On February 12, 2005, across the 843-acre expanse of New York City’s Central Park, 7,503 saffron-colored fabric panels were dropped from the top of 7,503 saffron-painted steel gates, each 16 feet tall, to billow in the wind about 7 feet above the ground. The gates were positioned 12 feet apart (except where low-hanging tree branches extended above the walkways) and were of various widths, depending on the widths of the walkways they covered (there are 25 different widths of walkways in the park’s 23 miles of paths). Seen from the skyscrapers that surround the park, the gates looked like golden-orange rivers meandering through the bare branches of the park’s trees (Fig. 1). In the bright sun of New York’s chilly February days, they glowed with an autumnal warmth.
The Gates, New York City, Central Park was the creation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the husband-and-wife team that for the last 40 years has wrapped buildings around the world. Like their other projects, The Gates was a temporary work, up for a few weeks and then dismantled, leaving no trace of their presence behind. The total cost of the project was $21 million, financed entirely by the artists, as is true of all their projects, through the sale of preparatory studies, drawings, collages, scale models, and other works (Fig. 2). All of the materials used in the project were recycled—the fabric went to a firm in Pennsylvania, where it was shredded and respun; the vinyl framing was ground into half a million pounds of orange chips used to make fencing; and the steel, including the screws, went to a scrap yard in New Jersey, where it was melted down and sold worldwide. Christo and Jeanne-Claude donated merchandising rights to a not-for-profit environmental organization dedicated to preserving nature in New York City’s urban setting, which in turn shared its profits from the project with the Central Park Conservancy.

New Yorkers generally received The Gates with enthusiasm. For many, the work represented the rejuvenation of the city after the tragedy of 9/11, a festive celebration of life. The gates’ presence certainly revitalized the city’s economy, as more than four million people visited the park in just over two weeks, contributing an estimated $¼ billion dollars to city businesses. Those who complained generally found the steel, vinyl, and fabric constructions an intrusive violation of the natural landscape. But, Christo was quick to point out, the geometric grid pattern of the hundreds of city blocks surrounding Central Park—to say nothing of the rectangular design of the park as a whole—was reflected in the rectangular structure of the gates themselves. Furthermore, the park itself was a man-made construction. More than 150 years ago, the original architects, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, were commissioned by the city to create a park out of a rocky, swampy, and almost treeless landscape to the north of what was then the city proper. So barren was the area that the soil was inadequate to sustain the trees and shrubs that were purchased for the site. Olmsted and Vaux had 500,000 cubic feet of topsoil carted in from New Jersey. They created lakes, blasted out boulders, and sculpted hillsides. If today the park looks natural, it was originally as artificial—as constructed—as Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work of art.

If, as critic Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *New York Times*, “The Gates is a work of pure joy, a vast populist spectacle of goodwill and simple eloquence, the first great public art event of the 21st century,” viewers from Japan saw it in a different light. For them, it echoed the famous Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto (Fig. 3), dedicated to the Shinto god of rice, where more than 10,000 orange and black *torii* gates line 4 kilometers of mountain trails. The similarity between the two structures suggested an important environmental message to Japanese audiences. They saw *The Gates*, especially in its commitment to recycling and its support of the environmental organization, as a commentary on the refusal of the United States to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement designed to lower the overall emissions of six greenhouse gases that are believed to be a factor in global warming.

If the experience of *The Gates* project was undoubtedly different for its Japanese and American viewers, both groups nevertheless asked themselves the same questions. What is the purpose of this work of art (and what is the purpose of art in general)? What does it mean? What is my reaction to the work and why do I feel this way? How do the formal qualities of the work—such as its color, its organization, its size and scale—affect my reaction? What do I value in works of art? These are some of the questions that this book is designed to help you address. Appreciating art is never just a question of accepting visual stimuli, but of intelligently contemplating why and how works of art come to be made and have meaning. By helping you understand the artist’s creative process, we hope that your own critical ability, the process by which you create your own ideas, will be engaged as well.

**THE WORLD AS ARTISTS SEE IT**

*The Gates* project demonstrates how two different cultures might understand and value the same work of art in different ways. Similarly, different artists, responding to their world in different times and places, might see the world in apparently divergent terms. They do, however, share the fundamental desire to create. All people are creative, but not all people possess the energy, ingenuity, and courage of conviction that are required to make art. In order to produce a work of art, the artist must be able to respond to the unexpected, the chance occurrences or results that are part of the creative process. In other words, the artist must be something of an explorer and inventor. The artist must always be open to new ways of seeing. The landscape painter John Constable spoke of this openness as “the art of seeing nature.” This art of seeing leads to imagining, which leads in turn to making. Creativity is the sum of this process, from seeing to imagining to making. By helping you understand the artist’s creative process, we hope that your own critical ability, the process by which you create your own ideas, will be engaged as well.

*Fig. 3  Torii gates, Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto, Japan, eighth century.*

Photo: © David Samuel Robbins / Corbis. All Rights Reserved.
same path leads to discovery in science, breakthroughs in engineering, and new research in the social sciences. We can all learn from studying the creative process itself.

Roles of the Artist

Most artists think of themselves as assuming one of four fundamental roles—or some combination of the four—as they approach their work: 1) they help us to see the world in new and innovative ways; 2) they create a visual record of their time and place; 3) they make functional objects and structures more pleasurable by imbuing them with beauty and meaning; and 4) they give form to the immaterial ideas and feelings.

1) Artists help us to see the world in new or innovative ways.

This is one of the primary roles that Christo and Jeanne-Claude assumed in creating The Gates. In fact, almost all of their work is designed to transform our experience of the world, jar us out of our complacency, and create new ways for us to see and think about the world around us. As visitor after visitor to The Gates commented, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art transformed their experience of Central Park forever, altering their sense of its space, deepening their understanding of its history, and heightening their appreciation for its beauty.

The work of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama has much the same effect. Kusama is widely known for her fascination with polka-dots. In the late 1950s, she began to produce paintings that she called “Infinity Nets,” huge canvases painted all over in tiny circles. The paintings were a means of coming to grips with an obsessive hallucinatory vision that she first experienced as a child:

One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows
and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness.

Over a career that has spanned the last 50 years, she has covered people, rooms, buildings, and landscapes with her polka-dot patterns, and she has created installations—room-sized environments—that quite literally reflect her sense of “the infinity of endless time.” You Who Are Getting Obliterated in the Dancing Swarm of Fireflies (Fig. 4) is an example. Created for the new 2005 addition to the Phoenix Museum of Art—where it has quickly become the most popular work of art in the collection—it consists of a room, the ceiling, floor, and walls of which are covered with mirrors that reflect the flickering glow of tiny dots of LED lights suspended in the space on small strings. Passing through, the viewer feels literally awash in a space so vast that all sense of self—or at least self-importance—is obliterated. Kusama makes us aware of just how small we are in the grand scheme of things.

2) Artists make a visual record of the people, places, and events of their time and place.

Sometimes artists are not so much interested in seeing things anew as they are in simply recording, accurately, what it is that they see. The sculpture of Pat (Fig. 5) almost looks as if it is alive, and certainly anyone meeting the real “Pat” would recognize her from this sculpture. In fact, Pat is one of many plaster casts made from life by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, residents of the South Bronx in New York City. In 1980, Ahearn moved to the South Bronx and began to work in collaboration with local resident Torres. Torres had learned the art of plaster casting from his uncle, who had cast plaster statues for churches and cemeteries. Together Ahearn and Torres set out to capture the spirit of a community that was financially impoverished but that possessed real, if unrecognized, dignity. “The key to my work is life—lifecasting,” says Ahearn. “The people I cast know that they are as responsible for my work as I am, even more so. The people make my sculptures.”

Portraiture is, in fact, one of the longest standing traditions in art. Until the invention of photography, the portrait—whether drawn, painted, or sculpted—was the only way to preserve the physical likeness of a human being. And artists have always understood that in the myriad expressions and attitudes visible in the faces of the people who make up their world, something like the spirit of their age might be discovered.

In the sixteenth century, portraiture became especially valued by the Muslim Mughal leaders of India. When the Mughal ruler Akbar took the throne in 1556 at the age of just 14 years, he established a school of painting in India, open to both Hindu and Islamic artists, taught by masters brought from Tabriz, Persia. He also urged his artists to study the Western paintings and prints that Portuguese traders began to bring into the country in the 1570s. By the end of Akbar’s reign, a state studio of more than 1,000 artists had created a library of over 24,000 illuminated manuscripts.

Akbar ruled over a court of thousands of bureaucrats, courtiers, servants, wives, and concubines. Fully aware that the population was by and large Hindu, Akbar practiced an official policy of religious toleration. He believed that a synthesis of the world’s faiths would surpass the teachings of any one of them. Thus he invited Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others to his court to debate with Muslim scholars. Despite taxing the peasantry heav-
Part 1 The Visual World

Fig. 6 Attributed to Manohar, Jahangir in Darbar, Mughal period, India, about 1620. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 13⅞ × 7⅞ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund 14.654.

ily to support the luxurious lifestyle that he enjoyed, he also instituted a number of reforms, particularly banning the practice of immolating surviving wives on the funeral pyres of their husbands.

Under the rule of Akbar's son, Jahangir, portrai
ture found even greater favor in India. The painting Jahangir in Darbar is exemplary (Fig. 6). It shows Jahangir, whose name means "World Seizer," seated between the two pillars at the top of the painting, holding an audience, or darbar, at court. His son, the future emperor Shah Jahan, stands just behind him. The figures in the street are a medley of portraits, composed in all likelihood from albums of portraits kept by court artists. Among them is a Jesuit priest from Europe dressed in his black robes. The stiff formality of the figures, depicted in profile facing left and right toward a central axis, makes a sharp contrast to the variety of faces with different racial and ethnic features that fills the scene. But the painting does, nevertheless, fully document the variety and tolerance of the Mughal court.

No one would mistake Claude Monet's representation of the Gare Saint-Lazare (Fig. 7) for a portrait. And yet his depiction of the Paris train station that by 1868 was handling over 13 million commuter passengers a year captures, as fully as Jahangir in Darbar, the spirit of its age. Beginning in 1852, Paris had undergone a complete transformation. Long, straight, wide boulevards had been extended across the city. Working-class citizens, who had previously lived in the labyrinth of ancient streets that the boulevards replaced, were removed to the suburbs, along with the industry they supported. Shops, cafés, and the world's first department stores lined the broad sidewalks of the new promenades. New parks, squares, and gardens were built, and the avenues were lined with over 100,000 newly planted trees. In order to allow traffic to flow seamlessly around the train station, a massive new bridge, the Pont de l'Europe, was built over the tracks. By the time Monet painted
the Gare Saint-Lazare in 1877, these changes had been effected. His painting captures the transformation of not only Paris, but modernity itself. Here is a portrait of the new modern world, for better or worse—both the promise of the railroad, of modern speed and industry, and the atmosphere of steam and smoke created in its wake. All around this scene—and Monet painted it seven times in 1877—are the new open avenues of airy light, but here, Monet seems to suggest, just below ground level, lies the heart of the new modern city. In describing the world, the artist is free to celebrate and praise it, or critique and ridicule it, or, as is the case here, acknowledge its ambiguities.

3) Artists make functional objects and structures (buildings) more pleasurable and elevate them or imbue them with meaning.

It is, perhaps, somewhat surprising to recognize that the sculpture of a cocoa pod by African artist Kane Kwei (Fig. 8) is actually a coffin. Trained as a carpenter, Kwei first made a decorative coffin for a dying uncle, who asked him to produce one in the shape of a boat. In Ghana, coffins possess a ritual significance, celebrating a successful life, and Kwei’s coffins delighted the community. Soon he was making fish and whale coffins for fishermen, hens with chicks for women with large families, Mercedes Benz coffins for the wealthy, and cash crops for farmers, such as the 8½-foot cocoa bean coffin illustrated here. In 1974, an enterprising San Francisco art dealer brought examples of Kwei’s work to the United States, and today the artist’s large workshop makes coffins for both funerals and the art market.

Fig. 7 Claude Monet, Le Pont de l’Europe, Gare Saint-Lazare, 1877. Oil on canvas, 25¼ × 31⅞ in. Musée Marmottan, Paris, France. Giraudon / Art Resource, New York.

Fig. 8 Kane Kwei (Teshi tribe, Ghana, Africa), Coffin Orange, in the Shape of a Cocoa Pod, c. 1970. Polychrome wood, 34 × 105½ × 24 in. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Gift of Vivian Burns, Inc., 74.8.
Perhaps the object upon which cultures lavish their attention most is clothing. Clothing serves many more purposes than just protecting us from the elements: It announces the wearer’s taste, self-image, and, perhaps above all, social status. The *Karaori kimono* illustrated here (Fig. 9) was worn by a male performer who played the part of a woman in Japanese Noh theater. In its sheer beauty, it announced the dignity and status of the actor’s character. Made of silk, brocaded with silver and gold, each panel in the robe depicts autumn grasses, flowers, and leaves. Thus, the kimono is more an aesthetic object than a functional one—that is, it is conceived to stimulate a sense of beauty in the viewer.

Almost all of us apply, or would like to apply, this aesthetic sense to the places in which we live. We decorate our walls with pictures, choose apartments for their visual appeal, ask architects to design our homes, plant flowers in our gardens, and seek out well-maintained and pleasant neighborhoods. We want city planners and government officials to work with us to make our living spaces more appealing.

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**Fig. 9** *Karaori kimono*, Middle Edo Period, Japan, c. 1700. Brocaded silk, length 60 in. Tokyo National Museum.
Public space is particularly susceptible to aesthetic treatments. One of the newest standards of aesthetic beauty in public space has become its compatibility with the environment. A building's beauty is measured, in the minds of many, by its self-sufficiency (that is, its lack of reliance on nonsustainable energy sources such as coal), its use of sustainable building materials (the elimination of steel, for instance, since it is a product of iron ore, a nonrenewable resource), and its suitability to the climate and culture in which it is built (a glass tower, however attractive in its own right, would seem out of place rising out of a tropical rainforest). These are the principles of what has come to be known as “green architecture.”

The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center in Nourméa, New Caledonia, an island in the South Pacific, illustrates these principles (Fig. 10). The architect is Renzo Piano, an Italian, but the principles guiding his design are anything but Western. The Center is named after a leader of the island’s indigenous people, the Kanak, and it is dedicated to preserving and transmitting Kanak culture. Piano studied Kanak culture thoroughly, and his design blends Kanak tradition with green architectural principles. The buildings are constructed of wood and bamboo, easily renewable resources of the region. Each of the Center’s ten pavilions represents a typical Kanak dwelling (in a finished dwelling the vertical staves would rise to meet at the top, and the horizontal elements would weave in and out between the staves, as in basketry). Piano left the dwelling forms unfinished, as if under construction, but to a purpose—they serve as wind scoops, catching breezes off the nearby ocean and directing them down to cool the inner rooms, the roofs of which face south at an angle that allows them to be lit largely by direct daylight. As in a Kanak village, the pavilions are linked with a covered walkway. Piano describes the project as “an expression of the harmonious relationship with the environment that is typical of the local culture. They are curved structures resembling huts, built out of wooden joists and ribs; they are containers of an archaic appearance, whose interiors are equipped with all the possibilities offered by modern technology.”

Fig. 10 Renzo Piano, Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center, Nourméa, New Caledonia, 1991–1998. © Hans Schlupp / architekturphoto.
For many people, the main purpose of art is to satisfy our aesthetic sense, our desire to see and experience the beautiful. Many of Pablo Picasso’s representations of women in the late 1920s and early 1930s are almost demonic in character. Most biographers believe images such as his Seated Bather by the Sea (Fig. 11) to be portraits of his wife, the Russian ballerina Olga Koklova, whom he married in 1918. By the late 1920s, their marriage was in shambles, and Picasso portrays her here as a skeletal horror, her back and buttocks almost crustacean in appearance, her horizontal mouth looking like some archaic mandible. Her pose is ironic, inspired by classical representations of the nude, and the sea behind her is as empty as the Mediterranean sky is gray. Picasso means nothing in this painting to be pleasing, except our recognition of his extraordinary ability to invent expressive images of tension. His entire career, since his portrayal of a brothel in his 1907 Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (see Works in Progress, pp. 12–13), he represented his relation to women as a sort of battlefield between attraction and repulsion. There can be no doubt which side has won the battle in this painting.

From a certain point of view, the experience of such dynamic tension is itself pleasing, and it is the ability of works of art to create and sustain such moments that many people value most about them. That is, many people find such moments aesthetically pleasing. The work of art may not itself be beautiful, but it triggers a higher level of thought and awareness in the viewer, and the viewer experiences this intellectual and imaginative stimulus—this higher order of thought—as a form of beauty in its own right.
4) Artists give form to the immaterial—hidden or universal truths, spiritual forces, personal feelings.

Picasso’s treatment of women in both Seated Bather and Les Demoiselles d’Avignon gives form to his own, often tormented, feelings about the opposite sex. In Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, the power of these feelings was heightened by his incorporation of African masks into the composition.

When Westerners first encountered African masks in the ethnographic museums of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they saw them in a context far removed from their original settings and purposes. In the West, we are used to approaching everyday objects made in African, Oceanic, Native American, or Asian cultures in museums as “works of art.” But in their cultures of origin, such objects might serve to define family and community relationships, establishing social order and structure. Or they might document momentous events in the history of a people. They might serve a simple utilitarian function, such as a pot to carry water or a spoon to eat with. Or they might be sacred instruments that provide insight into hidden or spiritual forces believed to guide the universe.

A fascinating example of the latter is a type of magical figure that arose in the Kongo in the late nineteenth century (Fig. 12). Known as a minkisi (“sacred medicine”), for the Kongo tribes such figures embodied their own resistance to the imposition of foreign ideas as European states colonized the continent. Throughout Central Africa, all significant human powers are believed to result from communication with the dead. Certain individuals can communicate with the spirits in their roles as healers, diviners, and defenders of the living. They are believed to harness the powers of the spirit world through minkisi (singular nkisi). Among the most formidable of minkisi is the type known as minkonde (singular nkonde), which are said to pursue witches, thieves, adulterers, and wrongdoers by night. The communicator activates a nkonde by driving nails, blades, and other pieces of iron into it so that it will deliver similar injuries to those worthy of punishment.

Minkonde figures usually stand upright, as if ready to spring forward. One arm is raised and holds a knife or spear (often missing, as here), suggesting that it is ready to attack. A hole in the figure’s stomach contained magical “medicines,” often kaolin, a white clay believed to be closely linked to the world of the dead, and red ocher, linked symbolically to blood.

Such horrific figures—designed to evoke awe in the spectator—were seen by European missionaries as direct evidence of African idolatry and witchcraft, and the missionaries destroyed many of them. More accurately, the minkonde represented a form of animism, a foundation to many religions referring to the belief in the existence of souls and the conviction that nonhuman things can also be endowed with a soul. However, European military commanders
No one could look at Picasso’s large painting of 1906–07, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Fig. 15), and call it aesthetically beautiful, but it is, for many people, one of his most aesthetically interesting works. Nearly 8 feet square, it would come to be considered one of the first major paintings of the modern era—and one of the least beautiful. The title, chosen not by Picasso but by a close friend, literally means “the young ladies of Avignon,” but its somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference is specifically to the prostitutes of Avignon Street, the red-light district of Barcelona, Spain, Picasso’s hometown. We know a great deal about Picasso’s process as he worked on the canvas from late 1906 into the early summer months of 1907, not only because many of his working sketches survive but also because the canvas itself has been submitted to extensive examination, including X-ray analysis. This reveals early versions of certain passages, particularly the figure at the left and the two figures on the right, which lie under the final layers of paint.

An early sketch (Fig. 13) reveals that the painting was originally conceived to include seven figures—five prostitutes, a sailor seated in their midst, and, entering from the left, a medical student carrying a book. Picasso probably had in mind some anecdotal or narrative idea contrasting the dangers and joys of both work and pleasure, but he soon abandoned the male figures. By doing so, he involved the viewer much more fully in the scene. No longer does the curtain open up at the left to allow the medical student to enter. Now the curtain is opened by one of the prostitutes as if she were admitting us, the audience, into the bordello. We are implicated in the scene.

And an extraordinary scene it is. Picasso seems to have willingly abdicated any traditional aesthetic sense of beauty. There is nothing enticing or alluring here. Of all the nudes, the two central ones are the most traditional, but their bodies are composed of a series of long lozenge shapes, hard angles, and only a few traditional curves. It is unclear whether the second nude from the left is standing or sitting, or possibly even lying down. (In the early drawing, she is clearly seated.) Picasso seems to have made her position in space intentionally ambiguous.

We know, through X-rays, that all five nudes originally looked like the central two. We also know that sometime after he began painting Les Demoiselles, Picasso visited the Trocadero, now the Museum of Man, in Paris, and saw its collection of African sculpture, particularly African masks. He was strongly affected by the experience. The masks seemed to him imbued with power that allowed him, for the first time, to see art, he said, as “a form of magic designed to be a mediator between the strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.” As a result, he quickly transformed the faces of three of the five prostitutes in his painting into African masks.

Fig. 13 Pablo Picasso, Medical Student, Sailor, and Five Nudes in a Bordello (study for Les Demoiselles d’Avignon), Paris, early 1907. Charcoal and pastel, 18 1/2 × 25 in. Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kupferstickkabinett Basel.
Photo: Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Martin Buhler. © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
The Creative **PROCESS** and Pablo Picasso’s

**Les Demoiselles D’avignon**

masks freed him from representing exactly what his subjects looked like and allowed him to represent his idea of them instead.

That idea is clearly ambivalent. Picasso probably saw in these masks something both frightening and liberating. They freed him from a slavish concern for accurate representation, and they allowed him to create a much more emotionally charged scene than he would have otherwise been able to accomplish. Rather than offering us a single point of view, he offers us many, both literally and figuratively. The painting is about the ambiguity of experience.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the squatting figure in the lower-right-hand corner of the painting. She seems twisted around on herself in the final version, her back to us, but her head is impossibly turned to face us, her chin resting on her grotesque, clawlike hand. We see her, in other words, from both front and back. (Notice, incidentally, that even the nudes in the sketch possess something of this “double” point of view: Their noses are in profile though they face the viewer.) But this crouching figure is even more complex. An early drawing (Fig. 14) reveals that her face was originally conceived as a headless torso. What would become her hand was originally her arm. What would become her eyes were her breasts. And her mouth would begin as her bellybutton. Here we are witness to the extraordinary freedom of invention that defines all of Picasso’s art, as well as to a remarkable demonstration of the creative process itself.
saw them as evidence of an aggressive native opposition to colonial control. Despite their suppression during the colonial era, such figures are still made today and continue to be used by the peoples of the Kongo.

In the West, the desire to give form to spiritual belief is especially apparent in the traditions of Christian religious art. For example, the idea of daring to represent the Christian God has, throughout the history of the Western world, aroused controversy. In seventeenth-century Holland, images of God were banned from Protestant churches. As one contemporary Protestant theologian put it, “The image of God is His Word”—that is, the Bible—and “statues in human form, being an earthen image of visible, earthborn man [are] far away from the truth.” In fact, one of the reasons that Jesus, for Christians the son of God, is so often represented in Western art is that representing the son, a real person, is far easier than representing the father, a spiritual unknown who can only be imagined.

Nevertheless, one of the most successful depictions of the Christian God in Western culture was painted by Jan van Eyck nearly 600 years ago as part of an altarpiece for the city of Ghent in Flanders (Figs. 16 and 17). Van Eyck’s God is almost frail, surprisingly young, apparently merciful and kind, and certainly richly adorned. Indeed, in the richness of his vestments, van Eyck’s God apparently values worldly things. Van Eyck’s painting seems to celebrate a materialism that is the proper right of benevolent kings. Behind God’s head, across the top of the throne, are Latin words that, translated into English, read: “This is God, all powerful in his divine majesty; of all the best, by the gentleness of his goodness; the most liberal giver, because of his infinite generosity.” God’s mercy and love are indicated by the pelicans embroidered on the tapestry behind him, which in Christian tradition symbolize self-sacrificing love, for pelicans were believed to wound themselves in order to feed their young with their own blood if other food was unavailable. In the context of the entire altarpiece, where God is flanked by Mary and John the Baptist, choirs of angels, and, at the outer edges, Adam and Eve, God rules over an earthly assembly of worshippers, his divine beneficence is protecting all.

In a group of works known as the Siluetas (Fig. 18), done in the 1970s, Cuban-born Ana Mendieta attempted to come to grips with her own complicated heritage by transferring the silhouette of her own body into the landscape. In 1961, following the Communist
Revolution of Fidel Castro, Mendieta’s parents arranged to have her flown out of Cuba along with thousands of other children in what was known as Operation Peter Pan. For several years after, she lived in a Catholic orphanage in Iowa. “The making of my *silueta,*” she explained, “makes the transition between my homeland and my new home. It is a way of reclaiming my roots and becoming one with nature. Although the culture in which I live is part of me, my roots and cultural identity are a result of my Cuban heritage.” That heritage, on her mother’s side, extends back to the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of the Americas. When she created the *Silueta* pictured here, in Mexico, she stained it with red paint to evoke the oppression, even genocide, endured by the native peoples of the Americas after the conquest. Here the silhouette of the body seems transformed into the imprint of a large, bloody sword on the earth, the head and arms its hilt, the body its blade. The imprint of the live body evokes the grave of her forebears and gives form to the tragedy of her ancestral past.

**THE WORLD AS WE PERCEIVE IT**

Many of us assume, almost without question, that we can trust our eyes to give us accurate information about the world. Seeing, as we say, is believing. Our word “idea” derives, in fact, from the Greek word *idein,* meaning “to see,” and it is no accident that when we say “I see” we really mean “I understand.”
The Process of Seeing

But the act of seeing is not a simple matter of our vision making a direct recording of the reality. Seeing is both a physical and psychological process. Physically, visual processing can be divided into three steps:

reception → extraction → inference

In the first step, reception, external stimuli enter the nervous system through our eyes—“we see the light.” Next, the retina, which is a collection of nerve cells at the back of the eye, extracts the basic information it needs and sends this information to the visual cortex, the part of the brain that processes visual stimuli. There are approximately 100 million sensors in the retina, but only 5 million channels to the visual cortex. In other words, the retina does a lot of “editing,” and so does the visual cortex. There, special mechanisms capable of extracting specific information about such features as color, motion, orientation, and size “create” what is finally seen. What you see is the inference your visual cortex extracts from the information your retina sends it.

Seeing, in other words, is an inherently creative process. The visual system makes conclusions about the world. It represents the world for you by selecting out information, deciding what is important and what is not. Consider, for example, what sort of visual information you have stored about the American flag. You know its colors—red, white, and blue—and that it has 50 stars and 13 stripes. You know, roughly, its shape—rectangular. But do you know its proportions? Do you even know, without looking, what color stripe is at the flag’s top, or what color is at the bottom? How many short stripes are there, and how many long ones? How many horizontal rows of stars are there? How many long rows? How many short ones? The point is that not only do we each perceive the same things differently, remembering different details, but also we do not usually see things as thoroughly or accurately as we might suppose. As the philosopher Nelson Goodman explains, “The eye functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make.” In other words, the eye mirrors each individual’s complex perceptions of the world.

Active Seeing

Everything you see is filtered through a long history of fears, prejudices, desires, emotions, customs, and beliefs. Through art, we can begin to understand those filters and learn to look more closely at the visual world. Jasper Johns’s Three Flags (Fig. 19) presents an opportunity to look closely at a familiar image. According to Johns, when he created this work, the flag was something “seen but not looked at, not examined.” Three Flags was painted at a time when the nation was obsessed with patriotism, spawned by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist hearings in 1954, by President Eisenhower’s affirmation of all things American, and by the Soviet Union’s challenge of American supremacy through the space race. Many of the painting’s first audiences saw the fact that the flag becomes less grand and physically

Fig. 19 Jasper Johns, Three Flags, 1958.
smaller the closer it gets to the viewer as a challenge to their idea of America. While contemporary viewers may not have experienced that Cold War era, the work still asks us to consider what the flag represents.

Faith Ringgold’s God Bless America (Fig. 20) has as its historical context the Civil Rights movement. In it, the American flag has been turned into a prison cell. Painted during a time when white prejudice against African Americans was enforced by the legal system, the star of the flag becomes a sheriff’s badge, and its red and white stripes are transformed into the black bars of the jail. The white woman portrayed in the painting is the very image of contradiction, at once a patriot, pledging allegiance to the flag, and a racist, denying blacks the right to vote. She is a prisoner to her own bigotry.

Flags inevitably raise questions of national pride and identity. In a series of museum installations, Yukinori Yanagi has used ant farms as a means to make witty assaults on nationalism. For a museum installation entitled America (Fig. 21), Yanagi created a grid of plastic boxes, each filled with colored sand in the pattern of a national flag—representing the 36 countries of the Americas. Each box was connected to adjacent boxes by plastic tubing. Yanagi then introduced ants into the system, which immediately began carrying colored sand between flags, transforming and corrupting the flags’ original designs. As each flag’s integrity was degraded by these “border crossings,” a new “cross-cultural” network of multinational symbols and identities began to establish itself.

Yanagi’s work directly addresses the permeable boundaries that exist between countries sharing a single land mass; his other work makes a similar statement about border crossings on a global scale. Audiences have interpreted the work as an image of the destruction of local cultures or as the creation of a new multiculturalism. While the meaning of the work is open for interpretation, there is no question of its power to draw us into a closer examination of our perceptions of the world.
In this chapter, we have discovered that the world of art is as vast and various as it is not only because different artists in different cultures see and respond to the world in different ways, but also because each of us sees and responds to a given work of art in a different way. Artists are engaged in a creative process. We respond to their work through a process of critical thinking. At the end of each chapter of *A World of Art* is a section like this one titled *The Critical Process* in which, through a series of questions, you are invited to think for yourself about the issues raised in the chapter. In each case, additional insights are provided at the end of the text, in the section titled *The Critical Process: Thinking Some More about the Chapter Questions*. After you have thought about the questions raised, turn to the back and see if you are headed in the right direction.

Here, Andy Warhol’s *Race Riot* (Fig. 22) depicts events of May 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, when police commissioner Bull Connor employed attack dogs and fire hoses to disperse civil rights demonstrators led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The traditional roles of the artist—to help us see the world in new or innovative ways; to make a visual record of the people, places, and events of their time and place; to make functional objects and structures more pleasurable and elevate them or imbue them with meaning; and to give form to the immaterial, hidden or universal truths, spiritual forces, or personal feelings—are all part of a more general creative impulse that leads, ultimately, to the work of art. Which of these is, in your opinion, the most important for Warhol in creating this work? Did any of the other traditional roles play a part in the process? What do you think Warhol feels about the events (note that the print followed soon after the events themselves)? How does his use of color contribute to his composition? Can you think why there are two red panels, and only one white and one blue? Emotionally, what is the impact of the red panels? In other words, what is the work’s psychological impact? What reactions other than your own can you imagine the work generating? These are just a few of the questions raised by Warhol’s work, questions to help you initiate the critical process for yourself.

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**Fig. 22** Andy Warhol, *Race Riot*, 1963.
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, four panels, each 20 × 33 in.