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Aesthetic Engagement: Pathways to Teacher Self-Identity

Engajamento estético: caminhos para a Autoidentidade do Professor

Engagement esthétique: les voies de l'auto-identification de l'enseignant

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Resumo

Este artigo chama a atenção para as ligações entre o enlace estético e a autoidentidade dos professores, antes e durante o exercício da profissão. Em geral, meus alunos têm pouca ou nenhuma formação em arte ou educação artística. Os cursos, tanto de pós-graduação quanto de graduação, são eletivos. O artigo divide-se em duas partes. A primeira parte começa com uma visão geral de termos e conceitos associados à estética e enfatiza mais a ideia de «enlace» (engagement) do que a de «experiência». Além disso, defende a inclusão de aulas de enlace estético em toda a educação escolar pública para formação e participação naquilo que Maxine Greene denominou como o «despertar alargado». Esta forma de ser implica uma compreensão do papel da imaginação, da empatia, do discernimento dos valores na educação, bem como do dever moral dos professores. Na segunda parte, apresentam-se duas estratégias para incentivar este forte compromisso com obras de arte, através da escrita evocativa, com ênfase no «mostrar» / «dar a ver» versus «contar» / «narrar». A escrita tem um objetivo pedagógico: auxiliar na partilha de experiências entre participantes de modo que o professor possa orientar os alunos para outros encontros estéticos. Mas os professores devem também envolver-se na escrita das suas próprias reações evocativas às obras de arte a fim de obter uma compreensão possível da paleta de respostas estéticas e, deste modo, alcançar também a credibilidade no seu ensino do enlace estético. Por isso, os exemplos, servem como orientações para alunos e professores. O artigo encerra com um exemplo de «poesia encontrada» sobre uma obra de arte específica, seguido do poema do autor, dedicado à mesma obra de arte.

Palavras-chave: envolvimento estético; autoidentidade; experiência; holística.

Abstract

This paper draws attention to links between aesthetic engagement and pre- and in-service teacher self- identity. Generally, my students have little or no background in art or art education. The courses, both graduate and undergraduate, are electives. The paper is divided into two parts. Part 1 begins with an overview of terms and concepts associated with aesthetics and argues for attention to 'engagement' rather than 'experience'. Further, it argues for inclusion of classes in aesthetic engagement throughout public school education as preparation for, and participation in, what Maxine Greene has called 'wide-awakeness'. That state of being involves an understanding of the place of imagination, empathy, and value discernment in education, and teachers' moral duty. Part 2 introduces two strategies for prompting engagement with artworks through evocative writing, a 'show' versus 'tell' emphasis. The writing has a pedagogical goal: to assist in the sharing of experiences so that the teacher can guide students to enlarged aesthetic encounters. But teachers must also engage in writing their own evocative responses, to gain some grasp of the possible range of aesthetic responses and thus achieve credibility in their teaching of aesthetic engagement. Thus, the examples are meant as guides to students and teachers alike. The paper concludes with an example of 'found' poetry regarding a particular artwork, followed by the author's poem devoted to the same artwork.

Keywords: *aesthetic engagement; self-identity; experiential; holistic*

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Résumé

Cet article attire l'attention sur les liens entre l'engagement esthétique et l'identité personnelle des enseignants avant l'obtention de leur brevet d'enseignement et au cours de la formation continue. En général, mes étudiants ont peu ou pas d'expérience dans le domaine de l'art ou de l'éducation artistique. Les cours, qu'ils soient de premier ou de deuxième cycle, sont des cours facultatifs. Le texte est divisé en deux parties. La première partie propose un aperçu des termes et concepts associés à l'esthétique et plaide en faveur de l'attention portée à l'« engagement » plutôt qu'à l'« expérience ». En outre, elle plaide en faveur de l'inclusion de cours sur l'engagement esthétique dans l'ensemble de l'enseignement public, en tant que préparation et participation à ce que Maxine Greene a appelé « l'état d'éveil ». Cet état d'esprit implique une compréhension de la place de l'imagination, de l'empathie et du discernement des valeurs dans l'éducation, ainsi qu'une conscience du devoir moral des enseignants. La deuxième partie présente deux stratégies visant à susciter l'engagement envers les œuvres d'art par le biais de l'écriture évocatrice, en mettant l'accent sur le « montrer » plutôt que sur le « dire ». L'écriture poursuit un objectif pédagogique: favoriser le partage des expériences afin que l'enseignant puisse guider les élèves vers des rencontres esthétiques élargies. Toutefois, les enseignants doivent également s'engager dans l'écriture de leurs propres réponses évocatrices, afin d'acquérir une certaine compréhension de l'éventail possible des réponses esthétiques et d'être ainsi crédibles dans leur enseignement de l'engagement esthétique. Les exemples proposés sont donc conçus comme des guides pour les élèves et les enseignants. L'article se termine par un exemple de poésie « trouvée » concernant une œuvre d'art particulière, suivi d'un poème de l'auteur consacré à la même œuvre d'art.

***Mots clé**: engagement esthétique; identité personnelle; expérientiel; holistique*

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1 Introduction

> Knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are…when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning (Parker Palmer, 2020, p.3).

I have chosen the above quotation from Parker Palmer's book, *The courage to teach*, to introduce this paper because, in conjunction with my teaching of aesthetic education to, mostly, pre- and in-service teachers until my recent retirement, it encapsulates ideas that I brought to my work over the years and that still engage me in occasional workshops (White, B., Sameshima, P., & Sinner, A. (2015a); White, B., Lemieux, A. (2015b); White, B. (2014)). Although self-identity and aesthetic engagement may not be synonymous terms, I suggest that they have mutually supporting roots and affinities. The points I raise in this paper are intended to highlight the commonalities and offer possible avenues for further exploration.

While I consider aesthetic education to be an essential component of general education, and art education to be its natural home, I acknowledge that the aesthetic realm extends beyond art into the rest of the curriculum and the world at large. Thus, while my area of specialization is art education, and anticipate that most readers will form part of that constituency, what I discuss in this paper has implications for teaching across the curriculum. The exercises in Part 2 of the paper are intended for adults/teachers. Teachers need practice in their interactions with artworks. With appropriate adjustments, the exercises should then be adaptable to students at various grade levels as well.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first, I provide a brief overview of aesthetic experience, its history, current foci, and components that I find essential to its make-up. I then discuss a distinction between experience and engagement, why the latter should be an essential part of a general educational agenda, and the teacher's task within that agenda. It is in this section that connections between self-identity and aesthetic engagement will become more evident. In Part 2 of the paper, I offer two successive strategies for the fostering of aesthetic engagement.

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Part 1

2 Aesthetic Versus Non-Aesthetic Experience

To begin the discussion, it may be helpful to recall the ancient Greek term aisthētikós, which has connotations of sensitivity and pertains to sensory perception.

In support of that interpretation, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) has said, "Aisthisis…is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing and smell—the whole corporeal sensorium" (p. 6). But aesthetic awareness is more than corporeal. Bodily acts, such as vision, are always associated with acts of feeling and thinking, and the emergence of values. That is, the related word 'aisthánomai' suggests the ability, not only to sense and perceive, but also to learn.[2]

As useful as those definitions are, however, they don't help us differentiate between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences. That is, people going about their daily affairs may be perceiving and learning, but they are not necessarily engaging in aesthetic encounters. In such cases, what are they doing? They are just getting on with their day in its everydayness—what Maxine Greene (1995), has called "the mechanical round of habitual activities" (p. 218). Our ability to perform those rounds is based on our capacity to establish categories of experience—this is a house, that is a person, here comes a car. Such category-making is spontaneous, efficient, and our first step in meaning-making. It is It is rudimentary, pre-reflective, and essential to managing our daily lives. But there are times when we want to experience more, and more deeply. At those times we want to savor the moment, not just check it off as belonging to the right category—car, person, etc. At such moments we enter a different realm of experience. And that desire to move beyond routine is, likewise, a human instinct. As Richard Hickman (2013) has said, "we are…biologically pre-disposed to 'create aesthetic significance'" (p. 238). Significance implies a complex relationship. That is, "significant things" are two-sided, both mental [feeling and thinking] and material [object or event]. (Husserl,1977, p. 84). But what makes that which we

[2]Available at: https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%B1%E1%BC%B0%CF%83%CE%B8%CE%AC%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%B1%CE%B9

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designate as 'significant' also aesthetic? As the above paragraphs suggest, the assigning of something as 'significant' involves the whole person—cognitively, affectively, physically— and that wholeness is an indicator of aesthetic response. Joe Winston (2010), for example, in his book, *Beauty and education*, describes his teenage years' fascination with the music of Bob Dylan, not to mention the clothes, lifestyle, and pretty women. In short, Dylan and his music became 'significant' for Winston, to the extent that music became a life-long passion, and teaching, his vocation. Winston's message for teachers: the necessity for passion in one's learning. I suggest that passion is synonymous with aesthetic significance. Hickman (2013) has also argued: that which is at least potentially aesthetic is a practically oriented capacity, not something esoteric and separate from daily life. Certainly, for the young Joe Winston, music became an integral part of his life, ultimately a career, and thus was practically oriented.

I include the word "potentially" in the above paragraph because I acknowledge John Dewey's (1934) cautionary note that aesthetic experience requires an awareness of the unity of otherwise disparate moments of experience. Such occasions of perceived unity, he argued, have a discernible starting point and a consummation (as opposed to simply stopping), which result in what he termed "an experience" of personal significance. I acknowledge that some philosophers take issue with Dewey's insistence on unity and consummation. Richard Shusterman (2004), for example, argues that significant/aesthetic experiences can be fragmentary and may extend beyond a definitive end point. He cites the example of rap music as one of fragmentation; and for some people, rap is compelling. Then, regarding the issue of consummation, Shusterman asks whether or not a particular experience (his example is the act of sex) may not extend beyond a given moment:

> Can we not enjoy with immediate satisfaction the reflective recognition that we are enjoying ourselves aesthetically? Cannot even subsequent reflection prolong or reactivate an already experienced immediacy that lingers in the specious present of short-term memory or in the proximate past? … [In short], cannot a lingering reflection on an aesthetic experience be part of the aesthetic experience by which it was evoked? (Shusterman, 2004, p. 3).

I'm inclined to agree with Shusterman. To return to my Winston example, surely the hours Winston spent listening to music and learning to play the guitar went

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well beyond Greene's 'habitual rounds'. He was aesthetically engaged for extended periods.

In what I have described so far, it should be apparent that, despite somewhat differing philosophical perspectives (Dewey versus Shusterman, for example), there seems to be a general agreement that aesthetic experience extends beyond the basic 'categorization' capability that I mentioned a few paragraphs ago, to awareness of personal significance of the occasion(s). Further, in recent years, numerous authors have seized upon John Dewey's (1934) notion of an experience to explore the potential of that 'an' beyond the realm of the artworld to include the aesthetic potential we can find in our everyday lives. See, for example, Duncum, P. (1999), Eaton, M. (1989), Kupfur, J. (1983), Leddy, T. (2012), Light, A. & Smith, J. M. (Eds.), Mandoki, K. (2007), Saito, Y. (2007).

We must further acknowledge that, just as significance is not confined to encounters with the arts, neither is it confined to considerations of the beautiful. There can be aesthetic moments that we do not savor, but nonetheless experience. Viewing an accident may be an embodied, personally significant moment, although not one to be savored. So, in what follows, and despite my use of artworld examples, I want to emphasize that aesthetic awareness can take place across a myriad of situations, and can result in experiences of horror, disgust, shame, as well as beauty and goodness—in other words, the whole gamut of human experience.

3 Experience versus Engagement

I turn now to the word 'engagement'. Why not 'experience'? After all, the notion of aesthetic 'experience' has been in common usage since Alexander Baumgarten's eighteenth century exploration of aesthetics, which was, for him, initiated by the exercise of individual 'taste' that dictated the principles of beauty, natural or artistic. While the emphasis on beauty declined in the early part of the twentieth century, (It has made a latter-day comeback), and a focus on taste invited accusations of elitism, the phrase 'aesthetic experience' continued well into the mid-twentieth century. Others, however, such as philosopher Arnold Berleant (2013) have more recently suggested the phrase 'aesthetic engagement'. At the risk of over-

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simplifying Berleant's position, I suggest that experience can happen whether or not one desires it; whereas, 'engagement' suggests something more deliberate.

Further, as Shusterman (2008) has noted, the word 'experience' can be used as a verb, to express an action, or a noun. As a verb, 'experience' suggests a singular, personal event. As a noun, 'experience' implies an object or event that exists outside the self—that which is experienced. That is, the word can imply a subject/object dichotomy. Whereas, engagement, as verb or noun, suggests more of a sharing mentality, an attempt at a reciprocal relationship, or a bond between entities.

That bond involves more than the sharing of facts. While facts are an important part of the educational agenda, they cannot be the sole focus, which is to address the whole person—body, mind, aspirations, fears, values, etc. Attempts to fully address the question: What does this topic/object/event mean to me? will engage that holistic character. Such attempts have the aesthetic significance to which the Hickman quotation, mentioned earlier, refers to. At the same time, this exercise in meaning making contributes to one's sense of self-identity.

4 Aesthetic Engagement and Education

To sum up what I've introduced so far, aesthetic interactions, as experiences, connote a combined, corporeal, affective, and intellectual encounter that results in an occasion of personal significance. Such encounters can be unexpected. Our accumulated life experiences contribute to such occasions.

The word engagement, however, suggests a more deliberate act, a choice to engage. Both fortuitous and deliberate (engaged) encounters can contribute to our informal education. I maintain, however, that aesthetic engagement should play an essential role in formal education as well, from public school through to post-secondary. Why? Laura d'Olimpio (2024), explores the question in detail in her book, *The necessity of aesthetic education: The place of the arts on the curriculum*. Here, I can only touch on a few key points (d'Olimpio, 2024).

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4.1 Imagination

First, the noted educator Maxine Greene's book, *Releasing the Imagination* (1995) and her many related writings have emphasized the role of imagination in our lives. The routines that I mentioned earlier blur into what Virginia Woolf (1976) termed "the nondescript cotton wool of daily life" (as cited in Greene, 1984, p. 55), or Greene's own 'mechanical round', mentioned earlier. But when we deliberately focus on a particular object or event, our whole being comes into imaginative play. Such 'play' is intense and, usually, of short duration (the Shusterman and Winston examples notwithstanding). That is, we normally do not maintain that intensity for very long before returning to our cotton wool mode. But while we are in that intense state, such engagement is what Maxine Greene (1977) has referred to as "wide-awakeness". She quotes phenomenologist Alfred Schutz to explain the term: Wide-awakeness is '…a place of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements' (p. 121). For Greene, those 'requirements' focused largely on imagination's capacity to envision what could be, as opposed to a current state-of-affairs. While I appreciate such possibilities, I am also interested in imagination's role in our grasp of any current moment, and its potential for personal significance. That is, as John Dewey (1934/1958) proposed in *Art as Experience*:

> […] all *conscious* experience […] becomes conscious […] only when meanings enter into it, that are derived from previous experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction…the conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination (p. 272).

Imagination, then, is fundamental to our capacities for meaning making, for engagement with the world in which we find ourselves, and ultimately, for self-identity.

Dewey's reference to consciousness in the above paragraph deserves a further word. Consciousness takes place in the form of perceptions. A perception is an end-result, of an understanding that emerges out of the connecting of a current vision with previous ones, as I hope the above quotation from Dewey makes clear. Perceptions provide understanding of events as they unfold. Such understandings have a built-in uniquely personal historical impetus. Each new experience builds on

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previous ones incrementally as we strive towards meaning; and the engine that drives perception is imagination.

To summarize this section, imagination is an act of synthesis that connects previous experiences, even pre-conscious experiences, with current ones in an act of potentially personally significant meaning making. Thus does imagination draw attention to the self and the nature of one's relationship with the surrounding world. In so doing, it contributes to an ongoing process of self-definition and, on the basis of that self-definition, perhaps a hint towards what singular contributions (creative works?) one might make to one's community. Awareness of one's potential for societal contribution is a boost to one's sense of self-worth, and key to engagement. Engagement, prompted by acts of imagination, has moral implications. Self-definition takes place only within the context of a community in which one finds oneself. To the extent that such engagement is aesthetic, it involves the whole person, not just the intellect, the physical, or the emotions. This is where attention to the arts can play a key role, as the arts are the only part of the curriculum that purposely draw attention to affect and accompanying physical and intellectual components (Swanger, 1991).

4.2 Empathy

An awareness of one's community and one's responsibilities towards it raises a second, important, aspect of imagination, that of empathy. Without imagination there is no empathy. As David Swanger (1991), in his book, *Essays on Aesthetic Education,* asserts unequivocally: "The epistemology of art is empathy. And empathy must be part of education because knowledge without it is incomplete" (p. 76). That is, emphasis on fact alone is a warped and diminished education, devoid of attention to students as holistic entities and their capacities for positive social interaction. Art is not the only avenue to education in empathy, but arguably it is the most direct avenue because we cannot enter into aesthetic engagement with artworks without empathy; whereas, in a history or mathematics class, a student might become empathically involved, but that is not the primary focus of the lesson. In art, it is the primary focus.

That is, there has to be an openness to possibilities for interaction, an interest in the other (person, object, event, idea), an awareness of one's own

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standpoint, and importantly, a related awareness of how one's standpoint might intersect with that of others. These conditions would seem to be addressed in one of the definitions of imagination available on Dictionary.com: "By means of empathy, a great painting becomes a mirror of the self" (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/empathy). I would argue that a painting doesn't have to meet the standards of greatness to have personal significance. The key point is that artworks have the capacity to assist in self-identity; and self-identity is always formed through awareness of relations to others.

4.3 Value Discernment

The above-mentioned mirroring capacity points to another feature of aesthetic engagement, that of value discernment. That is, empathy, as a particular form of imagination, plays a crucial role in the discernment of values. As an obvious example, our values become apparent in our decisions regarding what artworks to focus on and what to bypass when we visit a museum. But values come to the fore in less obvious ways too, in the form of gestalts. A gestalt is a spontaneous assignment of a quality to any particular situation—beauty, justice, danger, tension, and so forth. Such designations are exercises in value discernment. Their accumulation helps define who I am as an individual. But while values are individually experienced, they can also be shared.

In his 1995 Nobel Lecture, the poet Seamus Heaney cited a basic human trait: "We are hunters and gatherers of values" (n.p.). But not just for ourselves. Unlike the business world, where competition is the catchword and trade secrets are carefully guarded, education's mandate is to share knowledge and experiences—and, I suggest, values. And since sharing involves interactions between people, education is quintessentially a moral endeavour. I argue that aesthetic engagement is ideally suited to assist in that endeavour. Indeed, I agree with Marcia Eaton (1989) where she says: '…part of what it means to lead a moral and rational life is to respond aesthetically to objects, events and other people" (p. 9). Eaton's assertion echoes those of Greene, Dewey and others that I have introduced in this paper.

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4.4 From Private to Public

If what I have described above sounds self-oriented, that is because aesthetic engagement is precisely that—self-oriented. This presents an educational challenge. Aesthetic encounters, brief or extended, are, as the word 'experience' implies, personal. But education is a shared endeavour. In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, he makes it clear that it is the moral duty of an enlightened one to return to the cave and lead others out of it. If it's not too far a stretch to call teachers enlightened, they know that their duty is to share their learning. Thus, not only do teachers need to assist students in the latter's efforts to express what they have experienced, teachers themselves need to be able to share their own experiences.

The move from private experience to public sharing is usually a multi-step process–from experience, to interpretation, to some form of communication about that interpretation. Usually, that last step takes verbal or written form. In pre-service teacher education, most assignments take the form of a standard academic essay. But in creative writing and in journalism, for that matter, the adage is: show, don't tell. Similarly, in education, we need to show our students why attention to something is important, not just tell them about it. So it is that in the aesthetic education classes that I taught for many years, I encouraged a move away from essay writing to more evocative writing in the describing of their aesthetic encounters with artworks. I consider such writing to be experientially-oriented critiques, (as opposed to evaluative critiques. My students and I are not art historians. We are not qualified to judge the importance of an artwork, but we can report on how we experience it). My emphasis is on knowing my students better, after all. Insights about particular artworks that students may bring to light are a bonus. The goal is self-identity. In Part 2 of this paper I will elaborate on strategies to encourage evocative writing.

To sum up this section, if, as Heaney insists, we are hunters and gatherers of values, aesthetic engagements help in that gathering because such activity draws attention to one's values, facilitated by empathic imagination, perception, feelings, thoughts, and even physical sensations. In doing so, aesthetic engagements can provide unique insights into what is personally relevant— how one may choose to be involved as part of the human and other-than-human community.

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Part 2

5 Description versus Explanation

My classes and workshops on aesthetic education include pre-service teachers at both undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as in-service teachers and, occasionally, students from other disciplines. Regardless of their levels of prior engagement with the artworld, I have encouraged my participants to show me what they experience in their encounters with artworks of their choosing. The emphasis is on a moment-by-moment description of an encounter rather than an explanation of it. I want them to help me share in their seeing, thinking, and feeling. They do not have to justify their experiential moments—their feelings, for example—just describe them. Only once they share their descriptions can I then suggest avenues for further engagement.

As an initial step, participants make brief notes,—short phrases, even just single words—to remind them of the content and sequence of their interactions. Then I have them develop maps to visually depict the individual features of the encounter. I have written about the map-making process, which I call aesthetigrams, elsewhere (White, 2005, 2011; Frois & White, 2013; White & Lemieux, 2015, 2017), so, will not do so here. As useful as I find aesthetigrams to be, they are, after all, brief, visual overviews. So, as a follow-up step, I ask participants to write, to elaborate on the details that the aesthetigrams point to. They sometimes see patterns of behavior of which they were previously unaware: preference for a certain colour, tendency towards sentimentalism or, alternatively, over-intellectualization, and so forth. Once aware of such tendencies they can revisit the artwork and consciously try for alternative perspectives, and thus broaden their powers of engagement. What I am always hoping for is the emergence of insights, not only into the artworks, but into participants' evolving self-identities. I encourage writing in the present tense to avoid over-thinking/second-guessing the process (What does the instructor want?). A colleague once asked me, "Won't the students cheat, just make up what they are seeing, thinking and feeling?" My response is that to do so would be even more work than just reporting on what was taking place. Why would they do so?

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Most of my participants have little or no background in art. My concern is that, for teachers to be able to provide guidance to their own students in their engagement with artworks, they need to become aware of the potential range of experiential pathways they take themselves. In short, I encourage self-awareness, through private dialogue with a participant's chosen artwork. Self-awareness fosters self-definition.

5.1 Evocative Writing

The writing with which university students are most familiar is the essay, and in their own writing it's usually a term paper. The latter can be dutiful and reflective, but seldom do they capture the feeling engendered by encounters with artworks, the sense of personal engagement. To address that affective quality, I encourage evocative writing (White, 2017). Thus, I have searched for ways to make evocative writing a viable alternative to the standard academic essay. I want participants to show me, as graphically as possible, what's going on in their heads and hearts. Occasionally a student will attempt poetry or poetic writing. Generally, however, for most, poetry is foreign, and intimidating, territory. To lessen that feeling of intimidation my practice has been to offer a couple of interim steps.

First, I have often introduced a poem or two in conjunction with a reproduction of a painting (unless we are in a museum or gallery). Bruegel's *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, for example, often provides a good springboard. Participants usually begin by describing what they see. Normally, at least one or two in the class know the story of Daedalus and Icarus, and so they begin to move beyond description, to context, and ultimately, to possible meanings and attendant values (e.g. Who cares about the fate of Icarus? Why/why not?). I then introduce two poems based on the painting—W. H. *Auden's Musée des beaux arts*.[3], and William Carlos Williams' *Landscape with the fall of Icarus* https://poets.org/poem/landscape-fall-icarus[4]. While both poets refer to the same painting, their poems are very different from each other's. Participants begin to see that there is more than one way to respond to the work. This

[3]Available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159364/musee-des-beaux-arts-63a1efde036cd
[4]Available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159364/musee-des-beaux-arts-63a1efde036cd

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realization gives them license to attend to their own experiences of this and other artworks.

I advocate poetry, reading and writing, because it seems to me to come closest, in written form, to a condensation of experience. It is a bridge between inner experience and that which lies outside the self. Still, evocative writing—poetry or poetry-like— can seem a daunting task, especially if one has never attempted it before. So, I have come to enjoy introducing an interim step—an exercise in 'found' poetry. The rules for composing found poetry are simple: Use only words found in the text; no changes. But words can be rearranged, repeated. Fonts and colours can be altered. The words and phrases can be from any source that a student finds somehow relevant, even their own writing. For this paper I have been influenced by the writings of two eminent scholars: Rika Burnham (2011) and James Elkins (2004). Both discuss Giovanni Bellini's painting, *St. Francis in the desert* (ca 1475-80) with insight and eloquence.

In what follows, I borrow a few passages from James Elkins' (2004) book, *Pictures and tears*, in which he discusses his extensive interactions with Bellini's painting, which is a highlight of the Frick Collection in New York City, where Rika (we are on a first-name basis) worked for many years. Some passages are brief statements, but I have also included a lengthy section that demonstrates Elkins' considerable expressive skills.

My 'found' poem is divided into two parts—left and right—as I attempt to pinpoint Elkins' perceptual insights and, at the same time, address what his expertise has done to his original fascination with the painting. In an earlier book, *What happened to art criticism?* (2003) Elkins expands on his distrust of poetic critiques. But he is referring to professional art critics, whose job it is to provide insights into the worth of certain artworks. My job is to understand my participants' experiences and to guide them toward further experiences. Elkins' language is replete not only with acute perceptions, but also effective metaphors, and personal insights into what makes aesthetic engagement compelling, and conversely, what destroys it. In the excerpts from his text *Pictures and Tears (2004),* below, I have altered the font to bold text to indicate those passages to which I return for the development of my poem.

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…for me each visit is an uncomfortable experience, because the picture chafes against my memories (p. 78).

…I find history both valuable and pleasing…But in its cumulative effect, historical understanding undermines passion (p. 88).

The painting…shows St. Francis, dressed in his monk's robes, looking up into the sky. He is barefoot (his sandals and walking stick are back at his little desk), and he is **surrounded by a swirling sea of bluish rocks**. They're **hypnotic**, those rocks. Some look **chalky and dry, others ooze like melting jello**. Immediately above the saint's head, the **cliff face divides and flows around him**, as if he were a boulder in a stream. (Bellini may have been thinking of an early legend in which St. Francis escapes the devil by melting into the cliff. According to the story, the rocks parted like wax—a perfect match for the **liquescent stones** in the painting.) Toward the top of the painting, **an arc of yellowish rocks mimics the saint's pose**; even the **gatherings of fabric at his waistband** are **echoed in the tendrils of ivy** spreading from a fissure in the rock.

Above his head the **cliffs are creamy**; perhaps they are reflecting yellowish light from the afternoon sun. As you look down, **the cream dims to a florescent beige**, then **darkens into a deep glowing turquoise**. It looks **as if St. Francis were wading in a chlorinated pool, moving slowly down toward the deep end** (p. 80).

…The Ecstasy of St. Francis is an entire world where **every twig and thorn has its measure of holiness**. A contemporary of Bellini's said he loved to "wander in his paintings." Certainly that was true for me. **I loved every last, lost detail** in the painting, and **the more lost the better** (p.83).

It was **the lostness of the painting** that **held me**, its **capacity to lodge my attention on some forgotten detail.** Like all great paintings, **it changed the way I saw real landscapes** (p. 84).

That was then, and this is now. **Now, I feel almost nothing for the picture**. I can recapture part of what I once felt, but **the intensity is gone**, and **so is my conviction**…**I put the blame squarely at the feet of art history**…**each time I learned something new, I lost a little of what I had felt before** (p. 85).

Historical knowledge dampens our youthful enthusiasms…**My historical knowledge dulled my encounter** with the image, **deflected my attention** onto other things…and finally **extinguished the emotion I had once felt**. **History** wasn't just correcting my illusions…It **was alienating me from my own interest** (p. 87).

…in its cumulative effect, **historical understanding undermines passion**. It **smothers strong emotion** and **puts calm understanding in its place** (p. 88).

Now

Swirling sea of bluish rocks

hypnotic

chalky and dry

others ooze

like melting jello.

The cliff face divides,

flows around him

as if he were

a boulder in a stream.

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Liquescent stones
an arc of yellowish
rocks mimic
the saint's pose.
Gatherings of fabric
echoed in
the tendrils of ivy.

Then

An entire world where
every twig and thorn has
its measure of holiness
I loved every last, lost detail
the more lost, the better
The lostness of the painting
held me,
changed the way I saw.

Now

Now, I feel almost nothing

The intensity is gone
So is my conviction
Blame art history
Each time I learned
something new
I lost a little of
what I had before
Youthful enthusiasms
deflected
History alienating
me from my
own interest.

6 Discussion

In my 'found' poem based on Elkins' description of Bellini's painting (often now dubbed, affectionately, *The Frick St. Francis*, among several other titles) I have tried to capture a sense of Elkins' insightful perceptions, together with what I suggest are his poetic inclinations, despite his reservations in that regard. Who could not be struck by his depiction of rocks oozing "like melting jello", for example? And who could resist going back to the image and checking on those rocks?

Elkins has a cinematic eye, one that revels in the details to which he was so attached, and delightedly 'lost in', as an adolescent. But Elkins appears to mourn his earlier capacity for getting lost in the work. Art history has replaced wonder with certainty, and to the extent that it has done so, Elkins has mixed feelings. He is deservedly proud of his work as an art historian but regrets the loss of his earlier passion. I wanted my poem to capture that ambivalence. Srikranth Reddy (2024) has observed, "Poets trade in resemblances–between things in the world, and between

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themselves and others… (p. 465). I suggest that poets also trade in dissonance. The left side of my poem refers to Elkins' 'things in the world' while the right side explores Elkins' more conflicted duty to himself and what art history (the 'others') has bequeathed to him. A poem, like any art form, should also be capable of delivering at least a little surprise. I hope my poem does that.

The point of the above exercise is to demonstrate that there are avenues to evocative writing that are quite accessible. Students can do it. For a start, they've been highlighting text for years. Preferably, students can work from their own initial notes, but, as in my example, they can also choose to borrow from the writings of others. The key is personal practice. We need to practice a skill ourselves to be able to teach it with any sense of credibility.

But my poem, above, is not an end point; it is meant as a step toward further, perhaps more daring, exploration, in both reading and writing. Randall Mann (2024) recommends: "I want reading a poem to be a bit like risky sex… (p. 165). The recommendation leaves me somewhat uncomfortable, but surely that is Mann's point. Our evocative explorations of self and others should be open to the unexpected, perhaps even the uncomfortable. Otherwise, we are just repeating what we already know.

On that note, I offer my own poem about the *Frick St. Francis*—or rather, my memory of it and associated events. One doesn't just pop-in to the Frick Collection from Montreal.

My *Frick St. Francis*

1. It seems St. Francis
inserts himself
like a Little Lulu Kleenex
commercial from the 1940s
Up pops one, up pops another

2

—St. Francis in the desert
—St. Francis in ecstacy
—St. Francis in the wilderness
—the Frick St. Francis
An epic tale in word and image.

3

In St. Francis' desert
it is perhaps twilight
I can't be sure
Those bluish rocks
—Elkins' melting jello—
don't call to mind
the pastel pink/orange glaze

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that settles briefly
like fog
on my neighbour's wall
if I get up early enough
to see it.
Bellini's daylight teases.
St. Francis' desk and habit
emit an early morning glow
and then there is
the bright sky
with its scudding clouds
above the distant town.
Impending storms sometimes
have that mix
of light and dark.
Rika celebrates
the uncertainty.

4

Elkins' feverish dream:
the painting
like the meaning
at once
receding and remaining
reminding me of
fever-induced hallucinations
of my childhood
where the objects
beyond my bed kept
dissolving and reappearing,
disconcerting yet companionable
replaced now by
octogenarian memory
coming and going.

5

A diagonal line
cuts like a curtain
opening upon unfolding events.
Along the left edge of the painting
the thin trunk of a laurel
tree extends upward, then
exuberantly branches out
like a feather duster
sweeping the scene.
St. Francis's eyes are
trained on the laurel
his concentrated gaze
creating a virtual
diagonal dissecting
the rock-edged curtain.

6

In stage front
St. Francis, gaunt,
ribs showing through his habit,
tilts backward,
lower ribs thrust forward,
all his weight on his right leg
—a pain-inducing posture—
An edge of yellowish rock
directly overhead
echoes the tilted spine,
like an off-stage
timpani accompaniment.

7

St.Francis' left bare foot

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is planted as if
stepping on a switch
to open the curtain.
A donkey watches, impassive
beside an aloof heron.
A rabbit, almost underfoot
looks up, inquisitive.

8

St. Francis is standing,
arms outstretched by his sides,
hands forward,
receptive.
In the distance
his back toward us,
a shepherd tends his flock.

7 Conclusion

My poem is a work-in-progress, as are my interactions with the painting. I don't have Elkins' breadth of knowledge, nor that of my colleague Rika's either. But I enjoy the excursion—the looking and the responding. Digital images have their limitations, however, and an original work is not always an option. So, to assist my looking and to emulate Elkins' initial practice—getting lost in the details—I ordered a large-scale reproduction of Bellini's painting from the Frick. Now I have another pop-up title: 'St. Francis, the elusive', for they sent the wrong image. So, for the moment, I leave this exercise in its present state.

Engagements with artworks can and should foster the uncertainty that Rika celebrates, encourage some risk-taking, and take us beyond familiar territory. In this case, the territory is both the painting and the poem. My advocacy for evocative writing/experiential critiques, in this case, poetry, is based on my conviction that such writing not only prompts further looking; because the writing prioritizes a subjective stance, it also invites the mirroring that I mentioned earlier, in other words, the ongoing construction of a self-identity. But the mirror will always have foggy patches. They are what keep us intrigued. In other words, a definitive self-definition will always be elusive. The passage of time and new experiences keep altering our perspectives. What I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper, however, is that interactions with artworks, and evocative critiques of those interactions provide insights into one's perspectives and values at the time of those interactions. In an interview titled *Flunking*

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retirement…Maxine Greene said, "I am what I am not yet".[5] That statement seems to me to be an appropriate aspiration upon which to conclude this paper[6].

[5] Available at: https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2001/january/flunking-retirement-a-chat-with-maxine-greene/

[6] Grammar Editor**:** Boyd White, Ph.D. (Art Education, Concordia University), email: boyd.white@mcgill.ca. Experienced editor and guest editor of academic journals in art education and museum education.

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