Principles for Interpreting Art

This chapter offers further explanation and a summation of what interpretation is, with some guiding principles for how one might go about interpreting a work of art, an item within visual culture, or anything that can be treated as a "text." The emphasis of the book, of course, is on visual things rather than literary or musical things, but the principles of interpretation are sufficiently broad that they should cover any humanly made item or text. The principles offered here are eclectically compiled from scholars of art and literature and philosophy of knowing. The principles constitute a set, but a loose set that can be expanded or contracted. The set is meant to be noncontradictory. All the principles are asserted as reasonable, but not all reasonable people concerned with matters of interpretation will agree with all of them as a set or even with any one of them. When a principle is particularly contentious, the chapter provides fair opposition to it and reasons for acceptance of it. All of the principles are open to revision and none of them are meant to be read dogmatically.

These principles are offered to help guide any interpreter of any artistic object or event. They may well provide direction for any and all interpretive endeavors, not just making meaning of artworks; but interpretation in realms other than the artistic are beyond the chosen scope of this book. The principles are means to provide some security and stability as a foundation for the insecurity, the riskiness and exhilaration, of trying to make meaning of artistic objects and events that seem to shift as we gaze at them and change as we reflect upon them. If I follow these principles, I will be able to be confident that my interpretive efforts are in a right direction and a right spirit.

One may also use the principles as methodological ways to begin and continue constructing an interpretation of, for example, a painting, a dance, or a poem. Any
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single one of the principles will set one on one's way toward a meaningful encounter with a work of art. To apply all principles to every interpretive situation would likely be beneficial but prohibitively exhausting, except in cases of very serious pursuit. In some interpretive discussions and for some works of art, it's likely that the reader will find some principles more pertinent than others in the set.

To provide an overview of the chapter, here is, first, the complete set of principles. Explanations of each follow.

• Artworks are always about something.
• Subject matter + Medium + Form + Context = Meaning
• To interpret a work of art is to understand it in language.
• Feelings are guides to interpretation.
• The critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent.
• Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations.
• There is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow.
• Meanings of artworks are not limited to what their artists intended them to mean.
• Interpretations are not so much right, but are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening.
• Interpretations imply a worldview.
• Good interpretations tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter.
• The objects of interpretation are artworks, not artists.
• All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.
• All art is in part about other art.
• Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.
• Interpreting art is an endeavor that is both individual and communal.
• Some interpretations are better than others.
• The admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting.
• Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own.

ARTWORKS ARE ALWAYS ABOUT SOMETHING

A work of art is an expressive object made by a person and, unlike a tree or a rock, for example, it is always about something. Thus, unlike trees and rocks, artworks call
for interpretations. This is not to say that rocks and trees cannot be interpreted. Geologists and botanists have much to tell us interpretively about rocks and trees. Poets and philosophers and theologians have much to say about rocks and trees. But rocks and trees are things, and artworks of rocks and trees are objects about these things, things about things. Artworks are different kinds of things. Arthur Danto, a contemporary philosopher and art critic, names, as an essential characteristic of artworks, “aboutness.” That artworks are necessarily about something is the cornerstone of Danto’s philosophy of art. Since they are about something, they must be interpreted. This book is significantly influenced by Danto’s theory of art, as well that of Nelson Goodman (see below). Noel Carroll, a contemporary aesthetician, summarizes Danto’s theory as containing five major propositions, namely, that a work of art (1) is about something, (2) projects a point of view, (3) projects this point of view by rhetorical means, and (4) requires interpretation and that (5) the work and interpretation require an art-historical context.

Nelson Goodman is a philosopher who has expended much thought on artistic versions of the world. In his view, there are many good versions of the world, linguistic and visual, scientific and artistic. Art has important cognitive value. Goodman values works of artists as well as the contributions of scientists because both science and art present us with views of the world that provide us with powerful insights, valuable information, and new knowledge. However, art provides insights, information, and knowledge only if we interpret works of art.

Carroll contends that it is a standard characteristic of artworks “that they often come with features that are unusual, puzzling, initially mysterious or disconcerting, or with features whose portents are far from obvious.” This is not a problem to be dreaded when facing artworks, but a challenge to be enjoyed. If we want the obvious, we probably ought look to things other than artworks. Artworks require a tolerance for ambiguity. Since artworks are rarely obvious, they need to be interpreted to be understood. Even when artworks seem obvious at first glance, they can be revealed to be much more complex than we first thought, especially if we ask some of the interpretive questions offered in this book. For example, an Elvis-on-velvet painting sold on a street corner might require no interpretation to make sense of it, but that Elvis painting will become much more interesting if we ask some questions of it, such as What is it a part of? Within what tradition does it belong? What needs does it relieve? What pleasures or satisfactions did it afford the persons responsible for it? Does it change my view of the world?

**Subject matter + Medium + Form + Context = Meaning**

This principle is a formula for constructing meaning about works of art: subject matter + medium + form + context = meaning. It can serve as a definition of interpretation and it can also be used as a guiding methodology for interpreting works of art.

Subject matter is the recognizable stuff in a work of art: persons, places, things, and so forth. Not all artworks have subject matter: much abstract art, for example,
purposely omits subject matter. Subject matter is not the same as subject: the subject matter of a painting may be boats in a harbor but the subject may be tranquility. Subject is synonymous with topic, theme, or aboutness. Subject is a subset of meaning.

Medium is the material out of which an artwork is made: oil paint or marble, for example. Media are often mixed in a single work of art: elephant dung, glitter, map pins, and oil paint, for example.

Form refers to compositional decisions the artist has made in making and presenting a work of art: namely, how it is composed; how it uses formal elements such as line and texture and color; how it organizes space so that something is dominant and other things are subordinate. Although not all art has subject matter, all art has form.

Context refers to the artwork's causal environment, that is, what was historically present to the artist at the time the artwork was made. All art has a social context in which it emerged.

Meaning refers to interpretations that we construct about a work of art to make it understandable to us and to others. All artworks can be interpreted and can be shown to have meaning.

The term content, in this book, is synonymous with meaning. All works of art have content, including, for example, minimalist abstract paintings like those made by Sean Scully as shown in chapter four. Although some authors differentiate between form and content, this book does not: it is in agreement with Nelson Goodman that the distinction between form and content is dubious. All art has content, and all content must be interpreted to arrive at meaning. In abstract and Formalist works of art, the form of the artwork is the content to be interpreted and the form conveys its meaning. In works with recognizable subject matter, how that subject matter is selected and formed and contextualized constitutes the content of the work and conveys its meaning. The term content is used in too narrow a way when authors use content to refer only to social and political content. All works of art have content and that content must be interpreted to arrive at meaning.

TO INTERPRET A WORK OF ART IS TO UNDERSTAND IT IN LANGUAGE

To interpret is to respond in thoughts and feelings and actions to what we see and experience, and to make sense of our responses by putting them into words. When we look at a work of art we might think thoughts and notice feelings, move closer to the work and back from it, squint and frown, laugh or sigh or cry, blurt out something to someone or to no one. Our initial responses to a work of art are usually inchoate, incipient, beginning rumblings of undistinguished emotions and vague thoughts. If we make the effort and are able to successfully transform these initial thoughts and feelings into articulated thoughts and identified feelings with language, we have an initial interpretation.
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To interpret a work of art is to make sense of it. To interpret is to see something as “representing something, or expressing something, or being about something, or being a response to something, or belonging in a certain tradition, or exhibiting certain formal features, etc.” It is to ask and answer questions such as What is this object or event that I see or hear or otherwise sense? What is it about? What does it represent or express? What does or did it mean to its maker? “What is it a part of?” Does it represent something? What are its references? What is it responding to? Why did it come to be? How was it made? Within what tradition does it belong? “What ends did a given work possibly serve its maker(s) or patron(s)? What pleasures or satisfactions did it afford the person(s) responsible for it? What problems did it solve or allay? What needs did it relieve?” What does it mean to me? Does it affect my life? Does it change my view of the world?

Jonathan Culler, a literature scholar, articulates other interpretive questions about “what the text does and how: how it relates to other texts and to other practices; what it conceals or represses; what it advances or is complicitous with. Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted.” Karen-Edis Barzaman, an art historian, asks similar questions: “What is left unsaid in particular figurations?, or, in psychoanalytic terms, what is repressed?” Regarding figurations of women, Barzman asks, Is she presented as virgin, witch, muse, prostitute? How do the various figurations contradict one another?

Recall, from chapter five, a specific set of interpretive questions that scientifically-minded art conservators and restorers might ask of a work of art. “Is the painting correctly dated? What is the painting’s condition, and how closely does it resemble its original appearance? Is the format original, or has it been reduced, enlarged, or otherwise altered? By the artist, or by later hands? Have the color relationships changed since the work was painted? Are there repainted areas? Does the painting betray evidence of change through use? Has a religious image been updated for iconographic or liturgical purposes? Was a group portrait altered to account for a birth or death, or was a fragment of a religious work ‘secularized’ to appeal to the art market? Did more than one artist produce the work? How did the artist(s) achieve the effects? Were the painting’s materials or technique chosen for theoretical or political reasons? Are they part of a larger debate about the role of culture? Did contemporary criticism influence the technique? Does the technique reflect the artist’s education, travels, or exposure to foreign artistic traditions? Were substantial changes made during the painting’s execution? What is the relation among known variants of a painting?”

Paul Thom, an aesthetician, classifies general acts of interpretation this way: “The object of interpretation may be a text, an action, or a person; it may be an artifact or part of nature; it may be present or past. Objects of interpretation include dreams; unexplained facts; damaged texts; historical documents; unfamiliar social practices; sentences in unknown languages; works of literature and visual art; unperformed music, drama, or dance; and the conversation of our companions. Another type of interpre-
tive object occurs during the process of artistic creation, when the artist takes a set of elements from the emerging artwork and subjects them to illuminating transformations. The development of musical themes falls into this class. We distinguish different types of interpretation according to whether they have these different types of objects; for example, we are accustomed to distinguishing textual interpretation from the interpretation of art or nature, and so on."

When interpreting a work of art, we could select any one of the questions in the preceding paragraphs and use that question to further our initial interpretation, if we so desire. By carefully telling or writing what we see and feel and think and do when looking at a work of art, we build an understanding of it by articulating in language what might otherwise remain only muddled, fragmented, and disconnected to our lives. When writing or telling about what we see and what we experience in the presence of an artwork, we build meaning; we do not merely report it. As Marcia Siegel, a dance critic, says, "Words are an instrument for thinking." Thom characterizes interpretations as both discoveries and inventions. Interpretations are discovered: "by finding out something about the object of interpretation we come to understand it." Interpretations are invented: "we make of the object something it previously was not."

To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a work of art and what else we have seen and experienced. Richard Rorty, a contemporary philosopher, says that "reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens." By texts, Rorty refers to paintings as well as poems. By "seeing what happens," Rorty means examining what connections we can make between a painting, a dance, or a poem and relevant experiences of books we have read, pictures we have seen, music we have heard, emotions we have felt in situations we have lived or heard about from others. Some of these connections are meaningful and worth pursuing toward greater knowledge and insight about the artwork, the world, and ourselves. Other connections are less worthy and we simply let them fade away.

What Rorty says about processes of interpretation—"reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens"—seems to me to be precisely what Suzi Gablik did when she interpreted the paintings of René Magritte, as reported in chapter one. Gablik read the texts (Magritte’s paintings) in light of other texts (stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Surrealist manifestos by André Breton, the older Newtonian physics, and the newer physics of Einstein), people (Freud, Einstein, acquaintances of the artist), obsessions (Tom Stoppard praises Gablik for being "mad about Magritte"), "bits of information" (conversations with and observations of the artist), or what have you (thoughts and ideas that Gablik had but may or may not have put in her book), and then seeing what happens (her book, her interpretations of Magritte, the sense she made of his paintings for herself and for us).

To interpret is to make something meaningful for ourselves and then, usually, to tell another what we think. Gablik spent ten years on her book, Magritte. During that
time I imagine that she wrote her interpretations of Magritte's work by making sense of them for herself and then wondering if her interpretation would make sense to her readers and most especially, probably, to other viewers of Magritte, other interpreters, professional and lay. I imagine that she vacillated between two versions of her book, one that made sense to her and another that must make sense to her readers.

As I write this book, I am doing at least three related things: making sense of concepts of interpretation in ways that seem sensible to me; making sense of interpretation in ways that will be sensible to my intended readers, generally college students; and making sense of interpretation in ways that are acceptable to those who know more about interpretation than me. These three senses (mine, the one I provide for my intended readers, and the one other scholars will judge and hopefully approve), when I have them in alignment, fit comfortably and seamlessly together. Until I have each of the senses of concepts of interpretation compatible, I allow one version to affect the other versions.

If I can't make sense of interpretation for my readers, then perhaps I need to adjust my own understanding of it. If what I write will be found to be seriously flawed by a knowledgeable scholar of interpretation, then I must adjust both my understanding and the one I have fashioned for my readers. This is not to say that I expect universal acceptance of the ideas I have written: many sensible people might disagree with positions I am taking. What I am hoping, however, is that sensible people interested in matters of interpretation will find my writing about interpretation sensible and defendable. Thus it ought to be with all interpretive endeavors: good interpreters make sense of artworks for themselves, and for others, including those in the community of interpreters who are very knowledgeable about what is being interpreted. If I fashion an interpretation of something for a child, for example, I want my interpretation to be understandable to the child, but I also want it to be true or accurate in the sense that other knowledgeable people would agree that I am not misinforming the child or giving the child an interpretation that is false.

When telling our interpretation, we hear it in our own words, and we have the opportunity to obtain responses from others about what we see, think, and feel. Others' responses to our interpretations may be confirming or confounding. When their responses are confirming, we are reassured in our understanding; when their responses are confounding, we are given opportunity to further explore our interpretation or to elicit differing interpretive thoughts from the ones we have confounded. Telling is valuable for others as well as for ourselves. In successfully telling our interpretation to another, we enlarge that person's understanding of the artwork, the world as we know it, and ourselves.

Gablik did not publish her book Magritte to capture in words only for herself what his work means to her. She published her understandings of Magritte for others to read and to respond to. Interpreters I have read who have offered written interpretations since Gablik's confirm her interpretations and, then, perhaps, take them further or differently. Were her interpretations to confound other interpreters, they would still be of benefit to those interpreters: Gablik's interpretations would make the new inter-
interpreters aware of where or how their understandings of Magritte differed from Gablik's. She would have provided an interpretive service to the new interpreters. Were they to tell Gablik how her interpretations were confounding to them, Gablik would have valuable occasion to rethink her positions, maintain them with more vigor or more doubt, or change them.

FEELINGS ARE GUIDES TO INTERPRETATION

Emotions play a central role in interpreting works of art and in understanding the world. About emotions in life, Goodman writes, "In daily life, classification of things by feeling is often more vital than classification by other properties: we are likely to be better off if we are skilled in feating, wanting, braving, or distrust the things, animate or inanimate, than if we perceive only their shapes, sizes, weights, etc." About emotions in interpreting art, Goodman writes, "The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses. Emotional numbness disables here as definitely if not as completely as blindness and deafness. . . . Emotion in aesthetic experience is a means of discerning what properties a work has and expresses."17

Israel Scheffler, a philosopher who writes about education and art and is a proponent of Goodman's theory of art, offers elaboration on how the emotions are intimately tied to our perception of the world. Emotions help us to construct a vision of the world and to define the critical features of that world: Emotions help us to see the environment in a certain light. Emotions tell us whether it is "beneficial or harmful, promising or threatening, fulfilling or thwarting." The role of the emotions in reading the world applies to interpreting works of art: "Reading our feelings and reading the work are, in general, virtually inseparable processes." In his writing, Scheffler works to destroy false dichotomies between thinking and feeling: emotions are in the service of critical inquiry; emotions undergird the life of reason: "Emotion without cognition is blind, cognition without emotion is vacuous."18

Throughout this book, examples of interpretation that have been cited have often relied strongly on the feelings of the interpreter in responding to works of art. Recall, from chapter three, the feelings of the critic Jack Flam as he pondered paintings by Eric Fischl; for Flam, they have "a distinctly unpleasant edge." Recall, too, what Stephen Wright, a novelist, wrote when he first saw paintings by Eric Fischl: his response was "immediate and visceral. Here was an artist tunneling through the complexities of a genuine, urgent vision, operating as much from his gut as his head, and actually saying something, it seemed to me, that needed to be said." Critic Erika Billeter felt "an erotic and psychic tension which electrifies the person looking at the pictures" and wrote that Fischl's paintings "unveil the thoughts which produce a sort of guilty feeling in the observer." When art critic A.M. Holmes approached Fischl's work, she immediately acknowledged "the emotional side where you go in and explore feelings and relationships and memories. Often times you find things you're not ready for and you can't bear that this is in front of you."
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Very importantly, however, when interpreting Fischl’s paintings, these critics did not stop with their feelings: they started with them, articulated what they felt, and found in the paintings reasons for their feelings. **Feelings are necessary for interpretations of works of art but they are not sufficiently interpretive:** feelings, to be interpretations, must be articulated in language. Further, to be accurate interpretations of the artworks, they need to show the relationship between what is in the works and what interpreters are feeling. If the feelings cannot be shown to emanate from the artwork, they may be in the interpreter, but not in the work of art. In such a case, we will learn more about the interpreter and what he or she feels, but we will not be learning about the art.

THE CRITICAL ACTIVITIES OF DESCRIBING, ANALYZING, INTERPRETING, JUDGING, AND THEORIZING ABOUT WORKS OF ART ARE INTERRELATED AND INTERDEPENDENT

When learning to engage in criticism of a work of art, it is sometimes useful to distinguish among the acts of describing (telling what one sees), interpreting (telling what one thinks it means), judging the work of art (telling how good one thinks it is), and theorizing about the work (telling what counts as art, for example). Some authors further distinguish between describing and analyzing, by which they seem to mean that to describe is to identify subject matter and to analyze is to identify formal characteristics. Some authors prescribe methods for criticizing a work of art, such as this method: first describe, then and only then analyze, then and only then interpret, then and only then judge, and do not theorize about the nature of art because the role of theory is not addressed in this method.* This and other methods might be helpful in some teaching and learning situations, but there are dangers in reducing the complex activities of responding to art to simple step-by-step methods or in believing that description can be meaningfully distinguished from interpretation, description from judgment, theory from interpretation, and so forth.

What one sees and how one describes are highly dependent on how one understands: descriptive facts are dependent on interpretive theory. If one judges a work of art negatively, then one is likely to describe it in negative terms, and how one understands a work of art is highly dependent on how one values it. Recall, in chapter three, how often viewers could not separate acts of interpreting from acts of judging when looking at art made by Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles. When viewers who were quoted in the chapter interpreted the work of these two artists as reinforcing racism, they judged it as art that is detrimental to society and therefore not good. When viewers react to a work of art very negatively, they are not likely to interpret it at all. Or, when viewers are unable to interpret a work of art they may walk away from it feeling negative about it. Describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent and should not be separated too simplistically.
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ARTWORKS ATTRACT MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS AND IT IS NOT THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION TO ARRIVE AT SINGLE, GRAND, UNIFIED, COMPOSITE INTERPRETATIONS

The view here is that the aim of interpretation is not to obtain the single, right interpretation. There are some theorists who would disagree: E. D. Hirsch, for example, believes that there are singular meanings of works of art, namely what the artists intended them to mean. This book, however, along with other theorists such as Marcia Eaton, Michael Krausz, Joseph Margolis, and Stephen Davies, holds that there can be more than one admissible interpretation and that it is desirable to have different interpretations. Differing interpretations of the same work of art stand alongside each other and can attract our attention to different features of the same work. One interpretation shows us this aspect of the work of art, while another shows us that aspect. If we only had one interpretation, we would miss the insights that other interpretations provide.

A most compelling example of the power of this principle is Shakespeare's Hamlet. Consider all the books written by literary scholars that Hamlet has inspired. Morris Weitz, an aesthetician writing about fifty years ago, chose Hamlet criticism as the paradigm of literary criticism with which he could enlighten us about all of art criticism. Weitz read and analyzed the many books of Hamlet criticism written up to that time, seeing, in part, how each interpretation was different and similar. He found, among other things, that different interpreters asked and answered different interpretive questions about Hamlet, including its textual, dramatic, theatrical, and intellectual sources; Hamlet's relation to other plays; the audience; and the Elizabethan view of man, God, philosophy, politics, tragedy, passion, and ghosts. More succinctly, interpreters of Hamlet seek to identify "the causal environment" of the play, or its context.

Appealing to Shakespeare's intent would yield answers to none of these questions. As Robert Pinsky, a poet, writes, Shakespeare, outside of his plays and poems, "says nothing about his own work or life. He leaves no comments about the city of London, where he chose to live for about 20 years, away from his wife and children, before returning to them (again without comment) and his native town of Stratford. That silence has become part of Shakespeare's legend."

In addition to the different scholarly questions and resulting interpretations of Hamlet or aspects of it, consider all the different renditions of the play by directors across the world and over hundreds of years since the play was first written and produced. Then consider the many versions of Hamlet produced for film and television. Consider the impossible-to-count interpretations of the character of Hamlet by actors through time, across cultures, and in different media. All these constitute different interpretations, interpretations in action, so to speak. This principle holds that these numerous, varied interpretations are to be valued and that it would be a great loss to art and to humanity if they were all somehow replaced by one interpretation or if all the different interpretations of Hamlet or of any work of art were somehow coalesced into a single composite interpretation.
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This principle encourages a diversity of interpretations of any work of art from a number of viewers and from a number of points of view. The principle is in agreement with Stephen Davies's statements that "an interpretation is true if it deals with a meaning the work will sustain; where there are many such meanings, there can be many true interpretations." The principle values an artwork as a rich repository of expression that allows for a rich variety of responses. One critic presents an interpretation that contributes to another critic's previous interpretation. Both of their interpretations enrich our understanding of the work of art. They also enrich our appreciation of the responding interpretive mind: we do not all think alike about art or about life.

Because critics are currently offering new interpretations of the illustrations of Norman Rockwell, as recounted in chapter three, we have opportunity to think anew about the work of an artist that had previously been dismissed as unworthy of interpretation, as being too obvious to warrant interpretation. Because there are new interpretations, as well as multiple interpretations, we have opportunity to expand the canon of what ought to be considered worthy of interpretation and appreciation.

It may not be logically possible for one to accept all interpretations of an artwork such as Hamlet if those interpretations are mutually exclusive or contradictory. We could, however, listen to mutually exclusive and contradictory interpretations so that we come to sympathetically understand the beliefs of the interpreters and how they position themselves in the world. This principle of embracing the idea of multiple interpretations is an especially effective principle for dealing with art that is controversial.

Recall from chapter three that Mayor Giuliani's inflammatory remarks about Ossit's painting The Holy Virgin Mary divided the New York City community, setting group against group and individual against individual, perhaps from political motives in hopes of garnering votes in an upcoming election. Whatever his motives, in the mayor's remarks about The Holy Virgin Mary, he implied that there is only one correct interpretation of that work of art, namely the mayor's interpretation, and that no other interpretation ought be considered. The mayor's position seems to fit that of Steven Dubin's fictitious creation, Homo censorious, also in chapter three: "Homo censorious insists on a single interpretation of a work of art."

However, other interpreters did present their interpretations of the work, and these other interpretations, added to the mayor's, broadened the community's understanding of a work of art. Those individual interpretations can also broaden our knowledge of one another and of what individuals believe about art, religion, and life. When individuals honestly speak their minds about a controversial image, and when they listen carefully to one another and the range of responses the image generates, they can come to a richer understanding of one another and of the artwork. Interpretive discussion of controversial works of art can result in a new respect for one another, new knowledge of our diverse beliefs, and hopefully an increased tolerance of our differences. By speaking their minds about controversial art, people reduce the fear that comes from feeling powerless. By listening to the views of others, interpreters can reduce the fear that might be born of ignorance: I might be afraid of that which I don't know or understand, and if I allow
myself to hear and understand points of view different than mine, I might reduce my fear of what was previously unknown and scary to me.

Multiple interpretations can inform individual interpretations, causing individual interpreters to reflect more, consider further. A multiplicity of interpretations can unify rather than divide a group of individuals, helping them form a community of understanding, a community that values diverse beliefs about art and life. We all come to works of art with some common cultural constants that we have inherited from whatever social groups in which we were born and have lived our lives. We also come to works of art, and all of life, with unique sets of individual experiences. When we interpret works of art, these communal and individual life experiences necessarily affect our interpretations. This is a good thing. We are varied, and our responses to works of art will be varied. When we share our individual responses to works of art with others, we offer what can be uniquely nuanced responses that can enlarge understandings of the work of art for all who hear us.

THERE IS A RANGE OF INTERPRETATIONS ANY ARTWORK WILL ALLOW

Artworks ought not to be treated as if they were Rorschach inkblots, with interpreters seeing in them anything they want to see. A particular work of art is what it is because it is embedded in a particular culture, time, and social practice, and it is made with some human intent that can usually be recognized by examining the work itself. Thus, interpretations of a work of art ought to be consistent with the artistic conventions and intentions of the time at which the work was made. Davies, the aesthetician, states, "Interpretations are never indifferent to truth."

There is a fear about interpretation that is sometimes expressed as a fear of "overinterpretation," a fear of reading too much into a work of art or of beating the work to death through too much analysis and interpretation. Art students, in particular, can be heard to express this fear, especially when it is the art that they made that is being interpreted or in their view overinterpreted. Scholars also recognize a fear of overinterpeting. Jonathan Culler, a literary scholar, in particular, addresses the concern and tries to alleviate it. Culler imagines that overinterpretation might be like overeating: "there is proper eating or interpreting, but some people don't stop when they should. They go on eating or interpreting in excess, with bad results." Although Culler acknowledges the fear, he is more fearful of "underinterpretation."

Culler does not, however, accept that a work can mean anything that we might want it to mean: we should not "just use texts as we use word-processors, in an attempt to say something interesting." Meanings of artworks are context-bound, "a function of relations within or between texts." But there will always be new contextual possibilities and "what may count as a fruitful context cannot be specified in advance." Culler is not afraid of overinterpreting and instead worries about squelching opportunities to bring to light connections or implications not previously noticed. Culler asks interpreters to
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“Ask about what the text does and how; how it relates to other texts and to other practices; what it conceals or represses; what it advances or is complicitous with. Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted.”

History and culture limit the range of interpretations that are allowable. To interpret a work from a time and place other than our own, we must first recognize and acknowledge that it is of another time and from another place. When interpreting art of the historical past, we seek to recover what it may have meant to the people who saw it in its time. Savy Doshi, in chapter five, sought to determine what the temple signified to the Jains who built it and who used it. If she is interpreting what it meant for its original builders and users, it cannot mean anything that she would like it to mean. She seeks to find what it meant to them. She and we permit historical facts and cultural knowledge to guide our interpretive search and to constrain our interpretive conjectures. With art and artifacts of another culture, we learn how those objects functioned in that culture. History and culture put limits on what any work of art might be about.

Umberto Eco argues that all works of art, and not just historically old or culturally distant works of art, set limits as to how they can be interpreted. For Eco, and this book, texts have rights. The rights of the text are established in part by the “internal textual coherence” of a work of art that sets itself firmly against any “uncontrollable drives” of the interpreter: if one wants a plausible interpretation of a work of art, one cannot just fix on one or two elements of the work and forget about the rest of the elements in the work.

This book also agrees with Michael Krausz, who argues that there is a range of admissible interpretations established by pertinent practitioners. Interpreters through practice orient other interpreters as to what features of artworks are significant or salient. The community of interpreters provides rules, guidelines, values, and procedures that indicate appropriate methods and maneuvers to be pursued when interpreting works of art. The range of admissible interpretations for any work of art is thus socially constituted by consensual agreement of pertinent practitioners. Krausz writes, “What, in the last resort, makes an interpretation admissible is, as José Ferrater-Mora says, ‘the consensus, or agreement, that it is, indeed, acceptable or not. This consensus functions within the rules laid down, implicitly or explicitly, by the community of researchers by virtue of habits engendered by a multitude of common experiences.’” Or, as Eco asserts, certain readings prove themselves over time to be satisfactory to the relevant community of interpreters.

MEANINGS OF ARTWORKS ARE NOT LIMITED TO WHAT THEIR ARTISTS INTENDED THEM TO MEAN

Knowing what an artist meant to mean when making a work of art can be a tremendous aid to understanding that work of art. Artists' intents can play a significant role
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for interpreters who want to formulate meanings about artists' works. Some artists are very articulate and insightful about what they do, how they do it, why, what it means to them, and what they would like it to mean to us. Leonardo da Vinci's and Paul Klee's journals, Edward Weston's diarist writings in his Daybooks about his life in photography, Agnes Martin's personal notes and essays about her contemporary and very subtle paintings, artists' public manifestos, and their private letters are all rich resources for understanding the work of these artists and artistic sensibilities in general.

Many living artists make themselves available for interviews about their work and offer valuable insights into what they believe their work to mean. Some artists invite critics and historians into their studios for inside looks into their working processes. Robert Irwin, for example, is a contemporary American artist who makes work that is often difficult to describe and to reproduce because of its subtlety. Irwin granted author Lawrence Weschler many studio visits and extensive interviews that resulted in a book that greatly enhances an understanding and appreciation of Irwin's art: Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees. Irwin's art exhibits minimal perceptual properties; it is easily bypassed, not noticed, not seen, not understood as art. By granting interviews to an author and providing personal insights into his working processes and thoughts, Irwin furthers our understanding of his work in valuable ways.

From artists we can learn things about their work we can't learn from other sources. We can sometimes learn the artist's motivations, state of mind when making the piece, intended meanings, methods of working, sources of inspiration, beliefs about art and the world, attitudes about life and other artists and movements. Recall, from chapter four, that the abstract painter Sean Scully clearly stated that, in his mind, his paintings were abstract, but that they were also about social content, such as power in relationships. Scully's stated intent about his paintings provides us with a direction with which to interpret his work: his intent is helpful. Recall the interpretive mysteries of Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, given in chapter two. To help solve these mysteries, current historians are grateful that a contemporary of Manet, Georges Jeanniot, visited Manet's studio while Manet was painting A Bar and told us that Manet "did not copy nature at all closely," that Manet was not interested in exact replication and instead made "mastery simplifications." Jeanniot's visit to Manet's studio offered Jeanniot a valuable insight into what Manet was not intending to do, that is, replicate reality.

Many artists lecture about their work and their intents in making their art. It would be intellectually foolish to ignore artists' words about their works when trying to interpret those works. If today we had access to Manet's thoughts about A Bar at the Folies-Bergère and what he meant to convey by making that painting, many of our interpretive questions might be answered. Were we able to ask Manet, and were he able and willing to answer us, we would know whether he meant to paint the face of Suzanne, the barmad, as "bored," "sulky," "tired," "fatigued," "glum," "disturbingly impassive," "distant," "melancholy," "absent," "detached," "aloof," "lonely," or "not
impassive; "not bored," "not tired," "not disdainful," "not quite focused on anything." Different writers, quoted in chapter two, have described her in all these various ways. And yet, even if Manet wanted Suzanne's expression to be such and such, that of course does not guarantee that it is such and such or that he was able to paint it the way he wanted it to be perceived by viewers.

Were Manet here today, we might ask him and he might tell us if he was aware that the reflections in the mirror do not match optical reality and if he meant them to be the way that they are. Perhaps he was not merely inept at painting reflections, as some of his contemporary critics claimed. If the distorted reflections are the way he meant them to be, he might tell us why he meant them to be that way. His answer would add support to some extant interpretations of what the painting is about and would challenge other interpretations. If he said that he happened to paint the reflections inaccurately because he really didn't give a damn about the accuracy of painted reflections, then what? Would interpreters move on to other concerns, or would they say that the reflections are the way they are, no matter Manet's intent, and continue to offer reasonable and meaningful consequences based on how they actually are painted? If Manet did not mean Suzanne to be sensual, does that mean that she is not? If Manet did not intend the man in the hat with the cane to be a surrogate for us, the viewers, does that mean that he is not? That we cannot see him that way? That our interpretation of him as a surrogate for us is a wrong interpretation? If we were to tell Manet that we saw the man with the hat and the cane as a surrogate for him, the artist, and that we saw the painting as a kind of psychological self-portrait of him, the artist, and Manet were to turn red and scoff at such an idea, would we be bound to withdraw that interpretation?

I once taught a high school student, Marick, who completed an assignment to make a three-dimensional self-portrait in clay. During the discussion of the class's self-portraits, the class and I formulated possible interpretations of Marick's sculpture. In the midst of our interpretive discussion, Marick interrupted, objecting that we were all wrong, that his self-portrait did not mean any of the things that we said it meant and that, furthermore, in fact his sculpture meant nothing because he did not want it to mean anything. What do you think? Marick's classmates and I argued that the portrait did have meaning, regardless of Marick's lack of intent for it to mean, because the object that he made was by a person, in a certain shape, glazed a certain color, and it looked like a certain thing that communicated meanings to us."

Marick seemed unwilling to let go of control of the object he had made. He would not agree with this statement by Schefler: "Once the text is produced, it is objectified, released, given birth, assuming its own career beyond the maker's control. To understand it is to see its structure, its organization, its references, its various interpretations and not, in particular, its historical and developmental stages." 118

This book asserts that artists' intents, when they are available, can be very useful to interpreters of those artists' works of art. This book does not assert, however, that the work necessarily means what the artist wants it to mean. Nor does it assert that mean-
ings of works of art are limited to what their artists intended them to mean. To believe that a work of art means what its maker intended it to mean is to adhere to what is known in criticism and aesthetics as an Intentionalist position of interpretation. (Intentionalism is also sometimes applied to judgment of an artwork’s value: a work of art is successful to the extent that it meets its maker’s intent in making the piece.)

There are many objections to Intentionalism and an early one is known to critics and aestheticians as the “Intentionalist Fallacy”—it is very difficult, if not impossible, to know the artist’s intent. This is especially the case when one is attempting to interpret art made long ago or in a faraway place by an unknown artist, but it also holds with respect to the work of living, known artists. Many critics who were originally opposed to Intentionalism worried that the goal of finding the artist’s intent was not properly a goal of art criticism but, rather, the goal of a biographer or a psychologist. Seeking the artist’s intent, they worried, would likely lead the interpreter to the artist’s biography or personal psychology and lead the interpreter away from the artwork itself. It is artworks we attempt to interpret, not artists.

Another obvious objection to Intentionalism is that artists may not have actually produced what they intended to make: “an author may intend something not in fact said and say something not in fact meant.” The fact that artists intend to make certain objects does not assure that they have indeed made them: intention indicates ambition but not necessarily achievement. Robert Stecker, an aesthetician, distinguishes two types of Intentionalism: Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism. Actual Intentionalism is the view that the meaning of a work of art is what its actual maker meant it to mean. Hypothetical Intentionalism is the view that the meaning of a work of art is what an ideal viewer surmises the artists intent to have been. In Stecker’s definitions, success is a factor: in Actual Intentionalism, the artist must have successfully realized his or her intent in the work for it to be interpreted accurately; in Hypothetical Intentionalism, Stecker stipulates that the viewer be an ideal viewer to successfully interpret the work. This particular objection is sometimes thought to be taken care of by inserting “successfully” into the Intentionalist definition: a work means what its maker successfully intended it to mean; or, more fully, “the success of an interpretation is dependent on grasping the intended meaning [successfully] conveyed by the artist through the work.”

Gertis Gault, an aesthetician, argues against Intentionalism, writing that artworks may convey meanings that the artist did not intend or of which the artist was not consciously aware. (Marcik would most likely disagree with Gault.) Using an example he invents in language, Gault differentiates between a speaker’s meaning and a sentence’s meaning. Someone may say, “the bat is on the mat,” but intend to mean, “the cat is on the mat.” Both sentences make sense, and both have different meanings, one intended and the other not. Gault also argues that “to assume that all features of a work are intended would be to ascribe an implausible mastery to writers: it is to assume that they are (unconsciously) aware of all features of their (linguistic) actions, and that is not something that we believe about actions in general.” Further, he asserts that art his-
H Loriens frequently apply interpretations to artworks based on ideas that were not available to the artists who made the work: concepts of formal analysis came well after Renaissance and Baroque works, but are meaningfully applied to them, as are Freudian analyses, Marxist analyses, and so forth.

Positions about the role of artists' intention in interpreting their works of art can be extreme and polar: a work of art means what the artist intended it to mean versus an artist's intent in making a work has no role to play in interpreting that work. This book rejects both extremes and promotes a middle view: the meaning of a work of art is not limited to the meaning the artist had in mind when making the work; it can mean more or less or something different than what the artist intended the work to mean. It is sometimes very difficult to ascertain an artist's intent. Some artists choose not to reveal their intentions by talking or writing about their work, except in the most general terms. Some artists are not particularly articulate in verbal language: that may be one of the reasons why they paint, draw, or photograph rather than write! Cindy Sherman, the contemporary artist famous for her self-portraits, would rather not have to make images and provide her intent for having made them: "I've only been interested in making the work and leaving the analysis to the critics." Some artists notoriously give misleading or consciously unenlightening statements about what they make: Andy Warhol comes to mind.

Many artists work intuitively and from the subconscious. Sandy Skoglund, a contemporary artist who makes installations and photographs them, says one of the most captivating aspects of making her art is "the subterranean content and consciousness that kind of leaks out, that I don't intend when I'm making art."

Jerry Uelsmann, a contemporary photographer who layers several negatives to make one image, sometimes only realizes what an image means to him after he has finished it, sometimes the morning after: "I don't have an agenda when I begin. I'm trying to create something that's visually stimulating, exciting, that has never been done before but has some visual cohesiveness for me, has its own sort of life." He tells of how he made an image of a young woman, standing nude, presenting a glowing apple, and the picture now seems to him to be obviously an "Eve image." But at the time he made the multiply-exposed photograph, he was unaware of this connotation: "Because I concentrate so intensely on detail while I'm working, it wasn't really until the next morning that I recognized the obvious iconographic implications of the image that are so blatantly there. It seems impossible, in retrospect, that I didn't plan to do an Eve photograph. But at the time I was working the idea didn't enter my conscious thought."*

April Gornik, a contemporary painter of landscapes, says this about her thought process when she is making work: "I've had paintings—I swear to God—that painted themselves. I would start off just as nervous as usual and I always do an underpainting and then work up and up and up and up from that, get it going and all of a sudden the thing would just take off with me behind the brush."*

Lucio Pozzi, a contemporary painter, expresses ideas similar to Gornik's about intent, but in different language: "In a dynamic and critical scenario of creativity, it
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becomes impossible to statically and hierarchically conceive of intentions as a monolithic, binding component of artistic decision-making. Intentions become mere ever-changing, ever-updated, flexible instruments for the conduction (not the definition) of the art being made. They are a springboard for a flight or fall one never knows the end of. It is impossible to compare works of art to the original intentions of the artist. One may do so only for conversation’s sake, but one cannot believe such comparisons lead to an explanation of the art. The deeper (departure) intentions and the formal (arrival) meaning of the art are often unknown to the artist him/herself and a matter of continuous, unfinished, unending cultural discourse for its audience."

Scheffler, the philosopher, explains what artists Skoglund, Gornik, and Pozzi are saying, with different words and emphases: “human creation is always contingent, always experimental, always capable of yielding surprises—not only for others, but for the human creator himself. The product humanly made is never a pure function of creative purpose and foreseeable consequences of the maker’s actions. The human maker does not fully own his own product. Understanding it is therefore not reducible to grasping the steps that went into its making.” (Barzman, the art historian, reminds us that artists’ understandings of their work, like all understandings, are “situated, limited, and marked by specificity that cannot be universalized.”) Scheffler goes on to say, "The artist is not a composite of dreamer and robot, the dreamer intuiting the idea and the robot executing it automatically in the chosen medium. The painter or composer does not first thrill to a new conception and then thoughtlessly stamp it on his raw material; rather, he tries it out on the material, which reshapes him as he reshapes it. His thinking is not limited to the first phase of his making; it permeates every stage, the results of every move requiring fresh evaluation and a reconsidering of basic directions. . . . We may discern features, functions, and potentials of the product far outside the range of the purpose that led to its making.”

A significant limitation of Intentionalism is that it commits one to the view that there is a singular meaning of a work of art, and a single correct interpretation of it, namely, the artist’s meaning. Conventionalism opposes Intentionalism. Stecker defines Conventionalism as the view “that the meaning of a work is the set of meanings that can be put upon the work based solely on the linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions operative at the time the work was produced.” That is, the artist’s intent is very likely part of the linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions of the times during which the artist was working, and thus intent would play a part in interpretation, but the artist’s intent does not determine an artwork’s sole meaning.

Eco refers to “the intention of the text,” meaning that the text (painting, poem, symphony) provides guidelines or indicators within itself as to how it ought to be interpreted. “Intention of the text” is different from “intention of the artist” in that it is a much broader concept, and may include the artist’s intent, and certainly includes linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions operative at the time the work was produced. Eco argues that trying to find the original intention of the artist is very difficult and frequently irrelevant. He also recognizes the intent of the interpreter, who, he
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fears, may beat the text into a shape that suits the interpreter's own purpose. Eco asserts "the rights of the text" by maintaining "the intention of the text" which ought not to be overridden by the interpreter. This book is in agreement with Eco on this point: artworks have rights. The rights of an artwork ought to both guide and limit how it is interpreted.

Finally, to rely on the artist's intent for an interpretation of an artwork is to put oneself in a passive role as a viewer. Reliance on the artist's intent unwisely removes the responsibility of interpretation from the viewer; it also robs the viewer of the joy of interpretive thinking and the rewards of the new insights it yields into the art and the world.

**INTERPRETATIONS ARE NOT SO MUCH RIGHT, BUT ARE MORE OR LESS REASONABLE, CONVINCING, INFORMATIVE, AND ENLIGHTENING**

If one were to agree with the belief that there is a single, right interpretation of a work of art, then one would likely also believe that interpreters ought to strive for that single, right interpretation. This book, however, does not hold a belief in either the possibility or the desirability of single, right interpretations. Instead it advocates multiple interpretations. It agrees with aestheticians such as Margolis and Krausz, who argue that such a "singularist approach" is a mistaken view of cultural objects and interpretive practices. "That is, artworks are not the kind of things that yield simple and single interpretations; and interpreters of artworks are not the kind of responding individuals who are looking for simple, single meanings.

Barzman, the art historian, also cautions against the notion of a single, right interpretation: "Given that we come to objects and their texts as a plurality of subjects (with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age), can any of us really serve as arbiters of truth for reading audiences, which are heterogeneous communities of individuals?"

If we accept multiple interpretations, then, are some right and some wrong? This principle answers that interpretations are not so much right, certainly not absolutely and definitively right, but that interpretations are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, enlightening, persuasive, fresh, profound, well or not so well argued. Conversely, interpretations can be "unpersuasive or redundant or irrelevant or boring,"* fragmentary, obvious, trivial, inane, "strained," and "far-fetched."*

**INTERPRETATIONS IMPLY A WORLDVIEW**

Interpretations imply a worldview: There is no innocent eye. In Nelson Goodman's words, with an acknowledgment to the scholarship of Ernst Gombrich "as Ernst Gombrich insists, there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work obsessed by its past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers,
heart, and brain. It functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a
dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees
is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associ-
ates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make; and
what it takes and makes it sees not bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as
food, as people, as enemies, as states, as weapons.”

We all move through the world with a more or less articulated set of assumptions
about existence, and it is through these that we interpret everything, including works
of art. Some viewers interpret art on the basis of less articulated theories. Others have
more finely articulated and consistent worldviews, based on study of philosophy, psy-
chology, anthropology, and other disciplines. Through these worldviews they interpret
works of art. Interpreters may operate on the basis of semiotic theory, for example, or
offer neo-Freudian readings of all works of art they encounter.

Sometimes the interpreters make their basic assumptions about art and life explicit;
much more often, however, they leave them implicit. Once the interpreter’s worldview is
identified, choices follow: one can accept the worldview and the interpretation that it
influences or reject both the worldview and the interpretation, accept the worldview
but disagree with how it is applied to the artwork, or reject the worldview but accept
the specific interpretation it yields.

As worldviews affect how we understand life and interpret art, interpretations of
art also affect our worldviews. Thom, the aesthetician, explains that the act of accepting
an interpretation involves another act of interpretation, namely, self-interpretation.
In order for me to adopt an interpretation, “I must have certain beliefs and attitudes;
so I assume those beliefs and attitudes and by so doing partly determine who I am.
Choosing an interpretation is in this case part of choosing who to be.”

GOOD INTERPRETATIONS TELL MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK
THAN THEY TELL ABOUT THE INTERPRETER

Good interpretations must clearly pertain to the work of art. All interpretations reveal
the interpreter, but the interpreter’s primary challenge is to direct the viewer to better
perceive and understand the artwork that is being interpreted. If one cannot relate the
interpretation to the work of art being interpreted, the interpretation may be too sub-
jective. That is, it may inform us about the interpreter, but it may fail to enlighten the
work of art and, hence, is not a good interpretation.

Preference statements, for example, usually tell us about the speaker rather than
about the topic in question. We hear many preferences about works of art: “I like it.”
“I don’t like it.” These preference statements, however, do not provide information
about the artworks and ought to be considered, not statements of art criticism, but
personal psychological reports by the speaker.

Oftentimes critics tell about themselves, particularly for example, when they tell
about their emotional reactions to a work of art. It is the critic’s task, however, to re-
late the personal information being offered to the artwork that is being interpreted so that we are enlightened about the artwork, not only about the interpreter.

THE OBJECTS OF INTERPRETATION ARE ARTWORKS, NOT ARTISTS

In some conversations and writings about art, it is artists who are interpreted rather than the artworks that they have made: "Kara Walker is an angry woman." "Chris Ofili is just trying to shock us." In critical discourse, however, it should be the art objects that are interpreted, not the persons who made them. We want to be reading works of art and not be engaged in mind-reading.

This principle mitigates against name-calling and blaming when faced with artworks that we might find offensive. The principle redirects our attention to the art in question, not the supposed motives of the art maker, which are difficult, at best, to determine. The principle may also divert attention from the artist and back to the work and, perhaps, to what it is in us that makes us react the way we do to a particular work of art. If we focus on the artist rather than the work or ourselves, we are missing opportunities to better understand the work of art and our reactions to it.

This principle does not exclude the gathering of biographical information about an artist. Oftentimes interpreters provide biographical information that usefully informs their interpretations. Such biographical information can be used to provide insight into the work that is being interpreted. Biographical information reminds us that art does not emerge apart from a social environment. There is a caution, however, that concerns what might be termed "biographical determinism." It is an error of logic to move from a fact of an artist’s biography to certainty about what the artist’s work of art might mean. Artists should not be locked into their biographic pasts, nor should one argue that if someone is of this race or that gender or this historical background, then their art must be about such factors.

ALL ART IS IN PART ABOUT THE WORLD IN WHICH IT EMERGED

Donald Kuspit, contemporary art critic and aesthetician, reinforces this principle when discussing his decision to include psychoanalysis in his interpretation of works of art: "I began to feel that the artist is not exempt from life. There is no way out from seeing art as a reflection or meditation or a comment on life. I became interested in the process, including the artist’s life. I became interested in how art reflected life issues, or existential issues with which we are all involved." 12

The paintings that Magritte made (chapter one) emerged from a world of World Wars, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Einstein’s theory of relativity. The paintings and illustrations made by Norman Rockwell (chapter three) are inseparable from the social and political world of the United States in the years that Rockwell worked. Eric Fischl (chapter three) draws upon his childhood experiences in a dysfunctional alco-
holic family for the paintings he makes as an adult. The Temple Dharna Vihara in Ranakpur (chapter five) is the physical form of metaphysical beliefs of the Jains. Photographs (chapter six), because they are made by capturing light reflected from real-world objects, are intrinsically dependent on the physical world.

In addition to these examples, all art can be shown and seen to emerge from the context of the time and the space in which it was made. Conversely, we cannot understand a work of art without imaginatively repositioning it in the context from which it emerged. In the words of Michel Foucault, “a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.”

ALL ART IS IN PART ABOUT OTHER ART

Interpreters state over and over again who influenced a particular artist and on whose art the artist’s work may be commenting. Art does not emerge within an aesthetic vacuum. Artists are generally aware of the work of other artists and often they are especially aware of the work of certain artists. Even untrained artists are aware of and influenced by the visual representations in their societies. This principle asserts that all art can be interpreted with respect to how it is influenced by other art. Art can be about life, about art, or both. An important guide to interpreting any art is to see how it relates to or indirectly comments upon other art, both “popular” and “fine.”

Artists are usually aware of both the artists who preceded them and those they are contemporary with. Artists, like all of us, are also immersed in an inescapable visual culture that influences them consciously and unconsciously. In the words of art historian David Carrier, “The man we call Caravaggio developed his artistic style by means of a complex dialogue within the very rich inheritance of Italian painting.” Sean Scully, for example (chapter four), acknowledges that if you put the work of Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Mark Rothko together, you get a good idea of what Scully’s work is about. Willem de Kooning is quoted (chapter four) as stating that his Women paintings “had to do with the female painted through the ages.” The fine art paintings that Michael Ray Charles makes (chapter three) are dependent on images circulating in mass visual culture: without knowing about racist images of blacks in visual culture, Charles’s paintings will be misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Noël Carroll, reiterating views of George Dickie and others who support the theory that art is situated within an art world, writes this: “For art is a public practice and in order for it to succeed publically—i.e., in order for the viewer to understand a given artwork—the artist and the audience must share a basic framework of communication: a knowledge of shared conventions, strategies, and of ways of legitimately expanding upon existing modes of making and responding ... an artist needs to know the constraints on diverging from one tradition in such a way that her activity changes it rather than ends it, and the audience, or at least certain members of it, needs to share the knowledge of the modes of expanding the tradition in order not only to un-
understand the artist’s work, but, even more fundamentally, to recognize it as a development within a tradition.”

GOOD INTERPRETATIONS HAVE COHERENCE, CORRESPONDENCE, AND INCLUSIVENESS

The merit of any interpretation can be judged by the use of three criteria: coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness. Coherence is an internal and autonomous criterion, correspondence is an external and dependent criterion, and inclusiveness looks both at the work itself and its causal environment.

The criterion of coherence asks that an interpretation make sense in itself. Apart from the artwork, the interpretation is a good story or a compelling account of a matter or an intriguing idea or notion. Coherence is an autonomous criterion in that it simply asks that the interpretation make sense in itself and apart from the work of art. One could judge if an interpretation were coherent without even seeing the work of art it was meant to interpret: the interpretation makes sense or it doesn’t. The criterion asks that the interpretation be logical, that its premises lead to a conclusion, that it has a certain elegance and efficiency of explanation. These things can be decided by looking at the interpretation and ignoring the artwork of which it is an interpretation. Of course, a good story or a good account of a work of art that does not match the actual work of art that is being interpreted is not a good interpretation of that work. It may be a good story but it is not a good interpretation of the painting. Other criteria are necessary: the criterion of correspondence is one of them.

The criterion of correspondence asks that the interpretation match what can be seen in the work that is being interpreted. Correspondence is an external and dependent criterion that asks that the interpretation fit the work of art. A good argument or a good story is not enough for a good interpretation of a work of art. The interpreter must show that the story, account, or argument pertains to the work that it seeks to interpret, as well as to the artwork’s causal environment. This principle protects against interpretations that tend toward unleashed speculation by asking the interpreter to adhere to what is actually in the work or in the work’s causal environment. It is a criterion of relevance.

The criterion of inclusiveness asks that the interpretation account for what is in the work and what is in the work’s causal environment. The request for inclusiveness asks the interpreter to account for all that is in an artwork and for what is relevant to the artwork during the time that it was made. If an interpretation omits mention of an aspect of an artwork, that interpretation is suspect. If the interpretation leads one to believe that it has the capacity to account for the omission, but that capacity has for some reason not been used, the interpretation is not as flawed as when an interpretation is simply unable to account for what is ignored.

In general, good interpretations lead viewers to increased appreciation of works of art. Robert Stecker includes the goal of appreciation in his definition of the role of in-
interpretation: "Offer an interpretation that renders the work coherent in a way that promotes appreciation."

Recall, from chapter three, art critic Dave Hickey's interpretation of Norman Rockwell's painting *After the Prom*, 1957. It is coherent, it corresponds to what we can see in the painting and accounts for the time in which the painting was made and shown, and it is inclusive of what is important in the painting and around the painting in its causal environment. Hickey writes that this painting is "a full-fledged, intricately constructed, deeply knowledgeable work that recruits the total resources of European narrative picture-making to tell the tiny tale of agape he has chosen to portray."

Hickey's statement has coherence—it makes sense in itself. In his justification for his interpretive conclusion, Hickey provides ample internal evidence that shows that his interpretation corresponds to what we can see in the painting. He carefully describes the painting's subject matter: the 1930s-era soda fountain, the four characters who are dressed in 1950s-era clothing, their body postures, their facial expressions. Hickey also provides a formal analysis of the painting, showing that its composition is in agreement with his interpretation of its meaning. Hickey also accounts for the painting's causal environment and makes connections between it and the 1950s, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the relevance of the Great Depression and World War II. Hickey's is a good interpretation of *After the Prom*. It is not the only interpretation, nor the only possible interpretation, but may be the best one we have available to us at this point in time. It is a good one because it adheres to criteria for interpretation. In the long run, it may turn out to be the best interpretation we get, or perhaps equally good but different ones will join it, or an even better one will replace it. For now, however, it serves viewers well.

**INTERPRETING ART IS AN ENDEAVOR THAT IS BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL**

We can think of acts of interpreting as having two poles, one personal and individual, and the other communal and shared. An individual and personal interpretation is one that has meaning to me and for my life. I may have formulated it for myself, or received it from another and accepted it or modified it. A communal and shared interpretation is an understanding or explanation of a work of art that is held by a group of individuals with shared interests. Communal understandings are passed on to us as common knowledge in the history of art textbooks and in standard introductory art and art history lectures.

Some aestheticians position themselves closer to personal interpretations than to communal understandings. In the phenomenological tradition, specifically in European phenomenological hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, for example, believe that all interpretation necessitates an act of appropriation: "All interpretation involves necessity an act of appropriation in which the object of interpretation is made one's own through the reader's endeavor to make sense of the text.
in the light of her personal experience.”57 For Gadamer and Ricoeur the purpose of interpretation is to make the artwork “one’s own.”

For Ricoeur, the narrative in particular offers rich possibilities of understanding and self-discovery. Narratives illustrate the possibilities of our existence that can be discovered by interpreting what others have made. Narratives open up new avenues for self-definition, new ways of being in the world. For Ricoeur, the positing of the self is not a given, it is a task. The arts, and literature in particular, are created for the imaginative exploration of possible ways of being human. The arts and literature allow viewers and readers to freely step into alien viewpoints and to examine their own nature and illusions. “The task of the writer is to reader as perfectly as possible the vision of the world that inspires him, the corresponding task of the reader is to explicate and appropriate the type of being-in-the-world that the author has unfolded.”

Interpreting for personal meaning is also part of the American Pragmatist tradition of philosophy. William James and John Dewey, in the past, and Richard Rorty, today, for example, think that we should use our interpretive concepts as tools for certain purposes, to solve certain problems, rather than to figure out how “the world really is.” The belief that there is one way that the world is is rooted in Essentialist theory, a theory that Pragmatists reject. In the Pragmatic view, we ought to give up the project of trying to mirror the world as if there were only one way the world really is. In the Pragmatist view there are as many ways to represent the world as there are questions to ask and problems to solve.4 In Rorty’s words, the pragmatist “will come to think of himself or herself as, like everything else, capable of as many descriptions as there are purposes to be served. There are as many descriptions as there are uses to which the pragmatist might be put, by his or her self or by others. This is the state in which all descriptions (including one’s self-description as a pragmatist) are evaluated according to their efficacy as instruments for purposes, rather than by their fidelity to the object described.” This view also applies to interpreting art.

Regarding the interpretation of art, Rorty argues that there should be no difference between interpreting a work and using it to better one’s life. For Rorty, a meaningful interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one’s priorities and to change one’s life. “Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work. ... We pragmatists reish this way of blurring the distinction between finding an object and making it.” Rorty continues, “For us pragmatists, the notion that there is something a given text is really about, something which rigorous application of method will reveal, is as bad as the Aristotelian idea that there is something which a substance really, intrinsically, is as opposed to what it only apparently or accidentally or relationally is. The thought that a commentator has discovered what a text is really doing—for example, that it is really demystifying an ideological construct, or really deconstructing the hierarchical oppositions of Western metaphysics, rather than merely being capable of being used for these purposes—is, for us pragmatists, just more occultism. It is one more claim to have cracked the code, and thereby detected What is Really Going On.”
Chapter 8 • Principles for Interpreting Art

The requests from Phenomenologists and Pragmatists that we appropriate a work of art to make it our own, and that we allow a work of art to change our life, might be daunting to some readers. Actual examples drawn from teaching experiences might make these requests more tangible and less intimidating. Children can make personal what they see and experience. My wife, Susan, told me a compelling story of a young boy in her Montessori class who was able to personally enmesh himself in experience prior to making interpretive artifacts about his experience. She says, “I took my 3rd grade class to the beach for lessons in botany and zoology. One boy was especially fond of the sea. He drew many pictures of the sea. I had art books in the classroom—my college art history texts as well as contemporary books of art. He loved to look at art of the sea. He was an excellent swimmer. I watched him for more than a half-hour do this: he laid down at shore break. His body was limp. He relaxed and let his body do as the sea did. Like a jellyfish caught at shoreline, he moved as ebb and tide. It was one of the most graceful and peaceful movements I have ever seen. I asked him later to tell me about it: he said he watched the water and wanted to feel it, to be it, to draw it, and to write a story about it.”

Alisha, a second grader, wrote this personal interpretive response to an Expressionistic painting of a large monkey sitting in a rain forest, The Mandrill (Color Plate 25) by Oskar Kokoschka. Alisha’s paragraph seems to me to be an example of interpretive appropriation:

“I liked The Mandrill. Because ... it felt like I was in the jungle and I could hear the birds chirping. And I could hear it moving. I liked the purple on his fingers. And I could smell the fruit he was eating. I could hear the waterfall coming down. I thought it was neat. It looked like the artist painted it fast and a little bit slow. The mandrill looked neat because it looked like I was right there with him. I just felt like I could see what he was eating. And I could eat with him. I just like it so very, very, very, very much!”

Alisha’s personal interpretation of The Mandrill is valuable to anyone who is interested in knowing more about Kokoschka’s painting. It is informative: Alisha points out the jungle environment, the waterfall on the right side of the painting, the mandrill’s “purple fingers” reaching to the right of the canvas, and surmises that they are purple from the color of the fruit it was eating; she makes note of formal qualities of the painting’s fast and slow brush work. Alisha also lets us know that she is very fond of the work. This information is more about her than about the painting, but through her interpretive enthusiasm, we might see the painting through her young mind and enjoy it more because of that.

A museum tour guide and widow writing about Magritte’s paintings, quoted in chapter one, provided us with an example of an interpretation that caused her to change her priorities in life, when she wrote that seeing the isolation of people in the
paintings made her want to participate in life, not just observe it: "Life should not be a picture you view. You must put yourself in the picture."

It is not just children and docents who are willing and able to make artworks personally meaningful. Richard Schiff, an art historian, notes that many recent art historians are shifting from archival or biographical methods to more emphatically subjectivized, autobiographical methods. They are reflecting on what the experience of an artist's work means to them, the authors. For example, when interpreting Manet's painting A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, Griselda Pollock, as cited in chapter two, seeks to find what the painting means to her, as a woman and a feminist, a hundred years after it was painted.

Also, some artists want their works of art to be made personal by their viewers. When Eric Fischl, whose paintings are discussed in chapter three, was asked by an interviewing critic if he thought that people should try to tell the story of his paintings in their own psychological narratives, he responded, "I like that, because it means they are possessing the work. You want possession. You want somebody to internalize it and interpret it in terms that they understand themselves. It's about them. I seek that. What I try to do is narrow the possibility of interpretation to a certain area so that they're never that far wrong. You don't want to control it so much that they have no room. You want them to participate." Fischl implies that he thinks there can be interpretations of his paintings that are "too far wrong" but he gives enough clues in his paintings to narrow the possibilities for the interpreter. He believes that for him to control interpretations would not be desirable; he wants his paintings to allow viewers to "possess" his work, to "internalize it." As a painter, he wants his viewers to make the artwork, the object of interpretation, their own.

Within formal art education, communal interpretations are usually privileged over personal interpretations. Professors strive to have their students understand art as the professors' community of scholars understands it. So too, usually, do tour guides in art museums give standard, accepted interpretations of historical works of art, ones that they have usually received from the curators in their institutions and then supplemented with standard scholarly art-historical texts. Communal knowledge about art is the kind of art knowledge that is commonly measured in tests about art history.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica Online (2000) offers a clear example of a communal interpretation of the work of Magritte: "Magritte, René (-François-Ghislain). Belgian artist, one of the most prominent Surrealist painters whose bizarre flights of fancy blended horror, peril, comedy, and mystery. His works were characterized by particular symbols—the female torso, the bourgeois 'little man,' the bowler hat, the castle, the rock, the window, and others." This entry on Magritte is a succinctly articulated, comprehensive, two-sentence interpretation likely synthesized from volumes of scholarly Magritte interpretations.

Interpreters of young age can also offer communal interpretations. Here is a communal interpretation of Magritte's work by Luke, a nine-year-old. He wrote it alter
participating in a group discussion about paintings by Magritte that I facilitated with him and his classmates. "Magritte's mind is about things in common. He likes views out of a building or house. He likes perspectives. He likes to have round objects in his paintings. Optical illusions are another thing he puts in his art. He likes to make you think about his paintings. One piece of evidence of that are his titles. He does not give titles that really give any clues. Some of his art is a little fantasy, like in terms of how it looks. But most of his art looks realistic."

Luke's statement provides evidence of a communal interpretation. He synthesized the interpretation from insights and observations he gained from hearing his classmates talk about Magritte's paintings, as well as from his own insights and observations. As a teacher, I can see that Luke's communal interpretation is in line with scholarly communal interpretation. Luke and his nine-year-old peers have noted things in Magritte's work consistent with those features the Britannica scholar has noted. As a teacher, I am reassured that I am not leading the community of nine-year-old interpreters away from a broader and deeper communal understanding the art community holds about Magritte.

An interpretation that is wholly individual and personal runs the risk of being overly idiosyncratic or too personal. An interpretation that is too personal is one that does not shed any light on the object that is being interpreted. If one heard the interpretation and saw the object being interpreted, one would not be able to see relevant connections between the interpretation and the artwork. Such an overly personal interpretation may reveal a lot about how and what the interpreter thinks but it fails to reveal anything about the art object being interpreted. Thus, although Ricoeur upholds Gadamer's sense of appropriation—that to interpret an artwork is to make it one's own—Ricoeur adds the requirement that an artwork has an existence of its own, and it must be understood as well as appropriated. There are givens that come with a work of art that must not be ignored: it was made by someone in a time and place of a material in a structure and influenced by certain conventions, and so forth.

An interpretation that is wholly communal runs the risk of irrelevance to the individual interpreter. If the individual viewer receives an interpretation that has no bearing on his or her life, knowledge, and experience, it is not a meaningful interpretation for that viewer. No matter how accurate it may be, it ought not to count as an interpretation for that viewer at all.

Shared communal interpretations and individual personal interpretations are not mutually exclusive ideas. An interpretation that is both individual and communal is an understanding of a work of art that is personally meaningful to the interpreter and relevant to his or her life. It is also an interpretation that is meaningful to the community of interpreters who are interested in that work of art because it sheds light on the artwork.

Personal, individual interpretations can and should be informed by knowledge of the artwork from other persons and sources. In the literature, there are interpretive insights about the works of Kokoschka and Magritte. The artists themselves have writ-
ten and talked about their work, and art historians, curators, critics, and philosophers have provided us with interpretive insights into those works. Luke, for example, in his interpretation of Magritte’s paintings, touches upon the ambiguity of the paintings. Michel Foucault’s short book, *This Is Not a Pipe*, on Magritte’s painting of the same title, is largely about Magritte’s use of ambiguity. If I were a skilled enough teacher, I could help Luke and his fellow nine-year-olds broaden their thinking about Magritte by telling them about some of Foucault’s ideas about the same paintings they are looking at. Then the nine-year-olds would benefit from the larger community. Through this community, they have opportunities to expand and deepen their individual interpretations and understandings of art and life. If scholars could hear the nine-year-olds, perhaps they might think about things they had previously not considered.

**SOME INTERPRETATIONS ARE BETTER THAN OTHERS**

Many of the preceding principles clearly imply that *some interpretations are better than others*; this principle states so explicitly. If one were able to sit in on a studio critique in which students were discussing the artworks other students had made, or to overhear discussions in introductory aesthetics classes, one would likely hear beliefs something like the following from one or many of the students: whatever one says about a work of art is as good as what anyone else says; all responses to art are subjective; all subjects responding to art are equal in their abilities to respond to art; everyone has equal rights to their opinions; it is just talk about art, and all matters pertaining to art are subjective anyway. Stated another way, there is a belief in American society that whatever anyone says about art is as good as what anyone else says, because all matters of art are matters of opinion and we are all entitled to our opinions.

The principle I state here offsets what seems to be too common an acceptance of relativism, especially in American society, regarding what one can say about works of art. This principle and this book agree that many matters of art are matters of opinion but go on to assert that statements about works of art can be more than mere opinions, they can be *informed* opinions.

Some interpretations are better than other interpretations because they are more responsive to the emotional content in a work of art. Some interpretations are better than others because they are not limited to the intent of the artist in making the work; and some interpretations are better than others precisely because they take into account the artist’s intent. Some interpretations are better than others because they are more reasonable, more convincing, more informative, and more enlightening than others. Some interpretations are better grounded in art history; some are better informed by knowledge of the world at the time the work of art was made. Some interpretations are weaker than others because they are incoherent. Some interpretations do not correspond to what we can see and feel in the presence of the artwork that they seek to interpret. Some interpretations fail to see and account for important elements in the work they interpret.
Good interpretations are persuasive arguments that get us to see and understand a work of art in the way that the interpreter sees and understands it. Interpretations that are not persuasive are not effective. Interpretations that do not build understanding based on facts combined with compelling reasons are not good interpretive arguments. Some interpretations may contain the facts that pertain to the artwork but may not order them in a reasonable way, and thus they are not good interpretations, though they are factually accurate.

Some new interpretations make improvements over older interpretations. Gerys Gault provides a criterion by which we can judge the merits of new interpretations: "One criterion for a new interpretation being an improvement over others is that, on the proffered interpretation, one can see a work that before seemed boring, mundane and lacking in coherence as lively, profound and vital. The revelation of value counts toward the correctness of interpretation, for what was before fragmented and random now appears as a valuable whole whose coherence explains the structure of parts, the role of which previously seemed adventitious."56

Eco talks of "unsuccessful" interpretations: "Certain interpretations can be recognized as unsuccessful because they are like a mule, that is, they are unable to produce new interpretations or cannot be confronted with the traditions of the previous interpretations." Eco also makes a point of not automatically accepting all interpretations as if they were right: "When everybody is right, everybody is wrong and I have the right to disregard everybody's point of view."57

If one accepts the principle that interpretations are not so much right as they are more or less enlightening and so forth, then one would accept that some interpretations are better than others and perhaps that some interpretations are simply wrong. In addition to holding that some interpretations are better than others, this book makes the further claim that interpretations can simply be wrong. It is easy to imagine wrong interpretations, especially if an interpretation is based on false descriptions, for example. If a picture of the Mother of Jesus is described as and believed to be "dung splattered" or "dung smeared," then certain interpretations will likely follow. If, however, the picture is in fact not dung splattered or dung smeared, those interpretations that think it is are likely to be false. Or, for example, if a painting is mistakenly thought to be from one period of time but turns out to be from another, the original interpretation is likely to be wrong. To hold that no interpretation can be absolutely right and definitive and conclusive does not imply the belief that all interpretations are therefore equally meritorious or that there are no wrong interpretations.

THE ADMISSIBILITY OF AN INTERPRETATION IS ULTIMATELY DETERMINED BY A COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETERS AND THE COMMUNITY IS SELF-CORRECTING

This is an optimistic view of the art world and scholarship that holds that artists, critics, historians, and other serious interpreters will eventually correct less-than-
adequate interpretations and will eventually put forth better interpretations. This happens in the short run and in the long run. In the short run, interpretations might be very myopic. This principle asserts that eventually these narrow interpretations will be broadened. Essays in exhibition catalogues, for example, are often compilations by scholarly interpreters of the best thinking about an artist's work to that point in time. Such compilations put forth the most informative interpretations available at the time and omit less informative ones.

Recent interpretations of the paintings and illustrations of Norman Rockwell, reiterated in chapter three, provide a good example of this principle in action. Critics writing at the time that Rockwell was producing his work ignored it as not even worthy of interpretation. Recent critics, however, are reinterpreting the work and re-assessing it as very worthwhile. Because of re-examination and restoration of The Feast of the Gods, discussed in chapter five, we have a better understanding of the painting now than we did before the restoration work began. Because of John Berger's reinterpretation and critique of old paintings depicting women (chapter five), we go into the twenty-first century with a view of paintings that is very different from how they were understood in prior centuries when they were painted.

Berger's reinterpretation of old paintings of women is his individual interpretation, and it is a new interpretation, but it is informed and influenced by the thinking of others within the interpretive community. His reinterpretation, in turn, informs and influences others within the interpretive community, and those individuals, in turn will further or confront Berger's ideas. In both the long and the short run, a community of interpreters, composed of individuals, sorts out what it holds to be true at any given point in time. There will likely always be dissenting interpretations, and this is good, because these dissenting views may influence the majority view and may be cause to better it. Interpretation and the validation of interpretations is an ongoing process within the interpretive community of all those individuals who actively care about art: artists, critics, historians, collectors, curators, conservators, art publishers and readers, art students and professors, and museum-goers.

**GOOD INTERPRETATIONS INVITE US TO SEE FOR OURSELVES AND CONTINUE ON OUR OWN**

In general, good interpretations lead us to better experiences of works of art than we would have had without those interpretations. In the words of aesthetician Marcia Eaton, good interpretations usually "bring us to see things we would have missed if left on our own." She goes on to say that interpreters invite us to look at things and "provoke us to continue on our own to view the work." This book, throughout, accepts the premise that multiple interpretations of works of art are more desirable than single interpretations. This book, throughout, encourages its readers to continue to build their own interpretations of works of art, interpretations that both make sense in themselves and have meaning for those building the interpretations.
Some interpretations, however, discourage further interpretations. Barzman identifies some interpretations that seek to close interpretive discussions rather than further them. She refers to some of these interpretations as "master readings" that in their manner of interpreting assert their own correctness or truthfulness with a sense of absoluteness. Such interpretations have "a dependence on so much erudition that the reader is disarmed and even daunted at the moment of reception, a moment in which asymmetrical power relations between writer and reader are at least implicitly affirmed." Such interpretations position the viewer asymmetrically, as a passive recipient of fixed meaning, namely, the interpreter's. Such interpretations harmfully deny the plurality of interpreters and suffocate thought. "They presume to read authoritatively for their audiences, universalizing their own situated perceptions, fixing meaning with the stamp of finality, and thus rhetorically denying their readers the possibility of intervening interpretations themselves." In agreement with Barzman, this book wants to "refuse finality in the fixing of meaning." Barzman and this book ask readers not to accept with finality the interpretations already given here and elsewhere but, rather, to engage critically and to produce interpretations of their own. In Barzman's words, "We produce meaning—we produce meaning—and the meaning we produce is partial, contingent, and cannot be universalized."