Forget Kant's, Start your own Constructs:

Sharpening Students' Perspectives in Aesthetics

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Aesthetics is a course set in languages and arts department to equip students with capability to judge and appreciate artworks but students bear much more burden because they have to memorize many concepts. Further, they miss theoretical links when interconnections between concepts are hard to grasp. They feel desperate since there is a gap between a bulk of concepts and capability to apply and employ the concepts, or between theories and practice. Since aesthetics is a branch of philosophy, I am going to offer philosophical way of studying arts. One way of studying Philosophy is not memorizing ideas but studying how philosophers come into their ideas. They start from questions about anything. In the scope of aesthetics, I invite students to ask any question about arts. First, this strategyencourages them to have warm atmosphere of discussion. Second it also triggers their critical capacity. Then I lead them to a framework which accommodates their own constructs. Finally I map their various constructs into a globe of art perspectives. Then big theories such as expressivism, hedonism, cognitivism, essentialism, functionalism, formalism, realism, surrealism, institutionalism, structuralism, deconstructionism, and poststructuralism are no more than constructs which they can trace besed on their own sense of wonder upon the face of arts.

Keywords: aesthetics, construct, philosophy

Climate narrative

Layu sebelum Berkembang (*Die before Blossom*) is a documentary film by an Indonesian mother who witnessed how her child experienced a typical model of Indonesian elementary education. From the early beginning of their schooldays, children should follow what had been decided 'good' for them. They should know, memorize and follow. In school environment, there was no space available for their questions and curiosity. This also happens in secondary level. In the future they are expected to be good citizens, good clients and good humans, of course, without any question.

Is there any connectedness between elementary and tertiary education level? Once, I invited students into questions but I got no response. Then I asked them: "Do you remember when your teachers taught you to ask questions?" They said 'no' in an orchestra. What they did remember is answering teachers' questions for more than 12 years!

This is the intellectual climate I should deal with in my aesthetics class. Informally, I occasioned them to comment on theoretical classes such as mine. They told that these kinds of classes remainburdensome, as a bulk of texts to memorize. I am sure that practitioners

are eager to involve in a debate on the case. At this point, I am going to employ philosophical perspective to cope with this situation.

Aesthetics, at a glance

Aesthetics is a compulsory course for the sixth semester students ofEnglish Language and Literature Study Program. It is worth 2 credits. It is described as the following.

This course deals with the philosophy of art and **beauty**. It provides students with the history of aesthetics as a branch of science, right from the old Greek period until the postmodern era. It also covers philosophers 'different views and opinions about what the object of the study are, what **beauty** is, and what elements exist in arts' **beauty** and how arts' beauty is appreciated and judge. To get good understanding, students are to work in groups, discussing and compiling materials related to arts and **beauty** from the historical period and to present the materials in class. Assessment from this course is by group paper, group presentation, mid-semester examination and final examination.

There are two points to comment. Aesthetics is philosophy which provides students with ideas of art and their historical context from Greek to Postmodern era. Second, aesthetics is closely associated with beauty.

The first problem is placing aesthetics as a branch of philosophy which students have not been familiar with. This unfamiliarity means that they should be introduced with philosophy, history of philosophy, and elements of aesthetics just in 2 semester credits. This will bring them into confusion since the definitions and the elements of art seem unrelated because of their unfamiliarity with philosophy domain. Furthermore, books in aesthetics assume that their readers have already had some background of philosophy. The second problem is the general assumption that art is beauty. This is acceptable if the discussion of art makes use of a construct from a specific era. For example, Kant emphasizes that beauty is disinterestedly free. Otherwise, this construct is problematic when the discussion is about conceptual art which comes from contemporary era.

In first meetings, I invited them to talk about the definition of art. The central question was "What art is?" Most of them defined art as a form of beauty. Some conceptualized it as

expression of human feeling. To trigger them to get involved more into the discussion, some pictures were displayed on the screen.

Picture 1: *Karonsih* Dance

Commenting on this picture, students nodded and affirmedin an agreement that*Karonsih* dance contained graceful and beautiful movements so it was easy to have equivalence between art and beauty. It was also amendable to state that the dance was an expression of love. Accordingly, all would agree with the idea that art contained the elements of beauty and feeling. This logic led audience to the conception that beauty and deep emotion were valuable in human lives. This is a common and stable conception of art.

On the contrary, the students reacted differently when picture 2 was screened. The students seemedspeechless. There were various spontaneous responses: "It is indecent; pornographic; obscene; and erotic!" The stable conception above that art was strongly associated with beauty, grace, honour, and happiness stayed unreasonable for them. Some questions which represented their confusion happened next such as"How can you appreciate 'this' as art?; what is the basis to claim so?;and, Doesn't it corrupt our morality?" It is illogical; it is insensible to perceive this as an art form.

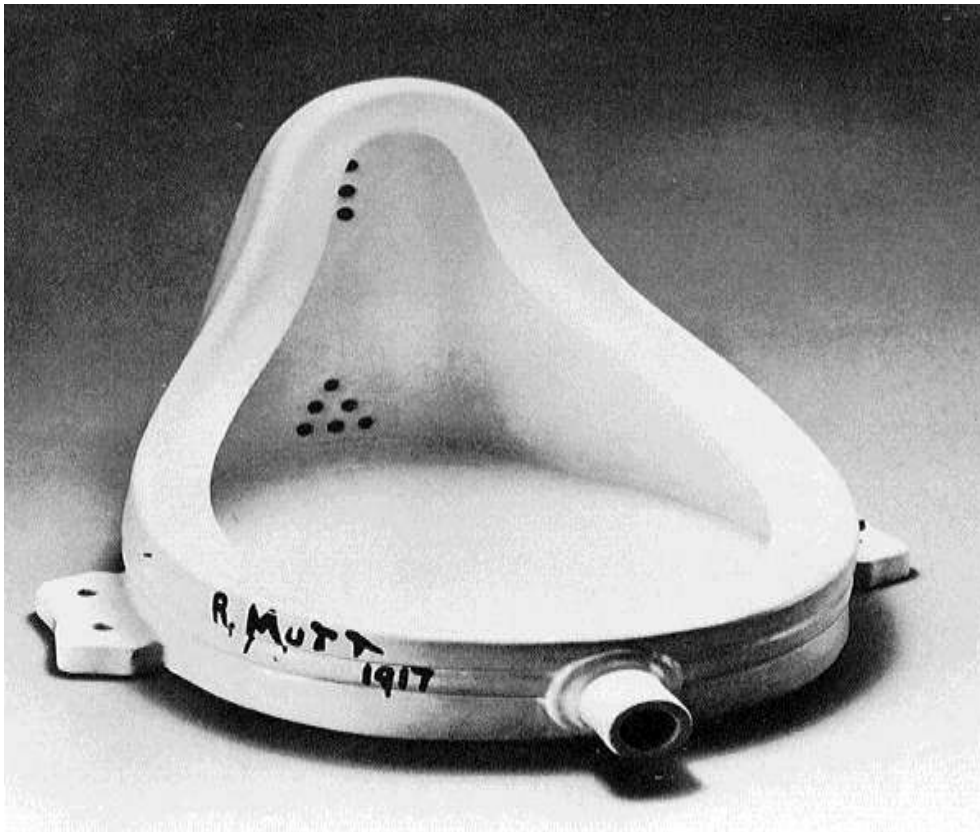Picture 2: Cotellete Dance entitled *the Death of Sex*

Instead of ending the discussion with final answer, I gave them more picture to compare and contrast. There were two art forms as the products of different eras. I asked them:"Can you label them as arts and why is the status of art attributed to each?"

Picture 3: Buddha in Borobudur Temple, Central Java

Picture 4: the Fountain by Marchel Duchamp

The paradox of drawing scenery

If meeting any Indonesian who spent their schooldays before and around the Reformation Era, you may test this case: ask her/him to draw scenery. You will find an identical pattern and objects. This will apply for the most: more or less the combination of two mountains, a sun in between, a home, trees, a way and paddy fields. There is a massive and stable visual construct of drawing scenery.

From critical standpoint one may ask whether the situation is the success or the failure of Indonesian education. It is debatable but, at least, I can sketch a link between the documentary film, the occurrence of the word 'beauty' in the aesthetics curriculum, the students' concept of art as beauty and the stable visual construct of drawing scenery. These identical conceptualizations end up with a homogenous perspective.

Talking about philosophical domain, I put aesthetics as a branch of philosophy which accommodates heterogeneous perspectives, not a homogenous one. So it is possible to employ not only a single perspective, but also different perspectives. One corner stone

which is impossible to be absent in philosophy is argumentation. It is open to questions. Taking the examples of the students' comments on the pictures above, I do not problematize their comments, their potential perspectives. What matters is how they come to their authentic questions before formulating their comments.

In line with I employ two strategies. First is foregrounding students' experience. The word 'foregrounding' means an act of bringing the students' suppressed capacity to pose questions into a concern. Following Socrates, lecturer is a midwife or facilitator to lead students into a dialogue of knowledge. Second, I adopt Gaarder's assumption. In his novel *Sophie's World*, he suggest that the best way of learning philosophers' ideas is not by memorizing them but by tracing how they come to their questions in formulating their ideas.

Forget Kant's: constructing students' perspectives

Kant metaphorically represents big and complicated ideas which are impossible to erase from the discussion of aesthetics. Then, my point is to locate his ideas on the basis of knowledge. His criticism philosophy is synthesizing rationalism and empiricism. In his Critique of Judgment, he places aesthetics judgment between the logically necessary and the purely subjective. Beauty is a central concept. When having discussion with students who conceptualize art as beauty, I apply bottom-up model with sharpening questions such as what beauty is, what part of mental process is used to value beauty, and how beauty is related to art. These questions do not delimit students' inquiry, but improve them to pose more questions.

Since aesthetics deals with ideas, this model illustrates how a perspective is formulated and constructed. So a concept or a theory does not come from unknown land but it is a part of students' comments which is formulated contextually and systematically. This is a part of epistemology which telling the process of how knowledge about something is constructed. This way more easily makes the integration of the complicated ideas into students' real knowledge.

On the case of the exemplified dance before, I try to explainit by giving a context that this is a *cotellete* dance entitled the *Death of Sex*. This genre pushes the possibility of female body exploration, female body as the battleground of different interests. Yet, I open a dialogue, an opportunity of accommodating their early comments into Plato's mimesis art theory which considers art as a false source of knowledge. At the same time, I also introduce that art is not only about a form but also about the concept beyond it. In contemporary art practice, it is called conceptual art. Then, the two constructs are put into comparison by calculating its context. Finally, the class will decide which one is more argumentative in appreciating and judging this art form.

In short, I make a simplified table to anticipate and to map out students' comments and questions while discussing various topics and art forms. This table facilitates students to locate their constructs into a broader aesthetics frame or theory. This model will invite students into a landscape of perspectives which are interlinked at certain extent. It is pivotal to know what perspective is in use when someone talks about art. So learning aesthetics primarily deal with basic concept which is integrated with their actual knowledge and with capability to analyze and criticize. Then learning aesthetics will be enjoyable since it is not burdensome and single-centred. This situation empowers them to be more participative than before. Students are not empty jars to fill in, but inquiring humans.

Examples of questions or comments	Art's elements	Constructs
What is the expressed feeling?	emotion	expressivism
What is sought in art?	Pleasure, enjoyment and beauty.	hedonism
What does art enhance?	understanding	cognitivism
What is art?	Definition, distinctive characteristics	essentialism
Which one is superior,	Art form and	Functionalism/formalism

function or form?	function, spirit	
What does art portray actually?	Real and imaginary	realism
Which part of the world is it?	existence	surrealism
Who establishes an object as art?	Authority of art status	institutionalism
What is the meaning based upon?	Binary opposites	structuralism
Why is there unpredictable/undecidable meaning?	Chain of signifiers, concept of concept	poststructuralism
Why is some aspect put into the central?	The table vs. the instable, centre vs. peripheral	deconstruction

An open closing

This is a share of my experience in facilitating my students to learn aesthetics. My text is more assumptive and speculative in nature rather than rigidly academic. I invite comments, suggestion and criticism especially in exploring its details. It needs more research to the betterment of learning process. If it is put in Hegelian dialectics, it requires antithesis to bear a synthesis.

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