



Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century

Tracie Costantino and Boyd White (Eds.)

SensePublishers

Rorty's belief that, as Rothstein (2007) wrote in Rorty's obituary: "the importance of democracy is that it creates a liberal society in which rival truth claims can compete and accommodate each other" (p. B3).

What we learned in these conversations is that persons of a generally homogenous group can hold very different positions regarding the same work of art. This was revealing to us. We did not have consensus. We disagreed with one another. We learned that we did not all think alike. We also learned that we could talk passionately about the work in a reasoned way and listen to one another's positions without interrupting one another, talking over one another, raising our voices, or calling each other names. We talked and listened to each other with attitudes of respect. We came to know each other better and accept our differences without walking away from each other in anger. We did not feel the need to censor thoughts or the image.

CARING ABOUT OTHERS THROUGH AESTHETICS

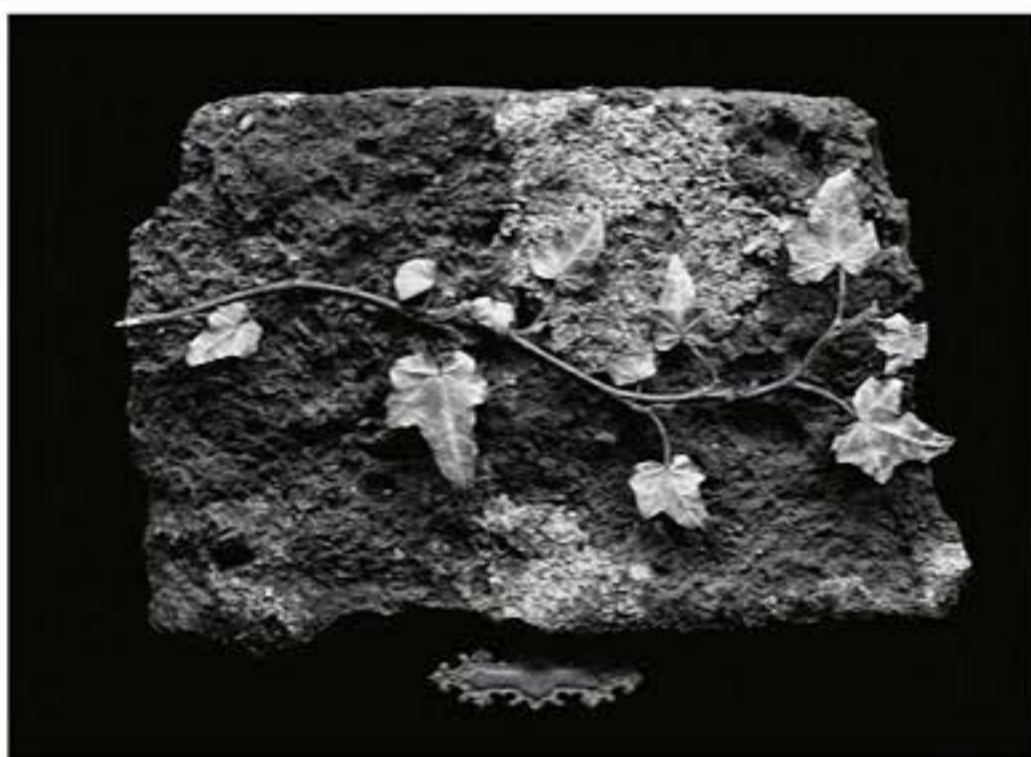


Figure 2. Stephen Althouse, Brick and Ivy, photograph, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

The following three paragraphs are spontaneous writings by men and women living in a senior citizens' home in Columbus, Ohio about the photograph *Brick and Ivy* by Stephen Althouse after a discussion of six of his images similar to it. Writers voluntarily read their readings to the whole group of about fifteen people.

Brick and Ivy meant to me the 'everlasting' solidarity of the rock with what looked like years of fossils tucked into crannies in the rock; then the ivy symbolizes if not 'life everlasting' at least the beings, earth's inhabitants (me included), that in some form keep on living. (Barb Austin, age 80, First Community Village, 2008)

In these days, in my 80s, I am deeply involved in questions of life's meaning in the largest possible context. How do I find my place in the Cosmos? And how do I find language for the deepest of all issues? There is something ineffable in experience with Ultimate Reality that is perhaps more mystery than objective phenomenon. So the brick and ivy represent the permanent and the temporary, the Cosmo's and the living, nature and human nature. And they are inevitably interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. Related integrally—integrity personified. (Greg, age 84, First Community Village, 2008)

Brick and Ivy made me realize the fragility of our life spans. It also impresses me with the durability (stone brick) contrasted with the ivy (changing life cycles). The human spirit's ability to withstand and overcome some of life's trials as well as the blessings—as expressed by the light as well as the dark—sunshine—shadow—hope and despair—optimism versus pessimism. The overall feeling is one of antiquity and eternal life. (Lila Brewer, age 94, First Community Village, 2008)

Following the discussion, one man who was initially resistant and sat in the back so he could escape should he choose to, stayed for the entire hour and afterward said, "I was negative about this art. I learned a lot. I was narrow, closed-minded. But I saw new things. It started the creative juices going. I had a good time just looking, and the people had such different reactions."

These paragraphs are shared here for two reasons: to exemplify philosophical thinking about life through art, and through the quality of the writing, all unedited first drafts, to counter ageism in the United States. The writing of Barb, Greg, and Lila, in their eighties and nineties, is comparable to that of college students and their professors.

The last set of quotations exemplify thinking through art about life by adults living with and dying of cancer, and their caregivers, generated in voluntary group conversations of about eight people at the Wellness Community in Columbus, Ohio, an institution that offers free support to patients and their caregivers. We discussed *Two Eggs*, a manipulated photograph by Rimma Gerlovina & Valeriy Gerlovin made in 2003 that shows a woman holding an egg in each of her hands. One egg appears solid and real and the other appears weightless and unreal.

This image reminds me of chemotherapy. I remember sitting in my chair in our living room, hours on end, thinking about whatever I was thinking. Some call it "mindful meditation." I let thoughts come and go; fears, hopes, doubts. Hours passed. My mind functioned well enough that I did not know what was happening to my body. I felt sadness over the medications I was taking into my body. Sometime I only had energy to sit and wonder. I gave myself over to chemotherapy, but I held onto my thoughts, wondering about life and if there is an afterlife, wondering about the meaning of my being on earth. In these meditative states, I maintained optimism and I see this work as optimistic. (Male, 63, treated for cancer, 2008)