

# Engaging with Beauty

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*This memo explores one of nine distinctive characteristics of ethical engagement through the arts. It is part of the research informing the report entitled: Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges.” This research was proposed by the [Community Arts Network](#) (affiliated with the [Porticus Foundation](#)) and carried out and written by [IMPACT: Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation](#).*

The memo explores the concept of beauty in relation to how it is conceived and positioned in various artistic practices and cultures, including 1) collective expressive art forms in the context of African and Indigenous cultures, 2) individual art practices in the context of Western, East Asian, Indian, and Islamic thought, and 3) participatory/community art. The discussion of each kind of artistic practice includes examples of art and culture initiatives that have the power to transform constructively. Further, the paper offers some thoughts on how beauty as an art quality can contribute to addressing complex global challenges, namely the legacies of violent conflict.

## Exploration of key concepts and examples of initiatives

### *Beauty in collective expressive art forms*

- ◆ **Two Rivers Pow Wow:** a group of Methow Indians, other Native peoples and Settler-descended people in the United States come together in Twisp, Washington (USA) to share rituals, stories, deep listening and meals.
- ◆ **Myall Creek Memorial Ceremony:** Aboriginal Australians and Settler-descended people gather in New South Wales, Australia, for the remembrance of a brutal massacre of Aboriginal People. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR1fhkpOPh0&list=PLx-paWOO14zUtFfATAF5CK1nD0pFlzroo&index=11&t=11s>)

Expressive arts theorists (Knill et al., 2004) see beauty as nourishment for the soul, especially needed in the times in which we now live, and an aesthetic response as the human capacity to be touched and moved by beauty. Beauty is a sensual, imaginative, and surprising response that has the capacity to reach the soul (Knill, et al, 2004).

Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (1988, 1992) argues that art-making behavior is an integral part of daily communal life and is universal; creative response is a biological tendency of human nature essential to survival. Dissanayake defines art as *the act of making special* - to make an experience special is to make art. She argues that art has been a living process centered around daily life and important issues people deal with for the most part of human history. According to her, engaging with arts nourished inter-communal bonds.

The ways that beauty and arts are perceived in some African and Indigenous cultures today are briefly explored below, building on Dissanayake's focus on 'arts for life sake'.

Dissanayake finds that art has been falsely separated from life and its meaning in communal life has been depreciated. She explains this disconnection of art from life and the rise of elite art institutions and appreciation of individualized art with the development of broad-based alphabetic literacy.

Written information can be categorized, analyzed, quantified, reviewed, and revisited while in oral cultures meanings are implicit, discontinuous, and conveyed and received simultaneously. Verbal arts are public and participative, and language must be vivid, inspirational, and memorable to catch the attention of those who engage. To the contrary, literacy enables a detached, mediated and isolated experience. Perception of information is also different in literate and oral contexts. Knowing that you can refer back to the information implies a different level of attention, whereas people in oral cultures have "no choice but to watch or listen and remember, so their participation in events, and their engagement with people, is much more direct and focused (Dissanayake, 1988, p.174). Thus, according to Dissanayake, literacy became the main factor influencing the formation of the modern perception of art.

Now that humanity is facing another shift from literacy to hyper-technological literacy it raises a question of what changes this paradigm shift will bring in and what forms the understanding of artistic and cultural expression may take. The extensive spread of technology-driven communication which went beyond text-based practice to include multimodal audio and visual means of communication such as photography, video, emojis integrated into applications, drawing pads, and others, opens new possibilities for embodied everyday creativity, which can even take collective forms. Development and the global spread of technology, on one hand, enable and re-privilege embodied, oral forms of expression and communication, but, on the other hand, not all communities can access these technologies equally and limitlessly.

### *Conception of beauty in African cultures*

The scholar of African studies Dona Marimba Richards (1993), refers to Kiswahili term *Kugusa Mtima* (to touch the heart) in her attempt of reconceptualization of the aesthetic "uniquely suited to African sensibilities," that relates to "power of a spiritual-emotional nature, which affects perception, thought and feeling" (p. 65). "*Kugusa Mtima*, according to Richards is the African experience of being "touched," "moved," "affected" by a self-consciously created form/phenomenon. This expression refers to powerful energies which act on reality and which act on us. They have the ability to change reality. The concept of *Kugusa Mtima* takes "aesthetic" beyond "beauty" and "pleasure," expands it and places it into the context of the profound African understanding/experience of the universe. *Kugusa Mtima* deals with transcendence, transformation, human consciousness, and the power of collective human will" (Richards, 1993, pp. 65-66).

As opposed to the western “art for art’s sake” concept, in African cultures the concept is rather “art for life sake” (Jegade, 1993) embodied in masks in ritual drama, dancing and drumming - a media for expressing and experiencing the most complex, nuanced African philosophical notions (Cohen, 1997).

## *Conception of beauty in Indigenous cultures*

Atkins & Snyder (2017) in *Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy: Integrating the Expressive*, refer to knowledge that Annie Kahn, a medicine woman from the North American Navajo Nation, shared with them. The word *hozho* in the language of the Navajo means beauty but in a wider sense than in reference to attractiveness or culturally determined ideals. “When the Navajo speak of walking in beauty, with beauty before, behind, beneath, above and within, as in the Navajo Night Chant, they mean to live in a way that is in balance and harmony with all other living things, recognizing and honoring the interconnectedness of everything” (p.70). For Navajo people, the experience of beauty is an essential condition of life. They see beauty not in objects or things but in relationships among things. Navajo sand painting, created as a part of ritual practice, is an example of art-making that encompasses the process of creating beauty, harmony and health. The aesthetic value lies in the process of the creation of the paintings, not their preservation.

In Indigenous communities, the arts are a communal phenomenon and are experienced to celebrate human life or mourn losses, honor nature and its cycles or movement of celestial bodies in the sky. Many Indigenous languages throughout the world do not have a specific word for art, as it is an integral part of life itself (Shiner, 2001). Expressive forms of art such as dancing, singing, drumming, ritual, and enactment are all intrinsic to other aspects of life and their spiritual, philosophical and cosmological understanding.

A belief that the world is alive and interrelated; a belief in the importance of community, and of story and imagination; a belief that human creativity is a part of the creativity of the natural world; and a belief that the arts belong to everyone in the service of life, including as enacted in ritual and ceremony are some key convictions in many Indigenous cultures that inform their approach to expressive art forms. (p.103).

As we see from the above examples from African and Indigenous communities, expressive art forms often serve the purpose of binding the group together and affirming collective meanings. Beauty is sought and appreciated in everyday life which is intertwined with art-making.

## *Beauty in individual artistic practice*

- ◆ “Cellist of Sarajevo” - **Vedran Smilovic**: Following the artillery shell that exploded near a bakery while people were in a line for bread in the besieged city of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), on May 27, 1992, Smilovic went out to that site with his cello and began playing Tomaso Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor. He did the performance 22 days in a row in protest of war and in memory of those who lost their lives in that conflict. (<https://daytonpeacemuseum.org/peaceherostories/vedran-smilovic/#:~:text=Vedran%20Smilovi%C4%87%20was%20principal%20cellist%20for%20the%20Sarajevo%20Opera.&text=He%20lived%20in%20Sarajevo%20when,would%20last%20nearly%20four%20years.>)
- ◆ Belgian Armenian cellist Sevak Avanesyan did a similar performance in the church of Ghazanchetonts in Shushi (Nagorno-Karabakh) after it was shelled on October 8, 2020. He played “KrunK” from Komitas as an outcry of mourning and resilience. (<https://www.thestrads.com/video/belgian-armenian-cello-plays-in-bombed-out-church/11333.article>)

## Western theory

My limited reading within the scope of this memo showed that beauty is one of the most complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical notions in Western philosophical discussions from ancient times until now.

Even the terminology itself in many cases leads to confusion, adding another layer of complexity. For example, the terms “beauty” and “aesthetics” or “arts” and “aesthetics” are used interchangeably in some sources. For the purposes of clarity, it’s worth mentioning that theories about beauty go back to the very beginnings of human thought while theorizing about aesthetics as such began only in the 18th century (Shelley, 2013). While beauty was **the main property** of concern and study for aesthetic theory through most of its history, by the middle of the twentieth century, beauty became just **one of the aesthetic properties** along with the sublime, the picturesque, etc. (De Clercq, 2013).

De Clercq (2013) explains the lack of a clear largely acceptable definition of beauty by its ambiguous nature, and also because it does not stand for a single property.

Some of the points of tension in the discussion around beauty lie in such dichotomies as subjectivity/objectivity, natural/artistic beauty, sensual/rational perception, and judgment based on pleasure/usefulness.

In western ancient and medieval thinking, the idea that beauty is an objective quality regardless of the viewer was long predominant. Plato talks about beauty in the context of love, and distinguishes between the “beauty of things and properties as they appear in the sensible world and ... eternal, unchanging and divine Form of Beauty accessible not to the senses but only to intellect” (Janaway, 2005, p.7). In Plato’s view, beauty as felt and experienced can be relative, and it may differ from one observer to another, from one instance to another or at different times, while the Beautiful itself is never relative, it is always there. Some interpreters of Plato argue that he took beauty too seriously to consider it in line with arts, hence he separated those two (Janaway, 2005).

In the 18th century, the concept of taste enters the area of philosophical discussion which opens a door to thinking about beauty as something subjective. Scottish empiricist David Hume (1711–76) and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) were among the influential thinkers of the time who discussed the standards of taste and the role it plays in the perception of beauty (Korsmeyer, 2005). Hume finds the taste in art developing in a similar way as does taste in food and drink as an “internal sense”. He recognizes the subjectivity of taste, “Beauty is no quality in things themselves, it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them, each mind perceives a different beauty...it fruitless to dispute concerning tastes” (Hume, 2017). However, he acknowledges that fine taste is something that one can be trained to develop by engaging with the great works that already gained recognition through time (Korsmeyer, 2005).

While recognizing the subjective nature of taste, Kant was in search of universality when thinking about aesthetic judgment, “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally... Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of an end” (Kant, 2017, p. 491 - 492). Kant links the judgment of beauty (or taste) to the feeling of pleasure, which is disinterested, meaning one does not carry any practical, moral or egoistic attitude towards the object and is completely indifferent to it (Davies et al., 2009). “A pure judgment of taste is, then, one which expresses a disinterested and universally communicable pleasure in the perceptual form of an object, considered apart from any concept” (Davies et al., 2009, p. 253).

Beauty is neither a property that exists entirely independently of the mind (which would be objectivism, as found in many medieval and classical works) nor a projection of a subjective state. (De Clercq, 2013). Beauty is a concept-dependent property. Beauty is exemplified only if there is actually a concept of beauty.

According to Kant, “A beauty of nature is a *beautiful thing*; beauty of art is a *beautiful representation* of a thing.” (Kant, 2017, p. 495). In order to appreciate beauty of nature, one does not need to know what the final look of the object should be: the object with its form is pleasing by itself. While a work of art, if it claimed to be beautiful, is supposed to carry a concept of what the object is intended to be.

Later, Hegel considered people’s identifying landscapes, natural scenes or animals as “beautiful” a “loose way of speaking,” while the true beauty is “born again of the mind”. Hegel was one of the

pioneers in conceiving the importance of context in understanding a work of art. While recognizing that artistic beauty can be appreciated in times and contexts far removed from those of the works' origin, he notes the importance of social, economic, ideological, and cultural contexts for understanding the meaning of art in its depth (Callen, 2009).

Various authors suggest multiple sets of concepts or domains for understanding beauty. For example, Sartwell (2017) introduced five philosophical conceptions in the understanding of beauty:

1. The classical conception: beauty consisting of an ideal composition of integral parts in harmony, symmetry, perfect proportions forming a coherent whole. This interpretation is present in classical and neoclassical Western architecture, sculpture, literature and music. This conception is also discussed in relation to mathematical science.
2. The idealist conception: beauty perceived as perfect unity or the unit itself. This perception gave rise to a mystical vision of beauty in God in the Middle Ages. In modern times this concept continued to be considered, particularly by Shaftesbury, Schiller, and Hegel, who mainly saw beauty as a bridge between the material and the spiritual.
3. Love and longing: the idea that love is a lack that seeks its own fulfillment in beauty and an infinite longing was present, since ancient times, through the Middle Ages and revived again in recent discussions about beauty. The thinking drifts away from the concept of pleasure and goes back to longing. E.g. Sartwell defines beauty as "the object of longing".
4. Hedonist conception: perceiving beauty in terms of pleasure which was prevalent among 18th-century thinkers.
5. Use and uselessness: perceiving beauty as a disinterested pleasure (Kant, 1790, cited in Sartwell, 2017) or from a distanced position (Bullough, 1912, in Sartwell, 2017). Others, like Berkeley (1732, in Sartwell, 2017) expressed a radically different position, stating that the pleasure in beauty is connected with the usefulness of the object and the perfectness of the proportions depend on what the object is, along the lines of the saying that a beautiful ox would be an ugly horse. Scruton (2009, in Sartwell, 2017) revisits Kant's argument and questions around subjectivity and objectivity.

In the 20th century, beauty came down from the pedestal of philosophical discourse. Arthur C. Danto (2003), in his book, *Abuse of Beauty*, explains this phenomenon with the frustration of artists (particularly starting from the Zurich-based Dada movement) after World War I and later, after the Vietnam War, who revolted against showing beautiful things in their art while the surrounding reality was so ugly. Interestingly, Elaine Scarry (2001) marks the start of the devaluation of beauty much earlier - at the end of the 18th century when Kant and Burke subdivided the aesthetic domain (previously called beauty), into two domains: the sublime and the beautiful. With this division, certain qualities were attributed to each realm, with sublime being recognized as masculine, strong, great, principled and noble, while beauty became associated with being feminine, charming, compassionate, good-hearted, and considered subordinate to the sublime. Scarry concludes that the sublime rejects beauty because it is less powerful, diminutive. The political rejects beauty because it is too powerful, in the

sense that the object of beauty is being damaged by being looked at (human, mostly female) and also beauty distracts attention from particular injustices as it can be perceived as closing one's eyes to the ugly surrounding reality.

Danto (2003) considered "the discovery that something can be a good art without being beautiful as one of the great conceptual clarifications of the 20th century philosophy of art" (p.58). Danto argues that something can be good art without being beautiful, and explores the contribution of beauty to the meaning of the artwork to which it belongs. The meaning of the work, he believes, is internally related to its aesthetic qualities. While beauty is part of the experience of art, it is not the only part of it. The experience of art is much richer and more complex than just being pleasing to the eye.

In the same piece, Danto (2003) draws a clear line between artistic excellence and aesthetic beauty. He does not find these two concepts interchangeable. Artistic excellence lies in the purpose arts serve or, in other words, the message an artwork is aiming to convey. For example, feminist art serves a clear purpose of changing the perception of women in society rather than pleasing the viewers or listeners. If an artwork enables a viewer to see the injustice that she has not seen earlier, then the artwork reached its excellence.

Some authors argue that beauty as a quality has re-emerged in arts and philosophical discussions during the last three decades (Brand, 2000, Zangwill, 2001, Brown, 2010 as cited in De Clercq, 2013; Sartwell, 2017). Danto (2003) finds these claims premature and believes that beauty can regain its position on the pedestal of arts in the same way that it once was not only with the changes in taste of people but also political changes. Artists can focus on beauty only if and when the world is a just, equal, and peaceful place for all or if artists stop caring about these issues and just create art for its own sake.

## Chinese theory

The Tao - "the Way" is a central concept in Chinese aesthetics which refers to the relations between nature and the human-made. Here, aesthetics is perceived as a natural organic activity for human beings, as a way of self-realization, or self-refinement, which is in close connection with nature (Williams, 2009).

Aesthetics in Chinese culture "incline towards the understated, the evocative, the lyrical, with an interest in negative capability and quiet surface. The ideal in painting is the hidden and obscure, in music the inaudible, in acting the motionless, in poetry the unstated. Painting is best in monochrome, music best in song for one or two, poetry best in the fleeting sigh of the brief lyric. The aesthete refines the human capability to live artfully, to create art and to perceive the true and beautiful in art and nature--something always there, but rarely perceived" (Williams, 2009, p. 69).

Chinese tradition values artistic geniuses but unlike Western tendencies, originality is a lesser concern in the traditional discourse. Instead, excellence is in perfect skills of the artist, their ability to master the principles of a particular art discipline and submission to the inner order of the world. The idea of



innovation is more present in the personality and life of the artist than the art produced by them. The aesthetic is more about the way the artist feels and perceives certain things while creating, rather than the art products, be it an object or a performance. Writings on aesthetics are more about how artists cultivate their inner world, how they interact with their media and the outside world, rather than on the works of art themselves. (Williams, 2009).

## Indian theory

*Rasa* - “pure aesthetic experience” or “aesthetic delight” is considered as a key element in Indian aesthetic theories. *Rasa*, among other things, is translated as taste, the highest delight experienced by the soul. And because it is an experience it is not inherent to the art object but is something belonging to the listener or viewer (Goswamy, 1991, p. 71). The concept of *rasa* addresses the relationship between artist, art object and the sentiment arisen in the viewer or listener by the art object. The concept also carries the “element of mystical and spiritual dimension. Here, beauty is explained in “terms of the enjoyment of perception or a state of sublime composure or blissful serenity which was a reflection, intimation, image or glimpse of the enduring bliss of the spirit (Raghavan, in Munro, 1965, p. 39).

The Indian theory of *rasa* refers to refinement of all the senses: touch, taste and smell. Unlike the Western aesthetics where only selected people with extraordinary genius are considered artists, in the Indian artistic tradition everyone can be considered as a special kind of artist. Art never came from the ego-centered individual, but rather from the community (Kumar, in Gablik, 1997).

## Islamic theory

There are no explicit theories on arts or aesthetics as such in Islamic theories. The term *jamâliya* in modern Arabic which can be translated as aesthetics has been borrowed from the west and is defined as the ‘science of beauty’. Muslim aesthetics lie in the saying of the Prophet, “God is Beautiful and He loves beauty” which creates a tight bond between art and faith. Art, and particularly architecture in Islamic tradition, center beauty – besides carrying a functional quality it also has to “display a purposeful sense of beauty” representing the unity (*tawhîd*) of spiritual and physical aspects of life (Ali, 2007).

The word *sâni'* in classical Arabic indicates a person who works with his hands, who does creative work, for example in crafts and trade. The artist produces an object which is to be used and also pleasing to the eye; the beauty of the object in its perfection. An artist is not considered a person with a gift, rather as someone who gained the knowledge and perfected his skills. The artists are most of the time anonymous, therefore, self-expression is not a concern in Islamic tradition; on the contrary, the artist is free from the self (Ali, 2017).

The artist's role is to discover symbols - symbols are not created, they are given. An artist's gift is considered to be in the ability to admire the beauty of the universe and suggest sensible forms that are worthy of that beauty. The selfless creative process of "presenting sensible forms as a work of art, as a beautiful thing, as a symbol is a path for coming closer to the spiritual" (Erzen, 2007, p. 71). The depiction of human figures or natural scenes does not have a spiritual reference in Islamic art, thus the traditional Muslim artist represents forms through a two-dimensional stylization instead (Ali, 2017; Erzen, 2007).

It's interesting to note that Chinese, Indian and Islamic cultures share some similar features that differ from Western understanding. For example, appreciation of the process and the inner senses cultivated by the artist in the process of art-making as opposed to the final product or attribution of utilitarian function to art objects (as in Islam). The idea of the figure of the artist in these cultures also varies. While in Western and Chinese understanding the self-expression and exceptionality of the artist is central, Indian tradition believes everyone has a creative capacity and can be an artist, whereas in Muslim culture an artist's merit comes into being as the artist obtains knowledge and perfects skills.

### *Beauty in participatory/community art*

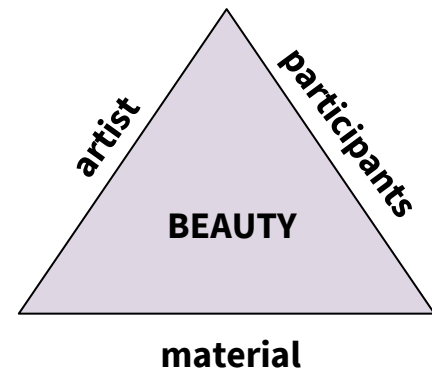
- ◆ **"Petals of Hope" - Artist Carole Kane** initiated cross-community workshops after the bombing of Omagh in 1998, engaging over 150 people in the creation of pictures from paper which they made out of flowers left in the town after the bombing (<http://www.carolekane.com/facilitation>). The images were shared in exhibitions and a book. (<http://www.carolekane.com/new-page>)
- ◆ **"Poetry Rains"** - Since 2011 the Chilean art collective Casagrande has been organizing Poetry Rains projects in the cities that were air bombed at some point in their history. Warsaw, Berlin, Santiago de Chile, Dubrovnik, and Guernica have been spots for the performances so far. Hundreds of thousands of poems rain down over people in public places as a protest against war and violence. (<https://www.gwarlingo.com/2011/the-art-of-poetry-bombing/>)

With the development of participatory or community art during the last two-to-three decades, the understanding of artistic beauty becomes even more complex. In the process where the traditional artist and audience roles are transformed, where the artist is a facilitator and the audience is a participant in art-making, a question arises of where to seek beauty.

Some authors argue that in the art initiatives with explicit a political agenda the aesthetic quality of the work is undermined by the socio-political outcomes and their impact on the individuals and communities concerned. This practice "led to an ethically charged climate in which participatory and socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism." (Bishop, 2012, p. 23, cited in Davey, 2019).

Other authors such as Grant Kester (2004), point more to the quality of the interaction and dialogue than to simple social usefulness (Finkelppearl, 2014). Kester talks about dialogical aesthetics giving importance to the relationships rather than characteristics of objects (Kester, 2004 in Holt, 2015).

Theatre scholar James Thompson (personal communication, January 28, 2021) describes the triangle of participatory art-making which has artist, participant and material on each side and highlights the power of the energy in the relations between these three elements as they come together. That's where beauty is born. In public-facing participatory or community art, the private intimate work process is much more important than the public show.



In another conversation with Eugene van Erven, artistic director of the International Community Arts Festival in the Netherlands, Thompson said, "Some people who judge artists locate virtuosity only in the final product. Perhaps what the community arts world offers the arts world is to try and account for the virtuosity in the process. And that is an amazing thing to offer. But to suggest that this is virtuosic (or can be) is a real challenge, a real provocation" (ICAF, 2018).

In the documentary film, *Acting Together On the World Stage*, van Erven talks about the aesthetic quality lying in the process of dialogues in community art projects or events. He sees aesthetics also in the struggle and negotiation artists undertake when facing certain circumstances creating obstacles in their work. Van Erven suggests that a new kind of approach is necessary for the critique of community-based participatory art. An art critic in the traditional sense of this word is not trained and does not have the relevant capacity to evaluate the excellence of a community-based theatre show, for example, by watching just a one-hour performance without witnessing the one-year-long process behind the show (Cohen & Lund, 2011).

Both the roles of the artist and the audience are transformed in participatory arts. An artist transforms from the individual genius into a facilitator of the process while the audience transforms from passive viewer/listeners to an active participant in the process (Melcher, 2017; Holt, 2015, 2015). Carol Kane, artist and peacebuilding practitioner from Northern Ireland (personal communication, January 28, 2021) speaks about the aesthetic responsibility of the artist as a facilitator in participatory projects, as someone with high sensitivity and high skills who is responsible for nurturing the aesthetic quality in the work with non-artist participants with fewer technical skills. The artist also must be attuned to all the qualities and possibilities the participants bring to the project.

# Contribution of beauty to constructively addressing complex challenges

Dagmar Reichert, who teaches Aesthetic Theory at Zurich University of the Arts and also does peacebuilding work in areas of violent conflict, particularly the Caucasus, shared an interesting point about beauty in a recent conversation. She said her students run away when they hear the word “beauty” while people in zones of violent conflict are longing for it. This juxtaposition provokes a question, how is that people in extraordinary challenging situations such as violent conflict are striving for beauty? We’ll now circle back to the questions of what beauty is, how it is perceived, by whom, in what context, and under which circumstances.

Above, we saw that Danto wrote that beauty is not the most important quality in the art concerned with socio-political issues. However, it’s also true that artistic processes engaging vulnerable communities and addressing socio-political challenges can’t be judged only by the product. Carole Kane, John Paul Lederach, James Thompson (personal communication, January 28, 2021) make two arguments about how beauty is crucial in a setting of violent conflict: (1) beauty as the opposite of ugly is a powerful way of distracting from the devastating reality; as people are distanced from the hard situation they gain the capacity to revisit it from a different angle; and (2) beauty or aesthetics as opposed to numbness comes to sharpen the senses in working with deep harm; reconnecting to humanity and restoring harmony (the original meaning of the word “aesthetics” in Greek is ‘perception by senses’ (“Online Etymology Dictionary,” n.d.)).

Elaine Scarry's (2001) book *On Beauty and Being Just* is an attempt to protect beauty from the political “attack” and show how beauty is important in the world becoming more fair and just. Scarry sees a connection between beauty as “fairness” and justice as “fairness” - a “symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other” (p.33) and argues that “when we see ourselves to be merely adjacent, lateral (subordinate) we are approaching more closely the state of equality. It’s alchemy of beauty” (p.113).

James Thompson (2006) in his article *Performance of Pain, Performance of Beauty*, building on Elaine Scarry’s theories on pain and beauty, explores what the performance of beauty looks like in war zones, its potential to inspire fairness and justice (as Scarry claims) or the risk of re-instigating pain among victims of violence. Thompson shows how the human capacity for destruction - war (performance of pain) and the capacity for creativity (performance of beauty) are connected in complex ways. For example, people express themselves in response to pain in ways that are similar to how they express themselves in response to beauty. A performance of beauty, which is intended to draw attention to the beautiful, could be an act of promoting community and social justice.

The physical enjoyment and energy that the performances (in Thompson's example it is a play, but it might be any other creative act) can bring forward in war zones are examples of beauty - "a performance of beauty moments that can make the heart beat faster, and people start a search for 'something of the same scale'" (p.56). Thompson also acknowledges that the performance of beauty and performance of pain are interconnected in complex ways and that the performance of beauty can cause harm as much as it might create beauty. However, the potential for becoming an "impetus in a search for justice" cannot be neglected.

Many complex challenges require people to face and stay present to painful realities. The energy and vitality of beautiful works of art and cultural productions can support people to face these painful truths. They can support people to stay present to suffering – their own and others – without losing their sense of vitality and possibility. (Cohen, personal communication, January, 2021).

## Author Biography

Armine Avetisyan is a peacebuilding practitioner focusing on creative approaches in transforming conflicts. She has been involved in building trust and creating platforms for dialogue among diverse groups from Armenia and Turkey, including local communities, artists, non-profits, local authorities and others to work together for building more just and peaceful societies. She co-directed the documentary "[Haven't We Shared Much Salt and Bread?](#)" where conflict transformation, food, gender perspective on building peace intersect. Armine holds an MA degree in Conflict Resolution and Coexistence from the Heller School at Brandeis University, and another MA degree in Cultural Management from Istanbul Bilgi University (Turkey). Armine is the Project Manager of [IMPACT](#).

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