

# Inside the Aesthetics of Attentiveness

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## **ABSTRACT**

Why do we need an awareness of aesthetics in our educational quests?  
What benefits and values flow from a knowledge of Aesthetics and are cultivated by the practice and teaching of art at the tertiary level?

As I understand it, Aesthetics constitutes a waking-up. Told from the vantage point of a maker and professor of art, I explore the extraordinary power of aesthetics to stop an onrushing momentum of preconception, to interrupt, change, clarify and inspire. What gives aesthetics this power, I suggest, is a necessary subjective cultivation of attentiveness, a perceptual suspension within a place of unknowing, complementing and completing reasoning. Through drawing practices and Kant, I explore interior and exterior movements of attentiveness, coming to the Aesthetics of Attentiveness as a means for grounding moral acting, changing, inspiring and waking up lives. Oh yes, and making art.

# 1: INSIDE AESTHETICS

I am a maker and professor of art stepping into a river of aesthetics texts. Reading for resonances with my experiences of making, exhibiting and teaching visual art at the tertiary level these past 20 years, I find my *interior practitioner* vantage point uncommon, the bulk of these canonical aesthetic texts reflecting an *exterior* and necessarily distanced perspective offered by art historian and philosopher, both viewers of the product of makers. My experience and expertise lay in the intimate, vulnerable, and not always pleasurable (but occasionally ecstatic) processes of making art, and in the transmission, initiation, and mentoring of young artists into this process. Thus this effort's primary aim is to discover what this internal and active engagement with aesthetics can offer the academic task and to inquire into the crossroads between aesthetics and education. In exploring the "in-side" of aesthetics I welcome streams of insight from a wide network of disciplinary perspectives, confident that each watery trajectory uniquely contributes to understanding the ocean that constitutes visual arts often wordless, but vital, contribution to life.

## 2: AESTHETICS

### 2.1 Aesthetics and Kant's Map of the Mind

Derived from the Greek *aesthesis*, *aisthesthai* and *aesthonomai*, aesthetics is rooted in sense-perceptions, our ordinary feelings and spontaneous reactions from birth on, as Colin Lyas describes it, to nature and created things (C. Lyas, 1997a). Although initially conceived of by Baumgarten (1714-1762) as a science of knowing by means of the senses

equal to logical knowledge he argued (Chaplin, 2005), it is Kant's *The Critique of Judgement*, that remains the canonical text, the cornerstone upon which subsequent aesthetics are built or against which they react. Kant locates sense perception within the subjective human mind, and analyzes the mind's capacity to synthesize the overwhelming and mystifying welter of data bombarding one at any given time into a unity. For Kant, aesthetic judgements constitute states of mind, are prior to concepts and practical formulations, and although they require subjectivity to be firmly intact, they are particular, disinterested, while also being universal. Pure intuition is the direct encounter of a sentient being with the world, and along with feelings arising from this encounter and sense-perceptions, constitute the raw phenomena that are experienced. These are given. Presented affectively they create the conditions, the structure of mind, necessary for thought and action. Kant grounds aesthetics in subjective consciousness (Bowie, 2003) not in something outside one's internal self. Delineating this interior territory, Kant's map of the mind provides a structure and language perfectly suited to describe the experience of making art from the inside, and for the investigation of attentiveness, what I am proposing as the Aesthetics of Attentiveness.

### **3: AESTHETICS OF ATTENTIVENESS**

#### **3.1 Seeing and Drawing**

“When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw “the tree with lights in it.” It was for this tree that I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard

cedar where the morning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I am still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colours died, the cells un-flamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in space through the crack, and the mountains slam.”(Dillard, 1974)

Every semester I read sections of Annie Dillard’s *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to my drawing students. Her chapter entitled “Seeing” is simply a masterpiece that tracks the drawing curriculum in an uncanny way. It also illustrates eloquently a mindful capacity delineated by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*. She sets up the chapter by describing Marius Von Senden's *Space and Sight*, his chronicle of the post-operative insights of the first recipients of cataract operations. He recorded their perceptions meticulously, as well as their struggles, fears, horrors and insights. The effort required of these newly sighted people is equal although opposite to the struggles of those in my class who are newly acquiring drawing skills. The newly sighted see, although everything is a meaningless jumble; those who want to draw, struggle to see the world again in this way. Form unhinged, at least in part and for brief intervals, from meaning, is what is necessary in order to see visual form clearly enough to be able to draw. Dillard’s eloquent description of seeing negative spaces (literally the spaces between the branches and leaves of the tree through which light shines, recognisable by any first year drawing student) come to life, we also recognise from Kant’s criteria of judgement, an experience of sense-perception, affect, disinterestedness, immediacy, final form, form unity, and universality that is non-conceptual in nature. The disciplined way of looking that learning drawing skills cultivates entails suspending one’s perception for ever longer periods of time, cultivating

focus and attentiveness, resisting names, words, readymade forms, and the stereotypes that curtail looking. Failing to do so will instantly end this generative search. Perceptual abilities can be stretched just as reason can be honed. And in the suspension into the intense attentiveness of this wordless task, the ones drawing find themselves also unaware of time, entering the ecstatic territory of flow described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) Sometimes we are given glimpses of extraordinary sight.

### **3.2 Aesthetics, the Sublime and Unknowing**

Dillard's passage evokes what Kant called the Sublime, an experience of the internal world described in the Critique of Judgement that goes beyond sense experiences. Still "found in the mind...the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense ... (Kant, 1790 anthologized in Ross, 1994, pp.117) Kant locates the sublime within the Critique of Judgement understanding it, along with beauty, to be separate from concepts and reason (S. Richmond, 2004, pp.80). Not containable or 'generate-able' by words, concepts or reason, and explicitly not connected to knowledge, this is then, a place of *unknowing*. Especially for the artist this is a generative place. This kind of seeing is often the result of long looking, here we think of Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour skill mastery (Gladwell, 2008), although when it arrives it is always a surprise. Contrasting deep seeing with ordinary sight, Annie Dillard observes:

"But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I stand transfixed and emptied," says Dillard. "When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses...The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and

monks of every order East and West, under every rule and no rule, discalced and shod...The secret of seeing is, then the pearl of great price.” (Dillard, 1974)

Adept at cultivating this way of ‘deep seeing’ are the religious communities William James (1842-1910) draws from in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. “Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians all have cultivated it methodically”(James, 1902). Ancient technologies of the soul are cultivated in many traditions to extend interior perception, each using different labels to spark similar insights: Jewish *kabala*, Islamic *Sufi*, Hindu *Samadhi*, Buddhists *dhyana*, Taoist *Tao Te Ch’ing*, Christian contemplative *via negativa* and *apophatic way*. When Tibetan monks were told of James belief that focussed attention cannot be extended beyond a few minutes they laughed and laughed. Rudolf Otto calls it the *mysterium tremendum* (Otto, 1958) and Dorothee Soelle calls it “a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality.”(Soelle, D. 2001) and invests it with power the to cut through discourses of irony. Technicalities aside, I observe that all these interior subjective practices share common territory with drawing and Kant’s Critique of Judgement in their concerns with delineating mindful sensory perception, focussed attentiveness, immersion in unknowing silence, and arrival into a timeless state. Also in their accounting for what empiricism and rationalism cannot.

### **3.3 Aesthetics vs. Anaesthetic**

Despite aesthetics rich history and complex ontological implications, it is often reduced, dismissively, to feelings. And feelings have a long history of dismissal. From the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> C contemporary art world’s high-powered biennales, prestigious prizes, high stakes auctions, curators, critics and collectors, connecting art with feelings

might be viewed as simplistic. However the Greek *Aesthetics*, besides referring to perception, also refers to feelings, sharing the same etymological root word with anaesthetic- “not feeling”(Townsend, 2001) or being put to sleep. Affect is certainly part of the *apriori* conditions of the mind Kant considers in the Critique of Judgement that ground reason and practical judgements. Perhaps then, the most productive way of defining aesthetics and its decidedly not ‘simplistic’ effects (illuminating at the same time what the buzz is about in the contemporary art world) is to say that aesthetics at its core, to feel fully, to be woken up.

### 3.4 The Stop

But what is it about aesthetics that can wake us up? What might enable aesthetics to stop, disrupt, rearrange, clarify, change or inspire? According to David Appelbaum in order to learn or teach anything, what has previously been, needs to be stopped. The Stop, as he calls it, is an indispensable reality in order to bring something new into being, but is precisely what is most often marginalized, dismissed, rejected, cast aside. Appelbaum explains, “the momentum of habit and preconception makes observation difficult...[the stop] breaks an onrushing momentum and opens experience to another point of view. (D. Appelbaum, 1995a, pp.ix)

*Last August I was stopped. Completely, utterly, and almost ultimately, from a headlong rush into deadlines, art projects and writing, I was stopped. For twenty-five years I have been making art and mentoring young people into their strengths as artists; productivity, deadlines, openings, syllabi, curriculum, critiques, and the academic calendar ruled my life. I loved it, but I was stopped.*

*After spending my whole life honing my perception you would think that I would have seen it coming. You would think I could have figured it out earlier- my image making being about embodiment all these many years. I blithely ignored bodily signs forcing myself to attend to an exterior drumbeat. But it was evident in my art making, in almost every image. Looking back at this body of work now, the images frighten me in their prescience. What I had no*

*clue about was staring me in the face. The momentum of habit, like a thick skin, had indeed made perception difficult, obscured the truth of my situation and had to be stopped. In truth I did not know what I was painting.*

*Now I feel like I am waking up. I feel peeled, raw and tender. Everything looks different now. I feel real now.*

Sometimes artists get stuck. Then, drastic means are necessary to coax, cajole or shock-out of ones visual forays (even if these investigations feel like big accomplishments) and into what is waiting to be born. *The Stop* is an aesthetic tool, and it is potent enough to break into these received conceptions and practices (momentums of habit that prevent perception), and wake us up.

### **3.4.1 Drawing and Courage**

Paying attention is difficult. Learning drawing skills, suspending and prolonging perception by keeping at bay closure by stereotypic symbols, is a start. Received formulas, no matter how reasonable or culturally current, need to be checked against experience lest they lead us astray. Every instructor looks for those teachable moments where a student can glimpse how wide the horizons are and see potential for their own work. Matisse said that it takes something very much like courage to see through the stereotypic images that “are to the eye what prejudices are to the brain”(Flam, 1973), and the bulk of the drawing curriculum is designed to help students recognize and stop predictable regurgitation of received images and to visually wake up.

## **3.5 Perception and Unknowing**

For Appelbaum, once one has been stopped, perception must be exerted in order to find a halting but authentic path forward into the unknown. “Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs

to neither one nor the other.”(D. Appelbaum, 1995b, pg 15) The aesthetic space of unknowing, requiring extended perceptual attention is what Appelbaum calls the stop. Here is arrest, unexpected choice and risk (Fels, 1999, pg10). Blindly groping one’s way into ‘the unfamiliar’ is a place of displacement, liminality and fecundity. It is a fearful place. And given arts non-rule governed nature, it is also the only way to make art.

### **3.5.1 No Rules the Gap and Expression**

As Kant rightly points out there are no rules to guide you. There is much to learn but there are no rules. Making something where there was nothing before can be terrifying, and exhilarating. To be held lightly, ‘rules’ are only to be understood as guidelines (S. Richmond, 2009, pg. 101). Mountains of guidance, suggestions, examples, formula, theories, and discourses exist-and there is much that is mandatory to learn, but in the end something must be made through your subjective self that *expresses*, that is an analogous form for something you are only inchoately aware of. Kant called the ability to give the rule to art genius; most artists call it terror, gap, lacuna, and ‘the only game in town’. Interstitial extended interior listening, long looking, is what is required; acknowledging uncertainty and risk (S. Richmond, 2009, pg. 98); humbly attending to this interior place out of which something will be born, something that, as of yet, has no shape or name or form. Suspend, extend the unknowing. Trust the “paradoxical vexed space between ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’.” (Szabo referring to T. Merton). Seek resonance with some unnameable yearning sense; embody and make manifest through formal means (S. Richmond, 2004, pg. 97); trust intuition, knowing at the same time that there are no innocent marks. Every mark, form and way of working sparks discourse and precedent- carries with it history and theory, carries meaning encoded with every choice

that complicates and makes clear ones expression. “Freefall into interstices between the real and the not yet real worlds where absence (the not yet known) becomes present.”(Fels, 1999) *Balance on the brink of the precipice called perception, gather into your sails affect, intuition, and discourse, and then, launch into the deep.*

### 3.6 Affliction, Beauty and the Body

*Hands reach up, jump, arc and plunge. Cool water startles... push and kick; inhale... then comforts, as it rushes past my face. Stroke, pull, kick, kick, kick, and slow exhale. Anxiety slackens. Gravity bound body responds. Buoyant and relaxed, I settle into a rhythm. Kick, kick, kick, stroke, pull, and breathe. Enjoying the pace, the blue green water and blurred edges of underwater forms, sunlit dazzled surface falls away. Kick, kick, kick, stroke, and breathe. Rhythm is marked by not counting laps. If I count laps the time is almost wasted. If I count laps I remain locked in mundane ordinary analytical time. When the rhythm takes over and I am no longer conscious of each stroke, kick, breath, each push off the wall, the repeated movement takes me elsewhere...stroke, pull, breathe, kick, kick...to a blessed unselfconsciousness where awareness of time melts away, thoughts connect and recognitions arise. I hear a voice saying ‘pay attention’.*

Simone Weil identifies the duo powers of affliction and beauty when she says: “There are only two things piercing enough to penetrate our souls in this way; they are beauty and affliction.”(S. Weil, 1977b, pg. 467) She believed them to be the most potent forces available with which life educates the heart. She would count them as likely candidates to cut through the thick skin of presumption, the onrushing momentum of habit, focus attention and to account for the power of aesthetics. She remarks on the connected role of the body “Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates our soul. Through suffering it penetrates our body. We could no more become a ship’s captain by joy alone than one becomes a ship’s captain by studying books on navigation. The body plays a part in all apprenticeships.”(S. Weil, 1977b, pg. 450) For Weil, these affective conditions and experiences are inextricably linked with the body. Interiority is not a negation of the body but a profound affirmation. Richard Shusterman observes that for

all the focus on sense perception within Baumgarten and Kant's aesthetics, it is seen as a function of the mind, therefore ignoring the body; he fills this lack by conceptualizing Somathetics. (Shusterman, 2006)

“We humanist intellectuals generally take the body for granted because we are so passionately interested in the life of the mind and the creative arts that express the human spirit. But the body is not only an essential dimension of our humanity, it is also the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought... We need to think more carefully through the body in order to cultivate ourselves and edify our students because true humanity is not a mere genetic given but an educational achievement in which body, mind, and culture must be thoroughly integrated.” (Shusterman, 2006, pg. 2)

All we ‘know’ is mediated through the body. This is not solipsism but simply recognition that the body is all we have. Thought is not separable from brain, nerve endings, synapse, or dendrites, all are part of the body having material existence, and enabling thought. Shusterman draws on Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty whose investigations started with envisioning a ‘science of experience’ rooted in lived, felt, immediacy. Merleau-Ponty radicalized Husserl’s beginnings and locates the living, breathing, attentive body itself as being the subject of perceptual experience, and describes science as a second-order expression of one’s basic experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.viii). When I swim, immerse and move my material body, my material brain functions better; synapses fire and serotonin is produced (a decidedly bodily event); connections are realized; cognitive discoveries made. Conversely, a sleepless night renders my brain and body foggy, awkward and sluggish; a good idea would not materialize due to my very subjective bodily state. Science can easily and systematically explain these phenomena that are first and foremost my experiences. Further, the body is seen not as a set of predetermined mechanisms but as an active, open system constantly adjusting and readjusting in relation to experiences- receptively and

reciprocally. Things are described in the active voice and a sympathetic relation exists between perceiver and perceived- requiring participation with things, entailing synaesthesia, a fusion of all the senses.

The articulation of this sympathetic relation between the perceiver and perceived, with an attendant heightening of awareness and subjective response, is important since it seems identical to the lived experiences of students even early on in learning drawing practices. Key to honing one's visual capacities in the studio is heightening one's embodied subjective awareness; learning to attend to what is expressed by each mark; watching for the embodied telltale signs of being deeply engaged with the drawing process, one of the most potent of which is an altered experience with time itself. It would seem then that the body plays a part in the Aesthetics of Attentiveness.

### **3.7 Catalytic Knowing**

*The water was colder than expected.  
It startled, but not like the nearly  
frozen northern West coast normal.  
So transparent, aqua green cut blue glass  
glowing light, beneath dark grey sky.*

*Just like in my dream. Phosphorescent  
blue green waves. But I was pulling weeds on a  
dry prairie plane, ignoring gods dancing, laughing, in the waves  
till they, in exasperation, threw difficulty my way.*

*Unwelcome diversion, I threw it back.  
Furious.*

*Chastened now, I enter the waves  
timid, always having been afraid of the ocean.  
Preferring, loving even, swimming within the safe borders  
of a pool. Cold at first step but warming imperceptively as waves  
flow over already wet skin. Green and blue, gathering and releasing,  
surprisingly strong pull back.  
I am a little tentative, making acquaintances*

slowly, feeling the surge, the sound, the burning air.  
Gradually water warms, dissolves anxiety, relaxes, then unexpected seventh  
surge knocks me breathless, off my feet.

Laughing, sent back in mind and time,  
to Krydor Saskatchewan and Redberry Lake: the anomaly  
of a salt-water body in the middle of northern prairie heat. Running to the  
water, breathless, laughing running barefoot, screaming delight in  
sand and gulls and waves. Burning sun overhead.

This time, with my own children,  
laughing at my awkwardness, bowled over.  
Letting go to water, leaning back, buoyed  
up and over each salty surging swell.  
How scary these surges felt while standing.  
Surprising how, once knocked over,  
how supportive, gentle, they feel.  
How grateful I am to discover  
leaning back, how effortlessly  
the water holds me.

Sitting at the water's edge I  
let the waves break over me.  
Lying back, my body imprints in sand,  
weight released. Hot sun on shoulders warming  
flesh chilled from a long, cold, rainy, distant winter.<sup>1</sup>

In stark contrast to a longstanding dismissal of affect, Martha Nussbaum accounts for the power of certain affects to right reason in her essay *Love's Knowledge*. In it she reverses the usual story of the way things work, explaining how the shock of pain can produce powerful instantaneous realizations of the truth of a situation, pointing out that reason can construct false façades. She describes this as *cataleptic knowing* (Nussbaum, 1990, pp.261-285), and through Aristotle locates the emotions and imagination as vital means of rationality (Nussbaum, 1990). Here is prime Critique of Judgement territory and Kant

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<sup>1</sup> The visual form of this poem echoes the ripples of water on the surface of the ocean by the one space indentation on every other line. The ends of the lines create wave shapes that increase in size. There are seven stanzas, mirroring the pattern of seven waves, each increasing in size.

might identify the free play of the imagination as the conduit between sensory-perceptual feelings and rationality and would approve of the instantaneous immediacy of its arrival. For Descartes too, opinions of weight are extracted by reason and objective tools, but also through the aesthetic tools of subjectivity and imagination.

*“It might seem strange that opinions of weight are found in the works of poets rather than philosophers. The reason is that poets wrote through enthusiasm and imagination; there are in us seeds of knowledge, as of fire in a flint; philosophers extract them by way of reason, but poets strike them out of imagination, and then they shine more bright.” (Descartes as quoted by Appelbaum, 1995, frontispiece)*

In my poem about swimming in the ocean, the dream predicts the stop, ‘difficulty being thrown my way’. The unexpected seventh surge that knocks me off my feet is a metaphor for this unwelcome difficulty; sometimes aesthetics can knock us off our feet, inviting us to pay attention and see more clearly; this is Weil's affliction as well as Nussbaum's catalytic knowing.

### **3.8 Kant's Imagination**

As Lyas interprets Kant “the organization of random stimuli into perceived objects is the work of the *imagination* and the production of conceptual categorizations of those objects is the work of the *understanding*”. (C. Lyas, 1997b, pg. 25) Imagination is the conduit between the intuitive sensory realm and the intellectual realm of reason, engaging in free play between them. “Spirit, in an aesthetical sense...is what puts the mental powers purposely into swing, i.e. into such a play as maintains itself and strengthens the mental powers in their exercise...[these] representations of the imagination which occasion much thought...cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language.”(Kant, 1790, pg.132) In some understandings of Kant's project

the imagination (and by extension art) is called on to heal the split between mind and matter and reunify human personality. (Townsend, 2001)

### **3.8.1 Kant's Whole Map of the Mind**

As any art student will tell you that there is a lot more to making art than valuing affect and honing ones sensory perceptual abilities (although it does start there and does effect the rest of the process). This reality is acknowledged in the latter part of the Critique of Judgement. “For in every art some purpose must be conceived...otherwise it would be a mere product of chance.... [art] requires talent cultivated in the schools, in order to make such a use of this material as will stand examination by the judgement.”(Kant, 1790, pg.130) Ted Cohen points out that Kant is primarily referring to nature early in the critique, but increasingly he “devotes more attention to the delicate balance between feeling and the conceptual order of understanding and reason in the case of art.”(Cohen & Guyer, 1982, pg.6) connecting sense, imagination and reason in a free play. Art making requires reason, fluency with theoretical, critical and creative concepts, 10,000 hours of skill mastery, a command of formal and imaginative concepts, familiarity with interior, divergent and linear thinking skills, creative synergy of intellect and mindful focus, proficiency with technical, perceptual and conceptual processes, subjective and social self awareness, wakeful and alert responsiveness, and most importantly, courage to face the blank wall or studio space. Graeme Sullivan offers many visual frameworks with which he theorizes the complexities of art practices in *Art Practice as Research Inquiry in the Visual Arts*. He theorizes visual art as research both practise-based and transformative. In identifying Visual Knowing he discusses visual cognition: thinking in a medium, in a language and in a context, as transcognitive and

critical. Regarding practice as theory he unpacks visual research as experience, exercise, encounter and enactment. (Sullivan, 2005) Although art making is first of all about attentiveness, cultivating this vision is not all that is required of the artist. Art occurs out of “ a web of culturally mediated affective encounters with the world”(Chaplin, 2005). While it is definitively not science, welcoming what is indefinable while paradoxically adopting many of its methods, it is an imaginative translation of the encounter of the conscious being with their environment into an intelligible form. Art expresses. In order to do this, art making practices require a full orbed familiarity with Kant’s entire map of the mind necessitating cognitive and practical knowledge along with aesthetic knowledge to translate perceptual experiences of unknowing into expression.

Artists create in these contested spaces between sense-perception, imagination and reason; enthusiasm, dream, and disaster; beauty and affliction; affect, intuition, and intellect; wordless, timeless, experiences of unknowing and those ‘known’ through our embodied existence. Each are powerful aesthetic tools; most sites of marginalized, denied, subjective data and ought not to be dismissed, carrying the potential to stop onrushing momentums and wake us up.

### **3.9 Attentiveness**

*“pay attention”*

At the heart of all these vehicles of the Stop is the presence of attentiveness, key to the many ways of breaking through the thick skin of momentum, and the foundation of the Aesthetics of Attentiveness. Within attentiveness Weil found what she considered to be the real reason for studying anything.

“Attention consists of suspending our thoughts, leaving it detached, empty and ready... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything but ready to receive... All wrong translations, all absurdity in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and faulty connection of ideas...all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to truth” (S. Weil, 1959, pg. 56)

“This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself ” (S. Weil, 1977a, pg. 44-52)

### **3.9.1 Recent Scholarship**

And given the flood of recent scholarship and conferences on attentiveness, or mindfulness as it is sometimes called, it seems many people share Weil's view. Rapt Attention and the Focused Mind by Winifred Gallagher (Gallagher, 2009), The Mindful Brain by Daniel Siegel, the Roots of Empathy Program designed by Mary Gordon, PATHS curriculum by Mark Greenberg, Flow The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), The Monk and the Philosopher by Matthieu Ricard explore different aspects of attentiveness from a surprisingly diverse range of disciplinary vantage points. When Michael Foucault asked himself what was the price of reason, he contemplated just these internal practices in *Technologies of the Self*, his hermeneutics of the self, developed by asking how humans develop knowledge about themselves (Foucault, 1988) 17. The Dalai Lama Centre for Peace and Education Conferences in 2006 and 2009, brought together experts in science, psychotherapy, the arts, business and education with Noble Prize winners in Peace and Physics, a “spiritual dream team”, according to the organizer Victor Chan, to explore how individuals and nations can benefit from the state of mind described as ‘paying attention’ to the world without distraction. The research is scientifically validated and the experts agree-it seems cultivating attentiveness is the key to success, happiness, identity, personal and world

peace and that we are hardwired to need this kind of practice in our lives in order to thrive. It is indeed the pearl of great price.

### **3.10 Self-Forgetful Attentiveness**

When students learn to draw they learn to focus their attention experiencing an intense attentiveness that results in self-forgetfulness. Unselfconsciousness is the experience of all those who master this discipline. Polanyi's notion of indwelling the tool (Polanyi, 1964) 59 is a helpful concept in understanding this process from the inside. Those who draw all recognize the moment the drawing tool is indwelt, the awareness of the self recedes, one become unselfconscious, and one draws usually at a level of expertise not possible before this level of attentiveness is achieved. The same happens with sight. When sight is indwelt the linear awareness of time melts away; awareness of the self recedes and the student's drawings reach a new level of clarity and insightfulness. When one is unselfconscious, the self, with its multiple, complex grids of gender, sexuality, culture, etc., fall away. The "other" is attended to, with less of the visual prejudice that comes from living in this visually bombarded culture. When sight is indwelt and the awareness of self loosens its grip, what becomes possible is recognizing, in every person, the 'givenness' of the body ("The body is the most palpable sign we have of the givenness of human existence." (Eagleton, 2003, pg.166)), that everyone is in fact amazingly made, and is beautiful, not just those who happen to fit the media profile of the month. One draws not because one can see but in order to see. Betty Edwards recounts in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* how a student remarked to her after a semester of drawing, "Now everyone looks beautiful". (Edwards, 1979, pg. 5) Drawing is a visual way of de-reifying the eyesight, cutting through the visual prejudice created by

the flood of images designed by consumerist global multinationals to create desire, but which distort what it means to be human.

### 3.11 Murdoch and Unselfing

Iris Murdoch sees this as the first step towards making moral choices. She sees the ‘deep seeing’ cultivated in art as a means of dislodging the “anxious and avaricious tentacles of the self.”(S. Richmond, 2004, pg. 81) She contrasts solipsism- the self preoccupation of living in a self aggrandizing fantasy world, with the outward direction of attention ‘away from self’(Murdoch, 1970, pg. 59) Focusing ones attentions outward is an occasion for ‘unselfing’ (S. Richmond, 2004, pg. 83).

*“This is not easy and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need”* (Murdoch, 1970, pg. 59)

Not only can art provide an analogy but it also provides a methodology, an experience of dislodging the self from the drivers seat. And once someone has experienced it in the context of drawing, then hope exists that they can apply it in other situations until it becomes habitual. Murdoch says, “that our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention.”(Murdoch, 1970, pg. 56) Murdoch concedes that art can participate in the consolation of fantasy, but it can also “silence and expel self...to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye...is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real.”(Murdoch, 1970, pgs. 64, 65) Murdoch is influenced by Weil’s discussion of attentiveness in her discussion of “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the

self.”(S. Weil, 1977a, pg. 442). Leading to, Murdoch suggests, love. Heesoon Bai comes to similar conclusions calling on arts potential for ‘deep seeing’ to address moral blindness. Radically dissolving barriers between subject and object is the key to Buddhist and Zen dismantling of ego consciousness and providing the link between art and morality. She sees in art-making potential to cultivate an empathetic moral imagination; with Schusterman she looks to the aestheticization of ethics, and with Wittgenstein, suggests that ethics and aesthetics are one. (Bai, 1997)

### **3.12 Interior and Exterior Scrutiny**

*After the heart attack  
I spent days following light  
patches through the house.*

*Front room- slanting arrival. Up  
stairs, angled shaft traces a trajectory.  
Illumines front (following floors, up walls,  
over ceilings) to back, this hollow shell.  
Its slow gentle slanting pace  
fills, makes ready.*

*No sooner am I settled, soaking in its  
wordless warmth, then it is gone.  
Continuing its inexorable scrutiny, filling  
shifted-foundation plaster cracks  
with golden light.*

*Towards days end, cloistered upstairs room  
is lit. Raking rays make visible  
careless detritus of the day.*

*Outside now, craning neck follows  
tree filtered last light.*

Both inner and outer movements of attentiveness are necessary. Gao Xingjian calls it loneliness, and identifies this double movement as a form of aesthetics. “While observing one’s external environment, one is at the same time examining the self that is located within it, and to a certain extent this is an affirmation of one’s own personal worth.” (Xingjian, 2006) 164 To avoid the ‘tangled mess’ of devolving into solipsism, that stinking mess of self-regard, self-scrutiny is vital. One needs to linger in loneliness to scrutinize both the self and the world. Without the scrutiny of loneliness, identity is incomplete, leaving one to parrot, consume and regurgitate, not create. Loneliness is essential to growing up and is prerequisite for freedom. Requiring the ability to reflect, and “reflection can only be done when one is alone.”(Xingjian, 2006, pg.165) Enmeshment with readymade forms, ideologies, fashions, and propaganda encourages one to pour oneself into a familiar mould rather than realizing one’s own shape and form. Identity is a matter of being comfortable with loneliness and cannot be created while looking outside of oneself for affirmation. It is being honest. Authenticity is realized through ones own voice not parroting an others. For Gao literature (and by extension visual art) is simply focusing ones gaze on ones self until a “consciousness that sheds light on this self begins to emerge. ... giving concrete form to perceptions.” (Xingjian, 2006, pg. 44) Most importantly art is a form of expression that is best made from the margins; art is a small honest gesture, a humble inconspicuous stance taken by an individual.

## 4: ENACTING THE AESTHETICS OF ATTENTIVENESS

### 4.1 Wide-Awakeness

Scrutinizing interior and exterior worlds is a matter of long attention (10,000 hours as they say) and one must resist the temptation to jump prematurely into categories and ‘knowing’. Art is a form of ‘knowing’ precisely in its embrace of ‘not knowing’, and it is from extending this perceptual gap that art draws its power. Whether one calls it loneliness, silence, unknowing, the gap or the stop, there is something here worth waiting for. Out of the silence, as Maxine Greene makes clear, comes a ‘wide-awakeness’, resulting from, and here she quotes Alfred Schutz, “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude full of attention to life and its requirements.” And continues, “This attitude, this *interest* in things, is the direct opposite of the attitude of bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time.”(Greene, 1978, pg. 42) This impulse to live with one’s eyes open is prerequisite to creating identity and leads to seeing possibilities and taking responsibility. Moral choosing involves action as well as thought and cannot happen without being wide-awake.

### 4.2 Natality

Out of the stop, this long extension into silence, something is woken up and brought to birth. Wide-awakeness is enacted in material matter, sound waves, installation space, educational spaces, and in ones life. Central to Lynn Fels Performative theory is that art is realized in the midst of enacting it. It emerges out of trusting the process itself (Fels, 1999). Gleaned from this visceral experiential ‘unknowing’ is a space of fecundity. *Do not stay in silence. Reject muteness. Move forward.* Realizations occur, ‘knowing’

comes in a flash of recognition, and something new is welcomed. A forward momentum is always generated by realizations. We have no words worth speaking until they are called out of us with a flash of recognition. *“Somewhere deep in me it is snowing.... I can't hear the words, I am old and tired now,”* (Colebrook Peace, 2008) But with recognition comes reenergized (coming back to) life. We are, as Stuart Richmond points out using a quote from Spazianis poetry, “sensual aesthetic creatures who respond to light, colour, shape, rhythm, movement, ...[art can be] care for the spirit, *children die because the world knows nothing of poetry.*” (S. Richmond, 2009, pg.101)

Hannah Arendt calls natality “the essence of education”(Arendt, 2006, pg.174) Human beings are always being born into the world, newcomers to education are not fully formed, being themselves in a process of becoming, and they are being introduced to a world that is itself in a similar process of change. Sir Ken Robinson points out in his TedTalk lecture that we educate people as if we knew what the world was going to be like in fifty years. The trick is to welcome the new without controlling its form, lest we destroy its very newness. Midwife the new by enacting educational achievements in which body, mind, and culture are thoroughly integrated; welcome new recognitions from within a solid foundation that make space for new formulations. To fail in this task, whether institutionally or for one's self is to invite sickness, leading to what Arendt called in 1952, a crisis in education (Arendt, 2006). Sickness occurs when the past is presented as a straightjacket, crippling the emerging form. Similarly disfiguring is the Dionysian fallacy that violence and chaos are a necessary part of creativity (Nietzsche, 1967), enacting unscrutinized false freedom whose birth is still born. With Thomas Merton and Kant I find within aesthetic experience, a more humble means accessed through attention,

silence and unknowing rather than violence, something that transcends the sensible order (in which however it has a beginning) that is key to living with one's eyes wide opened and in enacting the new- what I call the aesthetics of attentiveness.

## 5: CONCLUDING GESTATIONS

Why do we need an awareness of aesthetics in our educational quests? Within aesthetics lies a marginalized but potent capacity to break through the thick skin of preconceived notions, the onrushing momentum of stereotype, from within a solid ground of foundations, to create space for the new. Within the interior states of mind articulated by aesthetics and honed with art making practices, is found the potential for cultivating attentive mindful focus, life-giving habits of mind increasingly seen as practices vital to thriving, not only on personal but societal and global levels. Cultivating proficiency and comfort in inhabiting these interior states is the first step in making art, and some suggest, in making moral choices. Within art making practices at the tertiary level is found a methodology for developing attentiveness, extending perceptual skills, honing focus, trusting unknowing, connecting and completing reason, and launching into the suspended liminal spaces where something new can be born. What could be more important?

*It was a year before I could make art again, 8 months before I could write. I stubbornly tried, insisting I was ready. But silence kept calling me back. I ordered and organized my space, built panels, prepared surfaces, collected skins, pondered potent signs, journaled endless hints, read non-stop, bought video camera and computer programs, ordered steel and smelled wax; gathering, dancing and inquiring into an excruciating unknown. A deadline, that familiar launch into enacting, called the first piece out. "Approach your second paper as a blank slate, she said, better yet a blank canvas" and when she saw it, her response was first visceral then reasoned. Inside aesthetics conversation sparked, connections flowed, and realizations startled.*

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