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TENSION AND CRITICAL THINKING IN ART

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

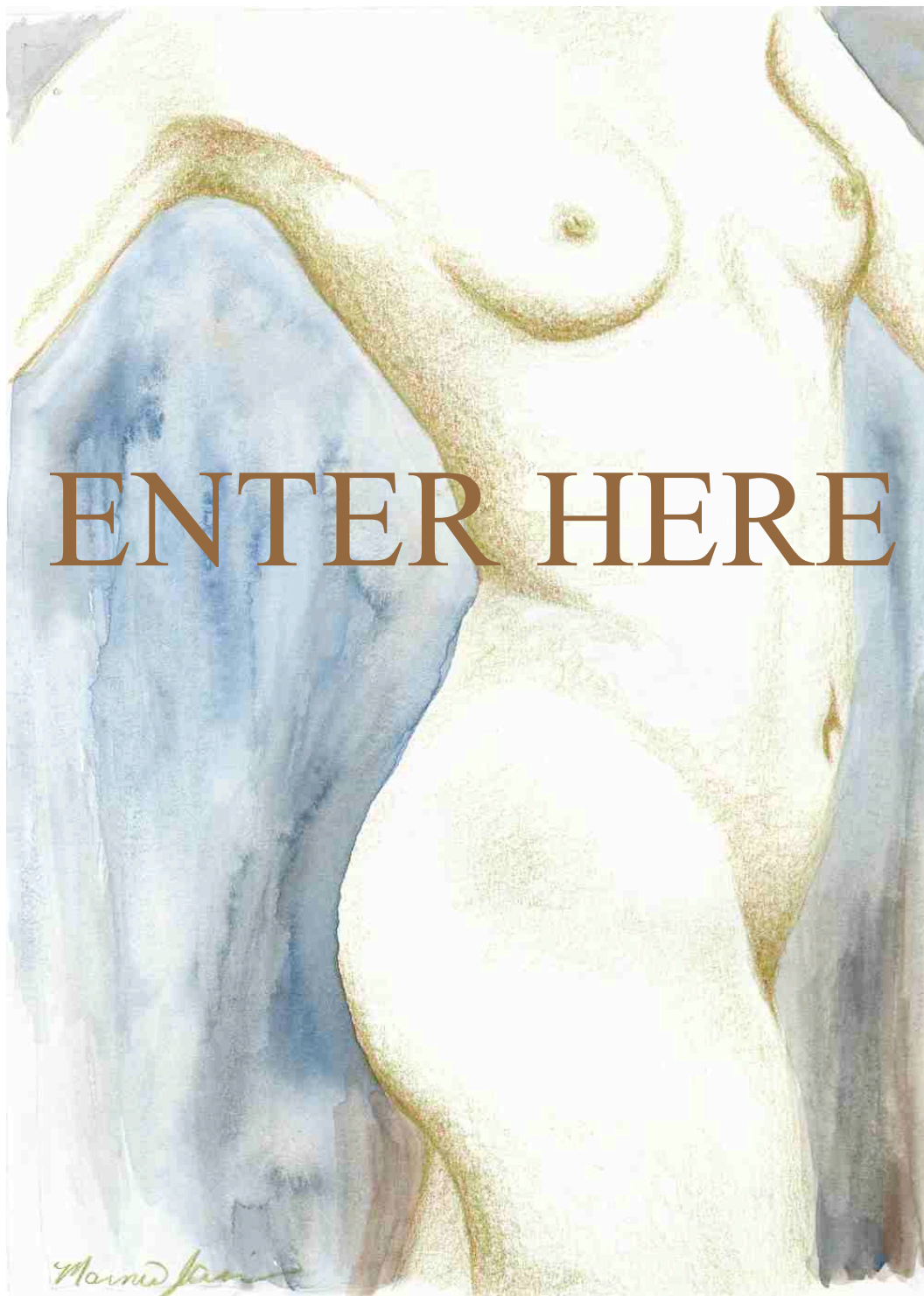
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Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2009

Critical and Creative Thinking Program



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A Synthesis Project Presented

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MARNIE A. JAIN

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ABSTRACT

TENSION AND CRITICAL THINKING IN ART

December 2009

This paper is a discussion about the existence, purpose, and use of tension in works of art. It does not take the form of standard papers, but is written as an interview where I am both the interviewer and interviewee. As the interviewee I am an artist and researcher of this topic. As the interviewer, I challenge myself to support my assertions with examples, and I try and catch myself in contradictions, and ask for clarifications.

Similar to conversations we have in the classrooms of the Critical and Creative Thinking Graduate Program, the discussion in this paper does not cease at some final agreement or truth, but carries forward in the quiet of our minds after walking away. This is the heart of the matter, how art affects us, how it works with or against the perceptions that we hold, and how it may open us to different and critical thinking.

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INTRODUCTION

I am an artist and this paper is about art. My knowledge of art is fair, the largest portion being my instinctual ability to draw connections. However, there is a world of knowledge that I do not possess. I offer this paper, not as a world, but as my small town, in a tinier country of that world. This portion of the world of art is important, but has to be further exposed to other thinking that is out there. But still, what a wonderful place to be! This is a place of possibility, a place that can be expanded. I feel privileged and excited.

I knew that for my synthesis I would want to create a few pieces of art. This is, after all, one of the two reasons that I joined the Critical and Creative Thinking program. But I also wanted to be able to articulate my ideas about art, my art, and in particular the type of art that I find most intriguing, which is art that pushes at our comfort and creates some tension within us. And so in this paper I have tried to explain what I mean. I've had difficulty explaining. In my mind the ideas are connected and clear, but they are less clear on paper.

One evening in a fit of frustration I pounded out a conversation on the page, a conversation with myself. After all, nobody knows better than we do when we are avoiding a task, when we are being lazy with an explanation, or when we really just don't understand. The conversation forced me to make statements and challenged me to support them. And then it occurred to me, this is where I am comfortable, in conversation. Later it became even clearer how dialogue, which is a part of what I want to say, is the appropriate format for this paper.

What follows is a conversation between the artist and herself. You might wonder then if this makes you an eavesdropper. If this idea pleases you, if there is a voyeur within, please feel free to embrace that title. For the rest of you, know that you are welcomed participants.

Welcome. Enter here.

What is this paper about?

In this paper, I look at tension as a specific element in art that invites critical thinking. I talk about art as a form of communication (a language of its own really) and a catalyst for critical thinking. Viewers are more likely to engage with art and think critically when they have an emotional response (as opposed to a purely intellectual response). Works with an element of tension can tease out the emotional response, the response that one might call a human response.

So there are a few concepts here that need clarifying, like tension, critical thinking, and what you mean by “engage with art”. Let’s start with Critical Thinking. In this context, what do you mean?

I am thinking of when we are introduced to information that contradicts or somehow challenges what we already know about the world. That information can be in the form of a conversation, or in a book, or something that we observe while walking down the street. But here I talk about information presented in the form of art. To take those contradictions and allow them to exist, to play with them, to question them, and ultimately to question how we arrived at what we know about the world and if what we know is immutable or if we have the capacity to sit with and converse with that tension, that is critical thinking as I am thinking of it here.

You mention Tension, but can you say what you mean specifically?

Tension ...hmm...by definition it is a state of mental unrest caused by stretching, straining, and it can be mental or physical. It can be caused by some opposition. In science it exists with an equally opposing force, in balance really. Here, I mean it in terms of contradictions. Art leans, presses, forces, and confronts. We lean back; we are an element in the tension. Imagine a piece of art in the dark behind locked doors. There is no tension because there is no viewer. So in a sense, if and when that tension exists, there is already a relationship

beginning between the viewer and the art. In his book, The Power of Images, David Freedberg opens his chapter on response and repression, saying, “People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures, mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt.” (Freedberg 1991, 1)

Is that what you mean by engage with art? I assume that you don’t really mean breaking things.

Well, it can mean that. Some art is created with the knowledge that the response will be controversial and stimulate intense emotions. I use engaging to mean more than just the processing that is occurring as we view a piece of art, but also the thinking that occurs beyond that moment, even after we have walked away. There are pieces that I have hated or that have deeply disturbed me, but these are the ones that have stayed with me.

And of course there are many examples of art that has been destroyed because it offends the government in power, which was the case with art that Hitler deemed “degenerate”, or art that was created as protest against existing regimes, such as the Goddess of Democracy and Freedom, a statue created for the Tiananmen Square protests. But even an individual standing quietly in a gallery, staring at a painting can have inside of them some boiling rage or disdain over the work or what it represents to them.

But again, I am not necessarily talking about that level of tension. A less drastic example is Marco Evaristti’s *The Goldfish Blender*. He filled blenders with water and placed a goldfish in each one. The blenders are plugged into the wall. The viewer is faced with the incongruity. In our society we do not use blenders on live animals and goldfish in particular are equated with being childhood pets. Questions arise, such as will the blender work and will my pressing the

button actually kill this goldfish? There is a tension. A viewer who does not press the button is interacting as much as a viewer who does push it. The internal questions (those dialogues) are as much interactions as the physical pressing of a button.



Figure 1

(image sources and information are located at the end of the paper)

You said that art is a form of communication and a language of its own. What do you mean?

When we speak of language, we are usually doing exactly that, “speaking”. But there are other languages, each with a unique vocabulary and forms of expression that cannot be translated readily from one form to another. Art is one of these. In his book The Psychology of Art and the Evolution of the Conscious Brain, Robert Solso speaks of the “Linguistic Prison”. While acknowledging the value of verbal language, he also states, “... much of the richness of sensory stimuli is seriously stultified by being expressed linguistically. Many things are just too delicate for words, yet we are compelled to give a word to everything, from a beautiful sunset to fantastic lovemaking.” (Solso 2003, 175) He further says, “The human spirit cries out for nonlinguistic

means of expression that tells of one's inner feelings." (Solso 2003, 176) He asserts, "...art is more than words can express." (Solso 2003, 176) For me, without art, some feelings can never be conveyed.

So the artist is using this "language". Do the viewers understand that language? Do they understand what the artist is saying?

It is not important that the viewer understands what the artist is saying. It is not about a dialogue between the artist and viewer. It is about the art and the viewer. And what the viewer understands cannot be prescribed. Not every viewer of Marco Evaristti's The Goldfish Blender will be engaged the same way. Not every viewer of Robert Mapplethorpe's Selfportrait/Whip sees the same thing, or has the same understanding.

Well, let me push back for a second. Doesn't language usually involve some common understanding of symbols? It sounds like you are talking about a completely open interpretation.

Yes, language does involve common symbols and some generally agreed upon meaning for those symbols. Art also relies on common symbolism at times. For example, in one of my pieces I use white feathers. Both feathers and the whiteness have some meaning that many viewers might share in common. Feathers can represent lightness, softness, comfort. White represents purity, freshness. But in the same piece those feathers are juxtaposed with curved pins. Separately they have meanings, but together (based on a common understanding of those separate meanings), they create visual dissonance, and the viewer must make new meaning.

Please explain visual dissonance for us.

Solso notes its definition as, "a state of psychological tension caused when one experiences a

disparity between what one expects to see and what one actually sees.” There are many examples in the works of Renee Magritte, such as *The Lovers*. Hiroko Okada’s *Future Plan #2* is another example.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Solso relates visual dissonance to cognitive dissonance, cognitive dissonance being a

disparity between two ideas. In her paper "Aesthetics and the Explication of Surprise" Mary-Anne Williams references Solso, agreeing that resolution is an intended outcome of visual dissonance. Williams even states, "If visual dissonance cannot be resolved, a negative aesthetic response can be expected to be experienced by the viewer."

Do you agree (that resolution is an intended or necessary outcome)?

I don't think so. Williams' term "negative aesthetic response" implies a continued discomfort and she later references neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux, and asserts that, "If there is dissonance, then a depressive effect". Maybe a state of persistent cognitive dissonance (which I believe is what Changeux was meaning) can have a depressive effect, but I don't believe that in the experience of art, dissonance is necessarily negative or that it must be resolved. Again, when I think of tension, I think of contradiction, of opposing forces, a balance, a sort of give and take between viewer and art, between dissonant images or ideas. But not everyone has the capacity or desire to sit with tension, and so for those individuals, perhaps resolution is required.

So your explanation concedes that the artist (at least you as an artist) creates the work with meaning, but allows viewers to create meaning of their own without the need or desire for you to interpret the work for them. Is that right?

That is right. Even here in this paper, at each point that I attempt to describe or explain a piece of work, it is awkward. Each word here is my choice, not the choice of the viewer. The beauty of viewing art is in the freedom of interpretation. At galleries or in museums, I don't read the plaques before I view the piece, because the title will influence me. Only after will I read the title, but not to say, "Oh, I was wrong, that is not what the piece is about," but to see if there is additional information that I can consider as I experience the work again. I rarely title

my art. Sometimes it feels possessive to title it. I want to be more detached. Eco quotes Stéphane Mallarmé, “To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest...there is the dream” (Eco 2006, 27)

So you don’t want the viewer to arrive at some conclusion? To understand what you intended?

No. My only wish as an artist is that their process is a dialogue involving Critical Thinking. But it does not mean my creation of art is entirely unselfish. Keep in mind that my ideas and feelings desire expression. Without art, I cannot say all that I want to say. My need to express is satisfied with the creation of a piece of art. After that, what the viewer “hears” belongs to them. I look at the work of Rebecca Horn and it says something to me, but not necessarily what she herself was saying. Am I misunderstanding her? No. I perceive the work through my unique perception, accessing my personal memory, and my interpretations may or may not have common features with the interpretations of others.

Then, let’s look at Rebecca Horn’s piece, Pencil Mask. Can you share with us your perspective, and say why you have included it in this paper?



Figure 4

Rebecca Horn’s Pencil Mask is a nice example of tension-eliciting art. There are a few concepts this mask might imply: bondage, imprisonment, or punishment. It might also be a

weapon or armor. As voyeuristic beings, we are drawn to any one of these meanings and more. Perhaps the sharp objects are protection or a boundary between the wearer and others. Yet the context (a gallery or museum) assures us that we are safe, and this sense of safety allows us to investigate. So, let's go ahead and say that this is an armed prisoner. Here is some tension. The sharpened objects are pencils. Is the wearer the artist? This question invites additional meaning. The mask might be a façade behind which the artist hides; it might be her voice only coming through the medium of pencils, which she controls. Again there are further questions, "Is she silenced when her pencils speak?" "Can she then only speak when the mask is removed?" "Does that suggest that the voice of the artist must be detached (or suppressed) to create art?"

Interesting. Is that what you take from this? That (your) verbal language is silent or silenced in order for your art language to "speak" or be afforded expression?

Well, that was simply an example of some critical thinking questions that are raised when I view this piece. But yes, part of me believes that verbal language is silent when visual art is "speaking". I am not saying that art always results from suppressed language. It can. Certainly art has always been an avenue for political and social expression, to challenge the status quo, to expose, to revolt. When words are censored, art can be a covert or even subversive expression. Kathe Kollwitz' work, *Outbreak* (1903) is one example.



Figure 5

But we can also censor ourselves, or rather, we might be reluctant or unable to say what we feel. Using the language of art might then help to “say it without saying it”.

Do you have an example of “saying it without saying it”?

This piece of three crayons is an example (from one of my older pieces). I didn’t create this piece because I was not able to talk about the subject, incest, but I created it because I wanted to stir a conversation on it.



Figure 6

How does this stir the conversation?

My intent was to create a disquiet piece. I chose to use objects that are familiar and have common meaning (the crayons). For example, the crayons might represent childhood and creativity. Also in the image, I have used written language that might not be as readily noticed, but once noticed, the viewer will hopefully ask questions about the relationship between the words and the crayons, about the absent child, about the obfuscation of incest, or about forms of communication.

This is an example of tension?

Yes, I think this piece has tension and offers an opportunity for critical thinking.

And (an opportunity) for resolution or comprehension?

No, not necessarily. Comprehension implies a correct answer. Again, I don't believe that there is a right answer to, "What does this work mean?" As for resolution, I think that we are too complex for such a finite state. There might be a resolution in a given moment, but when the viewer returns to the work (whether in person or in their visual sketchpad), they are now experiencing a different piece of art, different by virtue of the fact that they are no longer the

same person viewing it from the same perspective.

You earlier spoke about engaging viewers, but what would compel me to view art that will make me uncomfortable?

First, I think it's human nature to be curious and to engage with things that we don't understand or that we fear, or even things that we find offensive. But most of us are not comfortable with our own curiosity. Fortunately, art allows us to be voyeurs without the stigma. When we watch a video of French performance artist Orlan transforming herself through plastic surgery, we are not voyeurs, but appreciators of art.

Solso speaks about contemporary artists making visual "statements" to "motivate the thinking person to find a deeper message in art" (Solso 2003, 237). I like to think that we are all thinking people. And I agree with him where he says, "Although these disturbing art forms may not be as comforting as viewing a Norman Rockwell illustration, they demand active participation in the construction of 'reality'." (Solso 2003, 237) This is not to diminish milder art or work that is purely aesthetic.

When I look at Titian's painting, *Venus*, I am not that moved. Yet when Mark Twain saw it he said, "there, against the wall, without obstructing rap or leaf, you may look your fill upon the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses -- Titian's *Venus*... --and there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and art has its privileges." (Freedberg 1991, 343) I enjoy his passionate distain. I enjoy that this image lingered in him, perhaps offered him, in the privacy of his mind, a sweet cognitive dissonance.



Figure 7

It sounds like you are suggesting that if we felt more comfortable with our own curiosity, we might not need art to engage in these dialogues?

No, we would still need art. Art is a language. Art expresses ideas that cannot be expressed in any other way. But more, art is a catalyst for dialogue and critical thinking without being the conversation in itself. Can you picture Mark Twain sitting down to a meaningful conversation about Titian's Venus, about the male gaze, or about his gaze? We could sit down and discuss gender and sexuality, but viewing a piece of art is bringing a completely new voice into the conversation.

What do you mean by "Expresses ideas that cannot be expressed in any other way"?

I mean simply that creating a complete sentence cannot always express an idea, a longing, a fear, or an experience. The spoken language can be too much, too cluttered. Like poetry, art strips away excessive chatter, offers lines and colors and ...it is a unique language, separate from other languages. Marcel Duchamp said, "As soon as we start putting our thoughts into words and sentences everything gets distorted, language is just no damn good--I use it because I have to, but I don't put any trust in it. We never understand each other."

(cited by Shlain, p. 204).

I don't agree that (verbal) language is "just no damn good", but I have said things with lines on a page, with a color, or with an angle. I have said these things in place of a page of sentences that wouldn't have sufficed to express the whole of the ideas I had and the emotions I felt.

René Magritte's *Treachery of Images* (*Trahison des Images*) is an interesting addition to this argument. In this work, "This is not a pipe" is written below a prototypical representation of a pipe. Magritte's image and DuChamp's statement both speak to the limitations of language, one to the distortions of the written word, one to the treachery of visual representation. Like all languages, translation from one to another is never wholly successful.



Figure 8

But again, it sounds like you are saying something explicit, and yet you assert not having prescribed meaning. How do those two concepts co-exist?

I do have some sway over meaning of my work. All artists do. We can title it, and direct meaning. We can explain it (as I later explain my piece, *The Affair*), and there is always some assumption that the audience will "get" some intended meaning. Without the audience having some common meaning for feathers, my intentional juxtaposition of the needles would have less or no meaning. When I am creating, I am in my space, in my vision, in my world. Of course there is meaning for me. It is intimate. But once I share it, I like to hold back my meaning

because it is limited. The audience may find and see things that I had never thought of. That they created these meanings doesn't diminish them, not at all. So if I entered a conversation and said, "Here is what I think about feathers and needles," then the audience would respond to what I say. If the audience isn't "given" an opinion or meaning, they must think and create meaning.

I don't mean to be a pain in the ass, but what do you think about feathers and needles?

Can you tell us more about that piece?

For one, feathers and needles have some physically disparate features. One is sharp, the other soft. One is hard, the other flexible, and from those physical features, one might say that one is welcoming and the other is unwelcoming. The juxtaposition can create a tension. I curved the pins that I used in order to disguise them among the feathers, make them more feather-like. At present, they are incorporated into a sort of skirt, though this is to be the lower portion of a female torso when the piece is complete.

So is it that the female torso is welcoming and unwelcoming at the same time?

Sure, it could be, but it's not really that simple. It has to do with the human potential to be, well, soft, vulnerable, or enticing (like feathers), but to have those qualities coexist with the equal potential to be hard, perhaps dangerous, protective, or repelling (like pins or needles). To me, it's a conversation about these seemingly disparate qualities coexisting in each of us.

But can't we have a conversation like this without viewing works of art?

Not the same conversations, no. How we enter a dialogue influences the dialogue. For example, there are many dialogues about incest, and we know intellectually that children are hurt, but these dialogues can be abstract. The crayons are a symbol of the child, and they are a way of bringing the child, the concept of child, the smallness, and the innocence closer to us

without the need to render a child's form. With the feather piece, a conversation about vulnerability and protection has more avenues based on the rest of the piece. That it is a female torso doesn't have to be a part of that conversation, but it is likely to influence it, whether consciously or not.

Solso makes the point that "priming" influences meaning, even when we are not consciously aware of the relationship between the first priming word or image and the second priming word or image (Solso 2003, 29). There is a relationship between one of the primes (the female torso) and the others (the feathers and the pins). Women are traditionally sewers, menders, and creators of things, including new life. Feathers are associated with eggs, and while human ovum doesn't resemble a bird's egg, there exist multiple common references to link them, like 'nesting' or being a 'mother-hen'. These concepts might never enter into the spoken conversation, but they are present.

Is your finished piece going to include an egg?

I thought of that, but I think it's too literal. I don't believe that a viewer needs an egg in order to have a conversation about an egg, or about conception, or delicacy of life, or anything related to these. This is part of my point. An artist does not have to render a likeness, but can represent an idea by using association.

Again, art is intended for viewing. We are given permission to glance, gaze, or stare intently, and return again and again. A person might stand in a gallery and engage with the art privately, which for that person might be the only time they allow themselves to enter that conversation.

With some interactive art, where the work invites physical interaction, viewers come

under the gaze of others around them and their privacy is momentarily removed. This changes the dynamic, and now the viewers are engaged with one another.

Can we have an example?

Marina Abramovic's performance piece of 1974 is one example. She sat passively for 6 hours, allowing the audience to select from a table of objects which they could use to touch her. Some of the objects were weapons (such as a knife) while others presented no danger (such as a feather). In this example there is a clear enticement. That enticement is the allowance of touch, the breaking of personal boundaries with no apparent consequence. But in fact there is consequence, and there is also influence. In this work, each individual was influenced by not just their own personal memory and set of beliefs, but by the presence of others. Nobody went unobserved. When we are observed, we are in conversation with others about expectations and norms. These expectations and norms affect us.

What if nobody cares about or wants to be in this dialogue?

Then those people won't come to see that art, or if they do come, they might just pass that piece by, which raises the question of enticement. The world is full of ideas wanting and/or needing attention. Art needs to draw the viewer in, entice them, and the viewer needs to choose. Berger says, "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice." (Berger 1991, 8) I want viewers to choose to look at my work, make choices as they look, and be conscious of those choices, at least to some degree. If I can achieve that, I'd feel good.

Aside from initially choosing to look at your work, what other choices are they making?

In perception, we focus our attention. A commonly used metaphor is to see this focus as a spotlight, where all objects and stimuli are present, even if there is no light shed on them, but

we selectively shed our spotlight on one or a few (related) things. This is how we can have a conversation with one person in a crowded party, and how we can b-line for a single painting that has “caught our attention” in a gallery full of art. (Reisberg 1996)

So a piece of art “captures” someone’s attention?

Well yes, there is some reason, be it intentional enticement or simply something about that piece that draws the viewer toward it. Even if I am slowly making my way through a gallery and gazing at every piece, some will hold me longer, and others I will just pass by quickly. And once the viewer’s attention is on a piece of art, there is a next level of choice such as where the eye goes first, where it lingers, where it returns, what it avoids, what offends it, or what draws the viewer nose-to-canvas.

You said that in Amramovic’s piece, the enticement was the permission of touch with no apparent consequences. Can you say something about other ways artists might entice viewers (initially)?



Figure 9

People can be enticed by the permission to touch, but others might be enticed by implicit or explicit parameters. An example of an explicit parameter is Christian Moeller’s installation

Do Not Touch. In this piece the directive functions much like a sign that says, “Do Not Walk on the Grass”. The grass is so beautiful and it’s right there, it’s so tempting. Besides, what will happen if I touch it? Most exhibited art has an explicit parameter to not touch. I wouldn’t go up and touch a Monet, but part of that is my understanding that I can actually do harm by touching it. There are many sculptures I’d love to touch, and some that I have. But to be kept from the grass or from caressing a piece of sculpture feels like denial of a sensory pleasure. The sensuous pleasure of a painting is visually stimulated, so there is no need to touch it. Still, the taboo of doing what one ought not to do is wonderfully enticing.

As for other ways to entice, there are just so many, like appealing to our voyeuristic nature, or appealing to the senses, such as offering something visually sensuous. Also, teasing perception with seemingly disparate images or concepts is an enticement, because we cognitively strive to make sense of our world, and so would engage with the piece in order to make sense, make meaning. Those are just broad concepts of enticement.

Can you give an example of a work that offers sensory stimulation other than visual stimulation?

Interactive Art pieces immediately come to mind, though some of those still are largely visual. Another example is sculptures that are created with the intent to be touched. In Lowell, Massachusetts there is The Revolving Museum. In one exhibit they had a large, hollow log that you could touch, peer into, and speak into, listening to how your voice traveled or listen to the voice of a friend at the other end. But when you were silent and just listened, you could hear the tiniest chirping coming from the center of the log, which was so dark that you couldn’t see if there really was some type of bird, but neither could you say for certain that there was not.

Does some of your work fall into the category of Interactive Art?

In some ways, but I hesitate to give a definitive yes.

What is behind that hesitation?

Well, the definition of Interactive Art continues to evolve, but works considered to be interactive are largely works that employ technology. In Interactive Art, engaging might more specifically mean physical interactions with the artwork that then prompts some response from the piece, for example some transformation or completion of the work. My work does not employ technology, at least not at this stage. In addition, I am interested in interaction that employs metacognition, though I recognize one can “measure” physical interaction more readily.

Can you explain what you mean by “interaction that employs metacognition”?

With Interactive Art, the prompt to interact is provided to some degree. In the absence of those prompts, especially if a work is not identified as interactive, the viewer is likely to fall back on implicit rules: do not touch, maintain an appropriate distance. But there are times when the piece or some element(s) of the piece pull at the viewer enough for them to question and perhaps violate those implicit rules. That boundary line between touching and not touching, between standing back or getting closer is an uncertainty, a tension. (Remember The Goldfish Blender.) As they straddle that boundary line, there is a conversation in the viewer’s mind. “How did I arrive at the conclusion that I shouldn’t touch this? What is my motivation for wanting to touch this? What am I afraid will occur if I do touch this? Why am I lured by this piece: what elements are resonating with me?” These questions and the responses, even if they are never spoken aloud, are interaction that can employ metacognition.

And if they then never choose to touch or investigate further?

They have still interacted. They have still utilized critical thinking. And yes, they did

“choose”.

But we don’t always think consciously about our choices. Sometimes they are just made.

That’s true. There are many levels to thinking and to engaging in art. I pass by some pieces with barely a glance because they don’t interest me on the surface level, and I recognize that I miss some opportunities by doing so. I recall a bracelet in a jewelry show at Boston’s Museum of Fine Art. Several times I passed by this piece. Eventually, I came back and read the description. In a process that took ten years to master, the artist inlayed the bracelet with pieces of shell. My interest was sparked, but more, I began (and have since continued) thinking about my own investment of time as an artist, and what time represents to me. Why have I never dedicated myself to that level? Choices. There are many choices that we don’t stop to identify as such, or question why we make them. Yet so much is about choices.

Why are choices important to you?



Figure 10

Choice is important to me as a subject of art, but it is also an element of critical thinking in art. Let’s look at Salvador Dali’s The Persistence of Memory. Despite the fact that the clocks are not on a wall and that they don’t appear completely solid, they still have enough elements to be recognized as clocks. That we see them as clocks is not much of a choice. There is a

prototype of clock that we have learned to accept and it's what our mind effortlessly accesses upon seeing this image. Now, we can access meaning and interpretation beyond "this is a clock", but it requires additional effort. It requires cognitive thinking. After that initial recognition, we might ask, "Why aren't the clocks on walls? Why are they out here in this desert? Why do they appear to be melting?" Making that additional effort is an initial choice in thinking.

Our eye then begins moving around the canvas, so that the focuses of our attention (how long we consider each element in the painting, which ones we ignore) are choices as well. Let's assume that a viewer believes the clocks are melting. What is that viewer's concept of time, what is their concept of melting, and in what ways might these two concepts intersect? Perhaps one viewer will continue to think of academic definitions while another viewer recalls their life in a warm climate where people had a slower pace. The latter viewer could choose to engage in additional thinking along those lines, or choose to push that memory back down. In these ways, the viewers are choosing, even if not consciously.

Now look at Annette Messager's piece *Inflating – Deflating*. Some of the shapes she created are not as readily identifiable. But wait, maybe... Maybe what? Maybe we do see something familiar in them, but naming it makes us uncomfortable. Simply lingering over the image might make us uncomfortable. There is tension here in that we are unsure of what we are looking at. Additional tension, a different tension, might be when we can no longer deny that some of the forms closely resemble genitals. (There are actually numerous pieces like this, modeled after other body parts and organs such as lungs and arms.)



Figure 11

Why do you assert that resembling genitals would create tension?

It's my experience that most people are not comfortable with observing the human body or with sexuality, at least not in a meaningful way. But let's return to art as language. If we take a single form from this piece, we might unanimously say, here is a large phallus made of cloth. And we could do the same with the Dali piece by looking at a clock. Isolated from additional elements of the artwork, its meaning might be less complex, and certainly is different. It can be described by a word, phallus. There are additional words like fabric, pink, and large. And so there is a concept (a large, pink, fabric phallus) that is not impossibly divergent from the prototype of male genitalia.

Now let's return it to the whole piece. Can you see that the context can change the concept? There is no longer one, but many. They all resemble one another in some way, but there are variations. What does it mean? What is being said here? The artist has provided us with additional context and so there is more meaning than the single concept, phallus, and yet this is not as simple as offering us a completed sentence with subject and verb. She chose to use this art language to express herself. And in fact, this installation contains much more. There are forms that appear to be breasts, and some perhaps internal organs. As the title suggests, they inflate and deflate. That there is something not quite right about these body pieces is evident, but what exactly makes them repugnant is not as evident. They are like parts of our bodies, but

unlike parts of our bodies. We struggle with the visual dissonance and with similarity.

There is so much ambiguity in the way you describe this. It almost feels restless. Are there times when you just want a piece to become clear, to “come to rest”?

Personally, I am OK with ambiguity. With some pieces, my own or others, I will come to a place where I internally go, “Oh, I never saw that before. It makes sense.” And I like that. But I accept that the meaning I have derived from it might last only a day, maybe a year, or maybe longer. When I am constantly changing, how can I possibly expect there to be finality to my experience of art?

Critical thinking in art involves re-viewing and re-interpretation, whether it is facilitated by cognitive dissonance or visual dissonance, but ultimately, it requires that an individual be cognizant of the act of thinking. In “The Poetics of the Open Work,” Eco speaks about music, poetry and art. Eco defends ambiguity and openness, reassuring us that this does not “reflect a crisis of contemporary civilization”, but in fact, “we might see these poetical systems, in harmony with modern science, as expressing the positive possibility of thought and action made available to an individual who is open to continuous renewal of his life patterns and cognitive processes.” (Eco 2006, 35)

Can you explain what he means by “in harmony with modern science”?

I believe he means moving away from the need to understand in a conventional way, a way that asserts one clear explanation, and moving away from the illusion of control that comes from traditional (singular) understanding. Detachment from a single answer or meaning is necessary, is progressive. Meaning can change. “Facts” can change. Memory can change. While there is an emotional comfort that comes from predictability (and even from limitation),

he implies that we have choice, and that having this choice is valuable.

Which brings us back around to choice in art.

Yes. I'd hope that it does. This conversation should be circular, I think it is circular, and this is why the writing of my synthesis has been so challenging. Another concept that Eco addresses in his article is space and the positioning of poetry on the page, "Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial conservation in the page setting of the poetic text – all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities." (Eco 2006, 27)

This is how I feel at my best, when I am creating, including the creation of this paper. It is living, there is movement, and that movement is created when I touch it and lay down a line or a word, and yet there is movement beyond me, after I have turned my back, subtle shifts and motions that I only see when I return to look again at what I thought I had left.

What ideas are you, as an artist, wanting to bring to the attention of viewers? That is, what conversations, what tension, are you interested in offering?

I am a lover of cognitive dissonance, and regardless of the subject, offering that type of tension is extremely appealing to me. My subject matter has included and will continue to include sexuality and sensuality. Despite the sexualizing of American society, I find most people to be uncomfortable with it on a personal level. I want to press back against the cavalier, immature sexuality that is rampant on television and in movies and invite critical thinking on a more intimate and sober level.

But the classic nude is found quite a bit in art. How can you say then that we are uncomfortable with it? Are you including the art world in this assertion?

Just because the subject is a nude or there are nudes depicted, it does not denote comfort by the artist, an individual viewer, or the critics. Nor is it a measure of the social temperament, well, except that it may be a piece produced specifically to challenge temperament or some existing schema. For example, Titian's Venus put Mark Twain at great unease, as I am sure it did many of his contemporaries. By our standards today, she is mild. Robert Mapplethorpe's work, photographic re-animation of classical nudes, created tension. Sometimes, when art depicts sexuality or the sexual aspects of the physical body, that very sexuality is skirted and the discussion is focused on the more palatable or academic aspects of the work, like composition or color. "It is true that there are sumptuous colors and ravishing paintwork in Titian's picture..." "...But it would be wrong not to admit to the possibility of the response that has to do with sexuality, with the love of looking, and with the perception of desire." (Freedberg 1991, 13)

Some of Mapplethorpe's photographs reflected the classic nudes of Mannerist printmaking, and others shared images of intimate sexual acts, all of which made it impossible to ignore the physical and sexual aspects of the work.



Figure 12



Figure 13

You had some hesitations as to what work to include in this paper, is that right?

(Smiles) Yes. I catch myself being hypocritical at times, such as censoring what I include. But while I try and avoid self-censorship, some selection (and consequent omission) is required. This paper is about tension and critical thinking in art. Sexuality is an element in my work, and I think it is important to include it in this paper. I hardly feel equipped to scandalize the page or offend the reader with my assertions or images of choice.

But would I be upset if something I say or include challenges the reader? Of course not. I would love that. That is the point, to challenge, to present tension, to offer the opportunity of discomfort. French sculptor and painter, Jean Dubuffet, said, “What I expect from any work of art is that it surprises me, that it violates my customary valuations of things and offers me other, unexpected ones.”

And do you have any of your own work in this vein to share? For example, what would you hesitate to share, but are willing to share?

I think I have already presented what I am willing to share. To be clearer, there is more that I am willing to share artistically, than I am willing to talk about. So there is more for you, the viewer, to see, but I will not engage in as full a discussion, because I want my work to be experienced less in the context of me, and more on its own.

But we can still discuss the pieces accompanying your synthesis?

Yes.

The other piece you are working on is a paper mache egg. Can you tell us about this?

A tension that I have been exploring for a while is Impermanence, which I'd like to offer as much through form as through subject. The paper mache piece is about impermanence.

What do you mean by Impermanence?

Impermanence is inevitable departure. It is a truth. It is our truth, as human beings. Or maybe I should say inevitable departure from the current state of being. Our relationship with art amplifies our humanness and our own inevitable departure, be it from form, concept, or belief. We create art, driven to "create", driven to be nearer to God (or something greater than ourselves), to beauty, and also driven to understand. We constantly seek meaning. And we do this in a (relatively) brief life span. We are surrounded by impermanence and change and death but we habitually hold on rather than let go. In the gravitation toward our desire to be alive and feel and experience, we sometimes even hold on to tension and drama and dysfunction because if we let go, what is next? We don't know. But we want to know. We are generally not comfortable with uncertainty and change.

When you say that (impermanence) is what you want to offer as much through form as through subject, what do you mean?

A traditional notion of art includes preservation. But nothing can be preserved forever and arguably, nothing should be. Buddhists identify attachment as a source of suffering. They create elaborate mandalas that they disperse soon after completion, symbolizing transience and honoring detachment. That is just an example. My work is far from being that detached. But I do want, in some of my pieces, for the viewer or the possessor of a piece of art to explore their

feelings about “holding on”.

The paper mache piece is about an affair. Affairs have limited time spans. They also usually involve deception and lies, things that erode life and are revealed at some point. Here is impermanence. I appeal to the voyeur in all of us by offering pieces of the affair but withholding the full encounter. Yet the complete story is there, to be discovered, but at a cost.

What cost?

Since the full account of the affair is encased in the paper mache, the paper mache would have to be destroyed in order to access the story. Similarly, when an affair is exposed, there is something destroyed. There is destruction at every point along the way, small erosions, but the lovers continue in the illusion of secrecy and permanence. This is also about choice. For something gained, there is always something sacrificed. This is the law of conservation of energy.

Can you share examples of other artists who work with this notion of impermanence?



Figure 14

The works of Andy Goldsworthy are nice examples, such as Before the Mirror. Also, at the close of The Burning Man festival, the finale is the burning of every installation. It’s ritualistic, stemming from a Celtic tradition of burning a wicker man. That tradition is about

sacrifice. Burning the art is also about sacrifice of attachment, releasing ego, accepting that no piece of art is too precious to lose. I admit that I am not there yet.

What do you mean?

Just that any of my pieces that can be touched or that were created with the intention of inevitable destruction have a meaning related to that destruction or decay. None are destroyed for the exercise of detachment alone. I have a self-portrait that is made of Plexiglas. It includes images of me that are photocopied on transparency paper. In time, all of these materials will be scratched, faded, and cracked. But this piece is not about preserving my image. It is a metaphor of the physical changes that are unavoidable as I age.

Another work I created was a small black box. Inside the box were individual handmade matchbooks. Each matchbook contained a visual and/or written description of a sexual interlude between two people. I wanted to use matchbooks because of the association with things like slipping someone your number at a bar, leaning in to light the cigarette of a stranger. I also was intrigued by the way that matchbooks are picked up by so many different people, used, shared, and discarded. I wanted all of these meanings to be available as part of the piece, but ultimately I hoped that people would actually use them, strike the matches against the surface and use them up because, like a lit match, the urgency and passion of these sexual encounters cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Now, will you put these pieces that you just spoke of back into the context of tension and critical thinking in art for us?

Those pieces deal with impermanence through common human concerns: aging, identity, love, sex, loss. I don't believe that deep conversations leap from viewing these pieces. In fact, the matchbooks for example, have been received with a lot of humor and some arousal over the

evocative images and words. But laughter is an entry point. It escorts us into heavier discussions, and I'd like it if those discussions occurred. I would not mind if they did not. Ok, maybe I would, but I would try to be detached.

How did you get involved in this Critical and Creative Thinking program?

It took me a long time to feel comfortable with the idea of going to graduate school. I really chanced on finding this program. When I entered the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, I was determined to do two things: prove to myself that I was worthy of and capable of a higher level of education, and focus (finally) on my art. My undergraduate work was at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and in several ways, the CCT program is similar: small classes, a focus on process, more individualized and self-directed learning, and of course, the emphasis on how we think.

Higher education always had a mystique to me, but one that continues to diminish. The mystique was in my imagining that higher education was for an elite population of intelligent people. I am almost embarrassed to admit this, almost.

Yet you are including it...

My purpose for including this outweighs any ego damage. I doubt I am the only one who has felt this way. Intelligence is not a struggle, but self-worth is a struggle. It's like having something is not as hard as using it. I'm a fan of the human race. I tend to believe that we all possess a measure of intelligence. For me, the mystique that had led to feelings of intimidation and doubt is now more like those mirages that you see on hot summer days.

Mirages?

I am sure that you have seen them. It's a hot, hot summer day, not a cloud in the sky.

You are driving and you see a wide puddle of water on the pavement ahead. However, as you get closer the edges pull in, and soon the puddle disappears completely. This is my metaphor of what was once (for me) the intimidation of higher education. That intimidation is like “magic puddles”, it appeared as a substance in my path, but evaporated at closer inspection.

Has your focus changed since you began the CCT program?

In the fall of 2005 I took my first two courses, Creative Thinking and Philosophy. For Creative Thinking I created a piece Philosophical Self-Portrait. It used metal and mirror for reflective surfaces to facilitate the interaction between the viewer and the artist. I presented portions of my written history in layers of transparencies that could be removed and rearranged by viewers, “not concerned about the fingerprints on these layers because they simply join the fingerprints of others before them and these memories are touched and altered by new people who interact with my self-portrait, just as their access to these memories influences their current reflection of me.”

I then became very interested in art that could be touched and that could offer choices. Eventually I concluded that my concept of Interactive Art was broader than the concept generally applied to works considered interactive. While the touch aspect might still be present in some of my work, the choices in my work are more internal, and the exchange is more dialogue than physical. Human response is an element to Interactive Art, but it can be present in works not strictly interactive.

My content has not changed as much as my medium and concepts of what art can be. Trying other media allows more error, more accidents, more discoveries, and more creativity. This program and all of the readings, discussions, and papers created more intention in my work. In some ways I feel like I have given up an instrument that I some mastery of for one that I have

never played. It's scary, but necessary. I have not abandoned my previous art and medium completely, but I recognize that the familiarity and comfort was disabling.

In addition to the evolution of your focus, what else has changed for you?

In my Creative Thinking journal (two years ago) I wrote, "I love new experiences and yet I also fear risk. I feel like the cave dwellers in Plato's The Myth of the Cave, reluctant to move, needing to be dragged into the light. Yet I love light. I love light, illumination, awareness. But it is always a rough start."

I have created some unexpected work in the past two years, loosening myself from some tight structures and feeling more confident in calling myself artist. Art is my passion and my first language, but if I am to stand by the concept of art as language, then I also have to let it evolve.

In another paper you wrote, "There is an intimacy created when a stranger can regard my work and understand something of themselves, or be moved, which to me is them identifying a sameness. This is my connecting using my language. I don't want to be alone in the world and, often, we have the sense that we are alone through some feeling or experience that is uniquely ours, perhaps negative, perhaps immoral, but, in fact, internal struggles as well as internal joys, are more common than we think. This is what I want to pull from the viewers of my work." Do you still feel this way? Do you still have this need to create an intimacy with your viewers?

What a great question. I still feel that I create art to reinforce my humanness and my sameness with others. While I don't ever want my presence in a piece to taint the viewer's experience, I am not sure that I can remove myself completely. There are times when knowing

the artist brings additional meaning to the work, be it real or imagined, invited or imposed. So maybe the honest answer is that I want to create my work with the awareness of these things, and not shy from that potential intimacy.

Earlier, you said, “Just because the subject is a nude or there are nudes depicted, it does not denote comfort by the artist, an individual viewer, or the critics.” Are you ever uncomfortable with your own work?

(Smiles) Yes, definitely. This is one of my best contradictions. I do sometimes (not always) make myself uncomfortable as I create work and at the point of sharing it. Generally I perceive this as something to get over, but I want to acknowledge the value as well. I said that discomfort is an opportunity. I believe that is true, not just for the viewers, but for the artist. While I don't want discomfort to get in my way (of completing a piece), I want that tension to escort me through the process (of creating). Even completing this paper is filled with discomfort. *(So many things I haven't said. So much I still never learned. Is it good enough? Is it completed? Must it be? What do I do next?)* Yet I leave this page, this small spot of understanding, with additional queries and ideas, and that is always exciting.

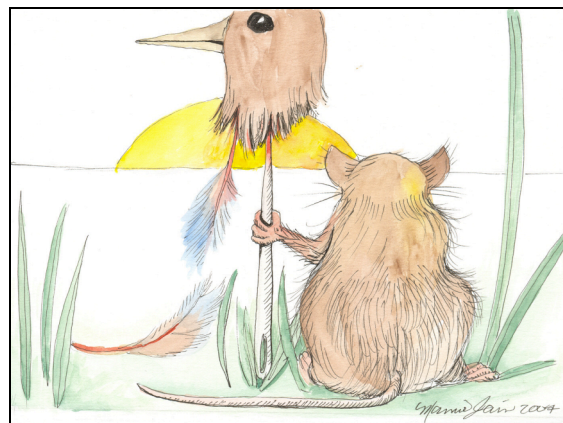


Figure 15

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- Figure 13 Jacob Matham (Netherlands 1571 – 1631), The Three Graces, 1588, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.
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- Figure 15 Marnie Jain

Jan 18, 2007 journal

I was thinking about my draw toward cognitive dissonance. My comfort with myself as an artist...this is one that is in constant tension, though I don't know if I mind that. When I taught rock climbing I spoke about the "edge" necessary for safe climbing. That was tension... caution and risk, stillness and movement, holding and letting go. But you can't just have risk and motion, or you will slip. The caution and the clinging, even when it is fear, is necessary, is present, and needs to be acknowledged and honored...or you slip. Maybe this is me as an artist, sometimes moving and reaching for a new handhold, unsure of the footing but trusting that the other three points of contact will get me there, maybe breaking rules and letting go and having only two points of contact, scrambling, feeling that rush of adrenaline as gravity suddenly garbs my hips and tries to yank me back to the ground where it thinks I belong, clutching the tiniest outcropping, my nails digging in to the crumble and dirt that is the semi-solidness that I will hold until my next move. So here I am, feeling the artist, not feeling "all that", but closer than I have been. But this is not semi-solid. This place where I am right now is not crumbling. The ideas I have been writing about, all of the work that I have done in the program is real and is valuable and I am on a path and there is a point beyond me that I have not yet reached, but that is ok. I hope there is always some point out of reach. I need that, the tension, the meandering, the movement, just the movement.

Nov 30, 2007 journal

Most people have no idea what images and ideas my mind has created over and over without ever making it to a page. That is a tension that I have grown very tired of. It can't exist forever. It has already shifted, but it is still something lodged in my throat. This is one of the reasons why I have censored myself. The viewer's eye looks at the work, and then at me, and back to the work, and then to me, and instead of the viewer drawing meaning from the work, they impose meaning on me. And of course there is a connection. Of course! And it is at times cathartic, and sometimes it is a scream, or a sob, or a gasp, or anger, but I don't create art as some coded call for help, or some secret (wink wink) request for male attention. Yet often I get that gaze (where the man goes, "Hmmmmm.") or that glance (where the person goes, "Awww.") and it really pisses me off. I just want to say stop looking at me with your sticky eyeballs. They are avoiding their own response by looking to the artist for that "Ahhhh...now I understand." I really get tired of people who don't evaluate their lives. But wait, wait ...I am guilty of that so often too. I am an excellent avoider. But eventually I dive in and deal with what I need to. God I wish I were a better person, and a better artist, and when I say better artist I mean not scared.

Feb 16, 2008 journal

On a related topic...just a ramble really...I was thinking about the lyrics of Leonard Cohen and trying to explain to someone why I like his music. I concluded this, and I think it is related to the above in some way(s)... he takes what is sad or ugly or crass or vulgar and softens it, makes it tender. He doesn't deal in opposites (beauty or ugliness, love or hate, right or wrong), but recognizes that they are defined by one another and they are like beads of water on a strand of web that move apart, or toward each other, and sometimes are so close that they combine and are inseparable, indistinguishable from each other. He just describes the world and people in a way that is raw and turned out, but he does it lovingly, without judgment. Maybe the connection between this and the above is that I am drawn to people who live in the world of all emotions and don't squeeze themselves (or others) into a box. We all do that sometimes, but you, for example, have a pretty huge capacity to accept complexity. I admire that. Maybe it's conceit to think that others don't possess that...maybe I need to be softer myself, towards others.