

## Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Children

We raise philosophical questions more than we probably realize. Singular events routinely prompt discussions about general issues and related principles. A nine-year-old is accused of murder, and the discussion in the media turns to the general (and philosophical) question “At what age should a person be held accountable for doing wrong?” which involves the related question “What does it mean to *know* what is right and wrong?” People leaving a gallery might begin to discuss the artworks of Cy Twombly *in particular*, and move on to questions about art *in general* as they wonder what makes good art. Philosophical inquiry is embedded in experience and our attempts to make sense of our world.

We not only raise philosophical questions, but we also often continue to examine them, sometimes referring to views we’ve read or heard about, even as we clarify and state our own views. This is a human process, one we participate in throughout life. When we do, we’re taking part in philosophical inquiry.

## Philosophy and Its Branches

From the Greek *philein*, which means “to love,” and *sophia*, which means “wisdom,” philosophy suggests the love of wisdom. In our search for wisdom, we have offered various explanations for or theoretical positions regarding concepts such as reality, truth, knowledge, and goodness. We have stated what we believe to be real, what constitutes truth, how we can know what is true, what is good and right, and how we can know what is good and right. We have categorized the questions and have given them names. In Western philosophy, for example, *metaphysics* is the name we have given to questions that consider reality and knowledge (*ontology* and *epistemology*, respectively). *Ethics* is the name we have given to questions and explanations about goodness, right, and wrong. These areas of inquiry are often referred to as the branches of philosophy.

### *Aesthetics as a Branch of Philosophy*

*Aesthetics* is the branch of philosophy that deals with issues of beauty or the beautiful. The questions

and ideas of aesthetics have been directed toward what society considers art: the creation of and response to art, the role of art in society, and the standards for judging art’s significance and for interpreting its meaning. In addition, aesthetics deals with our experience of beauty and ugliness outside of art—in nature, for instance. When the museum visitor asked if art is good simply because an artist does something that no one else has done before, she was asking a philosophical question. It was philosophical because it addressed standards for art in general, not just the standards for judging the work of the particular artist. Because this question had to do with an attempt to determine standards for the judgment of artworks in general, it falls within aesthetics.

In cultures worldwide, people have ideas and beliefs about things that they make and the ways in which they respond to such things. Differences in values and beliefs about the world and their place in it, along with differences in language and custom, account for differences in the ways in which people

1.1 *The Mission Inn wrapped for extermination of termites, Riverside, CA. Photo: Fred Bauman.*

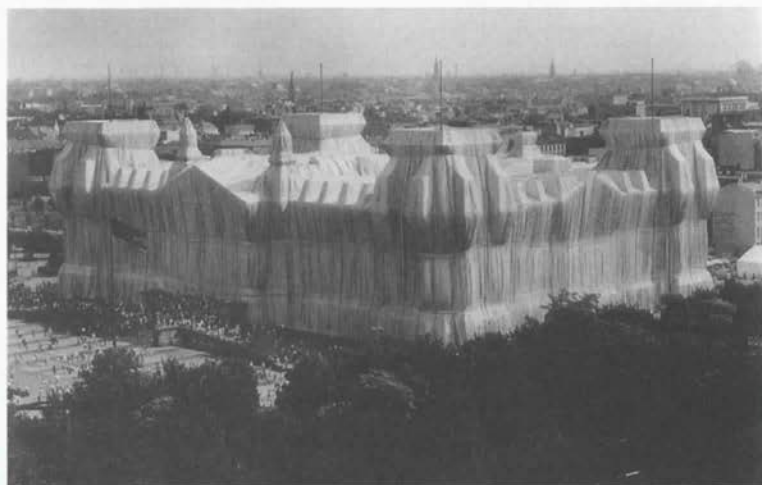
1.2 *Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971–95. Silver polypropylene fabric, blue polypropylene rope. Photo: Wolfgang Volz.*  
© Christo, 1995.



consider these things. In most cultures, even if no word exists for art, there is likely to be language that accounts for something that is “good to look at” and for a contemplative mode having to do with aesthetic appreciation.<sup>1</sup> This kind of thinking may or may not be organized into categories and subject to study, as it is in Western philosophy. Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy is a Western construction.

### Questions about Artworks

Within Western tradition and many other cultural traditions, questions in aesthetics can be categorized by considering their particular focus. Some questions center primarily on the work of art: What *is* art, after all? Are there certain things that all works of art have in common? Is there one, true, and universal definition of art, or do definitions change over time and throughout the world? Other questions concern certain kinds of art: What is sculpture? What makes a photograph different from a painting? What are the distinguishing characteristics of computer-generated imagery? Aesthetics is concerned not only with visual



### Discussion Point: When Is It Art?

Twenty-four years of effort by the artists and their team of advocates culminated in the 1995 wrapping of the Reichstag. For two weeks, the historic Berlin building stood draped by 1,076,000 square feet (100,000 square meters) of fabric, including tailor-made panels for the facades, towers, and roof. *Wrapped Reichstag* utilized 51,181 feet (15,600 meters) of rope and 200 metric tons of steel. This project is one of several in which artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, in collaboration with hundreds of other people, have draped objects in several parts of the world. Other projects included surrounding eleven islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay, wrapping one million square feet of Australian coastline, and creating a 30-mile (18.6 km) installation of 1760 yellow umbrellas north of Los Angeles and installing 1340 blue umbrellas north of Tokyo.

The Mission Inn is a National Register landmark which had been visited by presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. As part of the restoration of the inn, exterminators covered the building with brightly-colored tarps.

How is this different from *Wrapped Reichstag*? Is the Mission Inn covered with tarps a work of art?