

## Aesthetic Education as Reconstructionist Education

By David R. Conrad

In the cacophony of voices crying for efficiency, productivity, “time on task,” and excellence in education, few are heard speaking about the importance of aesthetics in education. A distinguished scholar who **has** been heard arguing persuasively for aesthetic literacy over the past several decades, however, is Maxine Greene (1991) of Teachers College, Columbia University. Greene supports far greater attention to aesthetic education at all levels, including teacher education, arguing that: “To perceive, to imagine new possibilities of being and action is to enlarge the scope of freedom for the individual; and, when people work to open new perspectives together, they may even discover ways of transforming their lived worlds” (p. 158).

Enlarging “the scope of freedom” and helping students “discover ways of transforming their lived worlds,” as Greene puts it so eloquently, are both goals of aesthetic educators who identify with the philosophy of educational reconstruction.

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It is my intention in this article to discuss some of the ideas of Theodore Brameld on aesthetics and to proceed from that point to make a case for aesthetic education as reconstructionist education. I will attempt to show that aesthetic education can help give voice to those who feel disempowered and that it can

provide fresh insights into social, cultural, historical, political, and educational issues confronting us. Aesthetic education crosses many disciplinary boundaries and stresses values that appeal to a person's sense of beauty however individually or culturally defined. Aesthetic education is life-affirming yet critical, hopeful yet unsentimental.

### **Brameld and Reconstructionism**

Brameld, the major developer of the educational philosophy known as "reconstructionism," is very much concerned with the role of the arts and aesthetics in education. Observing that aesthetics is a field within the branch of philosophy known as axiology, he argues that the "study of beliefs about value" (1971, p. 50) includes ethics and sociopolitical philosophy as well as aesthetics. The connections between and among these three branches are important, Brameld argues, citing the need to examine issues of aesthetics in sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts.

What Brameld calls "social-self-realization" is the inclusive, all-embracing value in education because human experience is "both social-centered **and** self-centered" (p. 421). Art is included within this concept, he explains, "because it deals with unique, organic, Zen-like syncretisms achievable by individuals and groups—the unities symbolized in poetry, painting, music, sculpture, the dance, the architecture of buildings and cities, or merely in the homely products of everyday craftsmanship" (p. 421).

After developing a conceptual base for art and aesthetics as a central dimension of "social-self-realization," Brameld outlines some "curriculum designs for a transformative culture" (p. 475). General education is at the center or core of a four-year curriculum covering the last two years of conventional senior high and two years of junior college. Year One of the general education curriculum widens a student's perspective both geographically and historically, including critical analysis of economic and political issues in the student's community. Year Two concentrates on the role of science in culture and on intensive study of art as "the most unifying of all areas" (p. 490).

In his discussion, Brameld introduces John, a hypothetical student, who finds that:

...awakening to the beauty existing all around him—in bridges, dishes, gardens, and buildings, as well as in music, painting, plays, and books—can in itself be an extraordinary learning experience. He may come to recognize that he has previously acquired a highly artificial conception of art—a conception associated with stuffy museums and memorized poetry. (p. 491)

John gradually begins to appreciate that "the artist is anyone who works imaginatively and creatively" (p. 491).

Outlining the role of the arts and aesthetics in educational reconstruction, Brameld touches on issues like the relationship of art to politics and the role of artists

as propagandists. Links between science and art exemplified by collaborations in architecture, photography, and engineering are suggested. Relationships between so-called “pure” and “applied” art are considered. “Art for human welfare” (p. 492), symbolized by the extraordinary architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and the utopian ideas of Lewis Mumford, is praised. After speculating about the role of the arts in the future, Brameld asks: “How can we discover, encourage, and support the artistic talent among countless people who have strong creative drives but who find no encouragement to develop them?” (p. 492).

### Seminar in Aesthetic Education

In a recent graduate foundations of education course, “Seminar in Aesthetic Education,” taught in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, I addressed some of the same questions and concerns raised by Brameld. While Brameld touched on some theoretical ideas regarding art and aesthetics as part of a comprehensive curriculum plan and philosophy of education, my goal was to engage teachers, prospective teachers, and other educators in a concentrated study of the role of aesthetics in their personal and professional lives. I wanted to explore various meanings of “aesthetic education” with students and to investigate together the nature of aesthetic experience and its relationship to personal integration and growth. Besides heightening the aesthetic awareness and sensitivity of course participants, I wished to help them become conscious of a wide range of artistic creativity in the social, cultural, historical, and political context from which it emerged.

As a reconstructionist teacher educator, I was inspired by Brameld’s high regard for the aesthetic dimension which permeates all aspects of education and life. And certainly I was influenced by the ideas of the University of Vermont’s most famous graduate, John Dewey, whose presence is still felt in Vermont. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey took the fine arts off their pedestal and related art and “the aesthetic” to everyday human experience. Dewey, like Brameld after him, associated aesthetic experiences with normal processes of living.

In the course, I viewed aesthetic education as a broad, interdisciplinary field of study relating the arts and aesthetic issues to human lives, social problems, and environmental concerns. From my perspective, the aesthetic dimension is a fundamental part of every person’s life and can be developed further through enhanced experience, awareness, and understanding. Wanting to go beyond appearances or shallow explorations to investigate stubborn assumptions, sociocultural implications, and possible future impacts of aesthetic concerns, I was drawn to Brameld’s concept of “social-self-realization” that recognizes both the possibility of individual transformation and social/cultural transformation toward a world of greater beauty and justice.

We began the course by discussing diverse perspectives on aesthetic education

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and aesthetic experience. Students were asked on the first day of class to share a recent “aesthetic experience” and were invited to discuss the special qualities or features which made it an aesthetic experience for them. The next class they were asked to bring in an “aesthetic object,” something considered beautiful for whatever reasons, and they were invited to share what made it beautiful for them. Lively discussion about what constitutes art, beauty, aesthetic judgment, and taste emanated from these sharing experiences. Later in the course, students were expected to write an “aesthetic autobiography” that revealed a great deal about themselves and the influences of family, friends, school, church or synagogue, and the media on their growing consciousness of the world around them. Toward the end of the course, one of the students in the class wrote:

With hindsight, I now see this course as a deeply human and collective journey toward a personal experience of beauty. As I depicted early on in my aesthetic autobiography, it is love and humanity which determine what is beautiful for me....Through the readings and activities of this class, I have not only gained a love and a human connection with new people, but I have also reconnected with some of the beauty in my own life which I had come to ignore.

In addition to the “aesthetic autobiography,” students were expected to keep an ongoing “aesthetic journal” in which they recorded thoughts, feelings, critical reflections, and analyses related to the required reading, class discussions, guest presentations, films and slides, museum visits, and other class activities. They were also expected to work individually or in a small group on an “Aesthetic Project” of their choice which was written up and handed in at the last class meeting, as well as presented in some creative form to all course participants. Library searches, interviewing, field trips, and other forms of research were encouraged and use of slides, photographs, artifacts, or taped interviews were suggested for the class presentation. Project themes ranged from a study of Australian Aborigine painting to the historical evolution of Vermont schoolhouse architecture to the first in a series of community television programs on women who create beauty.

Since the required reading was central to the course and discussion of it was a major part of most class sessions, it might be useful to take a look at a few of the ideas or concepts growing out of the reading. In all of the reading and discussion, students were asked to look for both personal and professional implications. Reading in order to recall names or details was discouraged in favor of reading to understand, critique, and relate to one’s own situation. Being a foundations course, the course did not have to have an immediate practical application but, rather, was intended to relate theory to practice and to stimulate critical thinking about aesthetic issues in personal as well as educational contexts.

As the first reading, I used a book published in 1924 by the great American scholar, Lewis Mumford. *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (1924) was written by Mumford before he turned 30, yet Mumford’s

wisdom and genius in interpreting American architecture and culture were very evident in this early book. Years ago, I had explored implications for education in Mumford's comprehensive philosophy (Conrad, 1976), so it was a pleasure for me to introduce some of his challenging ideas to the students in this course. It was fascinating to see them recognize Mumford as a prophet who warned Americans in the 1920s about the dangers of unplanned growth of cities and suburbs, the proliferation of motor cars and concomitant urban sprawl, and the unbalanced thrust toward material goods and imperialist fantasies. For Mumford, the land pioneer was matched by the industry pioneer who trashed the land and left a dehumanized landscape; one of his major worries was that "the forms of business take precedence over the forms of humanism" (p. 73), a legitimate concern worthy of debate in education today.

Mumford was prophetic in his recognition of and appreciation for great Americans like the architect Henry Hobson Richardson, a builder and craftsman whose "brand of romanticism was a genuine attempt to embrace the age" (p. 45). Since the University of Vermont is fortunate to have a building designed by Richardson on campus, it seemed appropriate to visit the former Billings Library (now Billings Student Center) and experience for ourselves the magnificent design and ambiance of this more than 100-year-old structure which remains a favorite of students.

Exploration of issues relating to city planning, like the favoring of efficiency over human needs, the construction of tenements which blocked out light and air, and the architect as an accessory of big business, led to discussion of the traditional communal holding of land by the community in New England villages—which Mumford praised mischievously as a kind of "Yankee communism" (p. 4)—and the move today in some areas toward community land trusts and cooperative housing. Reading and dialogue on the value of living in a more organic, ecologically sound, community-oriented environment suggested to one student a project investigating the aesthetic qualities of living in a particularly unique neighborhood within an urban region. She borrowed video equipment from the campus media service, learned how to videotape and edit, and interviewed a number of residents of this unique community. Hypothesizing that it was the beautiful lakeside location that appealed most to residents, she found that even more important to them was a sense of community closeness evidenced by people looking after each other's children and a tolerance for differences as well as shared concerns.

The second book used in the course was *The Diary and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*, edited by Hans Kollwitz. The diary and letters provided an intimate look at the talent, courage, wisdom, and philosophy of one of the outstanding artists of the 20th century. Too long neglected by scholars and critics, Kollwitz in recent years finally has been accorded the recognition she deserves. Through exploration of the life and work of this remarkable German artist as expressed in her writing as well as in her prints and drawings, we deepened our understanding of what Paul Von

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Blum (1976) calls “the art of social conscience,” or socially-conscious art. An essay I distributed on “Justice Through the Arts: The Power of Socially Conscious Art” (Conrad, 1988) introduced students to a wide range of artists who have revealed their commitment to a more just and humane world through their art.

As she grew up, Kollwitz was inspired by the strength and hard work of Polish dock workers she and her sister observed near their home and, from that time onward, she found—and expressed in her art—beauty in working people and in the struggle against oppression and war. Poor women especially appealed to Kollwitz’s artistic sense, and much of her work conveys her profound commitment to them.

Kollwitz was a pacifist who lived through the violent and devastating years of the first half of the 20th century. Her beloved son Peter was killed in what became the first World War and her grandson Peter died in World War II, so she experienced much personal tragedy. The loss of her son depressed Kollwitz tremendously, prompting her to work for years on a sculpture of a grieving mother and father which was placed in the Belgian cemetery where her son was buried. Her lithograph and poster, “Never Again War,” remains today one of the most powerful artistic statements ever made against war.

We were fortunate in my class to visit the University’s Fleming Museum to view closely several Kollwitz prints in the collection. This was especially valuable since the reproductions in the text were not of the highest quality. While in the museum, we also examined and discussed at length with the museum educator a large wood block print called “Man of Peace” by the contemporary American artist Leonard Baskin. Baskin shares much of Kollwitz’s disgust for war and commitment to peace.

As a contrast to the often tragic personal life and frequent focus on death in Kollwitz’s art, I invited a local social and political artist, Bonnie Acker, to visit my class to talk about her life and work. During the last 20 years, Acker has created numerous drawings, woodcuts, and other art forms for organizations devoted to social justice and peace. Her works have appeared on full-color calendars produced by the Syracuse Cultural Workers, on t-shirts championing land trusts and community supported agriculture, and in books on cooperative housing and gardening. After she showed us many examples of her art and we had had a fine opportunity to ask provocative questions about her ways of educating through art, we proceeded to the local public library where by chance an exhibition of her more abstract collages was taking place. Becoming familiar with an artist and being able to ask whatever questions we desired held meaning for my students, leading one of them to comment about Acker:

Her political art work has a simplicity yet brought such forceful messages. Her style and form are distinctive and transmit her message in a strong and personal way. She certainly is a gifted artist as the variety of woodcuts, prints, sketches, paintings, and paper cuttings revealed. It was very interesting to learn how she is moving into new mediums and colors. Her exhibit in the library showed a new style

and a freedom and grace about life, the seasons, and being alive. Surely her art needs to be seen in the social and political and economic context of her beliefs and life. She truly is joyous about her work and her life as mother and wife, and it is reflected in her candor and wide and happy smile.

Following an exploration of the lives and work of Kollwitz and Acker, we turned to the third major reading in the course, *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, by Marjorie Agosin (1987). Most of all, this is a book about hope in women who were able to survive the cruel Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, which caused their sons, husbands, lovers, and fathers to disappear, be tortured, and murdered. Women dedicated themselves to finding the truth about their loved ones, no matter what that required. They created patchwork pictures or *arpilleras* to express their own anguish and to inform the world outside about the plight of the Chilean people. To scholar Guy Brett (1987), “It becomes part of one’s conception of oneself as a human being to use all the art one knows to bring out the hidden qualities and beauty in the scraps of mass-produced material, a fact which is instantly recognized and magnetizes people to the patchworks, wherever they are shown” (p. 47). Agosin, a professor from Chile at Wellesley College, documents magnificently the struggle of Chilean women in the 1970s and 1980s in *Scraps of Life*, writing: “The *arpilleras* are a constant dialogue with the missing; the relationship of the women with their creations has become both symbolic and symbiotic” (p. 72).

The theme of “never again” is prominent in the *arpilleras*, as it was for Kollwitz in her poster, “Never Again War.” Agosin quotes an *arpillerista*, Maria, who reflects on the ordeal of the women creating *arpilleras* in the workshop: “God chose the humble to shame the powerful. It’s for that reason we make the *arpilleras* so this kind of thing will never happen again” (p. 83).

Because the survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, *hibakusha*, make the same plea in their drawings and paintings depicting the personal agony of nuclear holocaust, I chose to show a slide program of these art works. “Never Again Hiroshima and Never Again Nagasaki” rings out loudly in these drawings and paintings done many years later by people who never thought of themselves as artists. I first saw and heard their moving message expressed visually and through direct but simple words at the World Friendship Center in Hiroshima in 1977. Touched deeply by the presentation, I purchased the slide program and brought it back to the United States to share with students. When I showed it in class after discussion of *Scraps of Life*, my students were able to see how people’s art also helped them understand and “feel” on a deeper level the devastation caused by the atomic bombs. They could better comprehend the disaster of nuclear warfare and the need to prevent any use of nuclear weapons. They thought further about the decision to drop the atomic bombs, about the reasons given at the time, and about the multiple explanations offered by many historians today who believe that the atomic bombs were not needed to end the war. The art of Hiroshima survivors drew students into an important debate with a multitude of moral and ethical implications.

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The “never again” theme was picked up by several class participants in their aesthetic project and presentation due at the end of the course. One student, for instance, concentrated on the Holocaust and art done by children and adults in concentration camps. Voices wailing against the criminality of the death camps and sometimes offering hope for survival prompted one student to write: “That art [of the Holocaust] is so important to share so that it may never happen again. So much art that we have seen...cries out that same message—don’t ever let this happen again.”

In order to provide a contrast to the disturbing art of the *arpilleristas* and the *hibakusha*, I invited a weaver and authority on Latin American textiles to make a presentation on “The Aesthetics of Peruvian and Bolivian Weaving.” Currently writing a book on this subject, Libby VanBuskirk explained and passed around many textiles which she has collected over the years and showed slides by David VanBuskirk which further immersed my students in Andean culture. One student wrote:

The question posed by Libby VanBuskirk: What can we discover about a culture through the artistic expression of its people? opened the door for a new understanding of the cultures of Peru and Bolivia. The weavings and slides combined to tell a rich story of a people that provides interesting insights into their culture....One of the most interesting parts of the slide show and discussion was the explanation of how the eight-year-olds assume responsibility for the sheep, learn to weave by watching and progressing from small, narrow pieces to progressively wider and more complicated pieces, and take on a mentor to work with....Working with a mentor establishes communal bonds within the village and creates a strong sense of community and sharing....The art is real and intertwined with their lives. Art and culture are inseparable. The art provides meaning for the culture and is a mirror of beliefs, values and understandings.

VanBuskirk’s presentation with textiles and slides was “a wonderful follow-up to the *arpilleras* book offering a much lighter note,” another student commented, proceeding to discuss the richness of this experience for her.

bell hooks’s *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) was the last required reading for the course. Because I believe that issues of race, gender, and class are the most important issues facing the country today, I wanted to bring a feminist and African American perspective into the course. bell hooks, a brilliant African American feminist cultural critic, was just the scholar I needed to complete our exploration of aesthetic education. Influenced heavily by Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, hooks affirms early in her book that “Education for critical consciousness is the most important task before us” (p. 5). She clearly places herself in support of radical social change and liberation struggles through a critique of popular culture. hooks writes: “It’s exciting to think, write, talk about, and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may very well be ‘the’ central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and



radical happenings can occur” (p. 31).

hooks explores the concept of “homeplace, a site of resistance” (p. 41) by taking a closer look at her grandmother, Baba, who lived in rural Kentucky. From Baba, hooks declares, she learned “about aesthetics, the yearning for beauty that she tells me is the predicament of heart that makes our passion real” (p. 103). Baba, a quiltmaker who taught bell about color and about “how to look at the world and see beauty” (p. 103), was both poor and illiterate, but she helped bell really “see.” In Baba’s house bell “learned the place of aesthetics in the lives of agrarian poor folks. There the lesson was that one had to understand beauty as a force to be made and imagined” (p. 104). In contrast to Baba’s house “...which cultivated and celebrated an aesthetic of existence, rooted in the idea that no degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty, or how to use it as a force to enhance inner well-being” (p. 104), was bell’s house where the lack of material goods became an obsession. “I could see in our daily life,” she reflects, “the way consumer capitalism ravaged the black poor, nurtured in us a longing for things that often subsumed our ability to recognize aesthetic worth or value” (p. 104).

Despite the consumerism hooks found rampant in traditional southern black communities, artistic expression was prevalent. Music, dance, painting, and poetry created by African Americans, she argues, “was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilized, and that the measure of this was our collective failure to create ‘great’ art” (p. 105). Art served a political function in the struggle against racism, but it also brought delight and beauty into the lives of people who had few material possessions. Today, hooks declares, “the arts remain one of the powerful, if not the most powerful, realms of cultural resistance, a space for awakening folks to critical consciousness and new vision” (p. 39). She remains committed to an aesthetic that recognizes the power of beauty in everyday life, particularly in the lives of poor people, “one that seeks to explore and celebrate the connection between our ability to engage in critical resistance and our ability to experience pleasure and beauty” (p. 111).

“Homeplace” is a rich concept in aesthetic education because it relates to “sense of place” which includes cultural, historical, and geographical information. One student in my course, for instance, worked on a project focusing on Vermont’s special “sense of place,” looking at issues around development and developmental control laws, the impact of the family farm and consequences of its disappearance, town and village life, the craft tradition, and the mostly rural landscape. Influenced by hooks, she might have also looked at the role of women on family farms, particularly their production of useful and decorative works like quilts and other craft works which often were taken for granted. Georgia Collins (1987) argues that such neglect represents a masculine bias in art which historically has downplayed popular, commercial, folk, and applied art in favor of more culturally prestigious

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“fine” art.

Two students chose to do their project on quilts and quilting, both traditional and contemporary. The students, a kindergarten teacher and a high school health educator, became very close as they became engrossed in the art and craft of quilting. Their research revealed a great wealth of material on the symbolism expressed in quilts and on the communal process of making them. They gained a new appreciation for the creative genius of countless women who designed and completed beautiful quilts for special occasions or for practical everyday use. They began to find personal meaning in the concept of “homeplace” as a place of resistance as they examined quilts opposing war and injustice and affirming peace and justice.

Another student decided to concentrate on the AIDS Memorial Quilt as a way of dealing with her personal grief over the death of her brother from AIDS, as well as to share her experience of actually making a quilt with her sister as a result of seeing the AIDS quilt. Describing the powerful impact of experiencing the AIDS quilt, she chose to investigate the history and philosophy of this huge quilt in memory of the lives and hopes of so many AIDS victims. Her testimony was moving as she helped educate our class in a profound way about the meaning and significance of this terrible disease and of the power of artistic creations to enlighten and inform on many levels.

My class, which did not include any African American students, struggled to understand many of hooks’ ideas and insights into black culture, but had little difficulty relating to her discussion of “homeplace” or the role of aesthetics in the lives of poor people. hooks does a magnificent job relating aesthetics to everyday human experience, as Dewey and Brameld did before her. Grounding her philosophy in critical consciousness, she helps the disenfranchised gain voice. Identifying with scholar activists like Freire (1973), she supports empowerment through aesthetic appreciation and production. As one student commented: “Aesthetics can play a powerful role in unearthing an untapped power in all of us, especially those operating under some form of repression or loss. It is a powerful concept that cuts across class, race, and cultures.”

## Conclusion

Through exploring books on architecture and American culture, the life and work of the great German artist Kollwitz, the patchwork art of courageous Chilean women, and the insights of bell hooks on the popular arts and an aesthetic of blackness, my students gained new perspectives on themselves and on the power of art and aesthetics in human culture. Through presentations by Acker and VanBuskirk, they became familiar with issues relating to the philosophy of artistic creation and to the central role that art—specifically the visual arts and weaving—can play in people’s lives.

The aesthetic project required in the course allowed students to investigate a theme or problem area of their choice, and the aesthetic journal served as an outlet for further critical thought and reflection. Class discussion was central as students expressed their own “voices” about the issues at hand. “Social-self-realization” became a central value, as it is for reconstructionist educational philosophy in general.

Many of the issues which Brameld identified as important in the study of art and aesthetics were included in the reading, presentations, or dialogue during the course. Art and technology, art and propaganda, relationships between art and craft, and art as an integral part of human existence were explored. Above all, the potential of art and aesthetics for both critical analysis of culture and for envisioning possibilities of a reconstructed, anti-racist, economically just culture were considered. A reconstructionist approach to aesthetic education and teacher education seems even more essential today than it did when Brameld was developing his philosophy a generation ago.

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