

## Introduction

Upon leaving a retrospective exhibition of twentieth-century artist Cy Twombly, held at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, I overheard the following conversation between two people who were also leaving the show.

*She: Well, it's not that I didn't like the art; it's just that I can't see what's so great about it. Here it is in one of the biggest and most important museums in the country. What does it have that other artworks don't have? It seems so simple. Why is it here?*

*He: I know; it doesn't look like it took much talent to create it. Maybe it's because he did it first. Even though it looks like just anybody could do it, nobody else did do it. It's unique and original.*

*She: So, does that make it good? Just because he did something nobody else did? Is that what makes art important enough to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art? What makes something good art?*

*He: Uh, . . . I dunno. Let's go get some lunch.*

As I watched them walk toward the museum restaurant, I smiled a smile of recognition and amusement. The exchange was similar to many



*Cy Twombly, Triumph of Galatea, 1961 (Rome).  
Oil paint, oil-based house paint, wax crayon, lead  
pencil on canvas, 115 7/8 x 190 3/8" (294 x 483 cm).  
Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston and  
Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston, gift of the artist.  
Photo: Paul Hester, Houston.*

I have heard before—in galleries and museums and in the classes I teach. I was amused by the abrupt way in which the conversation ended. It was clear that the questions raised were complicated enough to provide a focus for several hours of discussion. It also was clear, however, that these two museum visitors were soon going to move on to other topics.

In galleries and museums throughout the city, as visitors wandered encountered artworks, I suspect that similar comments and questions were being put forward. In some cases, those visitors simply moved along to the next gallery or, perhaps, to their next meal. But I suspect that some visitors continued to question the nature and significance of what they had perceived.

In these extended conversations, the participants may have listened to the views of one another about art—what it is, what it is for, why some works seem to be better than others, and why some works and not others are included in one-person museum exhibitions. As a result of these discussions, the participants may have changed their minds a bit. Perhaps they would approach the next museum visit differently. People who take part in such discussions tend to ask *new* questions and approach the next artworks they encounter with insights gleaned from previous conversations.

People do wonder about art. They ask one another questions; they put forward ideas they have considered themselves or heard from others. Sometimes, people have strong beliefs and adamant questions about art. On the campus where I teach, we have a history of wondering, resentment, and even anger when sculptures are installed on the grounds. A large concrete and stone sculpture was recently installed outside one of the science buildings on campus, and its installation has been met with a flurry of angry comments about it and its placement. One professor is angry that his favorite view of the

campus is obstructed. Another is angry that the placement interferes with the functioning of his weather-monitoring equipment. Some members of the university community have written letters to the editor of the school paper demanding that tuition dollars ought to be put to better use, that what appears to be a construction site ought not be called art. Some have maintained that even they could do better if given the chance. Others have defended the work, claiming that art is supposed to cause people to think, that the sculpture is a welcome addition to an otherwise uninteresting campus. Some advocates have said that the materials used are beautiful. Others have claimed that the form of the sculpture is complex and dynamic.

Sometimes, people resign themselves to the belief that questions surrounding debates such as that on our campus are merely matters of opinion. There is a widespread assumption that when attempting to judge the merits of artworks, one person's opinion is as good as another's; these are matters of taste, and there is no disputing matters of taste. The view presented in this book is that in matters such as these and in other important areas of discussion about art, there is much to be gained by spending some time exploring our own views and those of others. The informal and formal discussions about the sculpture are important ways for individuals within a community to clarify their beliefs, learn from one another, and, perhaps, change their minds.

The debate about the sculpture on my campus is similar to debates on other campuses and in communities when sculptures are placed in prominent places or when certain kinds of artworks are made available to the public. From such debates, it is clear that people have beliefs about art that can be explored, clarified, and sometimes changed. From my experiences as a mother and a former art teacher, it is clear



### Others on Twombly's Work

In a *60 Minutes* segment, Morley Safer described the work of Cy Twombly as “a canvas of scrawls done with the wrong end of a paintbrush.”<sup>1</sup>

Artist and critic Peter Plagens said, “For all its look of chance, Twombly’s work is fearlessly composed and passionately colored. The best of his paintings—such as *The Triumph of Galatea* (1961)—are like vast desert dunes with scattered flowers growing in them. But the dunes are cut into perfect rectangles and the flower seeds have been delicately sown by dreams.”<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Danto, philosopher and art critic, said of Twombly’s work, “Scribbles, scrapings, rubbings, uncoordinated on often-vast expanses of space . . . There is an almost Taoist political metaphor here for those who seek such things: Out of the elements of human expression at its most basic, work of the greatest beauty is made. When you visit the show, take it all in rather quickly, then go back to bear down on one or two paintings at most. Buy the catalogue, do some reading, and then bear down some more. After that, try another painting or two.”<sup>3</sup>

that elementary- and secondary-school students also have beliefs about art.

When students voice their views about art and other art-related matters and when members of a community respond to art exhibitions and campus sculptures, they do so in an effort to contemplate and understand their world—to conceptualize and categorize their experiences. This seems to be a common activity with human beings. We need only to consider how humans over time and throughout the world have created imagery, narratives, and rituals in an attempt to explain their relationships to the natural world and one another to conclude that they tend to wonder at the world before them. In an effort to understand natural and social phenomena, humans have presented complex and varied accounts of the things they deem important in understanding their world.

Education philosopher Thomas Green proposes that wonder is rooted in our knowledge that things need *not* be as they are.<sup>4</sup> Green suggests that it is when we wonder at the ordinary—recognizing that while ordinary things can be *depended* on to occur, they need not always occur—we sustain our wonder and interest. To make his point, he uses the example of our wonder at the simple act of planting an apple seed and expecting it to turn into an apple tree. He suggests that this apparently simple and predictable process is cause for sustained wonder. Human beings have paused over time to wonder at, explore, and offer explanations for seemingly ordinary phenomena—things we most often take for granted. I believe that those who take the time to consider sculpture on campus or artworks they have seen are exercising a basic inclination to wonder about and organize their experiences with their world.

We humans also seem to have the need to create order out of chaos. In wondering at and asking questions about ordinary things and events, we have placed conceptual limits on and have made distinctions about these phenomena. At times, the interest has not been so much related to particular events or phenomena, but rather to human experience or the world *in general*. Throughout history and in different cultures, individuals have contemplated general questions about such things as human nature; about the place of our experienced world in the order of the universe; and about the nature of truth, goodness, and beauty. Centuries ago, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and other thinkers recorded their views and offered extended and organized explanations about matters that have importance to all humans. We still read and react to their views today. Throughout history, others have devoted major portions of their lives to involvement in an ongoing dialogue about these matters. In the Western world, these people are called philosophers, and the activity in which they engage is philosophical inquiry.

What is important to note is that as philosophers engage in dialogues, they represent the rest of us in the process. Their questions are important to us because they are also our questions. These philosophers, however, take more time, and probably more sustained care, to address the questions. This impulse to raise significant questions about our experience, to create order out of chaos, to conceptualize and categorize, and to offer possible explanations is as natural today as it has been over time. As adults, as teachers, and as students, we often wonder at the ordinary. Sometimes we take the opportunity to go further, to make conceptual distinctions and offer theoretical perspectives. We participate in philosophical inquiry more than we probably realize.

The purpose of this book is to provide teachers with ways to help students engage in these important dialogues. The two visitors to the Museum of Modern Art left the show with important questions about what makes an artwork significant. They began a discussion in which they proposed possible answers to their questions, but they soon dismissed the whole matter. In noting their conversation, I was struck by the possibility that they did not have the knowledge and skills required to take the discussion further. I believe that in artrooms around the country, as students wonder about art, they too fail to move from the point of raising questions to involvement in rich, layered discussions through which they might clarify their own beliefs, hear and learn from others, and perhaps even alter their own views.

For many reasons, we teachers have been hesitant to provide students with opportunities for philosophical inquiry. One reason for this is the persistent view that philosophical discussions almost always involve what is thought of as merely opinion. In addition, teachers have not always been prepared, through preservice professional education, to deal



Tom Sternal, *Pavillion*, 1993. Reinforced concrete, marble, sandstone, wisteria and virginia creeper vines, 12.5 x 30' (3.8 x 9.1 m). Photo: Katherine Stewart.

with philosophical issues that might arise. We have lacked guidelines for designing strategies for including philosophical inquiry as a regular part of art instruction. When asked to develop lesson outcomes or objectives, we have not had models of philosophical inquiry to guide us.

This book is an attempt to provide teachers with such models. In addition to providing a rationale for the inclusion of philosophical inquiry in the art program, it provides information about theories of art, suggestions for planning for philosophical inquiry, sample program and lesson outcomes or objectives, and examples of lesson plans and other resources useful for the teacher who wishes to add philosophical inquiry to the curriculum.

Chapter 1 introduces aesthetics as an area of philosophical inquiry and shows its connections to the interests and abilities of children and, ultimately, the concepts, skills, and attitudes promoted through the art curriculum.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of traditional perspectives in Western aesthetics and introduces ways to identify philosophical questions. It offers a sense of the questions and answers that have been addressed over the years, showing the connection between these views and those of students considering philosophical issues as they make and respond to art.

Chapter 3 introduces some guidelines for engaging students in philosophical dialogues.

The focus of Chapters 4–7 is on practice. Readers will find suggestions for teaching concepts and skills associated with philosophical inquiry. Many of the suggested strategies are from teachers who have gone beyond simply allowing questions and issues to arise, who have planned for such questions and issues, and who have designed lessons and units around them. Specific learning outcomes are also suggested.

When children try to organize their apparently unconnected art experiences into a coherent framework, they learn that focused attention to seemingly minor issues can help them clarify their own assumptions and beliefs. As they learn to listen to and carefully consider the views of others, they may be willing to approach the world less dogmatically. As they experience satisfaction in owning their ideas, children may be disposed to routinely question and give concentrated attention to their art-related lives.

I'd like to think that this book will prove useful for teachers and that as a result of incorporating some of the ideas suggested into their programs, their students will experience the satisfaction and rewards of philosophical inquiry. I'd also like to think that when their students next encounter an exhibition of artwork that triggers philosophical questioning, their conversations with friends will not come to an abrupt end by going off to lunch. I envision, instead, an exchange that sets the agenda for lunch and for a dialogue that continues throughout their friendship and over whatever meals they share.

## Notes

- 1 Michael A. Lipton and Susan Carswell, "Rogues' Gallery," *People*, 11 November 1993, p. 67, referring to a September 19, 1993 *60 Minutes* segment.
- 2 "Gods Are in the Details," *Newsweek*, 10 October 1994, 76
- 3 "Cy Twombly," *The Nation*, 31 October 1994, 507.
- 4 Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1971).