

On the Possible Limits of Aesthetic Experience, Radical Otherness, and Radical Indeterminacy in Learning to Live With Art

David Granger
SUNY, Geneseo

In an essay entitled “Texts and Margins,” Maxine Greene articulates her vision for art education today:

Hoping to challenge empty formalism, didacticism, and elitism, [I] believe that shocks of awareness to which encounters with the arts give rise leave persons (*should* leave persons) less immersed in the everyday, more impelled to wonder and to question. It is not uncommon for the arts to leave us somehow ill at ease, or for them to prod us beyond acquiescence. They may, now and then, move us into spaces where we can create visions of other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them.

Greene then adds to this that

the arts offer opportunities for perspective, for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and of being in the world, for refusing the automatism that overwhelms choice. [T]here are images and figures that speak directly to our indignation, to some dimension of ourselves where we connect with others. They open our eyes, they stir our flesh, they may even move us to try to repair.¹

I chose to open my response to Claudia Ruitenberg’s spirited essay with this quotation for two main reasons. First, Greene’s comments appear consonant with several of the main themes of Ruitenberg’s essay and seem to have been written in much the same spirit. Both writers would have us look to the arts in their capacity to pull us out of complacency, to problematize our customary ways of perceiving objects and events in the world. In this much I substantially concur with Ruitenberg’s central thesis. On the other hand, I also sense some dissonances in how Greene and Ruitenberg would have us situated with respect to the “other” in art, and what this might mean for how we teach and live with, and teach others to live with, art. It is in this and related areas that Ruitenberg’s essay elicits a number of knotty questions for me, questions that I have been struggling with myself of late. As a means of stimulating further thought on the issues at hand, I will review those questions here, but without necessarily presuming to offer any answers—certainly not any concrete ones.

THE QUESTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Early on in her essay, Ruitenberg invokes the notion of “aesthetic experience” and then explains how she will be using this term. She begins by citing Ralph Smith, a prominent figure in art education today, who describes aesthetic experience as the “serious perception” of and “intense engagement with what is immediately presented or invoked by the [work], with *its* world.” However Ruitenberg promptly qualifies this by saying that she has specifically in mind works that are “difficult, strange, or unfamiliar,” that unsettle their perceivers “like a hot potato in our mouth.” They provide a “disruption,” she says, drawing on Roland Barthe’s distinction between ineffable bliss, which she has in mind here, and the anaesthetizing comfort of mere pleasure.

This is where the first series of questions arose for me. This is because aesthetic experience has historically been characterized—and here again is Smith—as varying degrees of “delight in the aesthetic features of objects.”² In other words, aesthetic experience is conventionally construed as pleasurable, one that is rounded-out, unified, often inducing a sense of oneness with the world. Though some temporary disruption in the face of the novel, the tragic, or the menacing might accompany aesthetic experience, it is on the whole deemphasized, subsumed, presumably, by an overarching feeling of pleasure and unity.

This is surely not the kind of experience that Ruitenberg is recommending through encounters with works and worlds that are radically other. In fact, such experience might be better described as *anaesthetic*, and to the extent that it is so, discordant with the basic idea of the aesthetic as it developed out of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and, later, Baumgarten’s seminal *Aesthetica*. This is not to say that “aesthetic experience” cannot (or has not) come to denote a number of different things since then. That would surely be erroneous. But Ruitenberg so accentuates the experience of disruption in her account of the arts that I worry that the term might betray her in the end. Marcel Duchamp first warned of the danger “aesthetic delectation” poses in denying the arts such valuable disruptions, and Arthur Danto and many other contemporary writers have accordingly abandoned “aesthetic experience” as a viable expository concept in favor of a semantic anaesthetics.

On the other hand, the almost singular focus on issues of objecthood that often results from eschewing the concept has typically meant ignoring much, if not all, of the phenomenological dimension of art encounters. I think that Ruitenberg rightly wants to retain this dimension as integral to perceiving and responding to art in a fully engaged way. One noted commentator on this issue, Richard Shusterman, argues this same point, and very persuasively I think, in a number of recent works.³ However, for reasons mentioned earlier, he also makes a strong case against using “aesthetic experience” in any kind of foundational sense, as a way of defining art or justifying critical verdicts about it. Its place and purpose, he says, must be limited to helping us appreciate the value of phenomenological experience. Thus here again I was left wondering about Ruitenberg’s use of “aesthetic experience” in conceiving her argument. For all of the major theorists she subsequently appeals to in the essay—namely, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Barthes—are very linguistic or semantic in orientation, and find the discourse of experience more or less contaminated by foundationalist content of one sort or another (for example, the myth of the given). And they certainly would be uncomfortable with Smith’s emphasis, in reference to aesthetic experience, on what is “immediately presented or invoked” by a work of art.

THE QUESTION OF RADICAL OTHERNESS

In explaining her basic thesis, Ruitenberg refers to “the preparation for works of art so unfamiliar and radically “other,” that the only adequate preparation may be to confess that we cannot be prepared for what is coming.” Learning to live with art in this context is “learning to live with uncertainty and barriers to transparent meaning presented by otherness.” When confronted by this absolutely different

other in art, she says, we ought to “befriend it,” to welcome it into our homes and live with it, however without appropriating this other. We must learn to “keep our distance,” and we might begin to do so by understanding our own “contingent and constructed natures.”

Again several sensitive issues emerged for me here, especially regarding the pedagogical implications of this disposition toward the other in art. I wondered about the possibilities and implications of assuming that a work of art is radically other before it has been fully perceived, or perceived at all. Presumably there are different and ever-shifting degrees and kinds of otherness. Just as we might deny a work’s alterity and force it into a framework of the expected, we might also force it into the framework of the radically other so as to occlude any possible points of contact between the artists’ and our own worlds, “to some dimension of ourselves where we connect with others,” as Greene puts it. If I am right about this, the educational process of preparing for “the strange guest of art” must not be separated from the process of preparing meaningfully for “another myself.” In short, it must not neglect varieties of sameness for difference. Similarly, I worry about the practice of categorizing certain works as “radically other,” since this would seem to make certain assumptions about their perceivers and about which sources of otherness are most pertinent to any given art encounter. This might actually increase the risk of essentializing the other. Many times the artist might be trying intentionally to create an experience of disruption, of Barthesian bliss, but many times this might be accidental. This suggests that ontological difficulties in avant-garde “art-that-is-other,” for instance, might call for a different perceptual awareness than those stemming more directly from the contingencies of history or culture.

A related set of issues has to do with the consequences for (radical) praxis of positing and accentuating a radical otherness from which we must learn to “keep our distance.” Can perception occur apart from some kind of active response? I want to ask. And if so, what might this mean for our students’ willingness and ability to respond to the claims of the other in art or elsewhere? What exactly is allowed to transpire across Ruitenberg’s “rackety bridge between self and other”? Do (or should) uncertainty, opaqueness, and difference imply inaction, that we keep our distance, hands off? Or should works like Horn’s “Concert for Buchenwald” sometimes “move us to try to repair,” as Greene suggests? Derrida contends that

[one must] gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and *engaged* manner whenever necessity arises. This position of dual allegiance, in which I personally find myself, is one of perpetual uneasiness.⁴

I take this to imply that there is no escape from the responsibilities and obligations thrust upon us by the other. And since we can never know or control when we are called upon to respond, we must always be prepared to face new unpredictable responsibilities.

THE QUESTION OF RADICAL INDETERMINACY

My final comments concern Ruitenberg’s discussion of “ontological difficulty” and works of art that “call into question [the] presumed referentiality of language.”

These works, she says, “elude easy translation and hence disrupt [the] smooth and functional surface of communication,” they “suspend the desire to know and understand” by presenting us with new and unfamiliar “interpretive frameworks and ways of seeing.”

My questions here parallel those above. There would seem to be something quite significant about the sources and degrees of indeterminacy that one encounters in art. For instance, at one point Ruitenberg states that the new metaphor of art-that-is-other “has no meaning, because the system within which it would have meaning does not yet exist.” Subsequently, however, she claims that art-that-is-other asks us to allow “two systems of meaning [to] exist side by side.” If there is, as I suspect, an important difference here, what does it mean for how we prepare for art that is other? How do we know when a work of art is self-referential and thus “cannot be decoded,” and when it is using an alien code that might not be completely beyond our understanding? Ruitenberg herself shifts from saying that “Concert for Buchenwald” contains no representational or referential content, to saying that it refers to “the horrors of concentration camp Buchenwald.” What explains this shift? And is an unstructured space for encountering this work equally hospitable to both possibilities? For I suspect that Ruitenberg would agree with me that each might offer invaluable educational opportunities.

1. Maxine Greene, “Texts and Margins,” in *Context, Content, and Community in Art Education*, ed. Ronald W. Neperud (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 111-12, 118.

2. Ralph A. Smith, *General Knowledge and Arts Education* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 62.

3. For example, Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

4. See “Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 120.