

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

By Alice Bernstein

On a recent fall afternoon, the Brooklyn Children's Museum featured a tremendous special event, *The Heart Knows Better*, which will be repeated on Sunday, Dec. 9th, in relation to its exhibition "Face to Face" on prejudice and discrimination. The museum invited distinguished filmmaker Ken Kimmelman, who is an Aesthetic Realism consultant, to show three of his short films against racism and to speak about how the knowledge of Aesthetic Realism, founded by the great poet and educator Eli Siegel, enables prejudice to change to kindness.

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.



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 older children read aloud, "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 man 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 other people and things. When we see that true importance 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 the way to like the world is by seeing it is made well—it has a structure we can respect and like—a oneness of opposites.

I give some highlights from their exciting, rich presentations.

What Is the World? How Should We See It?

Lauren Phillips asked the children if they knew what the world is. She told them that

Mr. Siegel defined the world as "all that which begins where your finger tips end," and requested that everyone hold out their hands. As the audience did, people's faces showed wonder when the speakers explained, "Everything that is outside 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 next to you—isn't he the world?" The child looked doubtful. "He's not *you*, is he?" Then his look changed to discovery. And people were seeing that to someone else, *you* are the world. "There's ourselves and there's the whole world," the speakers said. "Our job is to be fair to what's not us, and that includes people whose skin looks different from ours and people in other countries."

To illustrate the fight in people about how to see the world, they took out a big, colorful beach ball. Mr. Kimmelman threw the ball to Ms. Phillips who smugly turned her back on it, and let it bounce away. He threw the ball again, and this time she eagerly caught it. "Did you respect Ms. Phillips when she caught the ball, or when she didn't want to?" they asked. "When she caught it," answered a boy. "Who wants to catch the ball?" they asked. The response was rousing and unanimous. Applause and cheers greeted each child's successfully doing so.

Mr. Kimmelman asked, "When do you think a person's more proud of himself, when he's having respect for the world or contempt?" A youth in the back row happily called out "Respect!"

The Fight between Contempt and Respect

Everybody, Mr. Kimmelman said, is in a fight between respecting the world, wanting to know and be fair to it, or having contempt. The choice for contempt, he said, is the cause of all prejudice. "You feel like a big shot when you think less of someone, but later you always feel ashamed." Prejudice begins in ordinary ways: you can be against certain foods even though you've never tasted them....We can be prejudiced against people who are taller or shorter than we are. We can also look down on someone because they have a rip in their sweater.

"The everyday way we can stick out our tongues and say pooh pooh," Mr. Kimmelman said, "is what leads to horrors like racism and war." Each speaker spoke courageously about prejudice in themselves, and how it changes when a person learns how to criticize contempt, and to see the feelings of other people as real and as deep as one's own.

Next we saw *Brushstrokes*, an animated film set to original jazz music by Major Holley and tap dance rhythms of Jimmy Slyde. It shows vividly that prejudice is contempt for difference. It is about a green brushstroke who thinks he's better than all other colors and shapes. When he meets them he growls and is mean. He only likes to be with green brushstrokes.

"Did you think the green brushstroke was smart?" the children were asked. "No!" many replied. "Why not?" "Because he didn't like the other colors," a child answered. "Was he prejudiced?" "Yes." "Would the world be beautiful if it only had green brushstrokes?" "No!" was the immediate reply. "It would be boring," said a girl. "Yes," said Mr. Kimmelman, "we need the difference of the world to be more ourselves."

The film ends as the green brushstroke finds his real importance is his relation to all

colors and shapes, as he takes his place in a mosaic which we discover is a huge picture of the world.



Still from *Brushstrokes*

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 softly 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.



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