By Alice Bernstein

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On the program were his Emmy award-winning public service film The Heart Knows Better, broadcast on television worldwide and shown at every game at Yankee Stadium; and two films he made for the United Nations: Brushstrokes and Asimbonanga.

Mr. Kimmelman was joined by public school teachers and Aesthetic Realism associates Lauren Phillips and Barbara McClung, and they addressed two enthusiastic audiences of parents and little ones up to 12 years old in the museum’s amphitheater.

Mr. Siegel defined the world as “all that whatsoever begins with your finger tips at the end,” and requested that everyone hold out their hands. As the audience did, people’s faces showed wonder when the speakers explained, “Everywhere that is something, your fingertips is the world. You can touch what you’re sitting on—the seat is the world; the person sitting next to you is the world.” A boy looking surprised, pointed to another boy—“Him?” “Yes, the boy may or mayn’t be the world.” The child looked doubtful—“He’s not you, is he?” Then his look changed to discovery. And people were seeing the not-as-dark-as-you-think people and things. When we see that true opposite, when a person learns how to criticize consciously, it changes to discovery. And people were seeing the not-as-dark-as-you-think other colors and shapes, as he takes his place in a mosaic which we discover is a huge picture of the world.

To learn more about Aesthetic Realism, including classes for young people, contact the not-for-profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation, 141 Greene St., NYC 10012, (212) 777-4490; www.AestheticRealism.org.

Imagery Film, Ltd., www.imageryfilm.com

The Opposites in Ourselves and the World

Every time we see the opposites as one, the speakers explained, we like the world and respect it. For example, Mr. Kimmelman showed that everyone is both hard and soft. He gave an example he saw Mr. Siegel give as he asked everyone to make a fist. “Do you feel something hard? There’s bone there, and anger when you make a fist.” Then he showed how the same hand can easily touch your cheek.

The children were learning that you don’t want to have contempt for a world you see as friendly, and you won’t want to be mean to a person if you see they have the opposites in them—hard and soft, same and different—opposites which make up the world and everything in it.

I am so grateful that I began to learn this as a child in Aesthetic Realism classes with Eli Siegel, which I attended with my parents and others. As a girl, without knowing it, I hoped to be important by feeling superior to others and this desire made me unkind both to people I knew—like my younger sister, whose looks and manners were different from mine—and people I didn’t know. I remember with deep regret calling a little boy I didn’t know an ugly name because his skin looked different from mine. In lessons when I was young, I learned that other people had feelings as deep as mine, and that I could have a good time and be more myself by wanting to know and be fair to them. The thrill of learning that is as fresh as ever, and I know this education enables children to make choices they can be proud of all their lives.

The Art of the Film

Opposes Contempt and Racism

The last film, Asimbonanga, based on a song by Johnny Clegg and sung by Joan Baez, shows contempt running a whole nation. It juxtaposes images of the deadly racism of apartheid in South Africa with images of courage by many people, including Steve Biko, Victoria Mxenge, and Nelson Mandela.

Aziza Arnette, an elementary school teacher, said, “I was looking for a method of teaching this subject and here it is. This is great! Are they going to do this presentation all over the world?”

Mr. Kimmelman has addressed organizations on Aesthetic Realism as the solution to racism, including at Harvard University, sponsored by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League.

Young and Old Learn Answer to Racism at Brooklyn Children’s Museum

Still from Emmy award-winning The Heart Knows Better by Ken Kimmelman

First they showed The Heart Knows Better, which begins with an animated beating heart and the words: “Is this the heart of...a black person?” The question is repeated, and other children then add: “Is this the heart of...a white person?...a Latino person?...an Asian person?” As the warm red heart, framed by a blue glow, gracefully fills the screen we see these words:

“it will be found that black and white men have the same goodnesses, the same temptations, and can be criticized in the same way. The skin may be different, but the aorta is quite the same.”

—Eli Siegel, Founder of Aesthetic Realism

Young and old responded with exuberant applause, and in the discussions which followed, new, important ideas of Aesthetic Realism were presented:

1) Prejudice doesn’t begin with skin color or ethnic background; it begins with how a person sees the world different from oneself. There is a fight in every person—whether you are 3, 10, or 87—between seeing the world with respect or contempt.

2) All prejudice arises from contempt—the hope to be superior by looking down on others and despising them. When we see that true opposite doesn’t come from building yourself up by making less of the world and people, but from wanting to know and be fair to what’s different from us, prejudice ends.

3) Liking the world is the deepest desire of every person; and to see the world, they took out a big, colorful beach ball. Mr. Kimmelman threw the ball and the children, who knew he growls and is mean. He only likes to tempt, and to see the feelings of other people when a person learns how to criticize consciously, it can be criticized in the same way. As a girl, without knowing it, I hoped to be important by feeling superior to others and this desire made me unkind both to people I knew—like my younger sister, whose looks and manners were different from mine—and people I didn’t know. I remember with deep regret calling a little boy I didn’t know an ugly name because his skin looked different from mine. In lessons when I was young, I learned that other people had feelings as deep as mine, and that I could have a good time and be more myself by wanting to know and be fair to them. The thrill of learning that is as fresh as ever, and I know this education enables children to make choices they can be proud of all their lives.

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Still from Brushstrokes

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