real beauty' challenging these entrenched notions. Large billboards depicting women with questions like "weathered or wonderful?", "fat or fab?", look critically at societal ideals of beauty. Their website states "a new definition of beauty is needed...lets widen the definition of beauty and inspire women to celebrate themselves...for too long beauty has been defined by narrow, stifling stereotypes".¹ To move forward toward a deeper connection and understanding of beauty, we may need to reframe the word itself and free it from its entrenched overuse. Author Crispin Sartwell does this by resorting to alien vocabularies, which at the very least arouse a useful confusion, intrigue and puzzlement. Other languages have allowed Sartwell in part to escape the constraints and banalities imposed on the English language by beauty, "and so there is the

¹ This information was accessed online at www.dove.com

possibility [with the help from other languages] that our own concept of beauty can still be enriched or shifted" (Sartwell, xiii). Similarly, Gordon Graham (2000) proposes that we need to establish a new term to avoid creating a kind of emptiness around both art and aesthetics when discussing that which pleases us in the visual realm (12). Caught between a politic of needing to delineate beauty's particularities perhaps to protect it from extinction, and realizing that in some way to do so destroys its very essence, creates a positive, fruitful tension. We need to linger in places without answers. I would have to agree that changing culture's understanding of the word beauty itself is somewhat problematic. Thankfully, we can shift and expand our understanding of its meaning if we are open to its possibilities.

Approaching a Working Definition of Beauty

Beauty is not defined as pleasantness of form but rather as the quality in things that invites absorption and contemplation...beauty is a source of imagination...that never dries up. A thing so attractive and so absorbing may not be 'pretty or pleasant'. It could be ugly, and yet seize the soul as beautiful. Some pieces of art are not pleasing to look at, and yet their content and form are arresting and lure the heart into profound imagination."

~Thomas Moore

Beauty's presentation in a variety of packages makes it difficult to define.

Moreover, our personal realm of subjective experience affects our individual responses. Specifically, because of the particularities of human nature, beauty is somewhat relative – not constant; we appreciate and experience it in varying manners and forms. We view beauty as universally important in our lives, yet there is no blanket formula for its

recognition, existence, or even our understanding of its particulars. Our constant effort to demarcate and define perhaps limits us as there are no rules for creating or identifying something as being aesthetically beautiful. Hundreds of years of scholarship have still been unable to determine a fixed set of properties which will consistently produce beauty in a given format. Beauty seems to be a vast and shifting fabric woven together with individual strands related to situation and experience. It is not possible that there is a 'right' way to identify, view or see beauty. Society, however, is still needlessly caught up with knowing the correct answer, perhaps something indoctrinated in us through years of institutionalized schooling. Neither beauty, nor the practice of aesthetics, poses a 'right' answer; it is not fixed, stable or predetermined, rather its layers promote multifaceted understandings and therefore it is certain that we all will have varying ways of identifying what we believe to be beautiful. On a meta scale, beauty cannot be universally understood due to differences in culture; for example, to what Western culture awards accolades, Eastern culture may recant; on a micro scale, our own idiosyncrasies and preferences also make this impossible. Finally, beauty is something that to some extent escapes language. It is that which cannot be articulated fully in a delineated linguistic form, but rather something which often tends to be just understood or sensed as that which cannot be described. Thus said, I will try to gather elements together to compose a 'working', not determinate, definition of beauty.

As beauty is undoubtedly rooted in pleasure and enchantment we tend to turn towards it for a source of delight. Immanuel Kant's seminal work, *The Critique of*

Judgement 1790, looks critically at the beautiful, essentially viewing beauty as objective and rooted in pleasure (Section 34). Kant breaks beauty into four “moments” or aspects, and suggests in his first moment of the beautiful, that pleasure must be disinterested and free (Kant 204). I will deal with Kant’s aesthetics more fully in Chapter 2. There is something salient about beauty being connected to pleasure and thereby a source of delight. Most generally, if able to catch a glimpse of genuine beauty, I view it as the reaction or the response which combines the aesthetic with the emotional when presented in a visual work or experience of visual quality. While certain elements function to please the eye with cognitive familiarity, I would suggest that beauty is something which not only the eye, but the body recognizes as significant and therein finds delight. Momentarily I would like to linger and examine this notion of body knowledge or understanding as I believe part of our need for beauty as human beings is related to the feeling of delight and enchantment which is recognized at a visceral level.

The body knows and remembers in a deeply entrenched manner. It can be said that our body knowledge in many instances exceeds cognitive practices. For example, marathon runners train primarily to give their bodies an imprinted body remembering. The long runs spent pounding the pavement are not necessarily to achieve greater distances at faster speeds, but to program the body to know, to learn and to remember what running feels like. The Mississippi River poses a poetic recapitulation of this notion. It was straightened out in places, occasionally however, the river ‘floods’, but in fact it could be said that is not merely flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be (Neilsen, 2001, 256). However fictional it might seem, beauty is bound to

remembering, to knowing, to memory. The body's varied and deep experiences recognize, remember and know beauty. Whereas Kant places beauty, and our response to it in the realm of cognition, I would argue that what he ignores, or glosses over is that cognition is often realized through faculties of the body. I believe Kant comes close to articulating a kind of body understanding or knowledge when he finds beauty to be the result of a free play between imagination and understanding, but he never fully explores this area. At times when I am painting, my body knows what to do, certainly my brain is also making critical decisions, connections, commentary and relations, but it is my body that remains caught up in a particular detail, colour, nuance or experience.

Undoubtedly, my body knows and recognizes beauty in my work and the work of others; it prompts thoughtful insights, reflection, analysis and wondering. Before I have time to 'turn my brain on' and think in an analytical manner, my body has already processed beauty: pools of possibility, colours of vibrant passion, brushstrokes of action, blue hues deep with meaning, drowning reflections, mesmerizing lines, metaphors of memory, places for pondering, textured technique, layers of obfuscation and moments of clarification. Occasionally, and I do mean infrequently, my body framed with heart and spirit meets a moment of perfect alignment and creates through pigment bits of beauty. Believing the body as able to recognize beauty, dances around ideas of soul or spirituality. Perhaps if we are going to enchant, promote growth and renewal of the very part of ourselves which makes life worthwhile, we need beauty as a source of pleasure and delight to do so. Beauty, moreover, promotes, encourages and enhances cognition. It does this because beauty is that quality which does not merely ask for

contemplation, but that which often requires and demands a second glance. When faced with “the beautiful”, it often becomes difficult to step away or break one’s gaze. It nestles into a part of you and alters your makeup. I tend to agree with David Hume when he stated that “beauty in things exist in the mind which contemplates them”. While essentially Hume views beauty as not attached to the object itself, but living in the person who contemplates it, I view this as not intended to be contrary to the body’s recognition of beauty, but in conjunction. Once something has caught our attention it becomes difficult not to attend to it in a deeper manner. Often this assiduous attention reveals beauty in profound ways. Contemplation as a means for attending to and understanding contemporary art will be examined in Chapter Three. While beauty has embedded in it a series of implications, it tends to reside within its particular nuance. Beauty, although nebulous, just is – regardless. We tend just to “know” when something is beautiful; this knowing comes from a place of analytical thought, knowledge and body understanding. It is not the content of the image or experience, but the exuding qualities which require attentive contemplation and dialogue. Let us agree that beauty does not merely appease our senses, but asks us to think more deeply.

In its artistic visual format, beauty tends to have something to do with form. It would seem impossible to recognize beauty without identifying formal elements. Accidental or carefully chosen, combined and placed; formal qualities work together to create the beautiful. I do not necessarily mean to suggest formalism in the highly realized manner idealized by Clive Bell or Roger Fry, but tempered such that formal qualities exist in a reciprocal environment with meaning, message and heartfelt

commentary. For example, working with absorbent inks on paper forced me to react and respond to both carefully selected and accidental elements (See Figure 1). Without at least cursory attention and sensitivity towards formal elements, the composition would have been much less successful. My intended meaning in this case was pure visual enjoyment, a heartfelt transposition of my love for colour. Because of a personal belief that beauty, and beautiful art makes life and living better, worthwhile and enjoyable I often choose beauty as a vehicle for content and meaning. In this mode beauty demands awareness and comprehension; viewers must choose a way of translating visual qualities into meaning for living. Under this framework, beauty is needed and necessary in life, not only to decorate its shadows, but also to allow space and reason for thought and understanding. If beauty is understood intuitively and recognized on a primal, visceral level, it becomes necessary to place it in the forefront of human necessities as attending to the human condition. Beauty remains as consequential today as to Plato and the ancient Greeks.

Figure 2: Passion Pink



In summary, when I speak of beauty, I am defining it as follows: a uniqueness and balance of formal qualities that reflects and traces humanness, that which is highly sensual and organic in quality, in a state of flux, continually changing and adapting, reminding us and returning us to a state of feeling. It tends to be somewhat instinctual - reflective of a kind of "flow" or "being". Beauty is not necessarily dependent on classical ideals or even pleasantness, but interest; its sensibilities invite and often require contemplation. At this point I will also briefly address beauty's antithesis, the ugly, which generally I view as somewhat mechanical, predictable, contrived and without care. If we agree on these characteristics, then we perhaps reach a starting place to meander through beauty's multi-textured surface.

Beauty in a Contemporary Context

An element of beauty that is perhaps often misunderstood, ignored or not properly illustrated is beauty's attachment to pain, suffering, ugliness and terror. If we, in part, understand beauty to be an experience, and not necessarily something objectified, we find openings for the beautiful to not only please, but to change the way things are. When John Berger poses the rhetorical question of "Where are we?" (Strauss VII), he paints a rather bleak, but true picture. Our world is filled with a certain pain of living: conflict, war, poverty, illness, starvation, political strife, increased competition, frenzied schedules and deadlines to name a few ills, darken our daily lives. Perhaps this is the 'art of being' as echoed in Bertolt Brecht's statement "the greatest art of all - the art of getting through life". The reality of imperfection is precisely why finding beauty is so

necessary to our living with in it. What separates the schism between pain and beauty? Should art remain silent in the face of Nazi death camps or the Middle East conflict? Where amongst world chaos does beauty in life fit in? It is important to talk about beauty, not only in relation to the arts but also with respect to a social and global context, one which we know is not necessarily filled with beautiful things. We need to accept this, search for and find beauty which may be hidden amongst the wreckage of life.

Some of the greatest art has been made out of the truly awful situations that arise in the world (Lyas 54-55). It is undecided as to how beauty can or should make the necessary political commentary on contemporary dissension. Politics and art today, as historically, form a reciprocal relationship. This liaison becomes increasingly more complex when the element of beauty is added. What is the role of beauty in non-fiction, when faced with terrifying photographs or paintings designed to depict the horrors of Rwanda or Baghdad? Is it deemed socially unacceptable to find bits of beauty among the carnage? Perhaps we could look to history where traditionally we have contextualized horrific events with beautiful elements. We can only assume that Goya's *Third of May, 1808* depicts the massacre with horrifying accuracy, yet there are qualities in the rendering which catch our eye, cause contemplation and could perhaps be defined as 'beautiful'. While we view works like the *Third of May* as partially romanticized with the patina of time, I believe beauty to be capable of rigorously attending to horror with necessary humility, consideration and compassion.

Currently the Sakharov Museum in Moscow is displaying photos which document the horrifying results of a decade of war.² The curator of the museum, primarily dedicated to recording human rights abuses under past regimes as well as in modern Russia, found himself wanting to do something. To in some way effect change by exposing citizens to images of what had occurred perhaps to remind and etch into individuals the horrors of war, in effect hoping for its resonance within human conscience. For him, that meant showing not beauty, but truth, however painful. I suspect that he in part feels that these images need to be learned from, that society needs to attend to these images of injustice in order to find future truth and beauty. In North America we do not need a Museum to mount a show documenting the results of war. These images are freely available to us, and therefore perhaps moments of beauty, not only non-fictional pain need to be illuminated. Canadian artist, Stephen Andrews, has in part subscribed to this belief. He assiduously transfers images of the war in Iraq, showing us the narrative of war, but with a facade of soft, gentle impressionism. Using a rubbing process with crayon against window screening he gives the surface a dotted texture which works in a dual manner to mimic the graininess of journalistic footage as well as to somewhat visually romanticize the material. Reporter Lorissa Sengara (2005) states; "Andrews' aestheticization of the images of war seems knowing, or even confrontational, rather than in any way comforting or anaesthetizing" (79). What these images do, where the photographs, or digital reproductions themselves fail, is remind us

² Found in an article entitled "Russia's Crusading Curator" from The Globe and Mail, Monday November 01, 2004.

through traces of the human hand of the human condition at stake in war. Notably, recognizing that these works contain beauty in some way connects us more powerfully to the event than mere documentation. In an era where technology has instantly transferred the means of information to the masses, a poignant, painstaking but beautifully rendered tragic image necessarily causes us to pause.

Do images of brutality paralyze us from the reality of the situation? Can, or should we beautify tragedy? The context of work when dealing with sensitive subject matter becomes important. Levi Strauss (2003) states of artist Alfredo Jarr's Rwanda works: "[l]ike the history paintings of the past, these works operate in time – one must know their historical context in order to fully appreciate them. But they work aesthetically, not [just] as propaganda" (102). These works consist of a series of somewhat contained photographs hidden in boxes or partially exposed. Jarr visited Rwanda shortly after the genocide took place documenting his journey with over three thousand photographs. Upon returning, he found it difficult to discover a way in which to appropriately exhibit the photographs. Eventually they were displayed not as photographs, but as non-photographs, essentially hidden from sight and buried in boxes sometimes with supporting text. The implication was that their power was not only in the imagery but in the message. "Jarr's Rwanda works constitute an attempt to throw light on an occluded history and to act as an indictment of the world's silence and inaction in the face of the genocide in Rwanda" (Strauss 101). As a society we were inundated with documentary images of what was happening and yet at the same time emotionally anesthetized by them. Jarr intuitively realized this and was able to tap

into a deeper place of feeling by not exhibiting the images themselves, but through illuminating the humanness and human connection, thereby eliciting not only compassion but possible power for change.

Artist/photographer, Joel-Peter Witkin deliberately uses an aesthetic language “which engages profound emotional dichotomies within the viewer” (Levi Strauss 54). Witkin’s photographic work uses bodies and body parts, often those which are dead. He wants to cause an uncomfortable disturbance, particularly one which is ethically rooted but uneasily packaged in the beautiful, a complex paradox. “They are so beautiful and yet so...disgusting. So fascinating and yet so...repulsive” (Levi Strauss 54). The viewer finds beauty where s/he does not wish to, and this makes the work uncomfortable, even if removed from truth. Witkin’s work is problematic for many because of a believed cultural need and belief in beauty emerging solely from that which is pleasing. It is commonly felt that art should embrace the beautiful, as there are plenty of uncomfortable images in the everyday; because life is filled with an absence of beauty, art should do the opposite. Paradoxically, often among art connoisseurs, art for whom the only purpose is to illuminate beauty is often met with disgust. While as an artist I tend to make images which to my sensibilities are pleasing and beautiful, I subscribe to the belief that beauty in horror and the uncomfortable can like Jarr and Andrews’ work, elicit needed social commentary and change. Is it sacrilegious to create works of art which while providing integrity to the condition, illuminate cracks of beauty? While Sebastiao Salgado’s *Mali*, for example, is indeed an image saturated with pain and

tragedy, it speaks of an undeniable sensitivity to beauty. Sometimes beauty seizes your eye, and may be appalling or shocking to look at, but nevertheless, captivating.

Before I turn specifically to examining what beauty in contemporary art might entail, I feel it is important to highlight that beauty frequently helps us to reach places of greater understanding; its mere nature in all forms requires moments of contemplation. This also is often where moments of beauty in everyday life reside. The moment spent staring out the window at the rain hitting the pavement, time spent stirring milk into tea, cooking dinner or running through the city; time where the mind is allowed to open up, let go, allowed to flow, to be. These everyday experiences when attended to provide instants akin to what Virginia Woolf calls 'moments of being', times when experience and beauty align, effecting perfect clarity. These moments of being, or times of heightened awareness, reveal artfulness in the "everyday cotton wool of daily life" (Woolf 72). Woolf (1985) states in her essay "A Sketch of the Past" from *Moments of Being*, "I mean all human beings are connected with this, that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art...we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (72). Being aware of and open to moments of beauty in everyday life can in effect help us to live increasingly meaningful, artful lives.

Beauty in Contemporary Art

"Beauty is my oldest subject, Fashion is my newest, and Beauty is my youngest. (They say) Art no longer produces Beauty: She produces meaning. But (I say) one cannot paint a picture...and not deal with the concept of beauty." ~ Marlene Dumas

As discussed, beauty and art seem to be akimbo, tangled and knotted, struggling to find common ground in a relationship that has been fraught with generalities. Often little apart from beauty itself can be captured by further description due to the unique and varied texture of its form. Moving beauty outside of culturally constructed imagery is a slow going, but necessary process. One key problem is that we tend to view beauty with an air of notoriety. We realize that our perceptions have been tinted by ubiquitous mass media inundation; however, we acquiesce, and feel a sense of complacency towards the all-pervading ideals. What then does beauty in contemporary art look like? Is it found in the positively stunning, pigment that Anish Kapoor uses to cover sculptural organic forms, the haunting Rachel Whiteread concrete casting of *House*, Jenny Saville's sensuous painterly female nudes or Frank Gehry's cutting edge architectural plan for the new wing of the Art Gallery of Ontario? While one person may attest that Lucien Freud's *Four Eggs on a Plate* reflects exquisite beauty, another might find it to be a banal still life.

Last spring I was visiting the Vancouver Art Gallery, looking at a particularly interesting and beautiful small drawing by Marc Chagall when I overheard someone beside me say "really, it's just a small sketch, why is it here it's not even beautiful, anyone could do that". This passing comment reflects frequently felt ideas about art,

especially contemporary art, and speaks volumes about the heavily entrenched dogma of both beauty and art. It seemed obvious to me that it was a beautiful work; it was exquisitely designed while outwardly effortless in execution. It contained an economy of line, and yet spoke vastly about character and quality. Arguably, many individuals continue to aesthetically judge art based on conventional beauty ideals. Beauty in art, as somewhat different from beauty ideals, I believe offers a place for ideologies to open and shift. Art, especially that apart from prescribed formulaic 'living room art' (I am thinking here about artists like Thomas Kinkade and Trisha Romance), tends to occupy a space fruitful for discussions of beauty. If we begin by looking towards Eastern beauty ideas we might reach a place to begin tempering some of our idiosyncrasies. Popular culture has taken of late to embracing Eastern ideologies. Yoga, feng shui, meditation, raku, Buddhism and the like while "new-age" and trendy, appear to offer "bits" which are perhaps missing from our Western concepts and can be seen as helpful in effectively wearing away at cultural beauty beliefs.

The Art Gallery of Victoria recently had an exhibit entitled *Birds, Beasts, Blossoms and Bugs* which showcased twentieth century Chinese painting. After wandering around the gallery through the other exhibits, it was with great clarity and trepidation that I realized the difference between Eastern and Western artistic ideologies. What "that" is exactly, is perhaps best left to the experience of the art itself. These works were indisputably beautiful in ways disparate from the rest of the work displayed in the gallery. The large ink and watercolour works on paper revealed careful and playful brushstrokes which fashioned an unequivocal yet subtle sensitivity and simplicity. This

feeling of effortlessness bathed the works with a confident glow. The execution of the works themselves seemed visible, I felt as if I could in part see the process unfolding; this window into transcription and the overall experience of art making, presented beauty. Work such as this leaves no room for erasures or change. The artist is essentially forced to be spontaneous; once the brush touches the highly absorbent paper the artist's intuition and senses must take over, a confidence in one's skills must be trusted. This remarkable alchemy of skill and spontaneity often reveals a multitude of meaning in a single brushstroke. One can only imagine the artist painstakingly practicing the discipline, allowing the expression to somehow seep through one's hands into the ink and onto the paper in an 'alive' way, such that hesitation and deliberation are eliminated. In a sense, the artist must forget learned skills, rules, and 'just go with it' in the moment of creation. Thus said, a balance between knowledge, skills, and trusting this knowledge and skill is reached only in careful, delicate equilibrium at the moment of creation. Tempering our world of worry and woe with a pared down simplicity, an allowing of things to be-in-the-moment is cathartic. Perhaps when I reached the room displaying these works the stark contrast was as marked by the ostensible simplicity of the Eastern aesthetic as the fresh perspective next to the quintessential, pervasive Emily Carr landscapes. Thinking of beauty as plain, as that of the happy accident and a kind of in-the-moment creation is valuable for our Western understandings. Wabi-Sabi, a Japanese word essentially for beauty, looks to the imperfect, impermanent, incomplete and unconventional (Koren 7). Beauty in contemporary art exhibits all of these tendencies; because art is no longer mandated to fill a given prescription, artists are

changing the way we view the beauty aesthetic. Wabi-Sabi, like beauty and beauty in art, especially contemporary, is not reducible to formulas.

Contemporary art embraces this and has moved away from traditions of creating works that fall under the conventional, omnipresent label of 'beautiful', and toward a beauty of disenfranchisement, marginality and nonconformity. It seems, however, "inconclusively split, unwilling to fully endorse an aesthetics of pleasure, yet increasingly uncertain about art's effective role in a politics of responsibility" (Charlesworth 279). Political-not politically correct, abject, sexual, taboo, controversial and conceptual art, to mention a few facets have left art appreciators and artmakers with few holds onto which to cling. Art which encompasses a spectrum as diverse as the personalities of its viewers, while positive, has in some ways left the meta-narrative of 'beauty' behind. I remember being shocked in an undergraduate contemporary art history class learning about body artist Catherine Opie 'Orlan', and her extreme personal quest to represent beauty through icons of ideal feminine loveliness from Western Culture. Using her body as the literal medium, she was appropriating 'beautiful' features and assuming them as her own, believing that the result was a compilation of traditional female aesthetics of beauty; a synthesis of so-called classical beauty. Through a lengthy and grotesque series of plastic surgeries, Orlan succeeded in changing the outward appearance of her body, taking for example the forehead of DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* and the chin from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* as her own. In partnership with her surgeon, Orlan was making a shocking, satirical attack of beauty, and deconstructing it in a rather frightening manner. In essence, she became both the

art maker and the artwork. In a similarly provocative and sensationalized mode, performance artist Annie Sprinkle pushes the boundaries of acceptable beauty ideals, and pairs beauty as power with erotic ideas. As a self-labelled 'post-porn modernist', she is overturning the beauty obsession with the body and offering her body as a site for personal and public beauty discovery. With art reaching these extremes, it is clear why many have difficulty identifying beauty within contemporary art.

It could be generalized that the things which are the most 'beautiful' in the art world, are not those which are necessarily awarded the highest accolade. It might be difficult to see the beauty in British artist Damien Hirst's controversial cross sectioned and pickled animals, yet society as a whole still seems to view beauty as something that belongs to art. As understood in contemporary circles, beauty no longer remains a determinate quality of art. By beautiful, let us remember that I do not mean that confined to a classical context, but that which I outlined earlier in this Chapter. This vision of beauty illuminated in much contemporary art may slowly shift popular aesthetic understandings, however, when met with existent extremes in the art world, tempering our sensibilities to meet at some point in between becomes tricky. Like attempting to find beauty amongst a segmented animal, beauty in contemporary art is at times difficult to identify. According to philosopher Dave Hickey, beauty and image are estranged. He states that Modernism has turned away from beauty "which made pictures attractive in their own right, and toward 'difficulty,' which makes art inscrutable and museums and the academy indispensable" (Nehamas 399). He equates *modernism* to magicians who show us how their tricks are done. While modernism and

postmodernism have generally moved away from representation and expression into an increasingly cognitive or purely aesthetically rooted formalism, I tend to disagree with his sentiment which seems to suggest that art has become straightforward and simplistic. Conversely, contemporary art and its particular dialect tend to leave most viewers discouraged, bewildered and frustrated because of its esoteric wrapping. Often partially shrouded in code, contemporary beauty may require viewers to commit time and energy toward actively attending to the work. We are experiencing a paradigm shift from art-for-art's sake, to a kind of art-for-survival. We need the beautiful, and beauty in art to return us to a state of 'being' in the world, however, we need to be open to the possibilities of new and changing forms of beauty.

Part of our difficulty in accessing and understanding much contemporary art could be attributed to our culture's need to categorize and file art into the art box, politics into the politic box and so on. Contemporary art continues to challenge boundaries and borders. For example, Santa Fe artist, Dominique Mazeaud worked for several years on a project entitled, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*. Ritually she cleaned garbage out of the river, literally beautifying it. One might say that this work embodied art and perhaps beauty in ways deeper than creating cultural objects of visual veneration. She was living out 'artfulness', not defining art as a realm separate from her life. Unfortunately, it is difficult for us to find ways to access for understanding artwork like that of Mazeaud's. Our cultural sensibilities tend to dismiss such work before even allowing time for cursory consideration. Traditionally, Western

culture has looked to art for beauty; twenty-first century art has in some measures turned this upside down.

This said, we need to remember that beauty is not dead, just reassigned, reinvented - reframed. Perhaps because of the entrenched ideologies and stereotypes which are now associated with beauty both in the world and in art, artists are now thinking in an increasingly necessary and critical manner about beauty and the aesthetic of beauty. There is the notion that beauty is becoming ever more difficult to recognize and understand, however, we are just being challenged as to what comprises, or forms "beauty". We would not wish for everyone to agree on beauty. "Differences in what we find beautiful are as valuable as differences in personality ... [u]niversal agreement on beauty would bring with it the desolation of uniformity, not the triumph of truth" (Nehamas 396). Having examined beauty in contemporary life and art, the following remains true; while beauty is linguistically a problematic word, it poses fundamental and necessary query and thus remains priceless. "The value of beauty is that its value is always in question" (Nehamas b, 12). This inquiry functions continually to shape beauty as a concept, thereby escaping stagnation, and forcing a process of continual evolvment. Today's world perhaps offers some hope to breakdown some of the beauty myths that have comprised the better part of history. As Dove suggests, a new definition of beauty is needed, one which escapes the dogma of deep-rooted traditions. Instead of defining beauty merely by certain characteristics or stereotypes, we should look to beauty as an experience that initiates and necessitates thoughtful consideration. Finally, we need beauty simply because an appreciation and awareness of its nature

deepens our enjoyment of life (Armstrong 51), our understanding, and ultimately our knowledge. Therein lies the value of beauty in contemporary life, art and education; not only does it house happiness; it is a source of knowledge. In the next chapter, I will examine beauty in contemporary art placing it within a broad philosophical context.

Chapter Two: The Philosophy of Beauty

What Exactly is Contemporary Art?

Art is an old, comfortable and well-worn but not worn-out discipline.

Contemporary art challenges the comfort of the old, and wears away at it until what is left is barely recognizable as art at all. While culturally, we understand art to be important and wish to encourage its production, when faced with its product we are often met with an overwhelming sense of anxiety and lack of understanding. At best, we have a wobbly, foggy, faded, blurred and imprecise understanding of what contemporary art is. While the nature of art encourages 'loose' understandings, a type of rapture that resists capture³, it seems necessary living in our 'modern' world, that we understand the art being made by our contemporaries. It is no longer sufficient only to appreciate art of the past. If we choose to ignore that which is happening in real time, in some cases we may become anachronisms of our own time: detached, disenfranchised and disenchanted. Understanding contemporary art, however, becomes problematic as it is often packaged as elite, esoteric and cryptic. It becomes difficult to appreciate, let alone understand and value. My aim here, therefore, is to examine contemporary art, placing it within a broad philosophical context in order to illustrate how some of these frameworks have influenced the nature of art and how we respond to contemporary art

³ Leggo, Carl. Beyond the Alphabet: Rapture resists Capture

today. Broad aesthetic questions will be addressed through the examination of various artworks and artists.

We live at a time when anything and everything can conceivably become art. If anything can be art, where is the value in art? A recent article in the Globe and Mail featured a performance artist who cooks strangers dinner in their homes. If cooking dinner is art and we all cook dinner, then are we all artists? If we are all artists, does the value of art change? A slideshow encapsulating the art of our times could include British artist Tracy Emin's unmade bed whose value was made public when it sold for 150,000 pounds, Damien Hurst's conceptual work with mammals suspended in formaldehyde accompanied with witty captions, Canadian Diana Thorneycroft's installation entitled *Monstrance* in which she transformed stuffed bunnies and rabbit carcasses into reliquary objects, Orlan who uses her own body and plastic surgery as the medium to transform herself into a picture of "ideal" beauty based on art historical icons of feminine beauty and Rachel Whiteread's haunting plaster casts of objects as extreme as empty houses. These contemporary artists are working in anti-traditional media and continue to push boundaries, challenging notions of what is art. Alongside these increasingly abstract notions of art, artists like Lucien Freud, Marlene Dumas and Jenny Saville are creating contemporary art entrenched in traditional media and dogma. The paradox concerning art of our times is that art literally can be anything, which is both fabulous and deeply problematic for understanding.

Today's art is anything, everything and nothing; tangled up with entertainment and popular culture and is commonly misunderstood. The question of 'What is Art' has never seemed so poignant and apt at a time when even the act of cooking someone dinner has become art. Everything from everyday chores to classical portraiture is art, yet we continue to lack mechanisms to fully understand or see the beauty in the art of our time. I would like argue for a return to beauty within contemporary art, not only for aesthetic reasons, but also as a bridge between art and understanding. Beauty's value is not merely retinal; I believe that it functions to make art increasingly accessible for an audience, and in doing so fosters understanding. I am not suggesting that we ignore all art which does not immediately strike us as beautiful, but that we are open to the possibility of beauty. Aesthetic understanding and education can lead to heightened ways of comprehending not only art, but the world around us. Beauty necessitates a relationship of infinite possibility, not telling us what to think, but asking us to think.

Philosophy's Importance to Contemporary Art

What is art? Art's quintessential philosophical question maintains relevance and continues asking us to think. As contemporary art continues to push the boundaries of our understanding of art and art making, it has become ever increasingly difficult to answer. Aristotle simply defined art as the capacity to make, "concerned with the coming-into-being of ends determined by reason" (Hofstadter and Kuhns 78). To begin examination into both contemporary art, beauty and the relationship between each other

and with culture in general, it seems most pertinent to look to philosophy and philosophers throughout time who have examined both art and beauty.

The history of beauty or aesthetics is fraught with argument and concern. Today the word "beauty", and even the term "aesthetics", has been applied haphazardly to almost anything resulting in a diluted and weakened meaning. As outlined, beauty as a concept is abstract and undetermined, it may however, help us to understand and make meaning from art which is increasingly complex and theoretical. What is the history of beauty? How does examining and understanding more about beauty help us in gaining a greater understanding of art and the world around us? We know that ideas about beauty have shifted and changed over time.

Before art even became an arena for discourse and investigation or a category for scholarship of its own merit, philosophers were setting up the scaffolding for art theory, criticism and art making practices. Plato, perhaps one of the most celebrated philosophers of all time, positioned foundations for what has become the philosophy of aesthetics. Plato saw beauty as a "changeless object of knowledge", one of his eternal 'Forms' or ideal realities such as Justice, Holiness and Equality (Mautner 426). It was within this theory or account of art as mere imitation of a form that Plato took issue with beauty and the arts. As he understood it, artistic representation could only be a copy of the original and therefore was only a "misleading and deceitful derivation from a true original" (Lys 40). Plato found all making of any kind to simply be a type of imitation which led the viewer away from the original 'true' form and therefore further away

from greater truth and understanding. This view is contrary to a contemporary understanding of art being able in some manner to communicate a greater truth or make us better in some way, such as refining appreciation for example. Whereas Plato felt it backwards to “paint replicas of beds, to be looked as beds are looked at” when we already have perfectly good beds to look at (Lyas 52), today it can be understood that it is not merely the ‘re-presentation’ of the bed which causes pause, but in the limitless manners of ‘re-presentation’. Within which the treatment of beauty is found.

Plato’s philosophy on beauty, presented in *Symposium*, includes the notion that we are never able to know entirely what beauty is, but should live in constant contemplation of a true beauty absolute. Author Crispin Sartwell echoes a similar sentiment stating; “[b]eauty is almost always found in the world outside human consciousness, almost never purely within it” (Sartwell 11). We tend, whether consciously or unconsciously, to seek ways within which to include beauty in our lives, wishing perhaps to live in a state of continual contemplation of the existence of some kind of greater divine beauty or being. The notion of contemplating one true beauty speaks spiritually as something which we need and choose to have in our lives. We are still unable to entirely articulate exactly what beauty is, but can recognize it alongside the importance of its presence in our lives. We tend to believe in beauty and its power as a kind of innate quality of understanding connected to our ontology.

Aesthetics, our Bridge Between Philosophy and Art

Ancient philosophers on beauty such as Plato and Aristotle have become the cornerstone of studies in aesthetics. Aesthetics essentially forms a bridge between art and philosophy dealing specifically with the visual and the way we react, relate to and understand what visually pleases us. Questions about art, what we see, how we see it, how what we see affects our experience, what we see as beautiful and how to define what is beautiful are all aesthetic in nature. Today any popular English language dictionary will offer up a fairly clear definition. Random House Dictionary states the following: Aesthetics – 1. The branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc., as applicable to the fine arts, with a view to establishing the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, and the principals underlying or justifying such judgements.⁴ While simply stated, its implications are not. What is art? What is beauty? How do I understand art? Why do I connect with some art and not others? Should art communicate a moral message? Does art need to be beautiful? As these questions indicate, there are no clearly defined or ultimate answers.

Alexander Baumgarten coined the term aesthetics during the seventeenth century (Mautner 8), but aesthetics as a subject area for study did not gain momentum until the eighteenth century. This period known as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason saw an increased amount of writing and scholarship on the character and value of beauty alongside which a romanticized notion of both art and the artist forever

⁴ Random House Dictionary by Random House

changed the way we look at and think about art. The concept of aesthetic experience is one which has continued to define our understandings and experience within the arts. It seems nearly impossible to think about a work of art without entering into questions of aesthetic merit, understanding or worth. Unlike Plato's ideas and theories of eternal forms, the focus has shifted from qualities of the beautiful existing in the object themselves to the observer's perception of the object. It could be argued that all art regardless of intention is created to produce an aesthetic experience for the viewer, even if that response is an absence of aesthetic.

Immanuel Kant

Any discussion of aesthetics would be incomplete without mentioning and attempting to explicate Immanuel Kant's philosophy on the topic. Perhaps the father of modern ways of thinking about aesthetics, he essentially believed the aesthetic to be a source of delight met by an individual (Lyas 25). This idea of pleasure or enjoyment as the result of interaction with an object or experience remains central to 21st aesthetic concepts. Kant's work in aesthetics relates to but does not limit itself to only art. His original inquiry was in fact not to created art objects, but to objects in the natural world around us. Part of his initial understanding of beauty realized that the artist was able to create beautiful objects, but that the natural world already contained beauty regardless of creative activity.

However, if artistic practice was to exist, Kant designated beauty to be an essential element of it, an understanding which has shifted over time. In, *The Critique of*

Judgement, Kant helpfully divides beauty into four moments with which we can judge the beautiful. Defining taste as the ability to judge the beautiful, he appropriated the logical functions of judging; quality, quantity, relation and modality in order to discover what is required to call an object beautiful (Kant 203). I will examine elements of Kant's four moments as they relate to and reflect beauty in art.

Notably, Kant distinguishes aesthetic from cognitive judgements as that which is separated from purpose of function, or concept (section 1). For example, I cannot by Kant's designation have an aesthetic response to the exquisite handcrafted quilts made by my mother until I separate feelings of love and admiration for her from the work itself. Kant believed a viewer's response to an art work (for example) as accessory to the object itself, thereby making the actual object irrelevant to its aesthetic condition essentially understanding beauty as a quality separate from use, function or purpose. He suggested that a kind of 'disinterest', specifically that which requires viewing the object or work of art without concern for what it is and without attachment to association, as essential for a 'pure' aesthetic experience; "Everyone has to admit that if a judgement about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favour of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it" (Kant 205). Because beauty is a kind of indeterminate concept, with no rules for the designation of beauty, and no rules for creating an object which will cause the experience of beauty, or at least no rules which we can all agree on, it may be useful to apply a disinterested approach to much contemporary art laden with difficulty either in

subject matter or intended message; for example, the work of Mapplethorpe, Witkin, or Serrano. We must remember that this idea of disinterest is not to be confused with un-interest. At the very least it offers a chance to experience more than that which immediately meets the eye, an avenue in, a capacity for recognizing and appreciating beauty. Thus said, I think that it is useful to approach disinterestedness with a grain of salt, a certain amount of caution and a temperament still attached to qualities of humanness. I think it is possible to conclude that disinterest is a way of recognizing beauty, realizing however, that completely 'pure', without concept adaptations of beauty are perhaps necessarily rare. Joel-Peter Witkin's images engage a dichotomy between beauty and disbelief. Once one knows, or realizes that the work is *actual*, and involves actual people, moral, religious and ethical quandaries enter and the disinterested response seems impossible. As Marcia Muelder Eaton outlines in her article *Kantian and Contextual Beauty*, once we know for example, the malaise of the "beautiful" people on television, or the reality that the exotic plant 'purple loose strife' if given the chance will destroy ecosystems, it becomes difficult to merely see pure beauty as it becomes acutely tangled with belief and moral judgement. Not to be viewed as disparaging or detrimental, rather, we are thankful for this tension as it offers thought, inquiry and connections to real life.

What happens when something catches your eye, or takes your breath away? Kant saw beauty to be a quality in an object that brings about delight or pleasure when perceived. The critical part of reaching the pleasure or delight was to be within the perceiving. As mentioned, a certain amount of disinterest is required; true pleasure in

the beautiful is different from other types of pleasure because it is not based on any interest we have in an object outside of the experience itself. Kant proposes in his second moment of the beautiful, that this found pleasure in the beautiful or feeling of delight arises when a form of free play, or balance between understanding and imagination is reached unlocking the mind from concern of meaning or context.

What then is it specifically about beauty that causes pleasure and delight? Part of this is tied to the belief that the beautiful is in some way related to goodness, and therefore has much to offer our lives if incorporated. Rousseau states the following, "I have always believed that good is none other than beauty in action, that the one is inextricably bound up with the other and that both have a common source in well-ordered nature" (Eco 237). With Kant delight appears to be connected to form, viewing certain formal qualities, as a-priori; places where it is possible to abstract from the quality the kind of sensation in question (Kant 225). It seems to be here where we perhaps see the birth of Theophile Gautier's popular term 'Art-for-Art's-Sake', or the beginning of the concept of formalism, the idea of merely appreciating the work and the beauty found within for what it is rather than connecting it to its meaning or context. Is it reasonable to accept beauty in art for its own sake independent of anything extraneous? Or, alternatively, in a world of chaos and tragedy is art-for-art's sake now homage to an age gone past. Is beauty still an important quality in art? What we glean from Kant, that for me seems of utmost importance, is his certainty that aesthetic judgements are rooted in feelings of delight. The beautiful evokes rapture, capture and joy.

Emergence of 'Modern' Thinking about Art

Our modern system of fine arts essentially emerged after Kant in the eighteenth century. Here we reach what still forms the basis of our 'modern' understanding of art, aesthetics and beauty; primarily that which sees art in the realm of autonomous work meant for refined contemplation (Shriner 4). This shift in ideology was labelled by literary critic M.H. Abrams as the artistic 'Copernican Revolution'; meaning that "in the course of a single century...the construction model...was replaced by the contemplation model, which treated the products of all the fine arts as...objects of rapt attention" (Shriner 6). Shriner suggests that the beginning of our modern concept of artist was related to the emergence of the artist's biography and the development of the self-portrait (Shriner 39). We are in a sense so used to looking at and thinking about paintings as expressive and painters as expressing that we tend to forget that the intent behind many masterpieces up to this point was not personal autonomy or expression but rather simply a commissioned project dictated by a patron. The entire philosophy of art shifted in one era and hereafter presumed that art should not only contain beauty, but be an expression of autonomy.

The need for beauty in art seems to be deeper than Kant's suggestion of mere visual pleasure, but related to cultural values. Alexander Nehamas summarizes this as follows; "the judgement of beauty is not a verdict on the features of persons or things but a sense that they may make our life more valuable" (Nehamas, 2000, 6b). In alignment with this sentiment is the understanding that any work of art can and does

contain aesthetic elements, and any interpretation of a work of art is consequently an aesthetic reaction or judgement. We value beauty in our everyday lives because it enhances our living. It is important to note that aesthetics does not limit itself solely to 'beautiful' work; we can have an equally aesthetic experience to that which is ugly. Sartwell finds Picasso's *Guernica* to be an example of unbeautiful art. He later mentions, "Picasso's beauty is a disturbed beauty or a distressed beauty and a complicated or disgusting beauty" (Sartwell 16). We tend to look towards beauty in moments of ugliness, difficulty, loss and disaster. We need and want to find beauty in ugliness.

Fitting into Frameworks

Art's history has been delineated through major periods and movements, which move in a sequential, chronological order throughout the greater part of history, each period building on the advances made during the last. Presently art is criticized for no longer advancing tradition, meta-narratives and practice. This is because art created today remains partially attached to as well as simultaneously rejecting these compartmentalized boxes of the past; operating in the schism between. Author and Art History professor, Hans Belting, suggests that "[c]ontemporary art manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward...[we have faced] a relatively recent loss of faith in a great and compelling narrative, in the way things *must* be seen" (Danto, 1995, 5). If the art created today is no longer carrying forward past traditions of art making and building upon these narratives, then what is it doing?

What is the future of contemporary art if it is no longer advancing that which has come before? Does this matter?

The emergence of Modernism, followed by Postmodernism (I will address these frameworks fully in Chapter 4) has changed the way we understand and think about art; the notion of chronology no longer seems applicable, or perhaps it cannot be viewed as appropriate for those of us living through it. "Contemporary" connotes both art which is created during our most recent contemporary times, as well as a type of style, framework or agenda; and therefore is not merely a temporal concept. "Just as 'modern' has come to denote a style and even a period, and not just *recent* art, 'contemporary' has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment" (Danto, 1995, 10). It seems to be a way of working, an approach to working, rather than merely art made during contemporary times. This relationship raises many questions. In essence all work ever created was contemporary at one point, although perhaps not contemporary in ideology.

Museums of Modern Art across the world are beginning to wrestle with and grasp this complex designation. Chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Modern Museum of Art (MoMA) in New York City, John Elderfield, maintains that the museum does not draw a distinction between contemporary and modern art but generally defines contemporary art as that which has been made during the past thirty years on a rolling basis (Thomas 144). Contemporary art has become not a segment on a time line, but part of an ever-shifting continuum. The MoMA recently re-opened after an

extensive expansion and renovation. In a sense they were 'modernizing the modern'⁵, and were forced to think critically about what the museum has been and what it wants to be; how to balance classical modern works of artists such as Marc Rothko and Jackson Pollock with contemporary works of today. Bill Viola noted the museum's predicament as follows; "all of a sudden we wake up at the end of the twentieth century, and there is a major, almost Metropolitan Museum-like aspect to the Museum of Modern Art, which has all these historical objects that are looking period and very old" (Thomas 143).

In the process of updating the museum and its collection, it became necessary to de-access works in order to acquire others which would help to reshape and contemporize the collection. While the museum received criticism for selling works by 'famous' artists like Picasso and Bacon, it recognized the necessity of building a collection which was not only an assemblage of 'famous' artists, but that which represents a comprehensive account of art as unfolding (Thomas 146). Thereby representing the difference between merely preserving and protecting; realizing and accepting that 'modern' art is not static, but in continuous flux.

How then is contemporary art distinctive? While it would suffice to state that it is merely art made by our contemporaries, this answer lacks any real depth of meaning or understanding. Contemporary art is elusive, challenges all that we have previously understood about art and seems to escape any attempt to confine it to a specific box or framework, which tends to cause smeared and muddled understandings. Directly

⁵ Article title from: Thomas, Kelly Devine. "Modernizing the Modern." *Art News*, 103 (2004), 142-146.

related to ideas of our time and tied to contemporary culture and theory, it is a position, feeling, belief in and approach to art, as opposed to an object of art. In many cases, the most important element is not the product or the visual, but the concept or idea, thus shifting the focus from skill to concept based. Encompassing all media, contemporary art tends to be highly expressive in approach. At times, it is transient or haphazard, psychologically challenging or disturbing, provocative, and visceral. It fuels discussion, debate and requires engagement as well as detachment. It often challenges viewers to think in a new manner, and if successful engages the intellect with feeling. It can use traditional materials like paint, ink and clay; but often steps outside and either combines media or looks to found objects, digital media, text, performance, installation, or the body. Contemporary art seems to navigate the space between art which attacks the senses, and art which addresses social concerns. All of these qualities and characteristics of contemporary art make it difficult to discern meaning, and as a result, the general population tends largely, to ignore and disregard it altogether. I will later examine artists Marlene Dumas, Jenny Saville and Roni Horn; their work and approach to art will help illustrate and navigate the slippery, nebulous space of contemporary art.

Communicating Meaning: Does Meaning Matter?

If art is not merely retinal, then it must have an agenda, meaning or message; whose job is it to communicate this meaning in a work of art? Is the artist responsible for contextualizing what they are doing? Is the viewer responsible for creating his or her own meaning? Why make art? On February 12th 2005 in New York City's Central Park

the environmental artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude unveiled their newest project entitled *The Gates*. This work of art consists of 7500, 16 feet tall gates which transformed twenty-three miles of footpaths within the park. The artists themselves state that they find it difficult to describe the project and instead insist that one must experience it. When a reporter asked why do it, Christo simply responded, "Why do it, why, because it is a work of art." In addition, when asked about the meaning or message of the work he states, "There is no point, no symbolism, no moral or intellectual statement, just something wonderful to look at. It's only the gates. A work of art of joy and beauty. We do not build messages. We do not build symbols. It's only a work of art. Nothing else".⁶ Jeanne-Claude and Christo seem philosophically to see their art as simply that, and not necessarily anything more.

How much does meaning matter? Much of contemporary art tends to be grey in quality, offering us questions rather than answers. When does a general lack of knowledge hinder us from appropriately unpacking images of art? Is it enough to accept beauty as the meaning, as with *The Gates'* intention of public beauty? The Christos' claim is that *The Gates* are devoid of instrumental meaning, the 'meaning' arises in collaboration with the individual viewer's experience and is individual, involving interaction and a deliberate seeking out of experience. "Only down on the ground can you engage the work in any meaningful way catching the shimmer of light as it plays across the pleats in the curtains, or hear the rustle and snap of the heavy

⁶ Taken from http://cbsnewyork.com/topstories/topstories_story_044205730.html

fabric in the wind.”⁷ Beauty was the catalyst for this meaning making, inviting and helplessly drawing people in to experience beauty. In a sense, beauty becomes the meaning. *The Gates* offer pause and contemplation about art, beauty, meaning and the relationship between.

Because Jeanne-Claude and Christo have world-class status as artists, they have succeeded in attracting a large amount of publicity and attention not only from art enthusiasts, but the masses. If we look to the National Gallery’s purchase of Barnett Newman’s *Voice of Fire*, the publicity was largely centred on anger and outrage. An article in February 14th 2005’s *Globe and Mail* begins, “When was the last time a couple of thousand people applauded the unveiling of a work of modern art?”. Regardless of mixed reviews from both critics and viewers as to its status of art, generally it was seen as vital. I would suggest that part of contemporary art’s importance is the way it opens up a space for dialogue, not as accessory, but necessary. *The Gates*, like much other art, has unearthed popular debate in modern art philosophy. Is it art? What is art?

Some feel that while interesting, it is not art. Interviewed onlooker Kathy Rau states, “I see this as an event, not art, it brings happiness, it brings joy, it brings smiles. But I don’t think it affects me as art.”⁸ Effectively in one work, albeit large scale in every way, the Christos have brought art to the forefront of the world. *The Gates* have produced valuable ongoing debate, inquiry, analysis, investigation and thought about art, its merits, value and various components. They have done this, moreover, not only

⁷ Taken from Monday February 14th, 2005 *Globe and Mail*, *Globe Review* section.

⁸ Taken from Monday February 14th’s *Globe and Mail*, *Globe Review* section

for those interested and involved in the art world, but for the world in general.

Therefore, whether or not one sees *The Gates* as art becomes secondary to the valuable discourse about art which it has created. *The Gates* has become, if only for a short while, a popular topic for dinner, water cooler and casual conversation, and thereby the philosophy of art. Having something that provokes this type of investigation and questioning about art becomes extremely valuable. Finally, although perhaps it does not matter to a culture concerned with concrete rewards, tangible outcomes and profit margins, *The Gates* are visually stunning and beautiful. Is something beautiful to look at, sufficient for a work of art? Is beauty enough?

Contemporary Art and Aesthetics

Does beauty help us understand art? Does beauty make art, especially contemporary art, more accessible? “[Currently] *beauty* is an ugly word, and *aesthetics* is no less troubled.” (8 Charlesworth). Contemporary art presents an interesting twist to aesthetics and our idea and sense of beauty. Much contemporary art is disenfranchised almost entirely from notions of aesthetics and even more generally unconcerned with the visible, visual idea of pleasure. While the eighteenth century ushered in and celebrated the existence and presence of beauty, the twentieth century faces an erosion of that which has been fundamentally entrenched in its practice for years. Artists themselves are torn between attending to aesthetic traditions and creating art with social implications, ethical understanding and conceptual meaning. Artists seem to desire their art to be more than just another ‘pretty’ picture, in fact, just another pretty picture

has become enough to disassociate it as art entirely. Contemporary art while embraced as all-inclusive has effectively discouraged all attention to creation of 'the beautiful'.

Work created today in the tradition of Monet, who was indisputably a great master, is considered banal. In many cases beauty, splendour and richness are out; the abject, ugly and taboo are in. This framework and mode of thinking tends to be encouraged in art schools where instructors often sneer and make callus comments about works of art which could "only be hung on living room walls", suggesting not only that living room walls are the soul appropriate venues for art which is boring and contrived, but that beauty is banal and should be sequestered as 'living room' art.

It has been my experience that this tendency to shun beauty within art is in the hopes of creating artists that have a greater ability to think about and articulate their work beyond that of the obvious. Notably, but not uncommon, Jeanne-Claude and Christo find it difficult to even describe *The Gates*, a project they spent twenty five years bringing into fruition. If beauty speaks for itself and offers a starting point for viewers to make meaning, its unfavourable tendency is to be seen as simple and lacking deeper meaning. When I was studying fine art at university during the late 1990's, a visiting artist made a careless, crass comment at a critique to a classmate stating that she should expect her paintings, if continued in the same manner, to never reach an institution greater than that of a nursing home. He made his implication clear, stating that her landscape paintings were tired, old, common and lacked contextualization, existing merely as poor representations of something that was already done well by the artists of yesteryears. When asked for the context of her work, she indicated that it was about

recreating the beauty of the landscape. As frustrating for me, as I am sure it was for her, was his comment to another student whose work at that particular critique consisted of piled bricks, ostensibly carefully arranged. He seemed to believe that this haphazard display of cubed concrete was brilliant and well developed, supported by the student's ability to attach a lengthy conceptual commentary to the work. This experience I am certain was not unique to me, but existed and exists at many art training institutions. Art that is merely beautiful in nature is no longer enough, and art which is questionable even to those versed in its particulars, has become the gold standard. It is true that we need both the beautiful and the ugly in art, however, beauty offers up an entrance point for further understanding which I would argue is necessary for deeper meaning making to take place. I am not suggesting that artists 'sell out' to beauty and create art devoid of meaning, lacking depth of understanding or avoid difficult subject matter, merely that they attend to the fundamental basis of aesthetics as creating visual pleasure and understanding. "Even now that Monet's art has mutated into a kind of wallpaper, been trivialized by sheer repetition and imitation, it yields a slight but sincere delight, especially in its colour and in the loving sense of a scene taken over into a serene subjectivity" (Sartwell 21).

My artistic practice, more often than not, embraces beauty as its meaning. Does this make it less worthwhile than artists grappling with social issues? Is art with beauty as its aim frivolous and lacking greater social meaning? At this point, I will try to say something specific about art making, and the making of art with beauty and aesthetics as its goal. I will take as an example a recent project I completed which explored

wallpaper as art. I began working on this project as a way to explore notions of decoration and our need to beautify our living spaces with paint, picture, wallpaper and the like. Wallpaper's essence implicates with its beautification, as for what other reason would we take time to paper our walls with pattern and design other than to make the space appeal more directly to our aesthetic sensibilities?

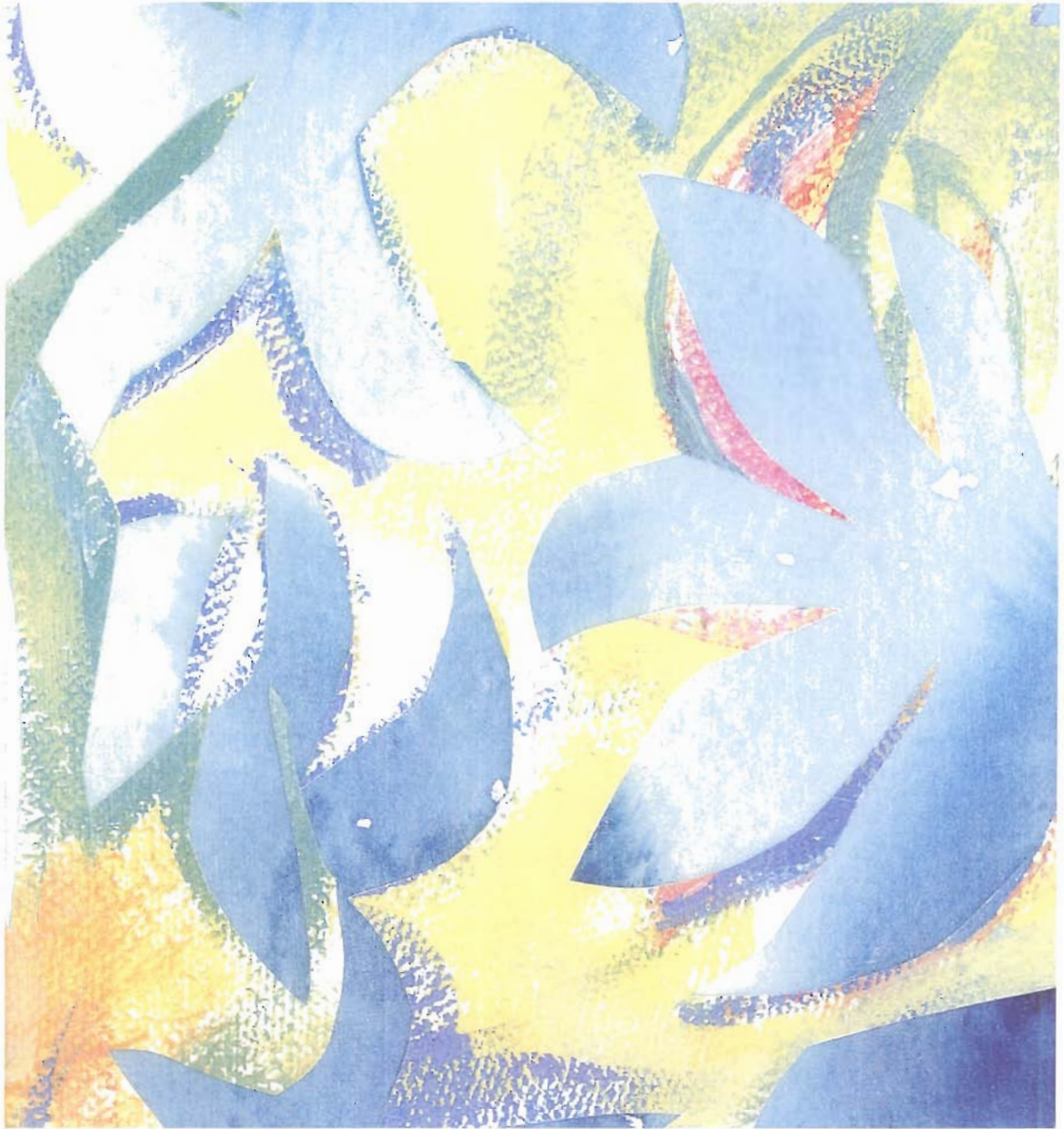
In part as a personal aversion to wallpaper as a means of beautification, and as well to solidify for myself the differences between hanging paintings, and hanging wallpaper, I created a series of wallpaper designs with paint on canvas. I then manipulated these into works, which could be 'traditionally' labelled as art (See figures 3 and 4), meaning, that we tend to view wallpaper design as quite detached from the art we hang on our walls. Curious questions arose from this process: What makes wallpaper decoration? How does cropping something like wallpaper and putting a frame around it change the meaning? By transferring imagery to wallpaper, making it reproducible and repeatable (pattern based), is the result still something from which one could have an aesthetic response? I wanted to investigate and create work designed to mimic wallpaper, the banal covering we use to beautify our spaces. I did not reach any definitive answers to the questions that I posed, however through my personal explorations, I realized that although it has been my experience that most wallpaper is fraught with hackneyed motifs, predictable patterns and banal colour schemes; wallpaper is actually carefully designed and tricky to mimic. While an artwork decorates as a focal point, wallpaper assumes a literal background role, the division between the two are only a 'picture-frame' away. Theoretically, my works, while manipulated, are cropped

bits of 'wallpaper' placed in frames. Let us accept and believe that artmaking whose end goal is beautification is not any less authentic or valid than art making advocating for

Figure 3: Wallpaper Sample



Figure 4: Framed Pattern



social change. The creation of work to beautify spaces does carry with it implicit understandings, that of making life better, of doing good in some form. As Plato stated lifetimes ago, beauty is the only visible quality that inspires love (Richmond, 2004, 78).

Alongside contemporary art's tendency to abhor beauty is its equal fervour to embrace new media. The so-called death of painting, however, never happened, Art Critic Martin Herbert recounts, "It's been a long time now since I heard anyone, or at least anyone worth taking seriously, say that painting is dead. And I almost miss it: the regularity, the gothic certainty of those coroner's reports, delivered, as they usually were, while some new medium for art was being noisily birthed in the next ward" (Herbert 82). Articles in the autumn, 2004 edition of *Modern Painters* look hopefully to the return for painting concerned with the visual pleasure of the medium. Much scholarship of late has revived an interest in aesthetics and beauty. However, parallel to this revival, art still seems to face a choice between being thoughtful and heartfelt, between intellectual understanding and aesthetic sensibility. Artists who are able to bridge both extremes and reach commonality between the two are successfully navigating the culture of our time. Work which is eye catching and without a doubt aesthetically pleasing, yet steeped in meaning and message cannot help but arrest our faculties.

Dutch artist Marlene Dumas is one of the many artists successfully navigating this space. Curator Emma Dexter describes her painting as dealing with the "very point at which art and the big questions of life and death converge...give[ing] a fresh perspective on the human condition" (Dexter 90). Her work is beautiful and somewhat anxious, visually arresting and oozing with painterly sensibility; beautiful, although not necessarily dealing with beautiful subject matter. "A list of Dumas' main themes - corpses lying in state, hanged schoolgirls, porno pictures - could appear crass or

insensitive, yet it is a testament to her subtlety as a painter that by intermingling these themes she achieves nothing short of a revelation" (Dexter 90).

As outlined earlier, Kant proposed a disinterested aesthetic. "What makes a disinterested response possible is the power to form representations and the possibility of ignoring questions about the real existence of what it is represented" (Lyas 30).

Having relinquished all interest in real existence, we are only left with the option of attending to the work itself; all we can do is muse over its possible purpose, meaning and existence.

At first glance, Dumas seems to present the antithesis of Kant's disinterested notion; however, her success comes from this very concept. The idea of purposeless purposiveness, requires finding an understanding separate from the brain's understanding, and argues for the independence of judgements of beauty apart from the sensuous, emotional and conceptual (Hofstadter and Kuhns 279). The sensual work of Dumas requires attention to exactly those elements; their honest, direct expression asks for emotional involvement from viewers, yet requires a detached form of compassion or empathy, at least in the beginning. Dumas, in dealing with subjects like love, death and desire, presupposes a certain required artificial distance from the subject (van den Boogerd 36), to allow for a balance between beauty and abject. The very idea that we could have art, be involved with art, making art and viewing art while at the same time allowing portions of our understanding to detach from the subject is Kantian in theory. With Dumas' work, it would seem that disinterestedness eventually gives way and

viewers inevitably become increasingly involved and attached. Dumas' work is saturated with beauty which somewhat contradicts her subject matter. Her work finds equilibrium between beauty and meaning, aesthetic understanding and compassion, in a way which is successfully different from aesthetics of the past. Moreover, she is able to connect with viewers; bringing a sense of the crazy, physical, haptic art of making something outside of her experience and into that of the onlookers. Realizing the ambiguity of an image, Dumas notes that the image can only come to life through the viewer looking at it, there it takes on meaning (van den Boogerd 37). Most notably, it is obvious that she paints from the root of pleasure and aesthetics, only choosing to deal with subjects by whom her senses are aroused (van den Boogerd 74). Nothing could be more emphatically grounded in aesthetics than this. I would argue that artists generally choose subject matter with towards which they feel a sensual connection. My most recent body of work dealt with swimmers, as a swimmer myself, I was intrigued with the sensual, transparent quality of water and its reproduction and translation in paint. In works like *Untitled Blue* (Figure 5), I try to engage the viewer through the sensuous material of ink and paint. Arguably, this is convincing and believable because the subject matter is that which not only intrigues, but also arrests my particular sensibilities.

Dumas is redefining and questioning historical notions of beauty in a most contemporary manner. We may not be able to put our fingers exactly on what contemporary beauty is, but Dumas certainly is illuminating bits of it for us to see.

Figure 5: Untitled Blue



After the End of Art: Massive Change

The continual 'newness' which has characterized much of modern art has to certain extent slowed down. It is not that there remains nothing left with which to label new, but that our pluralistic understanding recognizes and realizes the possibility of anything as art. This possibility while seemingly positive for art's general popularity and inclusiveness appears to have done the opposite for beauty. At the same time as opening the doors of the art world to everyone as an artist and anything as art, we seem to have narrowed occasions for beauty. A flurry of manic activity to create art and make a statement, cultural, political or otherwise, has in many cases caused visible beauty to

be tossed aside. The concept, idea, message and overall meaning seems to have become more important than the visual qualities that comprise the context. While art making is embedded in an aesthetic perspective, and is about creating something that is visual, the visual today appears to abhor beauty. Arthur Danto a major shaper of contemporary aesthetic theory argues that we have essentially reached 'The End of Art', and with that, an impossibility of distinguishing between what is and is not art. The obvious question to pose at this point is; what happens after the end of art? What happens to beauty and aesthetics after the end of art?

I am not convinced by Danto's argument, however, as art increasingly challenges notions of visual pleasure I would suggest that massive change is inevitable after the end of art, because what else is? Perhaps this is best illustrated through Bruce Mao's exhibit *Massive Change*, commissioned and organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curiously it is not specifically, or even obliquely, about art, but rather about the culture of our times. Suggested amongst the subtext of the exhibit is the notion that aesthetics and beauty have been rendered obsolete, next to current world concerns. The amassed collection invites viewers to change the ways in which we think about design of the world. Most importantly, it actually brought questions about the design of the world to the forefront and asked viewers to recognize the current state of design and its potential, beyond beautification. Moreover, it seemed to ask not only that viewers question and recognize, but that they take action. Instead of creating art merely as an object for aesthetic contemplation, *Massive Change* suggests that we look towards an aesthetic of

⁹ Title to Book

capacity, a place for global change and promise instead of global beautification. This beautification may be aligned with 'massive change', as in the development of sustainable communities, but suggests that aesthetics as we understand it is no longer necessary or even possible. The vision of the exhibit seems to view beauty as no longer a primary concern in a world which balances between extinction and survival. While many parts of the exhibit were particularly visually interesting and aesthetically pleasing, that was not the primary intent. Beauty seemed to be an accidental, rather than a deliberate goal. The exhibition focused on the fundamental role of design in all aspects of life on earth and the ways in which we as inhabitants of the earth are manipulating and reshaping the role of design in the world. A question posed among the overwhelming amount of text and visual stimuli presented as part of the exhibit rings particularly true for the future of art and aesthetics; "Now that we can do anything, what will we do?" While Bruce Mao's vision is of global design, and changing the culture of our world, now that anything is art, what will we create? In Chapter 3 I will propose ways to understand and digest contemporary art.

Chapter Three: Making Meaning from Contemporary Art

Are we beyond beauty? Contemporary art offers very little in terms of beauty, embracing instead an anti-aesthetic. Conversely, contemporary culture inundates us with ways to access 'so-called' beauty in our everyday lives. The fashion industry offers up skewed notions of beauty based on popular understandings, seducing us with flashy, sexy, eye-catching images. While we tend to understand that these symmetrical, proportional, identical, emaciated figures trap rather than emancipate beauty, we are nevertheless intoxicated by the propaganda. Curiously, as discussed our cultural obsession with the beautiful has shifted within contemporary art. Again, largely the beautiful in art has come to be seen as banal, tired and weak, and is no longer a compliment of quality. Can beauty be a way to make meaning; a means for understanding our lives? Undoubtedly, we also find meaning and understanding from qualities that are in no way related to understandings of beauty. However, involving ourselves with qualities that interest our sensibilities arguably have deep possibilities for accessing understanding. Likewise, we value art as a source of knowledge, as a form of understanding deeply rooted to and concerning our existence. There is an understood, implied importance even though we cannot scientifically prove beauty's value. Beauty's redefinition of qualities now range from classical ideals or perfection and symmetry, to sensibilities including the imperfect, unconventional, incomplete, conceptual and

challenging. This shift has not been necessarily endemic, but does seem to increasingly require openness and attendance from the receivers. Where do we go from here, as art makers, consumers, educators, critics and appreciators?

Art making over the course of history has both remained the same, and experienced paramount change. Themes and ideologies have continually shifted our understandings of art. The first examples of art that modern civilization discovered are cave paintings thirty thousand years old. Presumably, we believe that the artists of these works were drawn to mark making as a means of expression. Remarkably, centuries later, meaning is still being eviscerated from these primitive works. We are still able to look at these images and make meaning. Arguably, these images remain beautiful and are still of value today because they offer us access to forms of understanding that would not otherwise be possible. If one of art's goals has been capturing the beautiful, or creating and transmitting beauty, its method has been modified over time. Throughout history, art became less concerned with representing what the eye could see, and more interested in capturing its fleeting essence, a visual experience; alongside which we saw the advent and value of increased personal expression and style. Most generally, the twentieth century saw radical departures from tradition, art becoming more about concept and idea and less about aesthetic appearances. This is not to suggest that previous work was absent of idea, but that it was reciprocally concerned with the visual and concept. This shift in emphasis from work which was largely representational, to that which is increasingly abstract appears

to have opened up a larger area for reflection on broader philosophical questions in addition to beauty and visual pleasure.

We have gained a greater understanding of history, aesthetics, culture, life and ourselves in general, because of our access to art; it is a way of organizing and understanding the world – both images of beauty and ugliness. Our infatuation with art and its history is possibly attributed to its presentation of alternative ways to see, look at and think about the world. Similar to literature, dance or drama, it presents us with something we haven't perhaps yet conceived in our own mind, shows us something that we don't even yet know we want or need. In many ways, art necessarily balances atop uncertainty. This uncertainty allows space for infinite possibility which is critical for learning in both the formal educational system and for education of society in general. Art presents itself as an infinite realm and source of knowledge by not giving answers, but asking questions and opening viewers to possibility. We look to art for meaning, comfort, understanding and value. We value beauty for similar characteristics. It belongs alongside truth and goodness as fundamental qualities of humanness. We require our basic needs to be met, those of food, shelter, and healthiness, but beyond this, we need meaning in our lives; we need sources for this meaning, places for deeper satisfaction. Beauty does this. As humans, we often look for fulfilment in beauty to balance our lives against the global, corporate, consumer world we live in. Quite simply beautiful art enriches our lives, gives us a kind of knowledge and a heightened awareness simply through its presence. John Berger (2001) articulates art's endowment as follows; "What any true painting touches is an absence – an absence of which,

without the painting, we might be unaware. And that would be our loss (32). What then does this mean for contemporary art? Thus, my aim is to propose best-looking practices as a vehicle for deeper understanding and as providing a capacity for meaning making. Additionally, I will briefly look to the role of the artist in scaffolding for understanding. I do not expect to develop a prescribed formula, but rather a general pedagogy.

It is at times difficult with much contemporary art to believe it is filling a necessary void within our culture. Often it is tricky to identify what we are gaining. Sharks in formaldehyde, plaster casts of empty rooms, unmade beds, dead rabbits in trees, meat dresses, neon messages, blood-filled portrait busts and photographs of butchered chickens performing Olympic sports seem to leave us with little more than a unsettling feeling, a bad taste in our mouths and possibly a headache. What the art of our times, like art throughout history, does is provide us with a deeper understanding of the culture of our times. Ostensibly, no one will better understand the art of our culture better than we will. Unfortunately, too often, we seem to have no avenue for access. Not unlike art throughout history, understanding tends to require thought, discussion, dissection and engagement of critical faculties; however, the conceptual and non-referential nature of contemporary art increases difficulty in even accessing the work at its most basic level. In essence, we need to crack and decipher the code in order to arrive at understanding even if the code continues to change. The varied methodologies, presentations, media and frameworks involved in understanding art require continual inquiry. As a culture, do we understand the medium of contemporary

art well enough to do this? While art today combines a wide variety and breadth of both material and subject matter, it is useful to remember that the heart of art making has remained the same. Creating art is fundamentally about thinking, both with the intellect as well as the body and making meaning, not necessarily theoretical, essentially functioning to transpose the visual world surrounding us. These visual works ultimately provide viewers with a valued, varied and needed new, fresh perspective.

Making Meaning from Art

“Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable – perhaps everything.” ~ Carl Jung

While many of us if asked would agree that art is important to our general quality of life, few actually participate in the haptic activity of its creation. Although the value and learning possibilities attached to the creation of art are limitless, it is also critical to realize that much value and worth can be found within and from the work itself regardless of participation in the actual creation. We tend to search out beauty and look to find ways for its incorporation in our lives as offering us connections, forms of understanding and aesthetic fulfilment. Undeniably, everyone has the capacity to learn from art, to come away from the experience in some way changed. Christo eloquently states the following; “It changes something that maybe you’ve looked at everyday of your life but never closely, and suddenly, you see it fresh. That’s what art is about.”

When we look at art, made by other people we are offered experiences that often would not otherwise be open to us. “Each time, through the act of seeing with the eyes of

another, we amplify what we know [and discover what we don't know] of the life we live. We enrich the reality of our everyday." (Wyman 30). Reaching this is necessary for the greatest learning possibilities. How then, do we tap into this enriched reality?

Many people visit galleries and museums each day. Berger (2001) suggests that these people do not come away disappointed (21). Comparable with our need to fill our homes with aesthetically pleasing elements, we tend to look at art and believe in it as in some way doing 'good', and making us better merely by being in its presence. Do viewers feel similarly satisfied leaving galleries of contemporary art? I would argue that in many cases when faced with contemporary art, viewers are frustrated and disappointed with what meets their eyes. Perhaps because they deem the art child-like or simply ugly, or possibly, in many cases the cryptic, esoteric presentation of art prevents viewers from a chance or occasion to even connect with or contextualize the work. Faced with not understanding, they choose instead immediate detachment. "Art is of value only to the extent that it speaks to us" (Okakura 68).

How then do we interpret a work of art for the greatest comprehension? To some degree how we 'read' a work of art depends on the available information relevant to the process of creation, the work and the artist. Popular understanding grounded in romanticism still views the creative process as somewhat magical. If we had greater access to the progression involved in creating an artwork, these age-old myths might be dispelled. I will deal more fully with process in Chapter 5. When examining works belonging to historical artists, we attempt to weave together as many varying nuances as

possible to gain the closest possibility for understanding the work in context. At best, however, we are only able to temper our contemporary understandings in hope of reaching a somewhat accurate historical one. This is the nature of the discipline of art history; we can only make educated assumptions and understandings possibly coming close to reaching reality, but never a complete verisimilitude. Danto (2003) states: "We simply don't know how to read Pieter Breugel's prints the way his contemporaries... presumably could". (xii). Information relevant to the interpretation is simply lost or forgotten, "we no longer know the identity of persons in old portraits; the individuals who knew the keys to reading certain signs and symbols have died without passing that knowledge on to others" (Danto, 2003, xii). This is fact. No one will better understand the work than those living through it will. If society is finding difficulty in unpacking today's art, then what hope is there for future generations of art consumers? How can we begin to penetrate that which is heavily guarded? Installation artist Meyer Vaisman states; "At this time, I can't think of anything more meaningful than taking meaning apart". Seminal theorist of the 21st Century, Jean Baudrillard, saw the deconstruction of meaning as at the heart of the revolution of postmodernity (Gablik, 2002, 31). How then do we access this integral core and begin to unpack works of art? While the accessibility of art, and perhaps as well a prior knowledge of its theory, history and practice increase occasion for appreciation, arguably, the first and most important step is merely a willingness to attend with our entire being. What I mean is a complete sensual and analytical focus as a means for negotiating and thinking about art. Through this we are able to gain appreciation of both the work as an object of knowledge, and the work as a

means of knowledge for culture; thereby offering deeper insight. The first step in interpreting and transcribing art is reached through an openness of sight, a keen awareness of looking. There is a certain relationship, a reciprocity that must be cultivated between the work and the viewer. Seventeenth century Chinese landscape painter Shitao spoke of collaboration between artist and subject matter, however, I believe that it also pertains to the relationship between artwork and viewer.

Painting is the result of the receptivity of the ink: the ink is open to the brush: the brush is open to the hand: the hand is open to the heart: all this in the same way as the sky engenders what the earth produces: everything is the result of receptivity (Berger, 2001, 20).

If we look at "Freestyle" (Figure 6), the information that we glean from it is somewhat particular and varied to each individual. As the artist, I wanted to tap into personal knowledge and acquaintance with water and the feeling of swimming. I was particularly taken with the translation of this bodily experience into the visual format, my goal encompassed wishing and wanting to access a kind of receptivity and reciprocity between the act of swimming, and painting. I was hoping that viewers would, to a certain extent, experience their own construction of knowledge thereby enriching possibilities for personal meaning and understanding.

Figure 6: Freestyle



Looking, offers information and answers, a seemingly simple task, but perhaps our greatest tool for understanding. American contemporary artist Roni Horn sees viewing as somewhat of a discovery process, believing that too much knowledge could inhibit our openness to receive a work, and that all we really need is already contained within our senses and ourselves. Horn seems to see an excess of knowledge as cumbersome, limiting and restrictive (Neri, Cooke and deDuve, 22). This is better illustrated if we examine the process of learning to draw.

When people are learning to draw they often depend on their knowledge of the 'way things look', automatically relying on what has been previously experienced

instead of actually looking at what they see. The results tend to be contrived, crude, naive, rudimentary and raw. It is my experience that once students realize that their previous knowledge must be forgotten and relearned, likenesses emerge. The knowledge of what a 'face' looks like is actually an impediment to capturing a face. This abandonment of knowledge is necessary to reach a greater proficiency. Horn claims that if the viewer harbours preconceived notions or ideas, she merely looks without seeing, missing the opportunity to interact with the work in the same visceral manner as someone open to engaging with the work from a fresh standpoint (Neri 22). Similarly, students learning to draw need to forget, for example, what a figure 'looks' like. This is not to suggest that skills, needed conventions and knowledge are unnecessary, merely that they need to function alongside practices of looking. Actually experiencing, looking at and interacting with is necessary in order to capture a likeness, or sense of life. I do not mean to suggest that we accumulate knowledge only to later abandon it in favour of blank slates, but that we need to be aware of our inherent tendencies, perspectives and perceptions; effectively positioning these to promote and not hinder learning and understanding. Learning to look can be a laborious process involving and requiring our entire sensory beings. The engagement of our senses in responding to a work of art tends most often to lie somewhat dormant in our current viewing practices. While I will continue to touch on involvement of "feeling" with thinking, this is not something I can sufficiently answer here.

Looking: The Value of Looking as Revealed Through Looking

Most art reveals itself through looking; the more time invested in looking, often equates itself with the details revealed. For example, we can explain the particularities of a person, but it is in being with that person that we begin to know them, likewise it is a known fact that there is no better way to learn about the particularities of the colour red than by looking at red. Similarly, there is no better way to learn about art, then to look at art, to spend time with art, to be with art. If we return to Kant, he suggests that the idea of universal recognition of beauty is contingent upon the experience, or actual sensing of beauty within the 'thing'. "No one can use reasons or principles to talk us into a judgment on whether some garment, house or flower is beautiful. We want to submit the object to our own eyes, just as if our liking of it depended on that sensation" (Kant 216). The more art introduced into one's vocabulary, the greater the capacity for further interpretation and understanding of other art.

In a sense, we will spend the rest of our lives learning how to look at things. Sculptor Giacometti believed that the physical act of looking was like a form of prayer, a way of approaching but never quite being able to grasp an absolute (Berger, 1980, 180-181). Philosopher David Michael Levin uses a term he calls "enlightened listening". While he attaches this term to a deadening of empathy connected with the solitary, self-contained way we tend to live our lives as separate from society and social responsibility, it also applies to looking at art. Enlightened 'looking' as a "[looking] oriented toward the achievement of shared understanding", that which connects us, can

engage us and offer change in ways that other disciplines cannot (Gablik, 2002, 64-65).

Art is intrinsically designed to be looked at, it is transmitting data completely through the visual format, and presents information which can only be processed and comprehended if the viewer is agreeable and able to commit to quality time spent looking. Even work which appears at first to be relatively simple, will expose itself through this process.

The best popular culture example I can think of is the deceptive simplicity of the Magic Eye¹⁰ images. These images appear at first glance to be a kaleidoscope of shape and colour; it is only after intense concentration and looking that the hidden picture reveals itself. If we translated this process to art, we become acutely aware that time spent with a work reveals itself in a continual, cumulative manner. We need looking practices that seek to reveal complexities between the viewer and the work. This is true for visually busy, chaotic as well as for simpler, minimalist art.

Much art belonging to the Minimalist school tends to be commonly viewed as simple and straightforward. Given time, viewers may notice that looking uncovers nuances which were previously undetectable. I recently saw Ad Reinhardt's seminal work, *Abstract Painting*, at the MoMA and was generally frustrated by its lack of visual interest and aesthetic presence. Finding it rather boring to my sensibilities, I almost immediately turned and walked to the next painting but because I knew of its 'labelled' importance to art's history, I spent another moment with the work. This time spent

¹⁰ <http://www.magiceye.com/>

revealed a geometric pattern of squares created through subtle differences in colour variation. While for me the work remained devoid of beauty and visual loveliness, I found it remarkable that these slight, virtually undetectable differences remained invisible until one committed further time to looking. That is all, just looking. But what is it ultimately that causes viewers to make the decision between attending and quickly dismissing an art work? I would suggest that it is beauty. Often, a lack of beauty forces the viewer to move on in order to locate something which will engage their sensibilities. I do not mean to suggest that Ad Reinhardt's oeuvre of work is unbeautiful, nor do I mean to suggest that purely abstract and conceptual work lacks capacity for beauty, only that our first defence in beginning to make meaning from our art is allowing space for unbiased, attentive viewing practices.

I have been seized by highly abstract work on a number of occasions. One example in particular was a small reproduction I saw years ago belonging to Mark Rothko. This was long before I even knew of him or his influence within the art world, and before I began any of my formal art training. While the work contained few colours and no referential information I was still inexplicably drawn to it. The understanding and experience contained within the economy of colour and shape was unbelievable, I felt as though I could feel the artist's love for paint. The edges of the rectangular blocks of colour appeared to emerge from the ground radiating a kind of gentle movement. There was a subtle unevenness in the intensity of colour, shape and composition which created a kind of ambiguity. I had no idea what the painting was about, what the artist's intent was or what message he was hoping to communicate, yet it seemed to ask more of

me. There was something ineffable about the work. I believe part of what seized me in the first place was an overwhelming sense of contained beauty, albeit perhaps personal to my own sensibilities. Notably, in contrast to *Abstract Painting*, this perceived beauty provided an access point for me to scrutinize further, I needed no other reason to attend. This post-card sized reproduction offered something which I couldn't quite understand or comprehend, notably that quality was essential because it kept me grasping for more. If beautiful artwork invites viewers in, why then does much art reject this invitation?

Contemplating Time for Life, Time for Art

As already discussed, Kant essentially gave birth to the contemporary idea of contemplating the beautiful; believing that to reach true aesthetic appreciation one must allow a free play of consciousness to reveal itself. This notion of contemplation of art as a means of reaching deeper understandings belongs almost exclusively to our modern and perhaps Western framework. This is possibly because it was previously unnecessary. Historically, attending to the world may have been more of a way of living, connected to the way things were rather than something to be reminded of. During fourteenth century Italy entire rooms, "studiolos" existed as specific places to reflect and contemplate. This is what has been lost today. Curiously, our notion of contemplation is rather romanticized and contrary to the way we live out our lives in continual chaotic forward motion. Perhaps we have realized, or at least identified that the best way to fight this chaos is not with structure, but space, time, study and introspection. Although digested in varying ways historically, it is useful to embrace

this notion of time spent with art as that which leads to not only greater understanding, but also feeling. As earlier mentioned, people go to museums to look at paintings and do not come away disappointed. This fascination goes beyond art, its appreciation and history because it touches and perhaps changes or illuminates the human condition.

“In art museums we come upon the visible of other periods and it offers us company. We feel less alone in face of what we ourselves see each day appearing and disappearing. So much continues to look the same: teeth, hands, the sun, women’s legs, fish...in the realm of the visible all epochs coexist and are fraternal, whether separated by centuries or millennia” (Berger, 2001, 21).

The gallery space or art museum is essentially a modern product. It emerged in the 20th century with its primary function being collecting, preserving and displaying. Let us agree that the gallery is an “organized institution, essentially aesthetic and educational in purpose, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them and exhibits them to the public” (Attenborough 85). I see galleries as extremely important venues for promoting art’s education and displaying its value. Ideally, the gallery should function as a bridge or translator between the general public and the art itself (Attenborough 86).

The gallery space relies on the simple premise that our greatest possibility for deeper understanding and learning is contained within our eyes, and our openness to looking. Art challenges viewers to see in new and varying manners. Learners do not need to be actively creating, to obtain meaning from art, meaning can be, and is intended to be, derived from other’s art. Looking at art allows viewers to extrapolate, synthesize, construct and empathize with and about the artist and the subject matter; it

allows a form of communication between disparate entities. When we attend to a work of art, we engage in a type of thoughtful conversation, a dialogue that listens and responds. Art gestures to us, it asks us to look, to listen. Maleuvre (2005) poetically suggests that museums are the temples of silent conversation (91). If we are open to passionate understandings, art gives opportunities to extrapolate, synthesize, construct and empathize with and about the artist and the subject matter; it offers a form of communication between disparate entities. When we attend to a work of art, we engage in a type of thoughtful conversation; museums and galleries as the treasured houses of art offer us space and reason for this to happen.

“What do we find in museums? Objects that gesture to us. What do they ask for? That we pay attention to them, that we rest awhile with their quiet presence, so humble next to the razzmatazz of modern life...Perhaps we (the distracted, careless, hurried we) rarely do better than to look at them; they, by contrast, always *see* us. They teach us to take care; to pause; to heed; to orientate our attention away from egotist concerns; to attend to the other; to enter into a relation; to participate; to see as also we are seen. They are mortal lesson, lessons in gentleness and sensitivity, in compassion and listening” (Maleuvre 91-92).

Learning from and with art is really an invitation to being better human beings, looking at art as that which awakens deep in our consciousness, in our ‘being’ forms and ways of being. Looking at art teaches us to attend to reality, to be mindful and aware of its offerings.

How often do we allow time for listening? “A busy life doesn’t afford silence or solitude in the way I yearn for, and yet I discover that silence is so much more than absence of sound” (Snowber 17). Berger (2001) notes that *if* we listen, the painted thing

speaks (21). We tend to allow almost no time for reflection or silence in our hectic lives. Our world is becoming increasingly detached as the climate of globalization continues to leach moments for “being” out of our means; our sense of space and time is eroding; decaying at a rate faster than processes like art making can react to. As outlined already, most art still operates in the framework of dialogue. What I mean to say is that it still requires the actual experience of the viewer being in time, real time, with the work. This experience cannot be substituted, there is no other manner in which this information can be learned or transmitted. Horn is aware of the increasing disconnection that we are experiencing, from our environment, our interactions and ourselves.

“My sense is that as we go forward into the so-called ‘informational age’, paradoxically we recognize less and less because we value actual experience less and less. You need a strategy to survive in a culture of excess. Possibility can be oppressive, even meaningless, unless you enter into a relation with it, take hold of it, work with it. By the time I was in my teens, I was aware that there was less silence in the world, less empty space. I developed a nostalgic yearning for those empty silent spaces ...” (Neri 67).

So in this fragmented, faster is better world, where do space, listening, silence, contemplation and time squeeze themselves in? Consumers of art and the world in general seem to want quick, correct answers rather than an inquiry into what could be. Out of the countless images that are part of everyday life, how many do we spend more than a second understanding? “The speed of a cinema film is 25 frames per second. God knows how many frames per second flicker past in our daily perception” (Berger, 2001, 5). And out of these million frames how many register in our brain as modes of knowing and understanding? Viewers can wander about the MoMA and conceivably

amble from Matisse's *The Red Studio* to Pollock's mammoth drip masterworks in moments while passing countless other significant works on the way. What is the average length of stay for a visitor at a gallery? For how many seconds do we pause in front of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* before moving onto Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*? And if we spend 60 seconds gazing at the masterpieces of Western art, how much consideration do we give to the artists and work we don't recognize, find interesting or understand? At most, I only gave *Abstract Painting* about five seconds before nearly disavowing it altogether. In a sense, the art world is competing with popular culture, a culture of flashy, sexy, provocative, smart, superficial, tasty and easily digestible eye-catching candy. Commonly understood, rather disconcerting and alarming is the fact that some of our most creative beings are creating this double-edged sword. We seem to have created a culture of immediacy, a now culture. We live in an accelerated world thriving on faster, bigger, better, more. We purchase *Art History for Dummies*, microwave dinner from a box, shop virtually from our computer, prefer super sizes and super stores to quality and quaintness, send instant messages and wait for instant replies; we exist within a culture of immediate gratification.

"More and more our desire for instant gratification – our need to be kept entertained, whether by literature, pop music or television, without contributing any real effort – is starting to marginalize art of vision, art that questions and may require concentration in order to yield its rewards. Yet it is precisely this art that informs us most about ourselves as human beings. In an ever-changing society we need ever-evolving art to allow us to see our true selves."

-Composer Michael Berkeley

Artworks counteract our culture of instantaneous digestion, imitation and satisfaction. "In the age of simulation, video dogs and cats can be bought for twenty dollars...providing (to quote an article from *Time* magazine) the 'full, rich experience of owning your own pet without the mess and inconvenience of the real thing" (Gablik, 2002, 34). On the contrary, art offers genuine, real engagement. Art is not simulated, fake or virtual. Time with art allows us escapement flanked with deep inclusion to our world. Even though art's primary aim may no longer be the creation of something pleasurable to look at, art, good art, asks, demands, and needs dialogue and contemplation.

Artistic Commentary: Scaffolding for Understanding

The problematic part of looking and contemplating, is that contemporary art often does not scaffold itself appropriately to be accessible by merely looking alone, even for those versed in its particulars. Specifically I view scaffolding as aiding and supporting not only understanding but access to an artwork or the art process. Understanding art requires carefully navigating the chasm between those who make art, and those who critique art; between the practitioners and the theorists. Often the practitioners are guarded, view the process as ineffable and prefer to let the art speak for itself. The critics, without being necessarily versed in the particular haptic activity of artmaking, make informed but often disembodied commentary on work. Viewers are then left to assemble the puzzle into a coherent whole. What makes an artwork accessible? Is accessibility the artist's responsibility? Not all artists concern themselves

with how their work will translate to the spectator, and perhaps they shouldn't.

Nevertheless, art, which begs for collaboration from the viewer, is able to communicate and as such becomes significant, not only in its own right, but as a cultural object. The artist does not necessarily 'own' the experience; he or she presents it to us and it becomes part of our experience – “we get inside the landscape and can develop our own affective ties with it” (Gablik, 2002, 83). We are only able to do this when invited, and often work isolates itself from viewers instead of offering opportunity for engagement.

Kakuzo Okakura states in his *The Book of Tea*: “[t]he sympathetic communion of minds necessary for art appreciation must be based on mutual concession. The spectator must cultivate the proper attitude for receiving the message, as the artist must know how to impart it” (64). Roni Horn echoing a similar belief states: “A work always comes together twice: first, for the artist, and, second, for the viewer. For me that second coming together is really an essential part of the experience” (Neri 16). Horn is cognizant of her role of artist as a liaison between the work and the viewer. When speaking of her series of photographs entitled, *You Are the Weather*, Horn recognizes the importance of “establish[ing] equivalence between [her] position as a photographer, the position of the subject and that of the eventual viewer” (Neri 124). Navigating this space is difficult, but necessary if the work is going to communicate to a public, however small. Unfortunately, many artists feel that art needs neither discussion nor explanation. As an artist, I understand this sentiment. Art's ambiguous, ambivalent and abstruse tendencies make it increasingly impossible to delineate all that has unfolded in the somewhat mysterious and mystifying process. How do you explain

something, which was the result of years of practice and experience, a combination of risk, chance, luck, hard work, skill, intuition and talent? I have always found it difficult to explain my work and process. Often I don't even know until after, and perhaps not even then. This process of creating an artist's statement or commentary has always felt rather foreign or forced; trying to translate something which is so personal, intuitive and non-verbal into words seems to miss something in the conversion. All the same, this vision seems to fall slightly short in explaining art of our era which often needs contextualization and artist explanation. We need to look toward the arts for varied forms of knowledge. However abstract, they are transmitters of information which needs to be accessed. This understanding when met enriches viewers' perception, awareness, sensibility and knowledge. Perhaps because of the emphasis on idea and concept, but also attributed to our culture's general detachment from art and its significance, we seem to lack the capacities to understand the art of our times. Western society now functions in a space which isolates art and its product, successfully detaching it from other activities, ultimately creating confusion and separation. Relatively 'famous' artists like Marlene Dumas and Roni Horn are essentially unknown to those outside of the art world; what percentage of people are even able to name one contemporary artist? If artists continue to create works which are mainly received by those within similar artistic circles, we lose the capacity to engage a greater portion of society who does not even know yet what contemporary art is, or what it can offer them. What then is the answer? Viewers may not be inspired to enter a work of art that they view as pointless.

I recently visited the Art Gallery of Victoria and found myself discouraged by an installation entitled *Between the Lines 2*. Artist Byron Johnston probably had a meaning and a message to communicate; unfortunately, at the time I wasn't sure what it was. The work consisted of black twine strung horizontally throughout the space thereby creating walkways and open areas. There was nothing particularly pleasing and other than the regularity with which the strung twine was ordered, I found no aesthetic sensibility or representation of any kind of beauty. I couldn't begin to make meaning out of what I was seeing, and that is after being versed in art's history and concepts. If those of us who are practicing artists with deeply entrenched understandings of art lack a point of entry to a work, it would appear to be near impossible for the rest of society. In addition to actively attending and looking, access to an artist's statement, including relevant commentary on the work, may be immensely helpful in scaffolding for greater meaning, especially when faced with increasingly conceptual work. I was later able to find Johnston's commentary which provided me with a starting point with which to more deeply understand the work. This annotation functioned in a similar way to beauty, in that it gave me a reason to look for more. Why then isn't beauty used more often as a facilitator for understanding?

We search for beauty because we understand it to be a fundamental aspect of happiness. Beautiful things ask for further inquiry. "A beautiful thing only invites us further into itself. And the further we go into it, the further we need to go into everything else, for it is only by seeing how each thing is related to the rest of the world that we understand what it is: we cannot do one without the other" (Nehamas b, 402).

Yet contemporary art largely seems to loathe beauty and embraces the shocking, controversial and even the ugly. It may be important to note and remember that there is a difference between so-called nostalgic or popular notions of beauty and actually having understandings of beauty; this said twenty-first century art embraces an anti-aesthetic. It depicts abject bodies, anxious circumstances, and uncomfortable social issues; it can be psychologically challenging, critiques culture and confronts us in areas where we are often morally uncomfortable. While tricky for beauty, I realize that the freedom for artists to confront these areas is not utterly problematic; it opens up needed avenues for confronting these uncomfortable, anxious areas.

Canadian artist Diana Thorneycroft made viewers intentionally uncomfortable with her provocative installation *Monstrance*. This work transformed stuffed bunnies and rabbit carcasses into reliquary objects which were suspended from trees. With time, decomposition revealed photographic relics, the rabbits eventually becoming literal monstrances; reliquaries with window views of sacred objects contained within. Viewers found it to be physically disturbing, challenging and difficult to look at. Nevertheless, the stuffed bunny and rabbit carcasses asked viewers to think about the darker side of the human psyche. Using her work, she was exploring culture's devotion to and respect for the body in death. I believe, however, that Thorneycroft's commentary was essential for viewers thoroughly to understand this message. Like my experience with Johnston's work, this contextualization becomes critical in facilitating comprehension. Without her explanation, the work remains merely rabbits hanging in trees, largely lacking in any "beauty" aesthetic capacity. The statement, therefore,

becomes a kind of substitute for aesthetic presence, for beauty. What I am outlining seems to contradict my earlier comments about much art requiring artist commentary to facilitate understanding. I want to be clear that this artist commentary is not a type of *Cole's* notes for an artwork, or the only or "correct" way to understand the work, but merely an avenue into the work. A way to begin accessing the deeper meaning contained within. Contextual knowledge is not necessarily better as an avenue than beauty, I am not suggesting an either- or situation, rather perhaps we could have both. Is it not possible for beauty to evoke an even more powerful message than its opposite?

Contemporary Divide: Beauty versus Social Change

As previously examined, our ability to make meaning from and understand contemporary art is in some way inhibited by its impenetrable packaging. It seems that many artists feel an art-for-art's sake approach is no longer socially responsible resulting in visual pleasure becoming wrapped in meaning, theory and idea functioning to nearly if not completely veil and conceal any visual sensibilities. Outlined earlier and further highlighted in Bruce Mao's highly contextualized social vision, art can be almost anything. How does a work of art interact, speak and express itself to a viewer? We have already examined notions of attending, contemplating and the value of contextualization. Often how successful the artwork is perceived to be is directly related to its public approval and reception. If the audience cannot make heads or tails of the work, it becomes difficult to place in a realm of importance.

It appears that most art and artists today tend to fall into two broad-spectrum camps or frameworks. Most commonly, art is seen as either something which is created as a mode of individual expression and satisfaction or as an agent for social change and responsibility. Dave Hickey identifies this as a contemporary split between that of an aesthetic of affirmation and a politics of direct engagement (Hickey 10). This divide, arguably, is deeply unfavourably attached to aesthetics. Commonly this split views beauty as insufficient, self-centred and an unnecessary accessory.

We may no longer live in a time where it is acceptable not to make art as a response to the suffering and crisis happening around us. Chicago artist Othello Anderson states:

"Carbon and other pollutants are emitted into the air in such massive quantities that large areas of forest landscapes are dying from the effects of acid rain. Recognizing this crisis, as an artist I can no longer consider making art that is void of moral consciousness, art that carries no responsibility, art without spiritual content, art that places form above content, or art that denies the state of the very world in which it exists."

Performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena states, "Most of the work I'm doing currently comes, I think, from the realization that we're living in a state of emergency". Here is where a critical shift in beauty's role in contemporary life has occurred. Okakura (2001) stated in the ninetieth century; "Art to be fully appreciated, must be true to contemporaneous life...It is not that we should disregard the creations of the past, but that we should try to assimilate them into our consciousness" (55). While stated over two hundred years ago, it continues to ring true. We need to respond to the catastrophic, with however, a reverence for the past. Completely disregarding either

our current world situation or the historical veneration of beauty is not an appropriate solution. Art has in part shifted from visual aesthetic objects found in museums and galleries to political, social, ethical and environmental realms, embracing engaged practices of social responsibility. Artists are beginning to examine the effects of their work outside of the studio, moving beyond mere practices of viewing to participatory work. I am arguing for not only beauty in contemporary art, but that which ideally pays heed to both aesthetics and social responsibility. Art can be beautiful and not estranged from commentary. Because beauty's very nature interests and engages, why not harness this and use it as a place for serious thought?

The role of beauty has undoubtedly become political and ethical; an artistic work, which illuminates the cultural genocide of Rwanda, has to walk a fine line between educator and artwork, between beauty and truth. What I mean is that work which supports an agenda greater than beauty needs to be cognisant of its viewers; it wants to educate and inform, but not in an omnipresent, stifling manner. There must still be room for viewers to digest, think and create their own ideas, meanings and truth. The September 9, 1991 issue of the *New Yorker* reported in an article titled "Good Intentions" by Ingrid Sischy, that Salgado's photographs threaten the boundary between aesthetics and politics; "this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal" (Levi Strauss 5), the believed implication that beauty reinforces our passivity. Politically beauty is taboo, and ugliness welcomed as an antidote hoping to enfranchise the masses. In the light of tragedy, without being preachy or presumptuous, beauty does indeed have a role; it is not only a

call to admiration or comfort, but potentially a call to action. Beauty does not function to paralyze us from internalizing what it presents. Instead, beauty's particular qualities are necessary in a contemporary context where we are often anesthetized by images of the opposite. "The reason for pursuing beauty is that, perhaps, in finding it, we may produce it ourselves" (Nehemas b 12).

If we return to the recent VAG blockbuster exhibit *Massive Change*, it appeared largely to embrace an aesthetic of cultural change, or in the words of Hickey, a politic of direct engagement. The exhibit, while extremely thought provoking and engaging, did not concern itself with art as traditionally defined. The subtext of the exhibit seemed to suggest that aesthetics alone could no longer sustain a society faced with entropy. The exhibit while containing many aesthetically interesting artifacts, presenting stimulating concepts and issues related to the culture of our times, was divorced from beauty and visual pleasure. Bombarded with more text than imagery, the exhibit did not pretend to function aesthetically; its goal was social change, not cultural beautification. Photos and objects seemed to present themselves as entirely disinterested and detached from their function as visual objects meant for artistic contemplation. This exhibit about the design of the world, facades as art, in an art institution, but advocated its extinction as we know it. Upon leaving the exhibition, I did not feel particularly optimistic about the future of art, rather it seemed to push paintings, drawings, printmaking, sculpture, installation, collage, mixed media and performance art far into the shadows of the space. A portion of a wall read; "In fact, the secret ambition of design is to become invisible, to be taken up into the culture, absorbed into the background. The highest order of success

in design is to achieve ubiquity, to become banal.”¹¹ Kant embodies the antithesis; “In painting and sculpture, the design is the essential thing, [i]t invites attention to the surface qualities of pigment and texture” (Gablick, 2002, 99). *Massive Change*, while featured in an art gallery, was not interested in advocating the aesthetic arguments attached to art, but rather in campaigning for social change. I do not mean to suggest that examining globalization is less acceptable as art than exhibiting a retrospective on Marc Chagall, but rather, what about beauty? As seen with Jarr, Andrews, Goya, Salgado and Dumas’ art, work need not art abandon aesthetic sensibility to make thoughtful commentary? We can bring aesthetics and social change together.

Contemporary Aesthetics

Political and social concerns are without a doubt informing today’s work in the arts. There are a number of contemporary artists who, despite postmodernist doctrine, are still concerned with the visual qualities of art and want to create art which both visually pleases, embraces the beautiful, and offers thoughtful commentary or message. This is an engagement of beauty and meaning; a new type of aesthetic, perhaps, but not necessarily, entrenched in social or political commentary. Marlene Dumas is one of these artists. Her art oozes painterly sensibility, radiates visual interest and exudes sensuality. Dumas’ art screams its total sensory involvement. She states; “[painting] cannot ever be a pure conceptual medium. The more ‘conceptual’ or cleaner the art, the more the head can be separated from the body ... painting is about the trace of the

¹¹ From *Massive Change* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Fall 2004

human touch. It's about the skin of a surface. A painting is not a postcard. The content of a painting cannot be separated from the feel of its surface." (Van den Boogerd 127). This feeling, the aliveness of applying paint to canvas, the fact that a painting is not mechanically produced, but reflects the human hand is critical. Dumas' work is not devoid of meaning or commentary, rather she confronts difficulty and forces viewers to reconsider the traditional aesthetic conscience of art, not simply beautifying or idealizing but lacing her images with deeper consideration. Her work is highly accessible to viewers because unlike many other forms of contemporary art her work appears to tell a story, people can recognize and speculate on meaning and enter into a dialogue with the work.

Artist Roni Horn works in a similar space. Her oeuvre encapsulates a number of different media; print, installation, sculpture and paint. It is her photography work, however, which I find remarkably captivating. Like Dumas, she is concerned with accessing not only her own senses, but those belonging to her viewers. She wants to involve and engage viewers, and does this by presenting the sensual, non-visible experience in an intimate manner. "I try to reach the viewer by addressing the bodily and not just the mental/non-physical being. The viewer must take responsibility for being there, otherwise there is nothing there."¹² *You are the Weather*, a photographic installation of 100 colour and gelatin silver prints, presents intimacy, beauty and love in an immediate manner. Horn in creating the piece worked daily, regardless of weather conditions, photographing her subject, Margret, throughout Iceland. While I have only

¹² taken from interview posted online <http://www.jca-online.com/horn.html>

experienced the work through reproductions, it appears stunningly captivating. Horn establishes an intimate relationship between the work and the viewer. As a viewer, you believe the work to be speaking directly to you. She does this by creating equivalence between her position as a photographer, the subject and the viewer through careful editing. "It's in those moments where she becomes an object...where a hierarchical relationship is established with the viewer" (Neri, Cooke and deDuve 124).

So perhaps the question is not how do we actively see, but how do we engage ourselves to look in the first place? As viewers, we need and want something to hold onto, something that surprises us, but at the same time asks for, requires and desires further inquiry. We must see something in the work which catches our eye and challenges our understanding. Arguably, beauty, while commonly seen as somewhat rare in contemporary art, more often than not provides this entry point for viewers. If we look to an artist like Monet, who is widely celebrated and loved by non-art enthusiasts, it could be generally stated that his art is first and foremost, beautiful. Today Monet's art has been trivialized and rendered banal, perhaps due to the ubiquity of its presence in nearly every form possible. "[R]eproductions of these paintings adorn countless McDonalds and Holiday Inns; they have come to be seen as trivial and unchallenging in their beauty. But if you can recover the paintings from the vulgarization of their repetitions, you will remember that they are beautiful" (Sartwell 20). Arguably, their success correlates to a kind of beautifully balanced simplicity. They successfully provide an entry point for viewers, not merely providing all the answers, but asking for deeper involvement to find answers. Once involved with a work like

Water Lilies, the deeper complexities of the work begin to emerge. Recently, I experienced Monet's *Water Lilies* for the first time in a realm outside of reproduction. While I have always been fascinated with his work, especially that depicting water, the experience of standing before the large triptych was ineffable. Isn't it these ineffable qualities about art that keep us coming back? The beauty present within all aspects of the work essentially consumed me. When contemporary art offers space for beauty it opens up avenues of possibility. These cracks are opportunities through which learning and understanding can grow. In combination with available artistic commentary, contextual information and best-looking practices, viewers are able to access deeper understanding from contemporary art. Chapter 4 will explicate contemporary theory illustrated with artists navigating its varying complexities.

Chapter Four: Beauty as it Relates to Theory

Thus far, I have been examining art as largely separate from critical theory. A large portion of contemporary art's rejection of beauty, however, is directly related to major changes in the way we think about art. We have reached a point in the history of culture where although beauty is beginning to make a slow comeback, we still seem to be knee deep in an aesthetic crisis. Art has difficulty embracing the beautiful because of the greater problems facing our world. War, terrorism, poverty, disease, pollution, capitalism and globalization have all created a culture of anxious unease, in the face of which many believe art has no place or power. Embracing work steeped in political and social content for now has triumphed over visual pleasure. It may still be too early in the continuum of our 'post modern' world, really to believe that beauty has the power to effect change; however, if we know that beauty has an unprecedented ability to seduce, then why not seduce this change. Looking to art's history, and deeply engrained traditions of aesthetic belief and understanding, I shall situate beauty amongst modernity and postmodernity. Illustrating theory with artworks and artists, I hope to illustrate that postmodernism has not entirely discounted beauty, but fruitfully pushed it in new directions. I do not expect to develop unwavering definitions, but shall aim for a general understanding of how theory has necessarily shaped our understanding.

Tracing Traditions of Art History

Before looking to the ubiquitous catchwords of our times: modernism and postmodernism, I would like briefly to examine the way we have looked at and thought about art throughout time. The canon of art history has been subject to much criticism and protest during the last century. Largely regarded as a 'dead white guys' guide to art, and thus heavily critiqued for its Western bias, exclusion and elitist stance, I nevertheless believe it still to be of great importance and value to our understanding and mediation of art. It is necessary to acknowledge the deficiencies at hand, but then move beyond, as there is still much value to leach from it. If we pick up the quintessential guide to art's history, that as compiled and edited by A. W. Jansen, and flip through it, we are met with countless forms of not only knowledge, but beauty. While criticized for presenting "the" grand narrative of historical significance, the images offered, despite their tempered mediation, put forward a number of truths. When presented as it tends to be, in a continuum, it becomes clear how the changes in our culture of late have drastically altered the ways in which we think about and respond to art. When viewed as such it is impossible not to see our disenfranchisement from images of the beautiful.

There has always been a direct correlation between society's values and the art it produces. We learn much from art about society and culture of the time. Okakura (2001) poignantly suggested during the 19th Century that the art of 'our times' is the art which really belongs to us, and reflects us; if we choose to condemn it, we do no better

than to attack ourselves (71). With contemporary art, we need to develop a certain amount of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty; it is of no use completely to recant. Marxist ideology suggests that a capitalist society, like ours, cannot hope to produce art equal to that of earlier societies. This is because of marked emphasis on production and profit, as well as a resistance to the spiritual nature of art (Gablick, 1984, 39). This understanding appears somewhat despondent with regard to what Okakura suggests. For better or worse, our art reflects and belongs to us. Knowing that this is true, we need to combine a reverence of the art created by our society alongside a necessary revival, not sacrifice, of beauty.

The canon of art history effectively categorized work by schools and styles and thereby organizes the way we perceive history. Without a doubt, it assumes an agenda and is engaged in searching for 'the' way to understand art's varied narrative. Its chronology begins with the first surviving cave paintings dated c. 25,000 B.C., and attempts to follow in a rather linear manner the unravelling of art's content and style thereafter. Critical themes and ideas emerge. Classical antiquity offers up foundations for so-called classical beauty; proportion, symmetry, youthfulness and perfection reign. With the Renaissance, which was essentially the re-birth of classic Greek and Roman society emerged a culture of the artist as separate from craftsman and the beginning of the artist persona. In about the 18th Century we see the beginning of a seemingly endless series of 'isms'; Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Symbolism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. Notably, the 18th Century

also gave birth to the notion of artist as a kind of genius. Much of popular culture's perceived vision of how artists work is because of deeply entrenched stereotypes from the romantic period. We still like to conceive of the artist as hero or genius, struggling alone in his studio, mad with passion, creating as if it were a primal need. Art styles and schools began to change at a dizzying rate during the 20th Century, and no longer fit neatly into traditional timelines and boxes.

The canon preserves, even if only a small slice of the so-called best of what actually existed, ways of being. It is my belief that despite its various problem areas, it has much value for education. At worst, it is an illustration of art's survival of the fittest, an encapsulation of what a group of people valued and believed to be worth saving. Knowing that much art did not "survive the cut" is crucial, however, becoming fixated only on those disenfranchised from the canon is to jeopardize the value of what actually exists. At the risk of sounding too enlightened, it is difficult to imagine not having works by artists like Fra Angelico, Rembrandt or Monet. We need traditions like that of the cannon to preserve artists, their work and subsequently what this offers to us. Berger (2001) in speaking about Rembrandt's paintings suggests that "the spectator intercepts (overhears) dialogues ... [which] are so faithful to a corporeal experience that they speak to something everybody carries within them. Before his art, the spectator's body remembers its own inner experience" (109). It seems impossible for me to not look at a work by a painter such as Rembrandt, and not feel something of the sublime. I realize that there is a danger in creating something such as the cannon, however, not to do so opens up the possibility for not a pluralistic view, but a non-view, a danger of

complete extinction. "We have to remember how much has disappeared: art is a lot more ephemeral than we think. Rembrandt's work is still with us, but that's only three hundred years old-not that old, really. We just don't know what the situation will be in another thousand years" (Hockney, 167). What I am trying to iterate, is that by creating the cannon, we have preserved some of what came before in a way that is more or less, easily accessible.

As previously outlined, beginning perhaps in the 19th Century, the so-called early days of modernism, a critical shift began to take place; "the academic paradigms of mimetic exactitude ceased being compelling for painters and their more informed viewers" (Danto, 2004, 27). Gablick suggests, and I would tend to agree, that the deepest distinction between all art of the past and that of our own is that "whereas in the past, belief and hope permeated all human activity-and art had a clear consensus behind it-our own epoch is characterized by disbelief and doubt" (Gablick, 1984, 24). Art is not infused into society; instead, it is viewed as a kind of extra, the icing on the cake. A lack of spiritualization has perhaps been deadening for culture, not necessarily a legacy that we should aim to leave behind. I believe that this lack of spirituality is in part a lack of connection to humanness, to being humans. As a direct result of globalization, we are now able increasingly to disconnect ourselves from direct experiences with other humans, and therefore experiences of shared human insight, knowledge and truth have been compromised.

We need art's history to link us, to root us, to remind us of what has come before. Through art, we are able to learn about the history of varied times, places and cultures. The work itself functions as a primary source for knowledge; learning through art allows us to discover more, to recover ways of how things were, offers us different ways of looking at the world and is successfully able to transcend time. I would challenge someone to look at a painting by Fra Angelico and not be mesmerized by the ways of living, of being, which radiate from the fractured, weathered paint. Moreover, the incredulity that someone living lifetimes before us actually took a brush and made marks from which we continue to leach meaning.

In speaking to the canon, and its problematic reputation, it is useful to mention that it is artists who make people look at the past differently; artists make art history, not art historians (Hockney 168). The organization and categorization of history, whether problematic or helpful, is the work of art historians. What art historians' offer is a constant re-evaluation, re-searching, re-viving of art. Through access to art's history, we are able to recover something of original meaning. While as many attest, it is possible that something like the cannon of art history will never occur again, it would be counterproductive entirely to relinquish it because of its difficulties. There is undoubted value in seeking historical perspective.

If as postmodernism reminds us, there is no such thing as truth, there is value in looking at the tradition of art as something both understood and misunderstood. There is value in searching for truth, for the possibility, not necessarily the certainty of truth. If

there is no truth, there can be no true understanding, only interpretation. Art continues to offer us rich possibilities years after its birth. It continues to offer us these possibilities because of room for these varying interpretations. There is a particular richness to interpreting and making meaning from art, because it tends to transcend the delineated. Art, like language is not a closed system, but because of its looseness, its possibilities are endless (Richmond, in class lecture). Carl Leggo (2002), professor of language and literature at the University of British Columbia, brilliantly illustrates the possibilities for 'looseness' in *Beyond the Alphabet: Rapture Resists Capture*, although he speaks of language and not art, it similarly applies to that which is visual.

My words **are** loose, resisting capture, caught up in rapture, no more mine than the wind, breath, joy, love. Words entrance; words are an entrance, an invitation to play, a transport of bliss, a portal from places of stasis to spaces of ecstasy, carried away in body and spirit.

My words are poems, full of delight, seeking places to light, in the midst of the alphabet and beyond the alphabet, weaving a fabric for a coat of countless colours, still always eager for the rupture that bursts the fabrication of contexts that enchant, a dizzying dance of loose-limbered letters.

Art and its history provide those open to its possibilities, experiences like that which Leggo illustrates. Max Wyman, a Vancouver-based writer, critic and commentator states the following in his book *Why Culture Matters: The Defiant Imagination*, "We need the classics for their links to where we come from, their illumination of the forces that made us, the comfort they give us in the face of adversity, their affirmation of humanity's great truths. But we need new art as well" (109).

As I have been examining in the previous chapters, the nature of contemporary art is complex. It may be helpful to look to art theory for further clarification.

Narratives like modernism and postmodernism have been criticized for failing largely to follow the prior path of art history, however, aesthetic philosophies of the past may be the only way through which to understand and access postmodernism (Holt 3). As already mentioned the shift towards modernism and postmodernism has largely resulted in a loss of visual beauty. Alexandra Nehamas (2000) suggests that modernism has turned away from beauty in favour of 'difficulty' (399b). Whereas beauty tends to offer a common space and a format for mutual understanding, its antithesis often alienates viewers and presupposes an element of elitism. Most recently, postmodernist ideology has rendered art as no longer interested in presenting images of beauty, or the contemplation of beauty; but rather in changing the way things are. Art has always been intertwined with elements of education, teaching and learning to see the world in new ways, the dawn of modern and postmodern theory adds to this, albeit, in a largely anti-aesthetic manner.

We have been transitioning from modernism into postmodernism for nearly half a century, from a search for truth, to an abandonment of truth. What does theory mean to beauty? How important is contextualizing theory for understanding art? It is my belief that theory, although somewhat esoteric and elite in presentation, helps us make sense of our life, otherwise, why would we bother with it. As suggested by bell hooks: "Theory can help us imagine a different world and embody, name and experience our lives and our world" (Gaudelius and Speirs 19). Theory, provides a kind of

contextualization, and if understood, offers tools with which to think about and challenge, change or alter the way things are.

How does understanding theory help us to understand art? Nothing occurs within a vacuum; theory is developed and created in a direct relationship with what is happening around it in the world. Art, whether it wants to or not, always comes about as a response to what is happening in the world, personal or public, narrow or widespread. It is my belief that art offers up a visual, tangible, place for grappling with and understanding ideas and issues. Art has always been, but perhaps even more so today, is evolving into visual research, a primary research source and tool. The art itself is the research; consecutively speaking to, illustrating and highlighting the nuances. It probes, questions, uncovers, illuminates, demonstrates, inquires and reveals in exactly the same manner of quantitative data, facts, numbers and studies. Art communicates in a number of different ways that we do not expect. It is a research of substance; it enhances an understanding of the human condition. Leggo states in his article, *Research as Poetic Ruminations: Twenty-six Ways of Listening to Light*, "I want research that hangs out in the spaces between a poetics of possibility and a poetics of impossibility. I want research fired in the spirit of a hermeneutics riddles with riddles, a hermeneutics that conceals, as well as reveals, a hermeneutics that obfuscates, even as it clarifies. I want research that pokes into the cracks where light can find release" (Leggo 183). Art is this kind of research.

What does Modernism offer Us?

Modernism is a term which loosely has been used to identify and describe art of the past century. It presents as its main thesis an engagement in and dedication to searching for a greater truth. At the core of modernity are values of secularism, individualism, bureaucracy and pluralism (Gablick, 1984, 26). The contemporary split which I earlier identified, that between an unwillingness fully to endorse an aesthetic of visual pleasure yet also being uncertain as to art's effective role in a politic of responsibility, presented itself with modernism. "For the committed modernist, the self-sufficiency of art is its salvation. Aesthetic experience is an end in itself, worth having on its own account" (Gablick, 1984, 30). Curiously, until the advent of 'modernity', art had a social significance, value or obligation, and yet still presented work imbued with aesthetic sensibilities. As demonstrated, for example in the artwork of Dumas, art with an agenda does not have to abandon all aesthetic sensibility in order to do so.

Postmodernism: Problematic, or Possibility?

Postmodernism has introduced many ideas into our culture; we are in the midst of the 'postmodern condition' even if we do not choose to embrace its particular ideals. Virtual reality, the internet, the more general blurring between art and culture, and globalization are only a few examples of its tenor in our world. Fundamentally, postmodernism attacks the idea that there is truth, a truth of any kind, a central ideology, a meta-narrative, something which scaffolds our every experience and understanding. It has adopted a complete incredulity towards meta narratives (Butler

13), instead embracing pluralism, and a politic of difference. Devoted to calling notions, ideas, problems, understandings, ways of life, deficiencies and culture in general into question, postmodernist ideas present significant ways to theorize the world around us. As already outlined, what I find problematic in postmodern art is its tendency to turn away from beauty. Beauty as a component of art in the new millennium has nearly vanished, in favour of political commentary and social change. Art Critic for the New Yorker, Peter Schjeldahl states; *"There is something crazy about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial"*. To examine postmodernism it seems only appropriate to look to the art created under its shadow.

Navigating Postmodernism through Art

The 1990's saw a sensational group of artists from Britain join together in what has come to be known as the YBA's, Young British Artists. This group of contemporary artists, including those which I will subsequently discuss, Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread and Jenny Saville, achieved international success primarily due to advertising guru and art collector, Charles Saatchi, a genuine Lorenzo de Medici of the 21st Century. I believe that these artists embody postmodernism and its ideals in a way which is clear, straightforward and lucid enough for us to understand. This is not to suggest that their art is simple, rather it is the opposite, but merely that it presents postmodern ideology in a way in which is useful for education.

Postmodernism began to grow during the 1960's largely as an alternative to aestheticism. This is where much, but not all, of YBA art slides in. If we look to the

well-known member, Damien Hirst, his oeuvre exemplifies this ideology. Considering death, life, meaningful living, belonging and alienation, his work is not about creating something pleasant for the eye to look at, but rather, is about his startling content.

Postmodernism dictates that art should have a social responsibility or message beyond the beautiful. While my bias is obvious, I wonder how much beauty is to be found within the confines of an aquatic tank filled with formaldehyde and dead animals? By confronting viewers with challenging ideas, his work forces their emotions to respond accordingly. Hirst's quintessential work, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the mind of Someone Living*, creates a tension between the art and the viewer, between life and death. Hirst states: "I access people's worst fears, I like the idea of a thing to describe a feeling" (Kent 37), Hirst has found his thing. We are affected, and because of the intended shock value, our curiosity is heightened. In carefully choosing one form, he has harnessed human vitality and mortality. This work confronts issues and raises arguments, but unfortunately, says little about beauty.

As already established, postmodernism is entirely unconcerned with beauty and the way things appear. While it is useful to remember that using old criteria when receiving new areas in art is useless, postmodernism tends to view the beautiful as a by-product and not necessarily a goal. Like Hirst, it concerns itself with issues of social conscience, understanding and change. Tending to see its job as one that should breakdown the meta-narrative of modernism, postmodernism finds political commentary to be the best way to do so. Artists creating art under this framework are deeply aware of their political and theoretical position and understanding their work

requires a similar knowledge. The problematic nature of postmodern art is that in a way it has created its own idiom for this understanding and commentary; only those privy to its specific semantics are able to understand its message. For many, Hirst's work appears as merely what it is, a shark in a tank. The reality is that much work embracing postmodern ideals not only needs commentary to facilitate its deepest understanding, but is not complete without it. Hirst's titles: *Mother and Child Divided, A Thousand Years, The Lovers (Spontaneous, Committed, Detached, Compromising)*, while integral to understanding his work, cannot provide the needed discourse alone. In many cases it becomes no longer sufficient to spend time merely looking at the work; while much personal meaning can be gleaned from gazing alone, often more specifics are needed. This is an important shift in the way that we understand and look at art. To understand completely art belonging to the postmodernist doctrine, the 'reader' must have an awareness of the language, context and culture, and be involved in or understanding of the critical discussion surrounding the work. Thus said, I believe that Hirst's work is significant and critical as a filter or lens through which we can understand postmodernist ideas. He has done much for developing a greater social conscience, he asks viewers to argue with him, think critically about and respond to his work. These are all admirable, and valuable, but, is it art?

I would argue that Hirst had it best figured out earlier in his career. *In and Out of Love*, 1991, was an installation in which exotic butterflies spent their brief lives from birth to death confined within a gallery space. It was said to be beautiful, languid and melancholic (Kent 36). Reproductions affirm this designation. Afterwards specimens

were embedded into monochrome canvases; beautiful but dead, artifacts speaking to a literal loss of life and love. Sartwell sees longing and the gradual disintegration of things over time as a component which intensifies the beautiful thing.

“The loss that lingers in every beautiful thing intensifies desire...That we can lose things, that in fact we are always in the process of losing everything we have, underlies the longing with which we inhabit the world. And in that longing resides the possibility of beauty. The flowers and the music at a funeral are meant to make grief more poignant, to bring everyone into full participation with the grief, but including in it the touch of beauty. There is always a doubleness or an irony for us in the vitality of the cut flower. But grief and death and beauty call on us to yearn, and perhaps they call on us to yearn impossibly, to yearn for an object that is always slipping from our grasp.” (Sartwell 4)

The work was not merely about the visual, Hirst had a clear agenda to communicate, however, I believe viewers were able more easily to access the work through its visual beauty. I am not suggesting that art should not challenge us, but that if the artist attends to formal qualities, the overall presentation will engage and present conditions for involvement. Before one begins to understand or search for the narrative, stunning visual qualities arrested the senses and arguably open up a pathway for deeper understanding. This work seems to parallel the current aesthetic crisis. Beauty still exists, but is eroding, disintegrating and dead within art. Is beautiful art only beautiful, but dead? Dead because it lacks a greater connection or message to the community, society or world at large? Why has beauty been vilified? Or are we just unable to recognize it as beautiful?

Perhaps as critic Roger Fry suggested in response to Post-Impressionist painting, we have forgotten that every new work of creative design is ugly until it is beautiful, that is, they become beautiful once we have learned to see them as so (Danto, 2004, 27). It is possible that like the aversion towards post-impressionism, work such as Hirst's will become beautiful in time as our aesthetic sensibilities are weathered and tempered. Hirst is valuable to contemporary art because he offers a new and different perspective. Most generally, art has always offered new and varied perspectives. Nevertheless I question what people three hundred years from now are going to glean from sharks suspended in formaldehyde?

The earliest painted portraits that have survived are known to us as The Fayum portraits, and as Berger (2001) suggests in a short essay, they "touch us, as if they had been painted last month" (53). Why? Partly because "neither those who ordered the portraits, nor those who painted them, ever imagined their being seen by posterity. They were images destined to be buried, without a visible future" (Berger, 2001, 56). Because of this, there was probably a special process of collaboration between the subject and the artist and in "looking at the 'portraits' which were not destined for us, we find ourselves caught in the spell of a very special contractual intimacy" (58). Regardless of circumstance, they touch us because they speak to an experience of living. The possibility that experiences of living, of being, do not necessarily fragment and dissolve over time is astonishing. Similarly, Rembrandt's *Self Portrait, aged 63* continues to resonate an intensification of reality, of life, hundreds of years later. The visible brushmarks nostalgically remind us how fascinating it is that this was actually made by

the human hands of someone from a different lifetime. There is a clinical aura about much postmodern art. I yearn for art saturated with marks of life, of love.

Forsaken Beauty

What postmodernism has completely avoided and forsaken is a tradition of the creation of pleasing things to look at. While enfranchising the marginalized, attending to mass culture, consumption and marketing, suspecting the Western canon for treason, and eradicating totalizing 'grand' theories, postmodernism has forgotten about the heart of art. All that postmodernism supports, sketches and senses, deserves attention and merit. These qualities are possibly critical for our continuance in a society as fraught with malaise as ours. My personal caveat, however, remains connected to beauty. If we are only to engage and promote artistic practices as isolated from qualities of the beautiful, we continue to perpetuate the general disenchantment of society from something greater than being. We need beauty in our art not only as a way of cognizing what meets our eyes, but because it offers us a form of happiness. What about attending to aesthetic tradition in combination with postmodern reverence? Why as a culture are we so set on debating beauty's merit?

Curiously, even art mogul Saatchi, seems to feel a need for a revival of visual beauty as separate from merely esoteric installations and conceptually conceived objects of veneration. He has launched a major retrospective on painting, a distinct departure from the shark-infested waters that earned him global fame. *The Triumph of Painting*, a mammoth three-part exhibition has devoted itself to contemporary painting and

inadvertently a return to visual pleasure. Being a painter myself, I tend to be biased and find beauty in paint more often than any other medium. Thus said, I am not suggesting that a return to painting equals that of a return to beauty, merely that the exhibit seems to be focused on visual qualities in conjunction with conceptual qualities, and on their ability to function in a reciprocally generative manner.

Casting Postmodernism in a Veneer of Beauty

Artist Rachel Whiteread might help us further to illustrate the problematic divide between meaning, message and beauty. She is an artist also working within the postmodern doctrine, arguably however, her work has an inescapable, ghastly, beautiful sensibility.

Working centuries after Rembrandt's death, Whiteread is also struggling to create work which evokes life, albeit bathed in a postmodern veneer. Working largely with sculpture, casting negative spaces, she essentially makes the invisible, visible. Her most well known work, no longer in existence is (1993) *House*. Looking at dichotomies: internal-external, present-absent, negative-positive, life-death, her work addresses more than surface. Whiteread creates a tension between the physical and the psychological. *House* is an example of this, it references something we know, something rather ordinary and familiar, and yet through the process of its creation, reality has been altered; the ordinary has been made strange. The process of casting an abandoned house resulted in an eerie, textured and stunning monument to living. It is a physical entity of what is now absent. Kent further echoes this; "The chalky whiteness and maudlin silence of the

plaster reminds one of fossils: lives turned to stone; prevented from completing the cycle of decay and merging with the fabric of the world" (103).

Part of the mystique of the work may have been its transient existence, the fact that it only belonged as an art object in society for less than a year, its odd placement in an otherwise vacant street or the mere mammoth process involved in creating a concrete cast of a house. Regardless, it was undoubtedly a success. Alongside its visual intensity, is an underlying intention to make a stark commentary on social issues in London.

"House was a memorial to architectural idealism, and a monument commemorating the ambition of postwar governments to provide plentiful, cheap public housing. Although it was in place for only a few weeks before demolition, *House* was, nevertheless, a major public sculpture that embodied (and confronted) the lack of vision and generosity characteristic of the last decade of the millennium." (Kent 102-103).

Although I have only experienced Whiteread's work through reproductions, there is a painful, mournful, calming sense infused throughout. Moreover, and significant to my argument, is that Whiteread was able to make art with narrative, meaning and message while not loathing beauty. The beauty in her work directly connected to her message; mediates the relationship between the work and its significance.

It is my belief that this quality underscores and adds to the social commentary. Roni Horn, also combining social and political content in careful camouflage, notes; "Work with explicit political content tends to suffer in direct proportion to the permanence of

form employed. Work dominated by political and social issues must bear in its form the ephemeral nature of its content. It must risk disappearance..." (129). What I find particularly helpful about this comment is the understanding that regardless of content, political or otherwise, attention must be paid to formal characteristics and qualities. When we look at a painting from the 17th Century, we know little about the surrounding nuances. This is what art historians spend their careers working to decode, what we read is the quality in which the rendering took place. We react to a moment of understanding in a space where our cognition has not yet registered meaning, but our body recognizes and realizes a quality of beauty. Rembrandt's paintings continues to speak to viewers not necessarily because of information offered about the 17th Century, but rather because they are not merely a record or commentary of historical circumstance. We can identify with feelings, moments of being – moments of life present. We react to quality, before understanding or cognizing anything else.

A Postmodern Truth of Beauty

Earlier I mentioned the contemporary painter, Jenny Saville; I feel that it is useful to examine her work as another reference point for understanding and contrasting postmodernism. If we look to defining characteristics of postmodern art and ideology, Saville's work illustrates the antithesis. She is working with traditional media and subject matter in a way that is technically masterful. Her work, however, is absolutely postmodern in many senses. Through thoughtful combination of images, masterful collaging with paint, fragmentation and by providing multiple, distorted and varied

viewpoints, she navigates the body, mapping out meaning. "It's almost like a landscape..., the viewer visually navigates and climbs the body" (Holmes 145) states Saville.

Effectively breaking down the grand narrative of traditional female beauty, Saville offers myriad of standards with which to embrace. Functioning in a necessarily ambiguous political manner, her work offers a way to theorize beauty as separate from the heavily mediated images that surround us in popular culture. Addressing the lies of the media, Saville's work tells a truth about beauty and the body. Saturated with paint, her work reconsiders the relationship between the painter and the body, painter and muse. Using the female body, both her own and others, she creates a kind of necessary indistinctness. As viewers, we are not entirely sure how the figure is positioned, or what the figure is feeling, thinking; there is a certain amount of uncomfortable discomfort. In this discomfort she has effectively created space for uncertainty. Additionally, the traditional subject-object gaze is confrontational yet her position is different from that of a male artist depicting a female body. The female nude has finally become both the subject and the object, effectively forcing consideration of historically entrenched prejudices that have disenfranchised women throughout art's history. Saville states in an interview for Art News, "My overall objective was to try-visually-to find a female language and a feminine space...[however,] [m]y work was never about empowering fat women, [i]t was never that simplistic" (Holmes 145-146).

Most recently, her *Migrants* series turns wounds into objects for regard, delves into the messy domains of plastic surgery, displays accident and burn victims, diseased, brutalized and mangled bodies “all rendered on large-scale canvases with a candour that blatantly flouts conventional notions of taste” (Holmes 144). In many ways *Migrants* is dealing with similar issues to the earlier mentioned Orlan. Saville successfully subverts ugliness for beauty, presenting brutality as stunning. Without trivializing, belittling or denigrating the reality at hand, she challenges viewers to experience painful beauty. To see beauty in pain. Offering up a new, or alternative ‘truth’ to beauty through reflexive, self-conscious and aware portrayals, arguably, Saville has become an icon for what I believe to be a positive changing standard of postmodern beauty. An avenue worth travelling down, a place we need to continue to visit.

The nude flesh reflects the patina of time; a weathered, withered, worn uniqueness that Wabi-Sabi embraces and that which we are beginning to associate with beauty. Its rendering leaves the viewer longing for more time, more time for looking, seeing and being. There seems to be an infinite amount of knowledge, of information, of familiarity contained within the paint; the density, texture, colour, quality, consistency and weight of both paint and form are consuming in more than just their faithful rendition, the availability of artists marks for scrutiny also seem to recount the process of painting, the time spent with and elapsed during its creation. In an interview with Elton John, she speaks to this process: “With a film or piece of music, there’s always a beginning and an end – with a painting you don’t have that. You have the beginning

and the end of the activity of making the painting. But as a viewer, you don't see my whole activity; you only see the final surface. So it's like getting all the notes all at the same time, the whole sound."¹³

Beyond message and meaning, what makes her oeuvre so poignant? Arguably, it is her extremely high level of technical skill and exquisite mastery; the alchemy-like transfer of her content into what is undeniably beautiful. The portrayal of the figure is absolutely and positively lovely, revealing an almost obsession with and love for paint and painting. Every mark made is purposeful, thoughtful and sensitively placed. Even when Saville is using subjects which have been victimized in some manner, the result is completely stunning. Scars become beautiful in their painterly abstraction, surgery is critically analyzed through a veneer of paint and flesh becomes flashy, fabulous and fresh. The unique surface created through paint visually finds a space and a language for a typically un-classical type of beauty. The work radiates sensuality, a loving concern for paint and its application. Moreover, there is an undeniable attention to an entrenched understanding of aesthetics. What Saville is doing, seems to be responding directly in conversation with art's history, with great masters like Rembrandt as well as modern ones like Willem deKooning. Like the Fayum portraits and Rembrandt's self-portraits, it is my belief that Saville's portraits of postmodern beauty will speak and have something to say to viewers in hundreds of years. They will be able to do so because their message is laced with a visual handhold. They invite us to navigate their

¹³ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_9_33/ai_108050851

landscape because they speak to us about qualities of humanness, connect us to the human condition, remind us of our humanness and perhaps suggest a greater spiritual connection.

Transcending Postmodernism with Beauty

We seem to be indirectly pointing to a renewal in a kind of sensual experience or spirituality, an enchantment or a re-enchantment with life. That which intrinsically renews; something you take with you wherever you go. How many of us really deal with a sensual, spiritual reality? As understood, modernism has been largely responsible for the secularization of the world. How this evolved is more complex than I can begin to either understand or demarcate here. However, what this meant directly for art seems to be somewhat correlated to the power and rise of capitalism, alongside which, art's value became increasingly defined as economic, rather than spiritual, emotional or intellectual. Today market economies rule, together with the belief that perhaps in such a catastrophic world, art which merely offers spiritual renewal no longer matters or has a place.

There is without a doubt, as John Berger suggests a certain pain of living in our world. I do not mean to imply that either art or artists can altogether change this reality; art cannot completely fix or campaign against the superpowers of globalization and capitalism, it cannot change the desperate state of Iraq, the horror of genocide, the certainty of political dissent, the unequivocal disparity of power, the reality of terrorism, natural disaster, environmental entropy, human misery or poverty. Art can however,

offer relief, hope, awareness, conscience and a vision with which to see further and beyond. It can provide a way of synthesizing our relationship to the world, functioning as an umbilical cord; a connection reminding us that despite fragmented, technological, digital, isolating, de-humanizing forms and ways of being, we are still interested in, wishing for and wanting ways to make life better, more liveable and enjoyable. Beauty in art has possibilities for change.

Our present predicament seems to rest on finding a balance between living in the world as we know it and tempering that with a way of being that resists complete anesthetization to the existent horrors. If as Gablick (1984) suggests, ours is the first completely secularized culture in history (68), then a reverence for spirituality would seem to provide an adequate antidote. Artists themselves must have a deeply-felt spiritual, religious-like belief in art, otherwise why would they spend time making art? What else would keep them so deeply engaged, especially given that often the economic reality of such work is generally less lucrative than that of a barista at Starbucks? Artists believe in making art as something which provides worth and value in its abstract, not concrete form. It is my belief as an artist, that while necessary, artists do not make art merely to fulfil an economic need, they do not create art merely to be economic products; they make art because they have a deep belief in its value, in the intrinsic nature of art.

If beauty needs a purpose, other than visually to please, it is its ability to engage humans in something beyond the everyday, its altruistic offer of wonder and

admiration; its giving to us moments when 'being' seems to make sense. Beauty particularly as demonstrated in the work of Saville, offers the postmodern condition hope, spiritual enlightenment and optimism. It finds beauty amongst strife, despair and concern. I do not mean to suggest that postmodernism has offered us only endemic negative, degenerative, disease ridden pessimism; rather I agree with many postmodernist notions. I believe that postmodernist thought has opened up artistic practice, for both those within and outside of the art world. Its rejection toward meta narratives and tolerance of conflicting ideals and values has challenged viewers in positive ways. Rather I would like beauty to join forces more regularly with postmodern ideals. It is my belief that in this manner, beauty has not only aesthetic appeal but can lead to and possibly engender change. The final chapter will examine implications for education.

Chapter Five: Beauty's Educational Implications:

"It is art that makes life, makes importance, and I know of no substitute for the force and beauty of its process."

~Henry James

It is not difficult to transfer much of what I have discussed thus far to its importance for education, and for life. If education's purpose is to provide us with the needed and necessary knowledge to be contributing members of society, then art, with its deeply entrenched cultural connections to the world, provides the means to do so. Moreover, art develops an understanding of beauty and aesthetic sensibility, an intelligence that cannot be learned from any other secondary source. Art in its genuine nature presents itself as a primary source of knowledge. It is of no use to learn about art only by reading about art; one must look at art, engage in a relationship, and develop an acquaintance with it. As Richmond (2004) suggests, "Whether as artists or viewers, students must learn to see and feel things for themselves in the context of their own experience. Art and beauty are known by direct acquaintance" (85). Moreover, we turn to art, and believe in art, not because of what it can do for us, but because we believe that it makes us better. The belief that art makes us feel less alone, more connected is deeply entrenched, and not without reason. Art teaches us how to 'be' in our world.

A recent Canadian survey indicated that approximately ninety percent of individuals believed that artistic activities should be accessible to all Canadians, and felt that learning about the arts was important for children, agreeing that the arts teach us

about ways of living (Wyman 55). In addition, we know that art, and engagement with art teaches critical thinking, problem solving, self-expression, experience with developing and pushing ideas to fruition, conceptualization, communication, reasoning and intuition. It forces independent thought, creativity, discernment and originality; engages individuals in meaning making, develops aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, creativity, patience and it "develops a willingness to see problems from different perspectives" (Wyman 50). However, the rigorous curriculum imposed on school teachers over the past few years; in addition to severe funding cutbacks, has unfortunately caused the minimization, if not elimination of art in the classroom. Art in schools has become marginalized and demeaned to functions such as the making of a Christmas "picture" to fulfil a bulletin board requirement, or seen as an 'easy' elective to balance out the academic requirements of High School. Given the lack of instruction, inclusion, encouragement and support of art, the fact that some students even choose and pursue studies in art at the college and university levels is monumental. Art is being sold short as thinly spread frosting on an already oversized cake, as valuable only for creating aesthetically pleasing visual works. Art does this exceptionally, but it does more. Existential psychologist Rollo May stated; "What if imagination and art are not frosting at all, but the fountainhead of human experience? (1975). Arguably, individuals "who can enjoy and appreciate aesthetic engagement in the arts will likely be better equipped to find meaning and value in life itself" (Richmond 83). It seems that the aim of education is not only acquiring knowledge, but also equipping individuals to succeed in the complexity and rich diversity of the world beyond.

While at times I will speak directly to the educational system, that of a government created and implemented structure-educating students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, I shall not restrict my discussion only to the aforementioned. I am using the term education in the most general sense, that as applicable in varying degrees to a six year old child, or a sixty-six year old adult. I also see much of the same value from art for education in the broadest sense of the word. Beyond the confines of the educational system, art education continues to be pivotal. In fact, it is my belief that art is one area where individuals choose, more often than not, to engage in learning, as something believed to provide intrinsic rewards beyond the tangible. More specifically, continuing education programs in the arts continually offer learners spaces in which to develop skill, knowledge and competencies in areas which may have been previously undeveloped. People are interested in the process of art making, and what the experience of creating objects can bring to them.

Educating Towards Meaning Making

Art communicates where the world fails (Richmond 2003 in lecture). And our world is communicating, or attempting to communicate in a haphazard, hurried manner. We are bombarded, presented, shown and exposed to an infinite number of carefully constructed and selected visual images every day. It is my understanding that possibly many people who choose not to see the value in art, are unaware of the large impact it has on their everyday lives. We live in a contemporary world that is possibly more visually stimulating than linguistically. We are barraged by more visual imagery

than any other form of language. This is not necessarily to be viewed as negative; language alongside imagery without a doubt provides essential frameworks for how we think, it only becomes detrimental when we are unable to make meaning out of all that is around us. Arguably, this continues to happen as our interaction and familiarity with the visual becomes increasingly superficial. Individuals with aesthetic understandings and familiarity are better equipped to dissect, understand and construct meaning from the barrage. And what better a reason to educate with art, than for a deeper understanding of our world? Through art, individuals effectively move from consumers of information to meaning makers, constructing theory and practice.

Engaging in a Rich and Meaningful Manner with Contemporary Art

As demonstrated in previous chapters, we have difficulty accessing much contemporary art as its presentation often inhibits rather than invites participation. However, art so intrinsically tied to the world, necessitates that we understand it. Contemporary art challenges viewers to see things in new ways; it can effectively remove you from your normal state of being. If successful, the work of art does this in a way that both challenges your intellect and impacts you in a visceral, primal manner. Art can be highly transformative. It is necessary to be open to this possibility when interacting and engaging with art. Additionally, being open to the chance that you might not like, or agree with what meets your eyes allows for meaning making possibilities and potential to arise; being able to separate personal bias from a work's ability to function is necessary. A poignant example, Robert Mapplethorpe's beautifully

composed and highly controversial homoerotic photographs, shock, disturb, anger and enchant. Cultural critic, Kobena Mercer (1999) states, "We [Mercer and a friend] were fascinated by the beautiful bodies, as we went over the repertoire of images again and again, drawn in by the desire to look and enjoy what was given to be seen. We wanted to look, but we didn't always find what we wanted to see..." (183). Mapplethorpe's work has undeniably beautiful qualities emanating from its borders; often however, in order to access, it becomes necessary to set personal prejudices aside. If we return to Kant's concept of disinterestedness, we perhaps reach a framework which aids in enabling us to confront work dealing with difficult subject matter, issues and ideas. From here, we can then tackle the meaningful content matter.

Why is there much anxiety attached to contemporary art? Why is it difficult to view much art as of value for education? Superficially, it is because much contemporary art makes viewers feel anxious, most generally because we do not understand. Not understanding and the possibility of misunderstanding a work is disconcerting, creates confusion, bewilderment and overall anxiety. Critic Harold Rosenberg, specifically in reference to modern art that questions and tests our assumptions of what is art coined the phrase "anxious object". The quintessential 'anxious object' was Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, which questioned the very nature of art itself (Gablick, 1984, 46-47). When faced with work that seems impenetrable, and inaccessible we tend to look for the 'right' answers; we want to be told how to understand, and how this understanding is going to improve our lives in some way. Wyman (2004) aptly states; "We are always looking for the code that opens the safe where the jewels are kept" (101). Thankfully however, art,

does not present itself with the 'right' understanding; there is no one correct answer. Twenty viewers standing before Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, Saville's *Propped*, or Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, will have twenty different perspectives and understandings on what the work means; similarly, twenty individuals all painting the same sunset will create twenty very different paintings. Responding to, or creating a work of art is never simply a matter of deciphering a code; rather, it comprises a delicate balance of mediating personal understandings and experiences with hypothesis, theory and speculation. An equilibrium between learned skills and intuition.

Recognizing that the ineffable and indeterminate nature of art is necessary to build understandings presupposes a certain amount of uncertainty. The complexity of art within our current visual culture has only functioned to augment this condition. Contemporary art, seemingly more so than its predecessors, presents itself bathed in layers of unease. These feelings of unease, while seen as somewhat obligatory in art belonging to the postmodern condition, often produces highly effective work. The balance between uneasiness and pleasure, apprehension and contentment is tricky, yet when achieved produces unparalleled success. Artists examined, for example Dumas and Saville are all employing this narrative. Beauty need not necessarily equate with comfort and ease; beauty can illuminate unease and remind us of our anxiety, and can effectively present an awareness of the uncomfortable. "Some of the very greatest of art enacts its program in the very areas where our morality is not secure" (Lyas 209). Similarly, Gablick (1984) suggests that difficult and disturbing art is necessary because it

disrupts our normal habits of thought and subsequently strains our understanding (47).
“As a society, we need to be comfortable, ... with the fact that art asks difficult questions...It is the artist who helps us hope, helps us learn that [other, perhaps better] possibilities exist. We need a tolerance for eccentricity” (Wyman 103). We need openness to looking, because it is through simply perceiving that we open ourselves up to a greater capacity for understanding.

Contemporary art, in its often-esoteric manner, requires something of a translation between what we see before us and what it could possibly be communicating. It is not that the art recants articulation, rather that its expression or expressive qualities require more. Artists insist, expect and depend on viewers to interpret and decode their work. Art requires and expects visual analysis. Presently there has yet to be devised a curriculum for reading visual media in the same way as that which exists for print media. It could be argued that this is unnecessary and possibly contradictory to the basic philosophy of the arts; however, in order to “read” visual material, the appropriate code needs to be taught, or risk deficient comprehension. By this, what I mean is that familiarity with, exposure to and experience with art’s particular vernacular will provide viewers with the needed skills and tools to not only appreciate, but navigate art. The language of art is not literal. John Dewey claims, and I would have to agree, that understanding art is a bit like understanding another person (Freeland 149). You understand meaning in that person because of a formed knowledge and context. The more contemporary art we are exposed to, the greater the range of our experiences that we have to draw from, the

greater our formed knowledge and ability to contextualize meaning. Thankfully, there can be no one-way to read or understand a work.

Essentially, this is what I view as one of arts greatest merits, its open endedness, its available subjectivity, its room, its cracks, its space to play in - its life. As celebrated songwriter Leonard Cohen stated, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in". Art, like language, is loose, escapes confinement, continues to break rules, and presents spaces through which meaning seeps and oozes. Its uncertain, unfixed and imprecise multiplicity is to be welcomed and valued; the beauty and richness of art can be attributed to this indeterminacy. "Understanding on any level cannot be perfect, and that is what draws us forward and keeps us alive. It is the fact that we cannot grasp that keeps us groping, that we cannot have that keeps us lusting, that we cannot be that keeps us becoming" (Sartwell 149-150). Space for misunderstanding and understanding is pivotal to the way art functions.

Spaces to pause,
to absorb partial knowing,
the completeness and incompleteness of knowing.
Spaces to dwell
in the intimacy of knowledge.
Spaces to be still
in places of ambiguity, uncertainty, tension. (Thomas, S. 64)

Simply stated, art does not provide answers, but asks questions. The making of a work of art or the appreciation of a work opens means for thinking, offers room for making connections, and gives place and reason to think more deeply, critically and thoroughly about ideas, issues and concepts. The artist and the viewer reach down into untold

depths to grasp both transparent and opaque meanings. Thankfully, art escapes definition. The necessity of pausing, lingering, wondering and wandering in the spaces of an art work offer and present meaning; infinite, not finite knowledge. Our knowledge of art, through acquaintance exceeds in an ineffable manner that of language. Specifically, language lacks the capability to sufficiently delineate art's nuances. Through art, through our groping to understand and make meaning we are able to make sense out of life. "Visual representations are not transfixed; there are no limits to their capacity for luminosity, their capacity for meaning. Meanings embedded in visual imagery are illuminated as the reader becomes immersed in aesthetic descriptions that fuse the intellectual realm of ideas with the sensual realm of flesh. A chasm narrows ..."
(Thomas, S. 67).

How Does the Beautiful Aid in Understanding and Learning?

When looking to contemporary art, the notion of beauty, however scarce, functions in an integral space. Beauty is the bait, the worm, the hook; it provides access leading toward deeper appreciations. "Aesthetic work opens us up, opens up a space that interrupts the ordinary. It forces change" (Neilsen 47). Beauty is useful as a paradigm for education because it represents that which is not fixed or certain. Moving away from a kind of universal, fact-based, objective way of knowing reveals new ways of discerning, distinguishing, of seeing. "Aesthetic inquiry as participatory dismantles boundaries, providing openings within an otherwise closed arena" (Springgay and Irwin 82). As beauty in art and its role in life have been examined, it seems to point

directly to a fundamental role in education, that of making meaning from art. Characteristically, an aesthetic understanding not only enhances, but helps us to understand the experience of life, both past and present. Strauss speaks about beauty as something that when it 'works' is "a thing of great beauty and grace", time stops, the sun increases in brightness, and ugliness disappears, just for a moment (Levi Strauss 109). Similar to Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being', it is the second when something seems right and everything makes sense, an instantaneous understanding. Artist Andy Goldsworthy speaks as well about reaching this kind of awareness; "At its most successful, my 'touch' looks into the heart of nature; [but] most days I don't even get close"¹⁴, he realizes the unique temperament of times when everything makes sense, moments when beauty reveals itself. Beauty is perhaps not a thing, but part of a process, an experience, energy and space around and within. Sartwell states that "beauty is something the beautiful object emits, like a light: a thing is beautiful in virtue of what it gives" (Sartwell 28). Elaine Scarry states that beauty produces the same experience wherever it appears, "a strong, almost physical sensation of pleasure which blends the need to stop and stare at the beautiful thing with the urge to connect it with the rest of the world" (Nehamas b, 394), this association being a powerful product of beauty. Beauty not only offers us opportunities for making greater meaning from our world, but provides us with a necessary form of understanding.

Beauty when translated to education should be fundamental, however, that which on paper we deem valuable, important and necessary, in reality at best is

¹⁴ Unknown source of quote

considered superfluous. Where does beauty fit into the educational system? If we can remove some of the stereotypes from the word itself and, redefine them through a contemplative lens, space for beauty remains a vehicle for deeper understanding.

Professor Didier Maleuvre (2005) suggests that the aim of art is not necessarily art itself but that its destination lies elsewhere; "its aim is reality encountered and lived with. And the vehicle by which art travels into reality is not just skill, insight, knowledge or intelligence. It is love" (77). Love, like beauty is presented as one of the great truths, qualities or moments of humanness. The value of tapping into beauty for education is that it provides more than mere knowledge or facts, but it offers the possibility for this knowledge to be transferred into understanding as it is related to the world. Like love, beauty is to some degree unaccountable, unexplainable and inexplicable. It is difficult to delineate, but we know when we are a part of, or in its presence. Experiences with the beautiful in art not only broaden our understandings, but our horizons. Maxine Greene explains involvement with art as "enabling us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed" (Gaudelius and Speirs 87). This is becoming rather metaphysical; however, beauty and its communicator – art, have qualities about them which are inexplicable, and therein lays their quality. Max Wyman describes experiences with art as creating "Fine-textured human beings", I love this. Art and seeing value in its beauty is not about the visible, but about what it creates in the interaction. Beautiful art is not about image and representation, but participation, "it

seeks less to represent the world than to convey the exhilaration of our being in it”
(Maleuvre 85).

Plato pronounced the arts as an unsuitable source of knowledge, because of their ability in some manner to translate beauty. This was problematic for Plato because of his belief that beauty, being one of the ‘universal forms’ was itself an absolute form of knowledge, and thus any other copies of it were merely illusion and not clarifications, but muddied translations. Today we accept the arts as a source of knowledge, and similar to Plato, we can accept forms of beauty as sources of knowledge as well. Andy Goldsworthy attributes his deep understanding of the environment, patterns and systems of life to his commitment for spending time attending to and being in the environment. While he is not an environmentalist or a biologist by education, his love for the beauty in nature has provided him with a type of knowledge and vernacular that could not have been transferred in any other manner.

Knowledge and understanding are developed through making associations and connections; beauty does this.

“Beauty ... It causes us to gape and suspend all thought...but simultaneously what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation ... to bring things into relation ... [o]n seeing a beautiful thing, our world is transformed; our own importance is diminished” (Nehamas b, 394).

Nehamas states that his magnetism towards Manet’s *Olympia*, has “made it necessary to look at a host of other paintings ... learn more about Manet, his sources, his

contemporaries, art criticism in mid nineteenth-century Paris, orientalist painting, the history of the nude ... [and] has literally changed the shape of [his] life" (Nehamas b, 9-10). Nehamas passionately states; "I do know that the more I want to understand the *Olympia* 'in itself', for its own sake', the more I need to learn about other things" (Nehamas b, 10). If we choose to take education under the umbrella of contemplative attending, students might make increasingly meaningful connections.

The Beauty of Art Making

"I wonder what purpose, if any, possesses an artist to make things?" (Julian Schnabel)

If looking at art can and does provide us with knowledge, understanding and ways of being in the world, then it seems only cogent that actually making art would amplify these attributes. There is much beauty to found in Joseph Beuys vision of everyone as a potential artist; this revelation is critical for the educational system. However, the stark reality is that few exercise this possibility outside of institution walls. Even those schooled in its idiom at times find difficulty identifying themselves as artists and continuing the practice which they have been schooled. "If ninety-eight percent of our medical students were no longer practicing medicine five years after graduation, there would be a Senate investigation, yet that proportion of art majors are routinely consigned to an early professional death" (Bayles and Orland 11). As the previous chapters have outlined, I believe that art's greatest possibility for illuminating goodness and beauty in the world is through our exposure to it. Most of us, although capable of

making art, will never participate in its haptic activity. Nevertheless, as a maker of art, I believe art making to be of unprecedented value for education. I have learned more through my art making practices, for example: perseverance, problem solving, failure, success, judgement, than any amount of institutionalized education could ever hope to reach. While I am not convinced that art making can be taught in a direct, transferable manner, I am convinced that education can offer opportunities for the experience to unfold.

Thus far, we have mainly been examining and extracting meaning from art as separate from the process of art making. Finally, I will turn to that which has captured my heart and where I find meaning, comfort and satisfaction; in the messy, physical, frightening, fragmented, generative, surprising, irrational, inexplicable, evocative, provocative, reflective, frustrating, revealing, embodied, emancipating and absolutely beautiful, heart-full, art-full process of art making. Essentially, what is it that draws certain people to the process of art making? I am drawn to its vitality and sensuality; I yearn for a brush charged with paint, dripping with pigment, ready to create compelling images. I am eager to place art in the forefront of importance for human life, for meaning making, for learning possibilities and potential. Art is created with the mind, with knowledge and skill; but is transposed with the heart, with love, with beauty. It is my belief that art making embodies beauty, it is a process of revealing, disclosing and unfolding beauty. Artist Louise Bourgeois (1998) understands beauty to be a series of experiences (331), noting that we experience the idea of beauty, and not necessarily beauty as an object, a thing, a noun. Art making is an experience of beauty. My Dad,

while he would not identify himself as either an artist, or an artist pursuing beauty, I believe to be nevertheless infatuated with the translation, this experience of beauty. An accomplished photographer, he seems particularly taken with 'catching' sunsets. It is in the experience of meticulously photographing these experiences, seizing ephemeral, transient moments, that he captures experiences of beauty. It is my belief that he finds the experience and process of repeatedly photographing these moments to be essential and somewhat separate from the actual photograph itself. While the sunsets are beautiful, it is their translation and the experience of translating this that speaks meaningfully.

Despondently, it remains true that a large portion of the population either disregard the arts entirely, attend a few mainstream art exhibitions, or scoff when they read in the paper that Canada Council has funded yet another work which they designate a waste of money. Remarkably few people create art. This could in part be attributed to art making's ambiguous, ambivalent and abstruse tendencies, or a belief that art is not academic or serious; that its particular tendencies cannot hold up to the rigour of academic research, theory and facts. bell hooks (2000) writes; "Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational" (xxvii). As an art educator and practitioner, I believe that we need to advocate for art as an education of feeling, of being; an education of rigour and thoroughness. In many cases, art speaks to new potential, to love, to a spirit of promise. Rather than abhorring this possibility, we should look to art making as a practice of

revealing beauty, illuminating love and creating goodness. I am certain that we could find many examples where art does not as a product disclose the former; however, the practice of creation arguably heightens an awareness of not only yourself, but your connections and relationships with the world. Art is an aesthetic presentation of the world; theory, research, inquiry, wonderings and this re-presentation involves elements of corporeality that can be expressed in no other way than as that which gives birth to forms of beauty.

Those that participate actively in the arts, through art making, are engaging their brain in an aesthetic manner and creating works which present either intentional or accidental messages; they are making cultural artifacts. Research in both curriculum theory and contemporary art education suggest that students learn effectively when they are engaged in rich and meaningful experiences (Attenborough 92), I know of nothing either more meaningful or rich with possibility than that of creating. Artists engage in art because they designate the process as imperative, emancipating, primordial, challenging, exasperating, frustrating, satisfying, personal and rewarding. Many of these artists never in their lifetime achieve the acclaim that they perhaps deserve, yet they continue to create art, constructing a visual world.

James Whistler in reference to the creation of art stated; "art happens". This supports the rather romanticized idea that art making is not something which can be controlled, taught or learned, nor is it something that even given ideal circumstances will produce desirable results. While it is true in some essence that art is "caught" and

not “taught”, and is as much a slave to chance and luck as to talent, perseverance, time, mechanics and creativity; art making, like anything else, improves with time and practice. Making art is difficult, but its particularities can be learned. Art is made not by geniuses or masterminds but by everyday, ordinary people like you and me. An approach to art in education which I do not wish to abandon, is that embraced by Beuys and the potential for everyone to be artists. As Berger (1965) states: “If we think of [artists] as special creators, we are wrong. Everyone creates in the same way. They vent, imagine, hope, dream, frighten themselves, remember, observe – and from all this they make for themselves certain ideas and images” (186).

Artists throughout time have had difficulties explaining and describing the actual process that they undergo to create a work of art. Contemporary painter Jo Self explains her creative process as seeing the finished image on the canvas before beginning to paint. Susan Rothenberg states; “most of my work is not run through a rational part of my brain, it comes from a place in me that I don’t choose to examine, I just let it come” (Rothenberg 264). Frank Stella adds a cheeky explanation to painting as follows: “there are two problems in painting, one is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting (Stella 113). When asked to explain my own process I also am at odds to delineate it through language. The sensuous, qualitative nature of art makes the translation tricky. However, there is some danger in complacently believing this to be an adequate clarification for lack of explanation. If those practiced in its particulars neglect to explain and advocate then who will? The best way I can describe my process is outlined in a narrative expose (See appendix 1,

Palette Ruminations), a personal attempt to delineate and dissect bits and parts of the process of making art. Visual and performance artist Marina Abramovic suggests the following: "What is really important in the performance is the process. When the performance is finished, the memory is something else, but the process is what is essential". I would have to agree. I tend to work through creative and artistic problems visually, and use a sketchbook/journal/notebook to document and mark meandering progress (see figure 7). This collection of ideas, quotes, thoughts, photos, cards, sketches, meanderings, paint, newspaper articles, magazine clippings, post-it notes, research, rememberings, and beginnings effectively become a deep source of knowledge, a place to think and turn to for thought. These notebooks provide reference, inspiration and insight into art making, organizing the process, tracking growth, success and failure. A visual record, a record of art making. A record of life. Marks collected and arranged to understand life. Marks marking life. Increased access to material such as this might lessen the divide between artmakers, art and the viewing public. The somewhat ambiguous, tendencies of art making tend to diminish its educational value, I would argue, however, that these reasons are precisely why art making needs to be encouraged and promoted as a valuable activity.

Figure 7: Sketchbook/Notebook



The actual process of art making, while somewhat mysterious and mystifying, is no different in progression from other subject matters such as English, math and science; they all involve elements of critical thought, knowledge, organization, expression, creativity and problem solving. Therefore it can be deduced that creating art can teach skills which are not only valuable to the arts, but to other subject areas as well. There is much discussion about problem based learning and developing autonomous individuals with 'critical thinking skills' in education propaganda; art teaches these, and has been teaching in this manner for centuries. Art poses a problem, and artists must work and think to create individual visual solutions; unlike other subject areas, there is not always a right answer and in this way students are forced to think and approach their work in a more critical mode. Cornett (2003) implies that "teachers who use the arts as meaning making tools take advantage of the unique power of literature, music, art, drama and dance to deeply affect students intellectually and emotionally" (6). Art is a way of comprehending, much like any other subject investigation, but its understanding is emancipatory. For art to function, students are encouraged to think beyond borders in order to construct and deconstruct their creation and meaning thereby transcending understanding.

If looking at art makes us think and create meaning in a complex manner, then conversely, creating art should amplify this experience. Art is an intuitive, somewhat metaphysical activity, but only because few people are educated and experienced in its

specifics. Its nature relies on the fact that understanding comes through experiencing.

As earlier pointed out, verbal language is sometimes a somewhat blunt tool. All attempts to translate art from an intuitive, visual, non-verbal medium to language misses something, and for that we are thankful; art is so intriguing and interesting because it can't all be explained. In this manner, part of its understanding, comes from comprehending the process of art making. Frank Stella (1960) continued to say about problems in painting, that finding out what painting is, is about learning something and actually making the painting is about creating and constructing something (113).

Education tends to favour the former over the latter, the learning over the making, when much of the learning takes place through the making. Art making often viewed in the schools as a supplement, which over time creates students who feel that they cannot make art, leading to individuals who are unable to effectively understand and make meaning from the high percentage of visual media to which they are exposed on a daily basis. Moreover, it leads to a large percentage of potential art makers not engaging in art making. The creation of art is needed in education because there is still the idealistic belief, naive or not, that there is intrinsic, enriching value to be found in the process in ways and forms that other subject matters cannot touch.

Appendix

Palette Ruminations on Painting

Magenta

screams out at me. Piercing through the darkness. Through paper. Through the pages of my sketch book. Through canvas. Through the body. Blood red vitality. Life of body.

Power

I love the power inborn in its vibrancy, but I am careful, afraid not to overuse its power.

Dilute its power. Weaken. Watered-down. Change its properties. Make pink.

I am overcome by its deepness, its intoxication effect. overwhelming.

Power in a small package, small tube. Squeeze out the power, harness the power, but beware.

Red Wine. Power beware. Power invite.

Red wine. Printmaking. Lining
up

plates.

Registering

with

not

much

Registration.

Uneven

Off kilter

Uncertain

Unsure

Doubtful

Hesitant

Faltering

Unbalanced

Stained fingers, desperately seeking to stay clean, to be mark free so as to not blemish the pristine fabriano. Love the paper. The smooth textured surface. The watermark. Soft and maluble. Ready, wanting, yearning to accept ink.

Reciprocity
Giving
Accepting
Needing
Unconditional
Dialogue

Dialogue between artist and medium. Ink and paper.

ink

relentless

seeping into my body,

staining my body

relentless

seeping into my body

staining my body

absorbed by my body, relaxing my body. Radiating warmth into the chilly space.

Warmth I want my work to resonate

Cadmium orange. warmth. Primitive flesh
alive-art, warm-art, heart-art, body-art.

Art comes from our bodies, manifests itself through our hands, hearts, body

We don't create with our hands – but our entire being.

Standing.leaning.squatting.sitting.

Hating.loving.wanting.wishing.

Moving.reaching.pondering

Lingering

art

Body-art

Alive-art

Heart-art

Can we paint heart-full, meaning-full art without fully understanding, knowing.

“Paint what you know, what you see. Draw from your experiences. You are too young to be able to paint from a full knowing.”

Painters, like good wine and cheese, age and get better with time,

fuller bodied

body-full

beautiful

work ages, grows into itself. I need time. Time for art, time for life, time to grow, time to live, time to move my body in time.

Time involved, invested in making and being with art
time – age
age-knowledge
knowledge-knowing
How much time do I need?
How long do I have to wait?
Painting from knowing
Painting for knowing
Learning to not know
Learning to learn
Learning I have much to learn

Process yellow, canary yellow, naples yellow, lemon yellow.

Yellow

Yellow, the name isn't beautiful enough,
Yellow does so much more.
Light.invite.delight. l I n g e r

Time spent lingering,
 contemplating,
 looking,
 seeing,
 thinking,

time spent with art.

A work of art is not merely worked on in the studio, but created throughout the day. In that nebulous space inbetween busy and being. That space both just beyond and within our reach. Life gives art. Life brings art into being. Provides the time, space, distance, material and inspiration to create.

Morning swims bring new insight on the way that light dances across the underworld space, tea with milk providing time to just be, evening walks mark the intricate printed shadows, time spent wondering about the space between the leaves, cooking, working, running, all the while your mind working out space, colour, composition, texture, shape, rhythm.

Rhythms of art, rhythms of life.

Learning to not know. Learning to learn. Learning that you have much to know.

Viridian Green

Memoirs of nature. Vegetation.

Celery. Peppers. Cucumbers. Avocado. Granny Smith apples.

Pistachio. Lettuce. Pickles.

Limes. Parsley. Basil.

Watermelon

Misleading surfaces.

My mom wants the trees to be green and the sky to be blue – but it's not that simple. There's a rainbow of colour hidden in the tree. I want to give each one a chance to speak. To find the mango within a lime.

Room to breathe,

Breath

Trees give us breath.

breath from painting.

Giving life to a work. Creating. Birthing a unique object. A personal thing, belonging to you, part of you.

Loose and find yourself. Endings webbed together with beginnings. Tangled. Knotted.

Cerubean Blue

Ode to **turquoise**...

Perfect turquoise

Perfect calm

Perfect oasis

Submerging my heavy body

Eyes bewildered to see the underwater perfect turquoise world. Tropical. A tropical oasis hidden within. A stolen, secret moment.

Supporting my heavy body. Providing relief.

Make a 'remembering' I thought, don't forget this...the feeling of this...

Feeling of paint, of canvas, of the brush. Tactile, textile, tangible, texture; textures of life

Wet, thick, thin, sheen, matte, substantial, translucent, glossy, deep

Sensuous

Love and Hate

I'm not sure if I like painting, or simply spreading paint on the canvas, mixing the colours, creating a spectrum, a feast for the eyes, for the senses. The smell of wet paint filling the room, mineral spirits wafting chemical comfort, awakening the senses, the soft, smooth texture of paint on your fingers, the delicious way it is smoothed into a surface contrasting with the bitter taste of when your tea mug becomes confused with your paint mug. The pigments settling on the canvas, on your skin, on your clothes and the floor beneath you. Marking your existence. Making marks to mark your existence. Staining you with its remembrances. Marking you as a mark maker., image maker, picture maker, paint user. Mark making to make meaning. Not yet understanding the meaning of the marks being made.

Blue.Sky blue.Galactic blue.Colbalt blue.Prussian blue.Marine blue.Rowney blue.Process blue.Ultramarine blue.Sapphire blue.Indigo blue.Azure blue.Navy blue.Blue

I want to drown in the beauty of its hue.
Submerge, mask, paint, colour my senses.

My favourite

Why do we have favourite colours? I poke around in a Tupperware full of paint and notice the smooth pressed metal tubes of various shades, tones, hues of blue. I love colour, but I love blue more.

When I go to buy paint I stare at the racks of these tubes, neatly organized in analogous colours. I yearn to organize my life this way. Fit it all into neat compartmentalized packages, only squeezing out as much as I need or can handle. My life doesn't fit into small perfect tubes. Rather it resembles the chaotic blue Tupperware which houses them. The perfect tubes quickly marked by the pandemonium of life, no longer perfect, stained. Beautiful. Beauty in the disorder, disarray. Lovelieness in the no longer perfect tubes.

reflecting the impression of a hand, the patina of time.

Satisfaction from squeezing.

Happiness from carving away at the perfect tubes.

Leaving space.

Squeezing

Squeeze, ooze, leak, seep

Stress management in squeezing a tube.

Paint is why I love painting. Making marks. Marking my existence. Leaving marks of being.

Blue doesn't refer to a period or a sense of sadness, rather it offers up calm, steadfast support.

I yearn to saturate my canvas with comfort. To soak up the comfort from its stain.

Load my brush with pure pigment and swirl it around on the canvas.

Blue, backbone blue.

Blue helps me to begin a painting. Beginning.

New beginnings

Hard beginnings

Learning all over again.

Longing for the comfort of knowing...

Afraid.

Fear.

Beginning a work is like trying to swim up stream, like trying to move quickly through a vat of peanut butter...with weights tied to your feet.

Afraid to touch the pristine white surface and make an unforgettable mark.

Mark making – Struggle – Difficult - Inescapable

A mark that cannot be changed, erased, masked over.

Courage.calculation.unknowning.notknowing.

Fear. of not being able to do it again. of starting. of finishing. of not knowing. Fear of not growing. of not being an artist. of being an artist. of acceptance. of rejection. of failure.

In life.

In art.

Art teaches you failure.

The necessity of failure for growth.

Success is the accumulation of many failures.

Never knowing what will happen to a work, where it will end up, where it will take you.

Illusive, unpredictable, evasive, deceptive product.

Each mark made determines what will happen next.

Uncalculated, undetermined, unpredictable.

Unforgettable

There is no formula for the creation of art. It escapes all attempts to properly delineate its existence. Therein lies the beauty.

Effort. Luck. Chance. Happy Surprise.

Magnificent Mistake

Fuels Enchantment

Risk.

Chance

Risk Taking,

Chance Making

Happiness often involved an element of risk.

Art cannot be made without chance.

Art making by its very nature implies chance at every step of the process.

Every brushstroke.

Colour choice.

Compositional decision.

involves

Chance.

Risk.

Blue

Blueberries. Summer's fruit, summer's treat.

Summer

My favourite season,

Blue

My favourite colour

Would I be as in love with summer if it wasn't preceded by winter and spring and followed by fall?

Much like summer, blue's existence depends on the other components that make up the crayon box. Seasoned colours, seasons.

Seasons of painting.

Seasons of life

Growing. Dying. Rejuvenating. Circling. Forever dependable

Cycle of life, cycle of production, cycle of art.

How does art cycle into being? Where is the beginning? The end? What marks the end of a painting, the beginning of the next?

Violet

A product of red and blue.

Rememberings of trying to obtain violet from mixing cheap paint. Red

+ Blue

Doesn't always =

Violet

Not worth the battle of cheap paint.

Always trying to find ways to cut the astronomical costs of art supplies.

Reconstituting clay on the steps of Togo Salmon Hall. Non-art students staring in crazed wonder as I punched, pushed, pulled, smoothed and stretched the clay out to dry. Saving money. Trying to stop the art supply drain.

Art.

Drain on my body

Drain on my brain

Drain on my heart

Drain on my being

Art-body-brain-heart-being-drain.

D

R

A

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G

Hidden costs, hidden agenda.

Break them down.

Teaching by breaking us down.

Suffering. Struggling artist.

Art-student, not artist.

To be an artist one needs age, experience, an art CV, exhibitions, buyers, talent.

Art. I can't, won't, don't choose to define myself by my art.

Stereotype in the word. I want to escape the underlined implications. Make art on my own terms.

I won't, can't fit into the 'artist' box. It's not spacious enough, I'm not
ONLY
an artist.

I'm not an artist, not good enough, 'aged' enough, practiced enough, versed enough.
Enough.

Pink.

Platinum pink

The quintessential colour for girls.

Watered down, weak magneta.

The colour I abhorred, loathed, avoided, detested for many years is now the colour I am beginning to understand, to embrace. Pink has merits beyond Barbie. Pink. Magneta, not weakened, but strengthened with white.

tint.

Power diffused.

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