Chapter 14

Inquiry in the Arts

What's to Come:

- Applying the Guiding Questions to Inquiries about Art
- Interpreting Works of Art
- Making Critical Judgments about Works of Art
- Evaluating Disputes over Public Art

"Guernica"

Camillia Bell is taking a group of students through a new, and very special, traveling art exhibition. Present are Ahmed, Juanita, Lester, Winnie, Phil, and Stephen. The group comes across a painting, a very large canvass that takes up a whole wall (see image).



Phil: This is the famous painting that we all came here to see? You've got to be kidding! It's just a bunch of weird sketchy shapes and figures.

Stephen: Yeah—they don't look at all like real people.

Ahmed: It looks a lot like my little brother's drawings, the ones that we have on the fridge.

Juanita: You guys just don't appreciate art. I love it!

Ahmed: Why?

Juanita: It blows me away! I can't explain why—you can't explain these things.

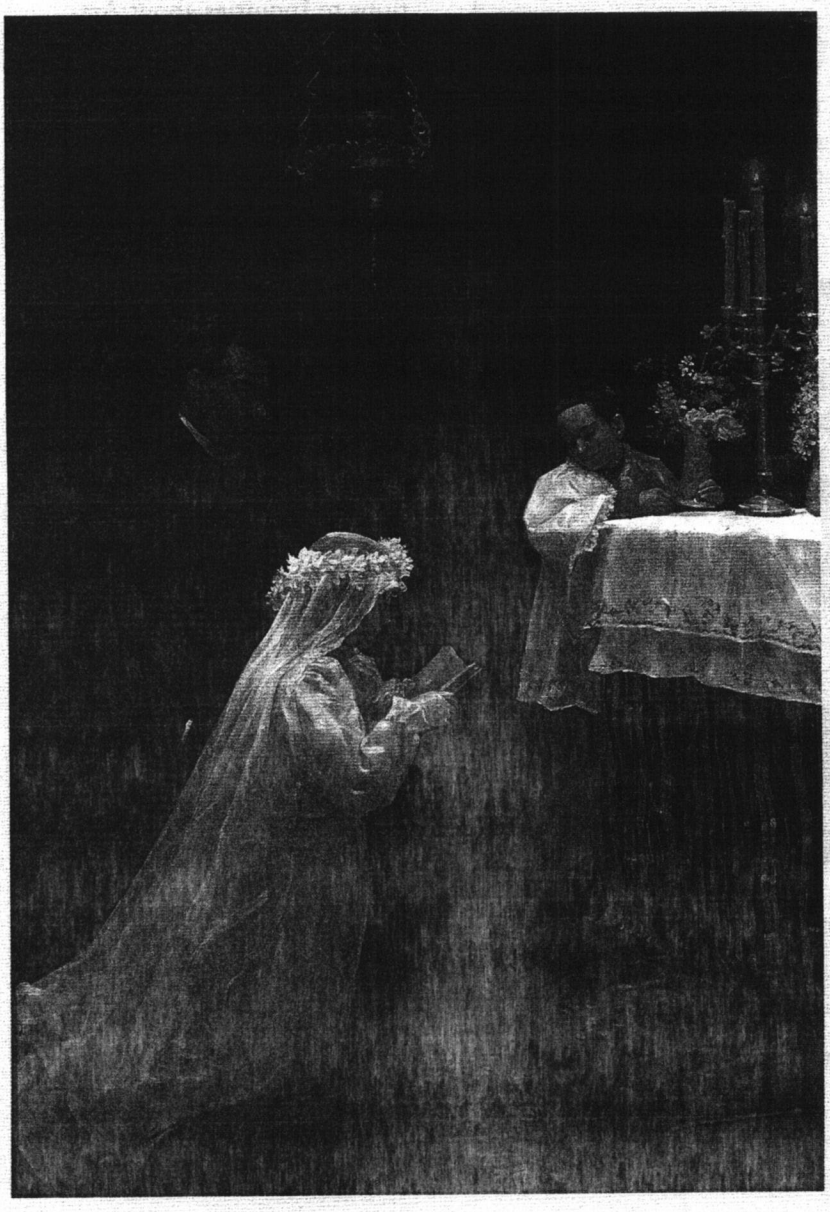
Winnie: I think that a painting either grabs you or it doesn't. Art's like that. It's all a matter of taste, just like food.

Phil: Well, for me, this one goes in the category of broccoli.

Ahmed: Hey guys, have a look at this one.

(Ahmed points to a painting on the opposite wall.)

Now this I can understand. It looks like a real scene with real people. I can see why folks think this is good. But I don't really understand why the other one is so famous. The guy can't even draw.



Lester: Well, I'm very struck by the painting, though I don't know enough about it to really judge. But experts who know a lot about art think it's pretty special.

Ahmed: But how can we make sense of it? How do we know if it's any good?

Camillia: You're all asking really great questions. It shows you're thinking about the artworks and reacting to them. Art should make you think and react. And your first reactions to the painting are important. But it is possible to go beyond your initial impressions, to try to make sense of the painting and consider its value.

Ahmed: Ah . . . so you're going to tell us what this painting means and why everyone thinks it's so great?

Camillia: Not quite. But what I can do, if you'd like, is give you some guidance and resources for investigating these questions yourself.

Winnie: You mean we're going to do an inquiry about this painting? I didn't think you could inquire about the arts—you know, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and all that.

Phil: Well, I'm sure game to try!

Others: Sure, let's have a go!

What Do You Think?

What is your initial impression of the first painting?

The students have come across an artwork that is challenging. It is not representational in any obvious way and they are puzzled as to what to make of it. Why is it painted the way it is? What does it mean? Why do experts value it so highly? How can they know if it is any good?

Most of the students have strong reactions, either positive or negative, but they don't know how to get beyond their initial impressions. Some of them, in fact, believe that this is not possible, that art is purely subjective, that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

It is true that, in the case of artworks, our personal, subjective reactions are important and should not be overlooked. It is, however, also possible to investigate, to find out more about a work and its context, be it a painting, a play, a dance, or a piece of music, and to make reasoned judgments about the work. And our reactions to a work may change in the process. Art can be the subject of inquiry in much the same way as science, politics, and the issues of daily life. Although there are important differences among these various sorts of inquiries, there are important similarities as well, as we shall see.

Inquiry on a Work of Art: *Guernica*

Phil: So how do we start?

Juanita: Since we're conducting an inquiry, why don't we see if we can use the "guiding questions for inquiry" that we've learned?

What Is the Issue? What Kinds of Claims or Judgments Are at Issue?

Ahmed: OK. So what's the issue? And what kinds of claims or judgments are we trying to make?

What Do You Think?

What is the issue? What kinds of claims or judgments are at issue?

Winnie: I can see two main questions that we're trying to answer: what does the painting mean, and is it any good?

Lester: Right. Now as for the kinds of judgments that we want to make. . . . For the first question, we're asking what the painting means, so I guess we'll need to make an interpretive judgment.

Winnie: And for the second question, we're going to try to evaluate whether the painting is any good, so we'll need to make an aesthetic judgment.

What Are the Relevant Reasons and Arguments on Various Sides of the Issue?

Juanita: And now we have the guiding question about the reasons on various sides of the issue.

Phil: This is the part where we go off to do research. So, folks, it's time to hit the library and the Internet.

Lester: Yeah, we need to see how the experts have interpreted the painting and why they think it's good—or not.

Camillia: For our inquiry about the painting, I'm going to ask you to begin with a different kind of research: observation. I would like you to start by examining the painting closely yourselves to see what you can see in the painting. Try to come up with some of your own hypotheses about what the painting means based on what you observe. At that point, we'll be ready to do external research about what others have said about the work.

Ahmed: So why shouldn't we just go straight to the experts right away? Why bother with this observation stuff? I mean, what do we know?

Camillia: It's a good idea to observe first because works of visual art are meant to be looked at and engaged with. Sometimes when viewers go directly to outside information, they never really look at the work closely or get involved with it. And they may never try to interpret the work themselves or make their own judgments; instead, they just depend on what others say. It is important to gather additional information to help you, but it's best to do so after you've had the chance to interact with the painting on your own terms.

The students have discovered that they can use the same structure of inquiry they used to guide their inquiries in other areas. There is a slight difference in that Camillia has asked them to leave their outside research until later and to begin with more direct, observational research. Many teachers of art appreciation recommend this approach because it fosters an early and direct interaction with an artwork. The viewer is encouraged to observe the details of the work, to think, and to raise questions. It is important not to bypass this process of personal engagement by immediately depending on outside sources for your interpretation and judgments, since you may end up never really thinking about and engaging with the work. And ultimately, art is to be engaged with and appreciated by each individual viewer.

Camillia has also asked the students to generate hypotheses based on their observations. This process of observation and generating hypotheses based on the evidence is one we associate most commonly with science, but we can see that it also plays a role in art appreciation. The process is not limited to works of visual art but can also be applied to novels, poems, musical works, in fact, works of any artistic genre.

The kinds of resources for inquiry we've seen before have been largely outside resources, from books and the Internet. But as we can see in this case, a person can also be a resource. Someone with expertise in an area can act as a mentor to guide participants and direct them to various aspects and other resources, as Camillia is doing in this inquiry.

Observation

Camillia: Let's start with what's written on the sign beside the painting.

Juanita: *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, 1937.

Phil: Picasso—I've certainly heard the name but can't say I know anything about him. But the word "Guernica" doesn't really mean anything to me.

Camillia: We'll come back to that. But for now, let's turn to the painting itself. In order to really observe carefully, I would like you to try and describe exactly what you see in the painting in as much detail as possible.

What Do You Think?

Describe the painting in as much detail as you can. Describe only what you see.

Phil: OK, I'll have a go. There's been this alien invasion and all the people and animals are misshapen because of this invisible particle-melting gas that the aliens have sprayed over everything and they're running away from—

Juanita: You've been watching too many horror movies, Phil.

Camillia: You've come up with an interesting interpretation, Phil. But at this stage, let's leave interpretation aside and try to simply describe what we see. What objects can you identify?

Ahmed: Well, I can see some people—mostly women—a few animals, and what I think is a statue.

Camillia: Let's try to describe them in more detail.

Juanita: Well, on the left I see a woman with her head tilted back and her mouth open. It looks to me like she's screaming. She's holding a baby. The way it's lying with its head back makes me think it might be sick—or even dead.

Lester: Just behind the woman there's a large bull. It's in a strange position, with its body facing the center, but its head faces the other way.

Ahmed: Oh yeah, so it is. I hadn't noticed that.

Winnie: In the center, there's this horse. Its head is raised up and its mouth is open. It almost looks to me like it's screaming too.

Phil: And look! There's something sticking into the horse's body—looks like some kind of knife or dagger. So maybe that's why it's screaming.

Ahmed: Good eyes, Phil. I didn't even see the dagger.

Juanita: Above the horse's head, there's a light of some sort. A light bulb? Or maybe the sun?

Lester: And I see a bird to the right of the bull's head. I think it's flying toward the light.

Stephen: I thought it was sitting on a roof.

Ahmed: I didn't even see it!

Winnie: On the top toward the right, there's a woman holding a lamp and leaning out of a window. And to the right of her, there's another woman. It looks like her clothes are burning; in fact, I would say that the whole building's on fire.

Juanita: Just below the woman with the lamp, there's another woman who seems to be rushing toward the left.

Phil: Along the bottom, below the bull, there's this figure, or at least its head and arms. It's like parts of a person—or maybe a statue. It has what looks like a broken sword in its hand, so maybe it's a statue of a warrior.

Winnie: I just noticed something else. There's a flower growing out of the warrior's sword.

Lester: Hey guys, have a look at this! If you look really closely at the horse's head, you can see a skull formed by the horse's nose and upper teeth.

Ahmed: No way! That's really cool! You know, I have to admit that I couldn't really see the point of all this observation stuff when we started. But others are pointing out things in the painting that I didn't notice. So now we know that we're all seeing the same thing, so to speak.

This process of describing a work in detail has an important point, as Ahmed has realized. It slows down the tendency to jump to conclusions (as Phil was beginning to do with his aliens interpretation) and allows viewers time to see as much as can be seen before deciding about meaning and worth. It also promotes agreement among the viewers on what they are looking at and gives them a store of visual facts which will form the basis for interpretation and critical judgment.

Camillia: So far, we've been looking at the content of the painting—what objects and actions you're able to identify. But we have to remember that an artist chooses to paint the content in a certain way. He or she uses lines, shapes, colors, patterns, and relationships to create certain effects, and knowing something about those choices can also help us to understand the work.

What Do You Think?

What do you notice about the way that the artist uses colors, lines, shapes, and patterns in the painting?

Camillia: Let's start with basic things, like the size of the painting.

Ahmed: It's huge!—I'd say about ten or eleven feet high, and probably over twenty-five feet long.

Camillia: How is it made? What media are used?

Lester: Oil paint on canvass, as far as I can tell.

Camillia: What about color?

Stephen: It doesn't really have any color to speak of—only black and white and shades of gray.

Camillia: What do you notice about the style of this painting?

Phil: The people and animals don't look like real people and animals. They're sort of . . . I don't know . . . weird and distorted—kind of like cartoon characters.

Camillia: Can you say more about how they're different?

Winnie: Well, the faces are just shapes, really. And everything looks kind of flat.

Lester: That's because there's no shading or perspective.

Camillia: Maybe you need to explain that, Lester.

Lester: Sure, Mom. Artists use perspective to give a realistic sense of space—the way objects look to the eye. Painters have known how to do this since the 1400s, so this painter must have chosen not to use it.

Winnie: Something else I'm noticing is that the painting seems very busy. The whole canvass seems to be filled up. There's hardly any blank space anywhere.

Phil: There's something that's kind of weird going on here. I know that this is just a painting and doesn't have any moving parts. But I get the feeling that everyone and everything's rushing toward the left.

Camillia: Why do you think that is? What is there in the painting that creates that impression?

Phil: Well, most of the people and animals are facing toward the left—even the bull, although his body faces right. And then there's that woman on the bottom right who seems to be running toward the left. And the woman with the light whose arm is stretched way out in that direction. They all seem to create a feeling of movement.

Juanita: You mentioned shapes and patterns, Ms. Bell. I can see some shapes and elements that are repeated in the painting. Like the heads of the woman with the light and the woman below her, which are the same shape. And then there are the two women with their heads back, screaming, one on the far right and one on the far left.

Lester: They seem to frame the painting and give it balance.

Winnie: You know, I always just thought about art in terms of how it affects us and whether someone likes a painting or not. I never really thought very much about how an artist uses lines and shapes and color and patterns to create those effects. It makes you look at the painting in a different way.

A work of art is more than its content, as Camillia points out. The artist makes deliberate choices in terms of materials and techniques to express what he or she wants to express in a particular form. And works of art will affect us because of the ways the artist has used the elements and principles of art to create the desired effects. In addition to subject matter, paintings have a style and an organization, and they make use of principles such as balance, repetition, and movement to do their work. Having some understanding of these elements, principles, and techniques can give the viewer another way into the artwork and another avenue for interpretation and judgment.

Apply Your Understanding ***Exercise 1***

Interpretation

Ahmed: OK, we've done all this observation stuff—which I have to admit was pretty interesting. But when do we get to the part where we find out what it all means? What is this painting all about?

What Do You Think?

What is this painting all about? How would you describe its mood or atmosphere? What feelings or emotions do you see in the painting? Is there a story being told in the painting?

Camillia: What do you think it's about, now that you've had a good look at it?

Phil: So it's time to generate some hypotheses?

Camillia: Yes indeed. Let's start with the mood or atmosphere.

Winnie: It's pretty bleak and horrible.

Camillia: Why do you say that?

Winnie: Well, the colors for one thing. It's very dark, all black and white and gray—not exactly your bright happy colors.

Lester: The use of black and white makes it very stark—and dramatic.

Winnie: And everything in the painting is so crammed together, with all the space used up. It feels very chaotic.

Camillia: What feelings or emotions do you see in the painting?

Juanita: Fear. And pain—terrible pain.

Ahmed: Violence and suffering.

Camillia: What do you see in the painting that makes you say that?

Juanita: The women on the far right and far left are both screaming in agony. And so is the horse. The other characters all have these anguished looks on their faces.

Winnie: And there's a woman on fire and an injured or dead baby.

Stephen: And a dagger and sword.

Lester: And don't forget the skull, which represents death.

Camillia: Is there a story being told in the painting?

Phil: There's been this alien invasion and all the people and animals—

Juanita: Oh Phil, there you go again.

Camillia: No, let's listen to Phil's interpretation. Phil, what do you see in the painting that makes you say that?

Phil: Well, you can see that something horrible and violent has happened because there are buildings on fire, people and animals have been injured or killed, and folks are scared and are screaming and crying—just like the others said. And I also think that the people are running away from something, probably something that's on the right because there's this sense of movement that we talked about.

Ahmed: I'm with you so far, Phil. But what about the aliens?

Phil: I'm getting to that. So I think, what are they running away from? And it reminded me of this horror movie I saw the other night where this band of extraterrestrials from the planet Zork land on earth and—

Juanita: We get the idea, Phil.

What Do You Think?

What is your assessment of Phil's interpretation? Why?

Ahmed: Sorry Phil, but I don't think I buy it. First of all, I don't think that they knew anything about particle-melting gas in 1937.

Winnie: And besides, we can see things like flames and a sword and a dagger, which would suggest some other explanation for the destruction and suffering, like a fire or a war. And these seem more likely explanations than the alien bit.

Juanita: I have to agree with the others, Phil. I don't see anything in the painting that would suggest an alien invasion.

Phil: But then why are all the people misshapen? I thought that the particle-melting gas was a great explanation.

Lester: It's my guess that the artist wasn't trying to make the figures look realistic. Not all art is realistic. I suspect that he had some reason to choose this particular style. I'm looking forward to finding out more about that when we do our research.

Ahmed: So we all seem to agree that the painting is about violence and suffering—probably war.

Stephen: If so, it's a pretty grim picture of war—none of those glorious war heroes.

Lester: The fact that the sword is broken and that there's a flower growing out of it would support the idea that the painting may be some kind of anti-war statement.

Juanita: Yeah, and the woman with the light might symbolize someone trying to find some hope in the situation.

Ahmed: But I'm wondering about the bull. What's he doing there, and why is he standing in that weird position?

Winnie: The bull makes me think of bullfights. And I know that Picasso was Spanish, so that would fit.

Phil: But he doesn't look like one of those charging bulls about to stick it to the matador. In fact, he looks kind of sad to me.

Ahmed: But why is he folded over?

Juanita: It seems like he's turned away from the horrible scene—like he can't bear to look at it.

Lester: It looks to me like he's protecting the woman and baby.

Phil: I'm wondering about why the artist made the painting so enormous. It's sure not your average hang-over-the-sofa picture. I guess he thought that he was making a statement about something big and important and that it deserved a lot of space.

Juanita: He must have wanted it to have a big impact (which it does).

Ahmed: OK, we've made all these hypotheses about what the painting means. Now do we get to find out if we're right?

Juanita: And if we are right that the painting expresses some sort of anti-war sentiment, then I'd like to know why the painter was moved to paint about this.

Phil: If Lester's right that Picasso chose to do the painting in this strange kind of style, then I would really like to know why.

Camillia: I think it's time now to move on and do some research about the artist and the context in which the painting was done so that you can try to answer those questions. There's an excellent resource collection on the main floor of the gallery with books, slides, videos, and Internet resources. I think you'll find what you need there for your research.

What Do You Think?

What do you think the students need to find out in order to answer their questions?

At this stage in the process, the students are beginning to apply what they learned from their observations to the task of interpretation—the task of trying to make sense of the painting and understand what it might mean. All artworks are about something, although what they are about may not always be immediately obvious. They may deal with subject matter or issues external to the work—for example, social issues in the culture such as war or poverty. They may have as their focus issues specific to the artist such as personal struggles or psychological traumas. But artworks can also be about form, about experimenting with color or line or technique. Much modern abstract art would fall into this category. And art is sometimes about other art, reacting to or commenting on other artworks or types of art. Some artworks are immediately accessible to most people while others are highly intellectual and may require more external knowledge for their interpretation.

You may begin the process of interpretation with your initial impressions, forming hypotheses on the basis of observations and then checking the interpretations against the evidence to see which hypotheses provide the best explanation of the evidence. This is the process that the students are using, and it has aspects in common with scientific inquiry (argument to the best explanation).

It is important to recognize that there can be a number of reasonable interpretations of the same artwork. Art is complex and ambiguous by its nature, engaging us by giving us the opportunity to think and imagine. It is not the case that there is just one and only one correct interpretation of a work. There may be several interpretations that are equally supported by the evidence, both observational and contextual. Having multiple interpretations is, in fact, a positive aspect since it is likely that no one interpretation will exhaust the meaning of an artwork. Thus there is a communal aspect to interpreting an artwork, as a group of people observing and discussing a work together can pool and debate their interpretations, as our students do, in order to delve more deeply into the meaning of the work.

Nonetheless, not all interpretations are equally valid. Some are more reasonable, convincing, enlightening, or informative than others. The main criteria that are often used to judge the validity of an interpretation are correspondence, inclusiveness, and coherence. Correspondence means that the interpretation corresponds with or matches what we can see in the artwork and what we know about the context. Inclusiveness means that the interpretation accounts for all the evidence and doesn't leave out any troublesome aspects that don't fit the interpretation. Coherence refers to the idea that all aspects of the interpretation fit together and that the interpretation makes sense as a whole. We can see these criteria at work as the students generate various hypotheses about the meaning of *Guernica* and as they provide evidence to support their interpretations, encouraged by Camillia's constant refrain, "What do you see in the painting that makes you say that?"

Criteria for Judging the Validity of an Interpretation

- correspondence—interpretation corresponds with features of artwork and with context
- inclusiveness—interpretation accounts for all the evidence
- coherence—aspects of interpretation fit together

Let's consider the interpretation which Phil offers for *Guernica* in order to illustrate in more detail how these criteria operate. First, it is important to note that many aspects of Phil's interpretation are justifiable according to the evidence in the painting. The idea that something violent has occurred, that people are suffering and frightened, and that they are running away from something all correspond to aspects that can be observed. Another point in its favor is that it does seem to be coherent in and of itself.

There are several ways in which Phil's interpretation goes off the rails, however. The most notable way is that his thesis that there has been an alien attack is not supported by any evidence whatsoever in the painting. His interpretation is not inclusive in that it leaves out aspects such as the dagger and the broken sword. In addition, his idea about particle-melting gas does not fit with what we know about the historical period nor does it take into account the fact that there may be a different and better explanation of the manner of portrayal in terms of a non-representational artistic style.

At this point, our students have come up with various interpretations of *Guernica*, both as a whole and in terms of individual elements, based on their observations of the painting, and they have supported their interpretations with evidence from the work. It is now time for them to do some outside research and gather information about the historical, political, and artistic contexts to take their inquiry further.

What Is the Context of the Issue?

Phil: Well, I now know what the title, *Guernica*, refers to. It seems that on April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi air force bombed the Spanish town of Guernica. They say that the attack killed as many as 1,600 people, and that lots more were injured.

Winnie: I read that Picasso had been commissioned to paint a mural for Spain's building at the Paris World Fair. He had some other ideas in mind for the mural, but when the attack happened, he changed his plans and painted the bombing of Guernica instead.

Ahmed: So we were right about the painting being about war.

Stephen: But we didn't know any details about the war or its context.

Juanita: The event was obviously very significant to him for it to be the inspiration for such an important mural. I wonder why. Did anyone find out anything more about the Spanish Civil War and Picasso's view of it?

Lester: I did. The Spanish Civil War was a major conflict that took place in Spain from 1936 to 1939. Nationalist rebels, led by General Francisco Franco, who was a fascist, were attempting to overthrow the Republican government. The German Nazis were their allies. The Nationalists won in the end and founded a dictatorship led by Franco.

Winnie: Apparently, the bombing of Guernica was a particularly horrible act. The village didn't have any strategic value, but it did have historical significance and was the cultural capital of the Basque people. The Nazi air force devastated the town, dumping 100,000 pounds of high explosives and incendiary bombs on it. They massacred huge numbers of civilians. The bombing of Guernica was seen as a symbol of the brutality of Franco and his Nazi allies. Picasso was very much opposed to Franco and to the fascists.

Juanita: We can certainly see in the painting how strong his feeling were against the war and the bombing.

Phil: I read that Picasso was so opposed to the fascists that after Franco won, he lent *Guernica* to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and specified that the work could only go back to Spain if democracy returned. Spain became a democracy again in 1978, and the painting went back to Spain in 1981.

Ahmed: You know, I have to admit that looking at the painting really carefully and trying to come up with our own interpretations really got me into the painting. And I'm impressed with all the ideas we could come up with before we even knew anything about it. But now that I know all these details about when and why it was painted and what was going on at that time, I can get a lot more out of it.

Juanita: Yeah, it's like I can really understand now how awful the event was and how devastated Picasso must have been about it.

Lester: But the painting's about more than the bombing of Guernica. I think that Picasso is also making a comment on the brutality and inhumanity of the fascists.

Winnie: It is really important to know something about the history and about Picasso's political views to understand that.

Ahmed: I was really wanting to find out more about this Picasso guy, so I concentrated my research on him. Listen to this: Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Martyr Patricio Clito Ruíz y Picasso (no, I'm not kidding) was born in 1881 in Malaga, Spain and died in France in 1973. His father was a painter, and young Pablo Diego José got pretty heavy-duty traditional art training from a very young age. In fact, he actually became a master of the realistic style. And—get this folks—you know that painting of the communion scene we saw earlier on (with the girl in the white dress kneeling) that I thought was so good—that was actually painted by Picasso, too!

Phil: So he did know how to draw!

Ahmed: And how! He went through a number of different styles after his realistic period: the Blue Period (mostly gloomy paintings in blues and greens); the Rose Period (more cheery paintings in oranges and pinks); the African-influenced period, when his work was starting to get less realistic, and then Cubism.

Lester: Ah, Cubism. I've been reading a lot about that (and seeing a lot of slides). It seems that the artists of this period were moving away from the idea that art should be realistic and copy nature. They were starting to reject the traditional techniques of perspective that I was talking about before. Apparently, they were trying to emphasize the idea that a painting is a human construction and that a canvas really has only two dimensions. So, instead of trying to create an illusion of three dimensions, they broke objects up into geometric forms and reassembled them in abstract ways. It's like they were focusing on what we know about objects rather than on how we perceive them. Cubist paintings let us see an object from several different angles all at the same time. *Guernica* wasn't strictly a Cubist painting, though; it was done after Picasso's Cubist period.



What Do You Think?

What are some of the Cubist influences that you notice in Guernica?

Winnie: But you can see elements that come from Cubism. The painting's not done in a realistic style. There's certainly no illusion of copying nature. The people and animals are mostly shapes, as we said before, and their bodies seem to be made up of separate pieces.

Phil: So I guess Lester was right that Picasso was actually aiming to paint like this. But why? I would think that an artist would want to make things look realistic.

What Do You Think?

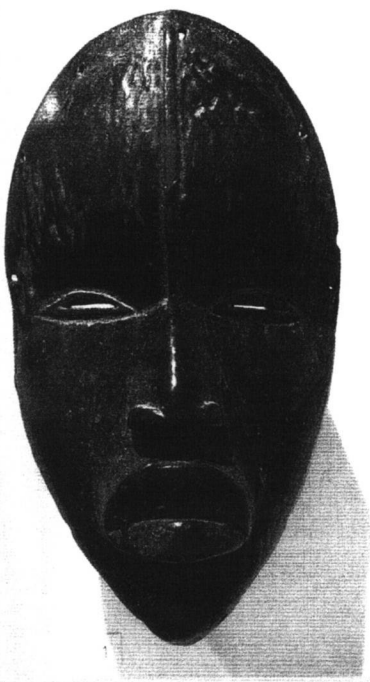
Can you think of any reason why some artists might not want their painting to look realistic?



Camillia: If you look at art throughout history and in other locales, it becomes evident that art hasn't always been focused on realistic representation. In medieval Europe, for example, paintings were made to inspire religious devotion and not to glorify the things of "this world," and so the placement and size of characters were determined by their importance in the religious hierarchy, and not by how they would actually look. The kind of representational art that we're so used to seeing really only became prominent in the Italian Renaissance in the 1400s, and it started to change again in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Did anyone find anything out about why the arts were moving away from representation during Picasso's period?

Lester: I did. I read in several places that a key factor was the rising importance of photography. After all, a photograph is a much better and more realistic representation of nature than any painting could be. So painting was left to find a different purpose.

Juanita: I also read that Picasso was very influenced by seeing Iberian sculptures and artifacts from Greece, Africa, and the South Pacific. Apparently the geometric features, the long noses and flattened, sunken faces in many of his paintings were inspired by these masks and sculptures which were very different from Western realistic sculptures. Have a look at these pictures I found. The resemblance is pretty amazing.



Winnie: Well, I was interested to find out how the art critics interpreted the painting.

Ahmed: At last, we get to see if we were right!

Winnie: It's not quite that straightforward, Ahmed. Everyone seems to agree that the painting is a statement about the horrors of war, so we were right on that count. But they also see it as a symbol for the Spanish people of their liberation from oppression, and that's something that we couldn't know without knowing about the background of the painting. But there is some disagreement among the experts about some of the symbolism in the painting. Some of them see the bull as representing aggression (in this case, the aggressive fascist state), and some see it as a victim of violence (here, the suffering Spanish people). And the horse with the dagger has been interpreted as either Franco's regime and its inevitable downfall or the Spanish people dying a senseless death. But both sides offer evidence from the painting for their interpretations, just as we did.

Ahmed: So we were doing what the critics do. How about that!

While the value of careful observation and initial reactions and interpretations has been evident in the dialogue, we have also seen that in the end it is difficult to interpret an artwork with any depth or accuracy without knowing about the context in which the work was developed. Knowledge of the historical and political circumstances surrounding a work can give us access to meaning in a way which is not possible without it. (This type of knowledge is more important for some works than others.) In the case of *Guernica*, for example, knowledge about the Spanish Civil War, the bombing of Guernica, and the fascist regime allows us to understand the events, emotions, and comments that are being expressed in this painting.

Knowledge about the artist, his or her personal and artistic history as well as social, political, and artistic views, can help us to understand what he or she is trying to express or accomplish in an artwork. In the case of *Guernica*, knowledge of Picasso's political views can give us insight into the meaning of the work. And an understanding of Picasso's Cubist and post-Cubist styles is indispensable for understanding why the painting is painted the way that it is and for preventing misunderstandings of the type to which Phil fell victim.

Apply Your Understanding *Exercise 2*

Understanding a work of art also involves understanding something about where the work fits into the history of art. It is important to recognize that art has a history and that its aims as well as its styles have changed and developed over time. Art changes in response to what is going on in the world and what has come before it artistically. Some works only make sense when seen in this context. In the case of *Guernica*, understanding the state of the visual arts at the time and the factors influencing its development (e.g., the development of photography, exposure to non-Western art) can help us to understand the departure from realism that Picasso's work exemplified.

Evaluation

Phil: We've considered our first question—what does the painting mean? But what about our second question—is it any good?

Ahmed: So is this where we get to see what the experts say?

Juanita: I don't know if we should be relying totally on experts for our judgments. After all, why did we do all this inquiry if we're just going to end up repeating what others say?

Stephen: These are people who have spent their whole lives studying art, so they should know what they're talking about. It should be worth listening to what they have to say.

Lester: I think it's important to know what they have to say but also why. Why do so many art critics value *Guernica* so highly? We need to know the reasons behind their judgments and what criteria they're using. Then we can evaluate their reasons plus our thoughts and reactions and come to our own judgments.

Camillia: What did you find out about the critical judgments of the art critics? What criteria were they using, and what criteria do you think are appropriate?

What Do You Think?

What criteria do you think are appropriate for evaluating works of art?

How Do We Comparatively Evaluate the Various Reasons and Arguments to Reach a Reasoned Judgment?

Juanita: My mom judges a painting by whether it goes with the sofa. Somehow I don't think that's an appropriate criterion.

Phil: And anyway, *Guernica* wouldn't fit over anyone's sofa!

Lester: The influence that a work has on the arts was one criterion that quite a number of the critics I read used. In that context, they talked about the major influence that Picasso's work had on the history of art. It seems that it changed the direction of art, revolutionizing painting and sculpture all over Europe, America, and Russia. It also inspired related movements in architecture, literature, and music.

Phil: So *Guernica* certainly was original.

Winnie: Uh-huh. I read that one of the big accomplishments of the painting was that it took traditional themes which had been prominent in previous paintings but reworked them to make them modern and relevant to a new time and context.

Phil: I also found out that Cubism has had a strong impact on the culture in general, beyond the arts. You can find Cubist-type images all over the place, for example, in ads.

Ahmed: And Picasso's name is certainly well known (well, maybe not his whole name). For instance, my mom always says to my little brother when he does his drawings, "I think we have a little Picasso on our hands."

Juanita: The painting was certainly important for the people of Spain, as a kind of symbol of their culture and their liberation.

Lester: But it also has a wider significance. It's become an international symbol of the horrors of war.

Juanita: That's all very fine. But I think that an artwork has to affect people emotionally. *Guernica* blew me away from the first moment I saw it. That's got to be important when we're talking about whether a work of art is any good.

Phil: Well, I didn't like it at the beginning. But I am kind of warming to it now.

Lester: I don't think it's just a question of whether one person likes it or doesn't (although that obviously matters to the person). If a work of art is going to be considered good, then it needs to affect many people over a long period of time. And *Guernica* has certainly done that.

Winnie: I don't think that it's enough that people have an emotional reaction. We should also learn something from a painting or other artwork, something important for the culture or for humanity, like the horror of war. A really good artwork should get people to see things differently and maybe want to change things.

Ahmed: From all the observing and discussion that we did, I can see that this painting really got us to exercise our imagination—Phil especially! We sure talked about the painting for a long time, and we came up with lots of interesting ideas.

Camillia: Perhaps we can summarize the criteria we've come up with and then see how *Guernica* fares overall.

Lester: Well, there's the influence on the history of art.

Winnie: The impact on the culture.

Phil: Originality.

Juanita: Whether it provokes an emotional reaction.

Lester: Whether a work withstands the "test of time."

Winnie: Expressing important ideas or values.

Ahmed: Encouraging imagination.

Phil: I have to admit that *Guernica* stacks up really well on all those counts.

Others: Agreed.

Phil: But I do have one negative. The painting is really hard to understand. Remember my first reaction? I wouldn't have given it a second glance if Ms. Bell hadn't encouraged us to inquire about it. You really need to look at the painting very carefully, to think a lot about it, and find out lots of information in order to be able to understand what it's all about and appreciate it.

Winnie: But is that really a negative? Why should we think that an artwork needs to be easy to understand at first glance to be any good? We learned so much from all the observation and research and discussion, and we were able to appreciate the painting in real depth. I don't think that "easy to understand" should be one of our criteria for the worth of an artwork.

Phil: You might be right. But what about if there was this painting that you couldn't understand even after doing all the observation and research? If it was so "way out there" that it was impossible to understand except by a few people in the know, I would think that would be a negative.

Winnie: Maybe you have a point there. My dad always complains that lots of contemporary music is like that.

What Do You Think?

Is the fact that an artwork is difficult to understand a negative point in evaluating the work?

Ahmed: While we're on the negatives, it doesn't seem to me that a painting like *Guernica* requires as much skill to paint as some of the other paintings in the gallery that actually resemble people and scenes. I was really surprised to find out that Picasso did that communion painting that we saw earlier. You would never know it from looking at *Guernica*. I would think that skill should be a factor for judging.

Lester: I agree that a painting that we consider good should be done with skill. But *Guernica* has a different purpose and is done in a different style than those paintings you're referring to, and it demonstrates skill in a different way.

Ahmed: OK, but I still think that it's somehow more impressive to be able to paint in that realistic style.

Camillia: Fair enough. So how do you think *Guernica* stacks up overall?

Ahmed: Well, I think that my complaint is a relatively minor one in the grand scheme of things. I have to agree that by all the other criteria, *Guernica* is a slam dunk.

Phil: Yeah, I'll buy that.

Criteria for Evaluating an Artwork

- influence on the history of art
- impact on the culture
- originality
- eliciting an emotional reaction
- withstanding the test of time
- expressing important ideas or values
- encouraging imagination
- skillful execution

Having explored the question of interpretation, the group now turns to the question of critical judgment: is the painting any good? In their research, the students have discovered what art critics have had to say about *Guernica*. While the views of those who have a great deal of expertise should carry some weight, the students realize that they should not simply rely on the judgments of others. It is important to know their reasons, however, as Lester realizes. Laying out the various reasons is a prelude to making a reasoned judgment in light of the context. Another requirement for making a reasoned judgment is knowing what criteria are appropriate, and the reasons offered by the critics are a good source of appropriate criteria for judgments about artistic worth.

The criteria suggested fall into different categories. Some of the criteria, such as provoking an emotional reaction, encouraging imagination, and accessibility, focus on the audience and its reception of the work. Other criteria, such as skillful execution and originality, relate primarily to features of the work itself. Still others, such as influence on art history and impact on the culture, focus on the work's influence on external circumstances.

It is important to determine which criteria are most appropriate for judging the particular artwork under discussion.

Not all criteria are equally relevant for judging every work, however. The criteria used must be appropriate for the purposes and genre of the work. For example, it would be inappropriate to judge *Guernica* by the criteria of accurate representation which are appropriate for realistic works, as Lester points out to Ahmed. Nor is dealing with a socially significant theme a relevant criterion for judging abstract works since they tend to have as their purpose experimentation with form rather than the expression of an external theme. Thus it is important to determine which criteria are most appropriate for judging the particular artwork under discussion.

Apply Your Understanding *Exercise 3*

In order to come to a reasoned judgment about the quality of the artwork, you must determine what evidence there is in the work and in the information about context that relates to each criterion and then comparatively evaluate the various reasons and evidence. The *Guernica* case is not overly contentious because of the sheer weight of positive critical judgments supported by considerable compelling evidence, as compared with very few negative critical judgments.

Phil does raise a negative point regarding the accessibility of the painting, and the issue of whether and to what extent this is a problem was the subject of some debate. Thus the appropriateness of the criterion he is using is up for discussion. Ahmed also expresses a reservation, in this case regarding the level of skill exhibited by the painting. Ahmed is drawing on what is generally considered to be a legitimate and important criterion of artistic worth. Lester disagrees with Ahmed's judgment, however, arguing that it is based on a misunderstanding about the nature of the genre. Thus he is disagreeing, not with the criterion but with the evidence offered related to the criterion.

In order to come to a reasoned judgment about the quality of an artwork, you must determine what evidence there is in the work and in the information about context that relates to each criterion and then comparatively evaluate the various reasons and evidence.

It may also be the case that Ahmed's judgment is based, at least in part, on a personal preference—he may simply not like non-realistic painting. But liking is not the same as critical judgment (Juanita's mother may not want to hang a particular painting over her sofa, but she still might recognize that it's a good work). In the end, Ahmed does concede that, given the weight of evidence, his was a relatively minor consideration.

There is a great deal of consensus on the importance of *Guernica*, but judgments regarding other artworks may be more contentious. In order to come to a critical judgment in such cases, it will be especially important to lay out the reasons on various sides and be clear about the criteria appealed to by various critics. It will also be important to determine which criteria are most appropriate to the particular work and which of these criteria should be given the most weight given the specifics of the work. In this regard, knowing the context of the debate surrounding the work and its artistic history may provide information relevant to its evaluation.

Apply Your Understanding *Exercise 4*

Knowing something about the purpose of a work, and the artistic background to which it is responding, can put us in a better position to choose among competing judgments. For example, in trying to make a critical judgment about an artwork such as Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (see the feature box on page 391), it is extremely helpful to understand something about the anti-aesthetic orientation, the rejection of traditional artistic materials and standards, and the blurring of the boundaries between art and life characteristic of much contemporary art.

The Meat Dress

One particularly controversial artwork is the sculpture *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, which was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1991. The sculpture consists of fifty pounds of salted, pounded raw steak stitched together in the form of a dress. The artist, Jana Sterbak, claims that the sculpture deals with issues of power, sexuality, control, and mortality, but the work has provoked outrage from politicians, food aid agencies, and the general public, some of whom have sent food scraps to the gallery in protest.[1]



The aspects of critical judgment we have looked at until now have relied largely on reasoned analysis, and one might well ask what role, if any, our own reactions to a work should play in critical judgment. What about Juanita's view that an artwork should affect people emotionally? Juanita is certainly right to some extent. A work that never elicited any kind of response from anyone at any time would likely not be very successful. Art should engage us emotionally in some way. This may involve purely aesthetic emotions and/or emotions related to our life experiences. So our own reactions are important and can be a starting point for judgment.

Simply relying on our own initial reactions as a basis for judgment would be a mistake, however, since our reactions may be quite individual, depending on such factors as our background, knowledge, and state of mind. In addition, our reactions to a work can change on the basis of knowledge and exposure (as seemed to be happening with Phil). An appropriate way to think about the role of people's reactions might be in terms of Lester's point that if a work of art is going to be considered good, then it needs to affect many people over a long period of time.

Camillia: Now that you've had the chance to observe and inquire about *Guernica*, it might be interesting to look back at your initial reactions. Have your thoughts or feelings about the work changed? If so, how? What made you change your mind?

What Do You Think?

Have your thoughts or feelings about the painting changed? If so, how? What made you change your mind?

Lester: The painting struck me right away. I've seen pictures of it in books, but seeing it live is really different—it makes a much stronger impression. But I didn't know enough to really judge the work or understand it in depth. Now I can understand why it's considered important and I can appreciate it at a different level.

Phil: I have to say that at first I couldn't really believe that this was the famous painting that people were making such a fuss about. It just seemed like a bunch of scribbles to me. But with all our inquiring, I kind of got into it. I really got involved in the story that we see in the painting. And the history around the painting is amazing. I learned a lot and can see now what the painting's all about. And I even understand now why Picasso did the painting in this weird style. I'm even starting to warm to it—kind of.

Juanita: As for me, I was blown away when I first saw *Guernica*, but I didn't think that you could explain those things. I'm still blown away by it, but now that I've found out more about the painting, I understand something about why it has the effect it does. And maybe I'm even more blown away now that I know all the awful facts about the fascists and the war and the attack on the village.

Winnie: I've sort of liked it all along, though I didn't really understand it at the beginning. But something really important that I've learned is that you can make critical judgments about art based on reasons and evidence. Art isn't just a matter of taste. Now I realize that I should take the time to really look at a work of art, and I now know something about how to look and what to look for.

Ahmed: When we first looked at the painting, I really didn't understand what the big deal was either. But now I can see why people think it's important. And I have to admit that looking at it and talking about it was pretty interesting. I can even see why others might like it. But I have to say that I still don't like it very much myself. Maybe I should, but I don't.

Winnie: Is there any reason why we should all agree about the painting at the end, Ms. Bell?

Camillia: No, there's really no reason in this case. It's important that we all go through the inquiry process and share our ideas and judgments. But in the end, we may come to different judgments, and as long as they're based on relevant criteria and evidence, that's just fine. And whatever our critical judgments, we still may have different preferences about what we like and don't like. What matters is that our inquiry opens up new possibilities for appreciating the work.

The Nature of Inquiry in the Arts

Our *Guernica* case has shown us an example of an inquiry in one area of the arts. Contrary to Winnie's original view that art is all a matter of taste, we see here that art can be the subject of inquiry. Inquiry in the arts shares many features with other types of inquiries and the same guiding questions can be used.

There are some interesting similarities in the process of inquiry in the arts and in science. The evaluation and weighing of reasons and arguments are central to both. Moreover, generating hypotheses based on observation, testing them against evidence, and seeking the best explanation of evidence all play some role in both endeavors.

There are also important differences, however. One of these has to do with the role of subjective factors in the inquiry process. In the arts case, the reactions of the

students to the painting constituted an important starting point for inquiry as well an important consideration at the end of the inquiry process. In addition, the collective reactions of people to an artwork was considered a relevant criterion of evaluation. This is the case because artworks are meant to be engaged with and appreciated by individual viewers. Engaging with artworks is not an entirely subjective process but also involves reasons and arguments, as we've seen throughout this inquiry. Critical judgment does not reduce to subjective impressions. Nonetheless, subjective reactions do have an important role to play and interact with objective factors.

In the case of science, on the other hand, subjective factors are not considered desirable. Although it has been acknowledged by contemporary theorists that scientific practice is not totally free of values and the personal commitments of scientists, every effort is made to minimize subjective influences and make scientific inquiry as objective as possible.

The purpose of an inquiry in the arts may also be different from the purposes of other sorts of inquiries. In the case of the *Guernica* inquiry, it was not necessary for the participants to come to an agreement about either of the two questions. No decision rested on the results of the inquiry, which was undertaken for the sake of gaining understanding and opening up possibilities for appreciation. There are cases, though, in which some decision or choice does rest on the outcome of an aesthetic inquiry, for example, whether you should go to see a certain film or whether an art gallery should buy a particular painting. In these cases, the issue is whether the work is worthy of the expenditure of resources (either time or money) and will repay one's serious attention and efforts to understand and appreciate it.

The example we've been examining involved an inquiry in the visual arts. But similar types of inquiries are possible in other areas of the arts. Inquiries about meaning and interpretation are common in literature, drama, and film but also occur in dance and music. Questions such as these all require interpretive judgments and can be addressed through the inquiry process: What's the meaning of the phrase "Do not go gentle into that good night?" What is the main theme of the novel *Catcher in the Rye*? Why did Hamlet hesitate in killing Claudius? What ideas are being expressed in the ballet *The Rite of Spring*? Questions that require evaluative judgments also occur frequently in all the arts, for example: Which is Margaret Atwood's best novel? Should *Boyhood* have won the Oscar? Who is the best contemporary rapper?

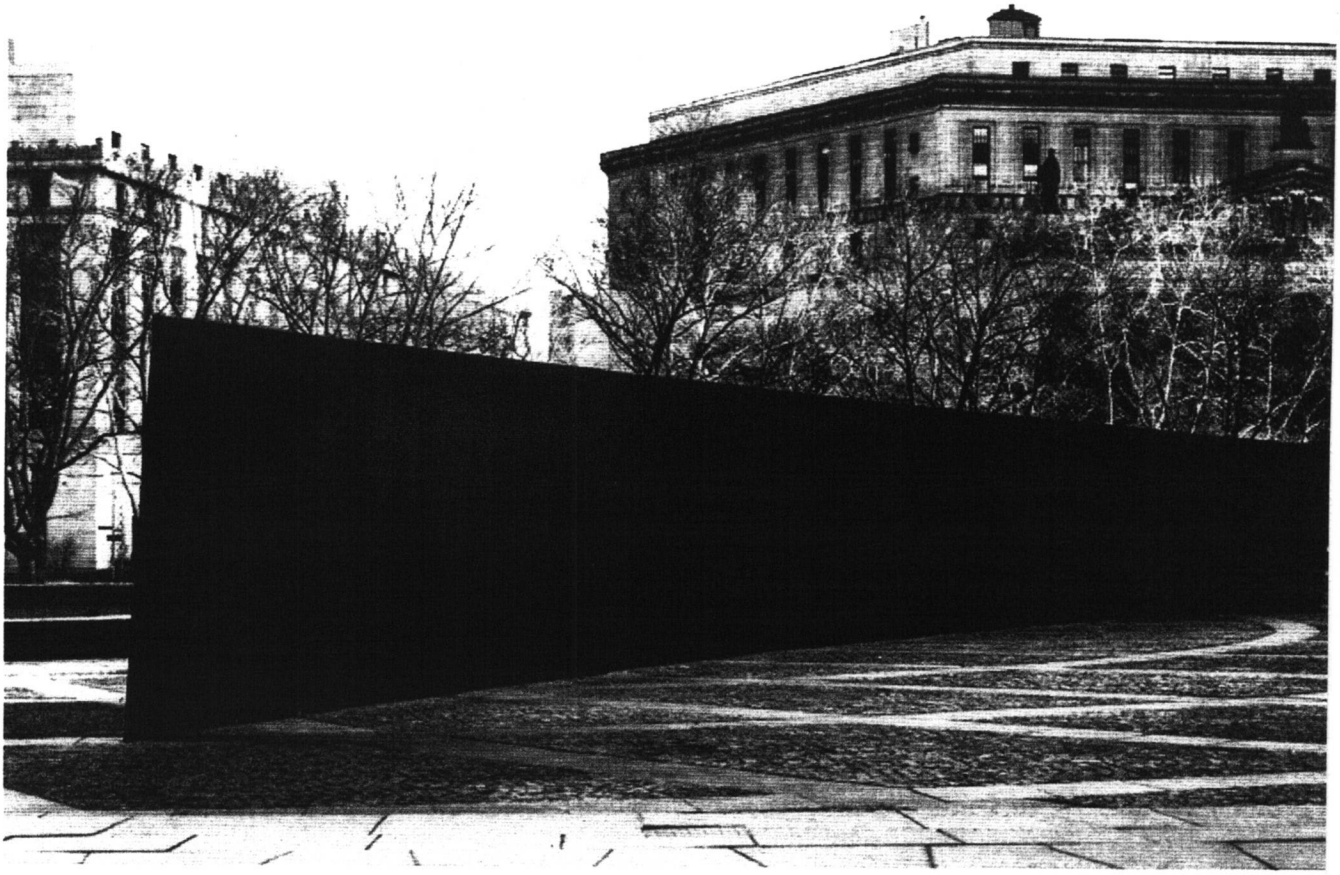
Although many of us may not spend a great deal of time in art galleries or concert halls, one way in which we are all constantly exposed to some aspects of the arts is through media. We are constantly surrounded by visual images and bombarded by musical and aural stimuli. In this context, many of the aspects of the arts which we have been investigating become relevant. It is possible to make critical judgments about visual and aural media through engaging in an inquiry of the type we've been looking at. One can ask questions of meaning and interpretation (e.g., What meaning or message does this image convey? and What effects does this ad intend to have on the viewer?). One can ask questions of evaluation (Is this an effective ad? or Is this ad truthful? Misleading?). Or one can focus on questions of form (How does this visual image create the desired effect?). From these various perspectives, it is possible to take a critical stance toward aspects of visual and aural media.

Apply Your Understanding
Exercises 5, 6

A Public Art Controversy

In 1981, a 12-foot-high, 120-foot-long sculpture titled *Tilted Arc* by the American sculptor Richard Serra was erected in Federal Plaza in New York City. The sculpture had been commissioned by a U.S. government body, the General Service Administration (GSA).

In March 1985, after a series of complaints and criticisms of the sculpture, the GSA undertook a public hearing to discuss whether the sculpture should be removed and relocated. The following excerpts are drawn from transcripts of the hearing.[2]



"Tilted Arc"

Joseph I. Liebman: My name is Joseph I. Liebman. I am the Attorney in Charge of the International Trade Office, Civil Division, U.S. Department of Justice, with offices located at 26 Federal Plaza. . . . Those of us who work there probably spend more time in the vicinity of the plaza than any other place. Our working environment affects our creativity, productivity, and our physical and mental well being, which impacts on our personal lives. . . . While the plaza never fulfilled all my expectations, at least until 1980 I regarded it as a relaxing, reflective space where I could walk, sit, and contemplate in an unhurried manner. . . . I remember the band concerts. I remember the musical sounds of neighborhood children playing on the plaza, while their mothers, sheltered under the courthouse, rocked baby carriages. . . . I remember walking freely in the plaza . . . undisturbed by the presence of other people engaged in conversation or young lovers holding hands. . . . All those things are just memories now, ending with the installation of the *Tilted Arc*. . . . The *Arc* has condemned us to lead emptier lives; the children, the bands, and I no longer visit the plaza. . . . Whatever artistic value the *Arc* may have does not justify the disruption of the plaza and our lives. . . . Relocate it on other land; reprieve us from our desolate condemnation.

Norman Steinlauf: My name is Norman Steinlauf, and I have been a tenant in this building since 1971. . . . [F]ederal employees, and more important the residents of surrounding communities, were not consulted regarding the *Arc*. Granted, most of us may not be experts on judging art, but we know when someone or something intrudes upon our environment, and that is a cause for concern. . . . No one asked those of us who "live" here for an opinion; that I believe is the democratic process—the missing element until this hearing.

Richard Serra: My name is Richard Serra, and I am an American sculptor, and American artist. . . . I don't make portable objects. I don't make works that can be relocated or site adjusted. I make works that deal with the environmental components of given places. . . . When a known space changes through the inclusion of a site-specific sculpture, one is called upon to relate to the space differently. . . . When the government invited me to propose a sculpture for the plaza, it sought and asked for a "site-specific" sculpture. As this phrase implies, a site-specific sculpture is one which is conceived and created in relation to the particular conditions of a specific site, and only those conditions. To remove *Tilted Arc*, therefore, is to destroy it. . . . It has also been suggested that the "public" did not choose to install the work in the first place. In fact, the choice of artist, approval of the sculpture, and decision to install it permanently in the plaza were made by a public entity, the GSA. Its determination proceeded on the basis of national standards, carefully formulated procedures, and a jury system to ensure impartiality and the selection of art of lasting value. The selection of the sculpture therefore was made by, and on behalf of, the public. The [Art-in-Architecture] program would have no meaning unless it effectuated, as well as signified and symbolized, freedom of creative expression. This implies that once the artist is selected, through objective procedures, the artist's work must be uncensored, respected, and tolerated, although deemed abhorrent, or perceived as challenging, or experienced as threatening.

Edward D. Re (chief judge, United States Court of International Trade): I want to emphasize that, personally and officially, I have never inhibited, and do not now wish to inhibit, artistic expression in any form. . . . However, from the moment the *Tilted Arc* was installed, we at the court received phone calls and visits by members of the public or public servants who daily visit and work in the Federal Plaza area. All who spoke to me or other members of the court uniformly expressed questions and doubts as to the placement of the *Tilted Arc* in the simple and open plaza. . . . What constitutes artistic expression is not the issue before us today. Rather, the issue is the governmental responsibility to the public when arriving at a decision to place art that is paid for with public funds in a public plaza or other public location. . . . The public . . . should participate in the decision-making process to purchase art with public funds for a public place. . . . My purpose is simply to highlight that the decision to place the steel wall was not made in accordance with due process and that the request for its removal stems from the public's desire that the plaza should not have been altered, dislocated and changed.

Virginia Kee: I am Virginia Kee, a resident of Chinatown. I am a member of Community Board #3. I am not here representing any group . . . but I am here as a person from the neighborhood. . . . History has shown that what may be valued in one time, or beautiful in one time to one group of people may be an outrage or an offense to others. Genius and beauty is always perception and, though I may not fully appreciate the *Tilted Arc* at Federal Plaza or the sculpture at Police Plaza, I defend their right to be there. . . . To remove a work of art based on perceived public pressure may be a dangerous precedent.

Representative Theodore Weiss: Imagine, if you will, this curved slab of welded steel, 12 feet high, 120 feet long, weighing over 73 tons, bisecting the street in front of your house, and you can imagine the reaction of those who live and work in the area. Many who first viewed *Tilted Arc* regarded it as an abandoned piece of construction material, a relic perhaps too large and cumbersome to move. . . . Mr. Serra argues that, because his work is site-specific, just to move it to another location would destroy it. It has, he maintains, a proprietary claim upon the plaza just as real as that of a painting to its canvas. But I suggest that there are other valid claims upon the plaza that conflict with Mr. Serra's, and that the scales tip in their favor. The community—those thousands of people who live and work in the area—have the right to reclaim this small oasis for the respite and relaxation for which it was intended. . . . Many of those who fear the removal of the *Tilted Arc* openly admit that the sculpture in this plaza . . . was ill-conceived. But they say that . . . they are concerned that relocating the work itself may establish a bad precedent. Being concerned about what wrongful things may be done in the future is no justification for allowing a wrong to continue in the present. . . .

Margo Jacobs: My name is Margo Jacobs. I am a physical anthropologist. . . . I am also married to Robert Allen Jacobs, one of the architects of the Federal Office Building and International Court of Trade. However, today I speak to you . . . as an individual and as a member of the public. I have a bachelor of arts degree in art and architectural history from New York University. . . . The plaza is a site-specific work of art incorporating a geometric pavement design, now disrupted. . . . The function

of the plaza or piazza or square has always been to encourage members of the public and workers from the surrounding areas to mingle, congregate, move freely back and forth. . . . That is what we had in Foley Square until a 120-foot long, 12-foot high metal sculpture was placed in the center, cutting the plaza in half and reducing its effectiveness as a public place. . . . Mr. Serra's work, according to him, was deliberately designed to change, alter, and dislocate someone else's artistic creation. This is wrong. The architects and landscape architects . . . consider themselves to be artists too. How would Mr. Serra feel if someone came in today and destroyed his design? From what I hear he would not like it.

Gustave Harrow: I speak as counsel to Richard Serra, and . . . I have a serious question to raise as to the legitimacy of the convening of this panel. . . . The convening of the hearing may be illegal because it was called by an official to consider breaching a binding contract between the government and an individual. . . . As to the due process: convening this hearing violates the meaning and spirit of due process, since it entails an effort to change the rules after the game has been played.

Rosalind Krauss: I am Rosalind Krauss, professor of art history at the City University of New York, and an art critic. . . . [T]he presence of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* invests a major portion of its site with a use we must call aesthetic. . . . The kind of vector *Tilted Arc* explores is that of vision, more specifically what it means for vision to be invested with a purpose, so that if we look out into space it is not just a vacant stare that we cast in front of us, but an act of looking that expects to find an object, a direction, a goal. . . . In the beauty of its doing this, *Tilted Arc* establishes itself as a great work of art.

Jessie Gray: My name is Jessie Gray, and I am speaking as an artist who lives outside of New York City but exhibits here in New York City as well. [O]ur public money is being squandered so that a small group of artists can make a financial killing. These artists are part of a . . . clique of galleries, curators, and critics. They write about each other, recommend and promote each other, and, as in the case of the Serra sculpture, they sit on each other's boards and advise and give grants and monies to each other. They, the political camp that is in control now, I believe, personally, advocates a dehumanized and minimal art, and in some cases an art that is . . . just plain smartaleckness. . . . Now the way they intimidate you is to just give you a smoke screen of intellectual mumbo-jumbo about art . . . and they will do this to make you feel you know nothing, should have no opinion, and just generally get rid of you. . . .

Clara Weyergraf-Serra: I am Clara Weyergraf-Serra. I am married to Richard Serra, and as his wife, have witnessed his involvement with the General Services Administration from 1979 up to today. . . . In spite of my general mistrust in government. . . . I cannot believe the manipulations and malicious tricks which have been used by governmental officials to achieve the goal of tearing down a work of art. . . . To perform this show trial is in itself an act of lawlessness. Inquisition-like procedures are being instituted under the guise of democracy. . . . A petition is circulating in the Federal Building asking those who work there to vote on the artistic merit of *Tilted Arc.* Are we really back to a situation where the "healthy instincts" of the people are going to decide what is art and what isn't? Book burning, I thought, was part of German history. The smell of burning books is in the air right here, right now.

Phil La Basi: I have been a federal employee for twenty-two years, about eleven years in this building. First of all, I would like to say that I really resent the implication that those of us who oppose this structure are cretins or some sort of reactionaries. It seems to be very typical of self-serving artists and so-called pseudointellectuals that when they disagree with something someone else has to say, they attack the person. So I am not going to attack the artist. What I see there is something that looks like a tank trap to prevent an armed attack from Chinatown in case of a Soviet invasion. . . . I think we can call anything art if we call that art. . . .

Joel Kovel: My name is Joel Kovel. I am a writer, a professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and at the New School for Social Research. . . . The value of art can never be determined by popularity contests or immediate concerns of taste. Every lesson from the history of art tells us that. The *Tilted Arc* is . . . subversive, and this very hearing proves its subversiveness and hence its value. . . . I would submit that it is the true measure of a free and democratic society that it permits opposition of this sort; and that, therefore it is essential for this hearing to result in the preservation of Serra's work as a measure of the value of opposition which this society can tolerate.

Roberta Smith: My name is Roberta Smith. I am an art critic. . . . The piece he [Serra] has made for the Federal Plaza is an excellent example of Minimalism, which has already been watched by the influential. . . . It is one of the two best public sculptures in New York City. . . . This is a confrontational, aggressive piece in a confrontational, aggressive town.

Harry Watson: Gentlemen, my name is Harry Delaney Watson. I work for the Bureau of Investigations of the State of New York as a supervisor. I have lived in this area for the last twenty years and work in this area. Every time I pass this so-called sculpture, I just can't believe it. . . . [T]his goes beyond the realm of stupidity. This goes into even worse than insanity. I think that an insane person would say, "How crazy can you be to pay $175,000 for that rusted metal wall?". . . I believe that it was a complete waste of money. . . . I can't see where anybody would approve such a piece of nonsense or garbage in this day and age, and I hope that this can be resolved and that it be taken down.

William Rubin: My name is William Rubin and I am director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. . . . About a hundred years ago the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists . . . were being reviled as ridiculous by the public and the established press. . . . By the end of the fifty-year period in 1939, however, the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists had long since been accepted by our culture as great voices of the Western tradition. . . . I tell this story because it illustrates a truth that seems to me very relevant in the present situation: namely, that truly challenging works of art require a period of time before their artistic language can be understood by a broader public. . . . I therefore propose that consideration of this issue be deferred for a period of at least ten years.

Holly Solomon: I have a gallery in SoHo and now I've moved to Fifty-seventh street. . . . I can only tell you, gentlemen, that this is business, and to take down the piece is bad business . . . the bottom line is that this has financial value, and you really

have to understand that you have a responsibility to the financial community. You cannot destroy property.

Betty St. Clair: My name is Betty St. Clair. I am associated with the law firm of Rabinowitz, Boudin, Standard, Krinsky and Liebman; and we represent the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. . . . ECLC believes that artistic expression, no less than religious freedom or political expression, is entitled to full and complete constitutional protection, and that our critical judgments of the merit of a particular artistic piece cannot justify, in constitutional terms, the government's action with respect to a particular piece of art. . . . The Constitution says that it is improper for government to decide, because a piece of artwork offends some people, that it cannot exist.

The public hearing over *Tilted Arc* constitutes an interesting case for our purposes for a number of reasons. First, it is an example of an actual inquiry that was conducted in order to make a decision about a controversial issue relating to the arts. The case is on historical record and the excerpts are based on actual testimony at the hearing. Focusing as it does on a work of public art, the case also provides an example of a number of issues in the arts which we have not looked at to this point—in particular, how artistic values interact with other types of values.

The case is somewhat different from other inquiries we've seen, however, because the speakers were simply offering reasons and were not themselves engaged in the entire inquiry process. It was, rather, the judge who oversaw the hearing who evaluated the various reasons and arguments in order to come to a reasoned judgment on the issue. This process is similar in some ways to the type of inquiry we see in trials, in which the witnesses give evidence, the lawyers make arguments, and the judge or jury evaluates the evidence and arguments and makes a judgment. The tasks of offering reasons and of evaluating reasons are present, but they are conducted by different individuals.

The excerpts quoted above constitute only a part of all the testimony given at the hearing. There has also been a great deal written about this case. All of this, in conjunction with the additional documentation available, can provide a rich source of material on which to base your own inquiry. In what follows, we shall work through some of the guiding questions together in order that, at the end, you will be in a position to conduct your own inquiry on this issue.

Public Art

The term "public art" refers to works of art that have been created by an artist specifically to be sited in a public space and therefore accessible to a broad audience. Such works may be permanent, temporary, or ephemeral. Within the art world, the term often indicates a particular working practice which includes site specificity, community involvement, and collaboration. Public art is sometimes controversial due to many factors: a desire on the part of the artist to provoke, the diverse backgrounds of the viewing public, and the issues it raises regarding the appropriate use of public resources and spaces and regarding civic oversight.[3]

Inquiry: *Tilted Arc*

What Is the Issue? What Kinds of Claims or Judgments Are at Issue?

What Do You Think?

Write down what you see as the main issue in this controversy. List some of the subsidiary issues which will need to be addressed in order to come to a judgment on the main issue. For each issue, specify the kind of judgment that is required. Compare your response to the analysis below.

The primary issue is whether the sculpture should stay where it is or whether it should be removed and/or relocated. This issue requires an evaluative judgment. There are a number of subsidiary issues that arise which require different types of judgments:

- Is the *Tilted Arc* (good) art? (aesthetic judgment)
- Would removal constitute an infringement of the contract between Serra and the government? (legal judgment)
- Would removal constitute a violation of freedom of expression? (ethical judgment)
- Would removal constitute a violation of due process? (ethical/legal judgment)
- Does the sculpture interfere with the use of the space in the plaza? (factual judgment)
- Would removal of the sculpture be bad for business? (economic judgment)
- Who should make decisions about public art? (political judgment)
- How do we weigh the value of artistic versus other types of values? (evaluative judgment)

What Are the Relevant Reasons and Arguments on Various Sides of the Issue?

What Do You Think?

Make a table of the arguments for and against the removal of Tilted Arc *that you find in the testimony. Check your list against the list of arguments below. Add any arguments that you didn't include in your table, and make note of any arguments you found that are not listed below. Add to the table any objections to the arguments and responses to the objections that you find in the testimony.*

Arguments for relocation

- It isn't art. It isn't good art.
- People who have to live with it dislike it.
- The plaza has become unusable for relaxation and for social functions and pleasures.
- It was a waste of public money.
- There was an absence of participation of the community in the selection process.
- It was an "in-group" with vested interests who decided on the sculpture.

Arguments against relocation

- It is aesthetically good.
- Expert opinion should have priority over popular taste in decisions about art.
- Time is required for new or difficult art to be accepted.
- Relocating site-specific art amounts to destroying it.
- The hearing is a violation of due process.
- The removal of the sculpture would be a violation of freedom of expression.
- The removal of the sculpture would violate the contract between the artist and the government.
- The removal of the sculpture would set a dangerous precedent, leading to increased censorship of public art.
- Removal of the sculpture would be bad for business.

There are a number of objections and responses which focus on the usability of the plaza, the process for selection, the implications of site specificity, and the issue of precedent, among others.

What Is the Context of the Issue?

What Do You Think?

There are numerous contexts which are relevant to the evaluation of the Tilted Arc *controversy. List all the various contexts which you can think of that might be relevant. Check your response against the list below and add any contexts that you have not included.*

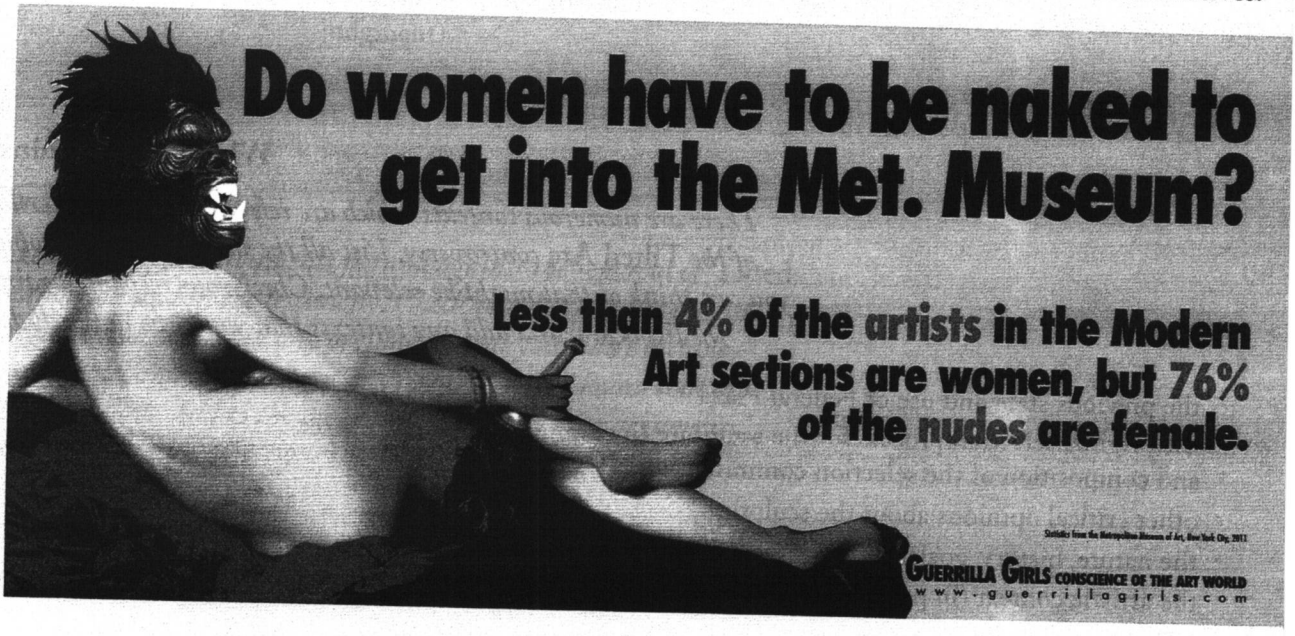
- the previous state and use of Federal Plaza
- the original selection process for the sculpture (including procedure, criteria, and composition of the selection committee)
- other critical opinions about the sculpture
- the nature, history, goals, and funding of public art
- the artistic context (in particular the style in which Serra worked; site-specific art)
- the legal context (regarding Serra's contract; constitutional regulations regarding freedom of expression)

- public opinion about the sculpture and the controversy (broader than just those testifying)
- the hearing (lead-up, procedures, politics, precedents)
- sources: the witnesses at the hearing (number, background, expertise, representativeness of those on each side)
- the media coverage of the controversy
- the sculpture itself (to see it for oneself in order to evaluate claims)

How Do We Comparatively Evaluate the Various Reasons and Arguments to Reach a Reasoned Judgment? In order to comparatively evaluate the reasons and arguments about this issue, it will first be necessary to evaluate the individual arguments. This will involve a prima facie evaluation, checking for fallacies and other problems in the reasoning (see Chapter 4). Conducting a comparative evaluation will also involve trying to think of alternative positions or additional arguments, evaluating reasons and arguments on the different sides of the issue, and weighing and balancing conflicting considerations.

Guerilla Girls, *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* (1990), New York

This billboard by the feminist art activist group Guerilla Girls and commissioned by the Public Art Fund in New York is a critique of museums that display paintings *of* nude women to the exclusion of art *by* women. The billboard juxtaposes the number of nude males to nude females in the artworks on display in comparison to the number of male versus female artists. The Public Art Fund rejected the work because it was too provocative. The Guerrilla Girls then rented advertising space on New York City buses and ran the ad themselves.[4]



What Do You Think?

Make a list of the considerations or values which are in conflict in the controversy. Check your list against the list below.

- aesthetic values versus other types of values (social, legal, moral, political)
- rights of artists versus rights of the community
- proprietary claim of original design of the plaza versus of the sculpture
- relevance and weight of expert versus non-expert opinion
- how to weigh testimonies of various witnesses—number? representativeness? expertise? how to take into account possible vested interests?

The case of *Tilted Arc* provides a very rich example of inquiry employed to resolve a real-life issue in the arts. Such controversies about public art are not uncommon. In the exercises that follow, you will have the opportunity to work through this case in more detail in order to reach your own judgment about the issue and to inquire about other public art controversies.

Apply Your Understanding
Exercises 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Check Your Understanding

- Why do teachers of art appreciation tend to recommend close observation of an artwork before looking at what others have said about the work?
- What are the main criteria for judging the validity of an interpretation in the arts?
- What are some of the strengths of Phil's aliens interpretation of *Guernica*? What are some of its problems?
- Why is it advantageous to have a group of people observing and discussing an artwork together?
- How did knowledge of the historical, political, and artistic contexts aid the students in interpreting *Guernica*?
- What are some criteria for evaluating works of art?
- What is the appropriate role of art critics' views in arriving at our own critical judgments of a work?
- In what ways is inquiry in the arts similar to inquiry in science? In what ways is it different?
- Describe *Tilted Arc*.
- What was the purpose of the hearing held by the GSA in March 1985?
- What were the main complaints of the tenants of the buildings in Federal Plaza?
- What were the main arguments by Serra in defense of the sculpture?
- What makes this case interesting for us when studying inquiry in the arts?
- How is the *Tilted Arc* case different from other inquiries we've looked at?

Exercises

1. The following exercises focus on the close observation of art works:
   i) Look at the painting on this Web site: http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/monet/adresse.jpg.html. (See exercise 14-1 on the textbook Web site.) Write a description of this painting in as much detail as you can. Include details of formal aspects (line, color, style, etc.) as well as details of content. Then compare your description with a partner to see to what extent your descriptions are similar and what is missed in each one.
   ii) Find a painting which strikes you as visually interesting. Describe it to a partner who cannot see it. The other person will try to make a drawing of the painting based on the description. See how closely the drawing resembles the painting.

2. Listen to the song "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel (you can hear it on YouTube). You can view the lyrics at http://sglyrics.myrmid.com/sounds.htm#track01 (or google "Sound of Silence lyrics").

   Your task is to develop and argue for an interpretation of the song which is appropriate and plausible. Use the following steps:
   i) Carefully analyze the language and images in the song, considering possible meanings.
   ii) Generate possible interpretations of the song based on the above.
   iii) Research the context in which the song was developed, including historical and social context and information about the writers' style and ideas.
   iv) Develop and argue for an interpretation of the song which meets the criteria for a valid interpretation.

3. Think of some piece of music that you think is good. List reasons that you like it. Compare it to a piece of the same genre which you don't think is as good. Give reasons why you judge one to be better than the other. What are the criteria that you are using?