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Aesthetics in Action: Arts in a Democratic Society: Les Aspin Center for Government

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The Les Aspin Center: Arts in a Democratic Society

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Early in my career, I realized that it would be important to bring my theoretical interests in aesthetics to bear on the ways that aesthetics and the arts help shape the societal and environmental dimensions of human life. This passion has led me to integrate aesthetics into a variety of projects beyond traditional academic pursuits including founding an art museum and volunteer leadership on numerous not for profit boards of directors for institutions concerned with the arts and other aspects of urban environments.

An invitation to create a program at the Les Aspin Center for Government on the arts in a democratic society for undergraduates studying at the Center, in conjunction with their semester long internships, allowed me to combine academic interests and a desire to activate the role of aesthetics in society beyond academic circles. The Aspin Center, founded in 1996 under the leadership of Reverend Timothy O'Brien, Director, in the Washington, D. C., is the home of Marquette University's undergraduate intern program for students seeking a semester long experience, relating to politics and public policy. This program offers courses related to government and public policy issues at the Center and participation in internships in Congressional offices and other related agencies. The semester long project on the arts in a democratic society is offered each semester since 1996 as part of the Center's curriculum. Additional

offerings include courses on the U. S. Congress, Interest Group Politics, Seminar on Urban Social Issues plus individual student internships. Application dates: mid-October for the Spring semester, mid-March for the Fall semester. Students who complete the program receive 15 credit hours. Costs include Marquette University Tuition, housing, and activities fees. Information is located on the Aspin Center Website: <http://www.marquette.edu/aspin/>

The arts in a democratic society project enables students, whose main objectives are centered on political science and future leadership in government and other aspects of public policy, opportunities for examining the societal roles of arts practices and arts institutions such as museums and other cultural organizations in a democratic society. The challenge was to create awareness and understanding by developing a program that would engage the interns in a philosophical grounding in aesthetics, research into the role of arts institutions, and experiential learning through direct contact with the arts through attendance at museums, theater, dance, and musical performances.

The program includes on site facility tours and seminar-discussions with museum professionals (curators, directors, administrators) at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, American Indian, Asian and African museums; the National Gallery, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the Library of Congress. Other site visits include: a session viewing urban street murals with a leading Washington mural artist, visits to private museums such the Newseum, Phillips Collection, and Anderson House, and the National Shrine in Washington. The interns also attend and write about their experiences at musical, theater, and dance performances: (National Symphony at the Kennedy Center, Arena Theater, and African Dance Theater, for example) throughout the semester in Washington.

The time frame for this semester long program consists of one week of daily sessions at the beginning of the semester, which run from 9 am to 8 pm with lectures, site visits, and discussion sessions. Each day ends with a two-hour discussion period from 6 to 8 pm. For their two-hour classroom discussion sessions, interns prepare a position statement on the discussion topics assigned for the session. The first hour of each discussion session is dedicated to responses to the site visits of the day. The second hour focuses on the theme for the session: For example the themes include: The Role of the Arts in A Democratic Society, Artists' Rights and Public Policy, Cultural Diversity in the arts and Public Policy, The Role of Government and Private Funding for the Arts, Public Arts and National Arts Policy, and The Art World and the World of Government: challenges and opportunities.

Two additional sessions, each one-month apart, include individual 30 minute tutorials based on a reading list with readings to be completed weekly in the interim periods between the professors' visits. Readings by philosophers, artists, and social science theorists who write on topics related to aesthetics and society are an integral part of the project. Interns must be prepared to discuss the readings in the oral tutorials, and cite the readings in their research projects.

Interns prepare a two-part research paper: the first half consisting of a written critical analysis of the 6 topics introduced in the discussions during the first week. The second half of the paper consists of an analysis of one of the cultural institutions (museum, theater, performing arts center, etc.,) which requires an interview with an official at the institution and other informational and interpretive sources that contribute to understanding the function, structure, and program of the institution, and assessment of its role, effectiveness, and contributions to a democratic society. A draft of part I and part II, respectively, is reviewed during the two tutorial sessions. These subsequent visits also include site visits, discussion sessions and attendance at a performance.

The objectives of the Arts in a Democratic Society project are these:

1. To foster personal growth in understanding visual and performing arts through analysis of the symbol systems used.
2. To introduce the role of aesthetics in the context of national policy issues.
3. To explore the role of aesthetics and the arts institutions in a democratic society.
4. To examine the role of not for profit arts institutions in a democratic society.
5. To prepare students for leadership in future arts policy decisions.