

For the Love of Aesthetic Puzzles

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Aesthetic Puzzles are a form of exploration that requires critical thinking, reasoning, and skills of observation and analysis. The exploration begins with an analysis of the facts and options of the cases while investigating the background and events that led to the controversy. Students can learn how to discuss controversial issues regarding works of art through a respectful and open classroom discussion. Controversial works of art can be discussed when all voices are given an equal say when no one opinion is favored. A case-driven approach, within the classroom, begins with a specific problem or puzzle that evokes a rejection or challenge of notions about art and/or its role in society. Battin, Fisher, Moore, and Silvers (1989) write, “When we say that something is art or a work of art, do we mean to say at the same time that it should be understood or appreciated in a certain way, or taken seriously in a particular fashion?” (p. 2).

Students should learn how to discuss controversial issues inspired and regarding works of art because art is a mirror of life. This discussion of controversy can inspire new perspectives and ideas that would not have been realized without the novelty of limited exposure or experience with the artwork in question. As a basis for the rules of discussion, to respect the ideas of different students, opinions should be rooted in respect and reverence of thought, variety of ideas, and personal, cultural, and societal identities.

Aesthetic puzzles play an important role in both teaching and research in aesthetics. In this case-driven approach, a specific problem or puzzle that involves art and/or aesthetic objects can be addressed and used to develop insight into aesthetic issues and to challenge notions about art and its place in society and elicit inquiry within our classrooms. Controversial case studies concerning art are used to provoke critical discussion in classrooms.

Case Study: 2021

(Hirst, 2007)

About the Art

- a) Title: “For The Love of God”
- b) Artist: Damien Hirst, 2007
- c) Materials: Platinum, Diamond, Human Teeth

Background information

“For the Love of God” is a work of art that was created in 2007 by Damien Hirst using Platinum, diamonds, and human teeth. The extravagant work is composed of 8,601 VVS pavé-set diamonds. The skull from which the work was cast was radiocarbon dated to as early as 1720 A.D. The skull is said to be that of a 35-year-old European, presumably white-skull. “For the

Love of God” acts as a reminder that our existence on earth is transient. Much of Hirst’s work centers around the idea of death. The title of the work is said to have come from a phrase the artist’s mother would often say, In regulars to Hirst’ work. This work of art is perhaps the most expensive work of art ever created. Financed by means of an investment of \$28 million of the artist’s own money the work is reputed to have sold for \$100 million, paid in cash. (Steinmetz, 2009). For the Love of God’ acts as a reminder that our existence on earth is transient. Hirst combined the imagery of classic memento mori with inspiration drawn from Aztec skulls and the Mexican love of decoration and attitude towards death. He explains of death: “You don’t like it, so you disguise it, or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else (Hirst, 2007). Damien Steven Hirst was born in 1965. He is one of the Young British Artists (YBAs) who dominated the art scene in the UK during the 1990s. He is reportedly the United Kingdom's richest living artist, with his wealth estimated at \$384 million in the 2020 Sunday Times Rich List (Tate, 2020). The work was first exhibited in 2007, in the exhibit “Beyond Belief” and was most recently in a solo show at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, in Oslo, Norway.

In September 2008, Hirst made an unprecedented move for a living artist by selling a complete show, Beautiful Inside My Head Forever, at Sotheby's by auction and bypassing his long-standing galleries. The auction raised £111 million (\$198 million), breaking the record for a one-artist auction as well as Hirst's own record with £10.3 million for The Golden Calf, an animal with 18-carat gold horns and hooves, preserved in formaldehyde (Tate, 2009). The previous year, Hirst exhibited work at the White Cube gallery in London. Inspired by Aztec turquoise mosaic skulls held in the collection of the British Museum, Hirst thought it would be great to create a diamond version but was originally deterred by the prohibitive cost. Upon

further consideration, he decided that the ludicrous expense could be the work's rationale: "maybe that's why it is a good thing to do. Death is such a heavy subject; it would be good to make something that laughed in the face of it." (Hirst, 2007).

Controversies

Several different controversies are surrounding the work of art. The first controversy could be the objectivity of the materials, the debate over using human remains within a work of art. The second controversy could be the exponential price for which the artwork is sold. The third controversy, perhaps the most interesting, is the rationale of the artist himself. Hirst states, "Death is such a heavy subject, it would be good to make something that laughed in the face of it" (2008). A fourth controversy is regarding the role of the artwork within the contemporary art movement. Greer (2008) writes, "Damien Hirst is a brand because the art form of the 21st century is marketing. To develop so strong a brand on so conspicuously threadbare a rationale is hugely creative - revolutionary even."

Perspectives

Cultures around the world over have used human skulls as sacred objects in rites that involve the celebration of life and the contemplation of death. It always touches us deeply to see a human skull festooned with flowers or decorated with emblems of the living (Kerstetter, 2009). The controversial choice of materials and the topic about which the artwork resonates can be seen as taboo, within western culture. One solution or answer to the controversy is to research and understand the ritualistic practices not found in contemporary cultures. Another major controversy surrounding the work is the exponential cost of the materials and the price of the work sold at auction. To better understand this controversy, one can reframe the value of such a

work. Questions surrounding the value of the work itself, and the intrinsic value of the work throughout the contemporary art movement.

Aesthetic Questions

- I. How do we determine the value of Art like, “For the Love of God”?
- II. How does the work, “For the Love of God” by Damien Hirst (2007) affect or influence our ideas about the human skull?
- III. Is the controversial work, “For the Love of God” by Damien Hirst appropriation or appreciation of Aztec culture?
- IV. How do Artists work with and use Bones and other remains to create works of art?

Strategies for Discussion

- I. The first method I would use to organize the classroom discussion would be to discuss the inspiration behind the work, I would explore strategies for teaching about Aztec cultures, artwork, and ideals.
- II. One strategy I would use to make sure the arguments stay on track would be to use a “talking stick”, or focus on hearing each student's opinions, without allowing students to interrupt one another.
- III. Another strategy I would use to focus the discussion is to write students' thoughts on the whiteboard, or screen-space students can easily see. This would also work to help students to come up with ideas that build or refute existing theories surrounding the work.

- IV. One strategy to make sure that all students had the opportunity to participate in the discussion is to rotate the discussion in an orderly, or linear fashion at first. Allowing all students to speak and share their ideas, at a minimum, once.
- V. I would make the discussion equitable where multiple interpretations could be heard, by setting the guidelines of the discussion from the start.
- VI. One way I could close the discussion is by reviewing the ideas, and opinions shared by students. Another idea could be to have students share one final thought, going around in a circle.
- VII. Using the Socratic method, students gain insight into each other's viewpoints and perspectives. Their ideas about the artwork can be further developed by forming new opinions and ideas based on what other students think.

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