

Aesthetics is the study of the arts: the nature of art objects, the making of art, the art (or aesthetic) experience, the relation between art and culture, the role of the perceiver, the sensual and imaginative aspects of art. There is, of course, psychological aesthetics, focusing upon the examination and description of the cognitive, bodily, and (often) the interpretive responses to the several arts, as well as the application of various theories in attempts to understand the roles played by the arts and the behaviors associated with them. My concern is with philosophical aesthetics and with the questions evoked by various encounters with works or performances believed to be works of art. The grounds of such beliefs, the changes in them over the years, the impact of social and cultural changes upon them all may become subject matter for aesthetic inquiry. But the point of such inquiry is not to explain what occurs in the artist's study or studio; it is to discover the meaning of those occurrences, as it is to discover the meanings of aesthetic experiences--or the transactions that take place between a human consciousness and what is presented as a work of art. One of the ends in view of such an inquiry is to find clues when it comes to aesthetic education, education aimed at making more likely a reflective aesthetic response--or, if we find it possible to recognize such a response in another human being. There is, I am convinced, no way of proving whether a mode of practice succeeds in eliciting what we agree to be an aesthetic response. And when I say "proving", I have in mind providing evidence of a desired change.

Now I have to admit a bias on my part--or draw attention to the lenses I look through in seeking the meanings of the diverse phases of an aesthetic situation. They tend to be much affected by the work of Merleau-Ponty and by certain other existential phenomenologists. It is not, of course, only their view that dualisms of all kinds must be rejected, most particularly the subject/ object split--the setting of the human being or human consciousness up against an objectively existent world. As I see it, the phenomena or the appearances of the surrounding world are grasped by a consciousness as it thrusts into the world and comes to know it through acts of perception, imagination, judgment, and belief. Rather than existing independently and objectively, it is the world as perceived, the world as conceived, as sensed, as felt, as imagined that becomes our reality, it is important for me to see the tension Sartre pointed out between what he called 'being-for-itself' and being-in-itself. The living human self is 'for itself' with a passion for and always open possibility of changing or becoming. The 'in-itself' can be a chair, a table, an object forever fixed, impervious to change except from without. Human experience at present is said to be marked by a struggle against objectness, having lost the passion to be, to become. We need only think of the orthodoxies of our present moment, of a growing incapacity to think of things as if they could be otherwise, to imagine alternative ways of being, indeed the loss of the passion for the possible--Paul Ricoeur's way of speaking of the imagination.

And that leads me back to thinking of aesthetics as research. Merleau-Ponty spoke of the "primacy of perception" with particular relevance to the arts. He wrote about a primordial reality, a perceived reality in which all of our lives begin. To perceive is to apprehend or look at things and to structure what we perceive from a lived perspective in

the world. Wherever we are we can only discern profiles of things, there is no 'view from nowhere'--no universal view. Each view being incomplete, there is the sense of more being in reserve, an unpredictable possibility. Not only does the likelihood of such a perspective feed into the ability to grasp a work of art as something multi-layered, in most ways inexhaustible. It makes more meaningful what most of us envisage as a transactional encounter between a consciousness with its stored meanings, its sense of insertion in nature, its ability to imagine and thereby open new possibilities--and what was expressed and, perhaps, illumined by the creator of the work. What occurs, therefore, is an event--often unexpected, untranslatable into words--that some of us call an aesthetic experience, (Bishop, Cunningham, Kite--) McEwen, Hopper, Van Gogh, Caravaggio.