Aging and Contemporary Art: A Narrative Ethnography

Alva Stux
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Preface: To Study One’s Culture is to Study Oneself

My name is Alva Elisabeth Diana Stux. When my parents were watching a Thomas Edison documentary on PBS and learned of Edison’s middle name, Alva, they instantaneously decided that if they were to have a child he or she would take on that name. Elisabeth was the English version of my paternal grandmother’s Hungarian name, Erzsebet--Erzie for short. And Diana was the name of my mother’s therapist and best friend who literally died in my mother’s arms. In other words, I have many different legacies to live up to, including the invention of the light bulb.

This family who so heavily named me consists of my father, Stefan Victor Stux, a Romanian immigrant to America who was a young survivor of the Holocaust and who also endured the subsequent Soviet occupation of Romania. He was born and raised in a border town of Romania, called Timisoara, which was long-before Hungarian. Ethnically, and culturally, his family was Hungarian. As it was explained to me, the family spoke Hungarian at home and ate Hungarian food, but they learned Romanian language and literature in school, and my father dated Romanian girls. He came to America at the age of 22. My mother, Linda Kay Bayless-Stux, was born in Savannah, Georgia and was raised in an orphanage in Decatur, Georgia. She was never adopted, but was set for release at the age of 18. As she told the story, she bought a one-way ticket to New York on the day of her release. The ticket saleswoman told her “I see a lot of pretty girls like you buying one-way tickets, but I always see them come right back.” My mother responded, “Well, that won’t be me!” And she held true to that claim. My mother and father met at a Blimpie sandwich shop while they were both attending NYU, and my father made the first move. At least, that is how the story was conveyed to me.

I was born in Fresno, California. The first thing I was told when I was born was that most babies are born through sex and subsequent impregnation, but that was not my story. My mother and father contracted one of the only Jewish egg-donors in the country--at the time surrogacy was a fairly new practice. She lived across the country, in Olympia, Washington. I was the fifth try. Once my parents created a successful zygote, with the egg-donor’s egg and my father’s sperm, it was implanted into a third woman, who was living in Fresno, California at the time. She carried me to term. Through this web, I have three half-sisters and one half-brother; we all share the same egg-donor. I avoid using the word “mother” to describe the egg-donor in order to respect the time, effort, finances, and love given to me by the woman I feel is my real mother, Linda.

On day two of life, I was taken on a plane to New York City where I was raised and reside to this day. My father owned and operated a contemporary art gallery in SoHo, then in Chelsea, and currently in Midtown, called Stux Gallery. My mother was a math teacher at Seward Park High School on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. My family structure was set in such a way that my mother would raise me and
my father would play his role when necessary. This plan was interrupted when we lost my mother to lung cancer in the year 2000, when I was seven years old. After that point, I was largely raised by Israeli au pairs who were 22-25 years old and straight out of the army. My father thought that was the best way to supplement my Hebrew-learning that was taking place at my Jewish day school, Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan. I spent the ages of zero to eight in Battery Park City living in a building complex 500 feet away from the World Trade Center. Considering this proximity, September 11, 2001 caused a significant impact; my father and I were required to move, first to the East Village, and eventually to the Upper West Side where I live to this day.

Aging has always been a topic of interest to me. My father is currently 73 years old and had me at the age of 51. Being raised by an older male forced me to face some of the physical and cultural specificities of aging at a younger age. Though my father has not retired, I was present for many conversations about retiring at the dinner table. And though my father is in excellent health, his experience with some physical issues associated with aging was often interwoven into family discussions. In high school, I volunteered with a non-profit organization called Dorot, which coordinated volunteers in helping elder individuals with their chores. I would often do their grocery shopping for them. Each time we met, we would spend at least a short amount of time plainly discussing life. The program’s goals were two-fold; the elders needed help in their everyday tasks, but our conversations pre and post the chores were equally as valuable. In my junior year of college, I took a course about cross-cultural notions of aging. As an offshoot of this class, I enrolled in a seminar called Sages and Seekers, which paired students with one older person from the Brandeis Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. My partner’s name was Richard, and he was a white male in his late-60s or early-70s. He never did tell me his real age.

Why should you care? “Isn’t this work about contemporary art and aging, not about you?” I am sure a number of you are pondering this thought. You might then consider, I propose, that the motor that produces and propels all academic work is people. Therefore, to understand and contextualize an individual’s work, you must first understand that individual and his/her biases and inclinations. In other words, considering that much academic work is based on specific interpretations of material, knowing the biography of an individual plays a critical role in understanding how that person may have come to the conclusions of a work.

To further bring this point to present relevancy, this idea is particularly crucial to recognize in the production and dissemination of anthropological work. The ways in which questions about culture and its manifestations are researched and presented are largely reliant on the ideas, priorities, and convictions of an individual or small group of anthropologists/sociologists/cultural scholars (Rabinow 1977, Abu-Lughod 1993, Shostak 1981). To speak more specifically, one might argue that the confines of anthropological fieldwork could be summarized as one person or a group of people (the anthropologist(s)) encountering another person or group of people in order for the former to better understand the latter. This encounter could take place in person via electronic mediums, or even through material goods in cases where the society has perished, to name a few examples.
Moreover, there is a very specific power dynamic that often takes place anthropological and ethnographic encounters (Abu-Lughod 1993, Rabinow 1977). Though the studied group has the power to act/interact in any variety of ways in order to encourage the anthropologist(s) to understand the culture in a certain fashion, the anthropologist(s) ultimately hold the authority in interpreting material in any way, and in propagating that material to the general and academic public in any way that he or she sees fit. One hopes that the anthropologist would take on this task in a particularly self-conscious way in order to not unduly misconstrue the anthropologist’s ideas and judgments about that group as ones deriving from the latter. But, nothing is guaranteed. A conscientious anthropologist hopes that he or she can portray the studied group in a way that is comfortable for that population, but many times the anthropologist, instead, takes on an omniscient tone that is assumedly unbiased. It is exactly this paradigm that my writing hopes to circumvent.

To begin to mediate this complicated interaction, and with the intention of being as honest in my work as possible, I provide my biography in order to provide some of my biases. Additionally, opening up my personal biography can serve to begin to level the power dynamic that occurs in such interactions. I am aiming to open my life to you, as the reader, in a parallel way to that of my studied population. In the end, my experience of anthropological fieldwork was hearing stories, interpreting and synthesizing what I had heard, and writing up what I felt I had understood, questioned, and learned. Providing a sketch of my biography allows you, the reader, to begin to fathom how I synthesized my ideas and arrived at my conclusions. In short, this preface plays a much more significant role than merely quenching curiosity. The work to come, at its core, is a conglomeration of experiences and stories that are very personal to me. The interviews and subsequent anecdotes are all provided through the lens of my life experiences and my perspective. With this in mind, I use many “I” statements in the writing to come and try to maximize that effort. I do not wish to argue that all complications in the fieldwork interaction have been henceforth mediated, but I instead hope to incite dialogue about the importance of these considerations and to offer one way in which an anthropologist might begin to level the playing field.
Introduction

“Let’s go out, we are still young after all!” a friend of mine commented a few nights back. “I am still going to go out when I am old,” I retorted, though I shied away from impulsively adding that I will still wear my miniskirts as that is a promise I am not sure I will feel comfortable keeping. “I won’t,” my friend answered. She continued, “When I am old I will be tired and I will just want to eat my oatmeal and applesauce, watch some shopping channel on TV without buying anything, and head to bed. Hopefully, if I am lucky, I will have a nice guy by my side. We will mope around together.”

Contemporary U.S. culture’s ideas about aging are reinforced in common discourse in one’s home, at one’s workplace, and in most other public places. It has been quite a while since a day has passed in which I have not heard at least one person make a comment about their own or others’ aging. Perhaps I pay more attention to such remarks as I am writing about aging. But, my experience nonetheless goes to show that if one pays even a minimal amount of attention to these comments in particular, they can be found ubiquitously.

Aging is a universal phenomenon, but its effects are handled in a variety of fashions that range from disgust to respect and from fear to freedom. Sometimes, these feelings are not experienced in an isolated manner; they are collapsed and intermingled. Though individual engagements with aging vary, it would be irresponsible to overlook the overwhelming negativity that saturates much of the dominant Western cultural discourse about growing older. It is particularly telling to explore print and televised popular media portrayals of aging, as they are not only consumed by a wider audience than discipline-specific academic writings or even widespread literature (being that technology has largely seized the attention of most), but they are also influential to the end of guiding our cultural preferences.

Though Western cultural trends in print and television popular media have been explored by journalists, scholars, and the like, there has been little completed research on portrayals of aging in contemporary artworks, an alternative form of printed and filmed image production. Exploring portrayals of aging in contemporary art is a fertile topic as there is much available visual material. Many artists have visually expressed the idea and manifestations of aging over the course of art history, and this trend persists to this day. But secondly, contemporary art is in a unique position to initiate cultural change. Culturally vetted contemporary art is often in demand by those who have significant amounts of disposable income and who are intellectually inclined. By pairing socially critical concepts exemplified in art with fiscal resources, cultural change has the ability to blossom. Artists have the unique ability to present social issues to collectors: individuals who have the disposable capital (and often interest, considering their pull to art as an intellectual journey) to incite meaningful change in that area.
This work focuses on an analysis of gallery-goer, gallerist, and artist ideas. The art world is far from constrained to one geographical region, and many people in the art world do not know many other individuals involved in the art world. The individual experiences manifested through the artists’ works are affected by their nationality, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and personality, to name a few. It would be close to impossible to talk about art world culture in the same way as one might discuss a culture that is geographically constrained or even one that interacts electronically via one platform, for instance, as the art world is very large, hugely diverse in each of the aforementioned indicator categories, and some individuals from within the art world community may never encounter certain others from within it. Nonetheless, the art world is grounded in its institutions; the vast majority of individuals from within the art world interact with one another through art world places such as museums, galleries, art fairs, collectors homes, art schools, alternative non-profit spaces, and the like.

The contemporary art world is a fertile ground for exploring ideas, as it is a culture epitomized in a diversity of opinions, or so it argues. The art world is stereotyped to be a culture committed to a wealth of different views, manifesting those ideas in some tangible visual or other-sensory medium. Being that most topics are explored in art, and considering that aging is a universal human phenomenon that has captured the minds and imaginations of thinkers for most of history, the examination of aging in contemporary art is quite logical. This assumption is supported by the case study at hand, that of Stux Gallery. Namely, there are two Stux artists who directly deal with aging and its effects: Miki Carmi and Thordis Adalsteinsdottir. Each artist manifests distinct work, and each has a different set of ideas about aging represented in their work. The ideas of each artist, and the underpinnings for their artistic decisions, will be discussed in-depth in subsequent chapters.

In short, this thesis will use Stux Gallery as a case study to concretize gallery culture and to explore some of the ideas on aging ruminating around the minds of artists and gallerists in the contemporary art world. These ideas will be conjured and explored through formal and informal interviews as well as through formal analyses of chosen Stux artists’ works that discuss aging. The manifested thoughts will then be juxtaposed to dominant anthropological and gerontological theories in order to probe the contemporary art world’s claim to be a hub of counterculture.

**Understanding Art as Cultural Production**

In terms of the art side of this art and aging research, it must be noted that this work could arguably fall within the category of visual anthropology as it uses visual mediums to present cultural ideas (Mead 1975, Sorenson 1975, Sandall 1975, cited in Hockings 2009). Amanda Ravetz notes the relationship between fine art and anthropology as “founded in a particular conception of social research as a process of making social objects. Such objects are shaped in the creative tension between social experience (participation) and reflexive communication (observation). The making of social objects demands the ability to reflect and communicate from a perspective forged from within social experience itself” (2004: 70). Fine art is a
form of social production and should be considered ethnographically much as any other cultural object.

Further, this work also relates to visual anthropology in that it calls for a certain level of reliance on the “intelligence of sight” (Stafford 1997: 4-6, Ravetz 2004: 69, cited in Grimshaw and Ravetz 2004). In other words, for one to conscientiously use artworks as ethnographic material, one must not exclusively rely on words to explain the images in order for one to understand them. Instead, one must have faith in one’s “other-sense based ways of knowing” that are conjured when encountering a work of art (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2004: 6). It is exactly this joint body-mind reaction to images and fine art that differentiates Malinowskian fieldwork from the current endeavor; while the former asks the anthropologist to remove him or herself from the research, the latter ensures that the personal reactions of the anthropologist are forefronted. As Ravetz agrees while discussing her notion of the anthropology of fine art, “Experience and reflection become part of the fabric of the research piece, whether in text, film, or installation art” (2004: 70).

Though the above argument highlights the idea that the research within this thesis is related to visual anthropology, it does not assert that it is a typical form of visual anthropology. Unlike ethnographic film created by or photographs taken by anthropologists about any studied culture (a more commonly encountered form of visual anthropology), the fine art discussed in this work is produced by those who are within the studied culture. Artistic works that will be discussed are interpretations of the world provided by individuals within the art world, not from exterior onlookers (albeit those onlookers may be highly trained). In other words, anthropologists are often the ones who produce ethnographic film and photography, not those from within the studied culture (though exceptions do exist). Differently, fine art is always created by an individual from within the studied culture and never an outside source.

Moreover, the topics of the artistic pieces are not specific to experiences or portrayals of the art world; they instead hope to be individualized portrayals of personal experiences living in the world and/or in a national culture. This topical element differentiates this type of visual material from ethnographic film or photographs (both of which are more common manifestations of visual anthropological material) because most ethnographic film and photography is topically about that culture’s manifestations and nuances, specifically. The works that will be discussed are not created specifically and exclusively about the culture of the art world, though they may engage this topic in some fashion. The art world speaks largely in images, and those images are essential to this study. But, those images cannot be interpreted as a guide to the way in which the art world functions. A painting about one individual’s experience of aging cannot be used to generalize about painters and aging or about the art world’s perspective on painting and/or aging; it can only provide one perspective. The variety of experience is close to unending. New artists emerge daily, and new perspectives in art are constant. Nonetheless, the artistic works that will be discussed are still a visual manifestation of cultural experience, which is a visual anthropological pursuit.
The Context of Aging Discussions

In order to contextualize the aging portion of this research, one particularly important perspective must be acknowledged. Namely, it is essential to recognize that for the purposes of this work, “the ageing process cannot be adequately explained solely in biological and medical terms but is an interactive process involving social and cultural factors” (Featherstone and Hepworth cited in Johnson 2005: 355). In other words, discussing aging is not solely the act of considering a specific set of biomedical happenings that take place at certain chronological ages. Rather, this work will consider aging as an inherently social process: an activity that does not take place in an isolated matter but instead from within a network of personal and cultural actions, interactions, and pressures.

This work also hopes to challenge the notion that one’s chronological age means anything more than just that number, and that age does not need to be interpreted as full of cultural opinionated value. Though cultural inclinations exist, and the specifics of those pressures for the aged in U.S. culture will be discussed in a later chapter, I believe that an 85-year-old woman, for instance, does not inherently need to behave and/or think in one way or another solely based on her chronological age. Culture pushes, but individuals do not need to inherit these biases: people have agency to choose to engage with or rebel against culture’s pressures. And once agency is realized, one may construct and/or reconstruct one’s life in any which way. Though this proposition makes reclaiming one’s agency seem easy, that would be an overstatement. One must acknowledge that he or she may receive significant feedback (some positive and perhaps some negative) when one goes against the social norm. But, the above idea supports that one is not forced to fit oneself into the constraints of the cultural regularities; one may choose otherwise.

In order to complicate the direct relationship between chronological age and specific cultural ideas linked to those ages, this work presents manifestations of aging in its raw state. In other words, this thesis offers artistic works about aging as it naturally occurs: without anti-aging technologies implicit in many dominant cultural and media representations of aging. As Abigail Brooks defines these types of technologies, “[a]n anti-ageing surgery-and-technology-driven paradigm that edges out successful ageing in favour of a kind of feminised agelessness – health work on the body in the context of ageing is subsumed into youth / beauty work on the body that aims to minimise, reverse, and even prevent signs of ageing altogether” (2010: 251). After presenting these images, this work provides responses to such portrayals of aging from art world professionals. How do individuals in the art world (i.e., artists, gallerists, and gallery-goers) respond to seeing aging in such a format?

These responses are then compared to a number of dominant theories about U.S. experiences of aging in order to answer the question: do individuals in the art world speak about aging in the same or very similar ways to those used by academic and public cultural thinkers? Some of these scholarly writings include discussions about the definition of aging (de Beauvoir 1972) and the inclusion of death (or lack of inclusion in the U.S. model) in conceptions of the life course (Cosco et al 2013, Lamb 2014). Some focus on the variety of liminal experiences of aging (Silver 2003,
Advanced Style 2014, Brooks 2010), and a final set of thinkers endeavor to define the most important elements to aging “successfully” (Rowe and Kahn 1998, Moody 2009).

Ultimately, this research finds that the ideas propagated by aging thinkers pointedly overlap with the ideas of art world professionals. In fact, views on and representations of aging in the New York City art world seem to resonate quite strikingly with views about, or perhaps assumptions regarding, aging in the scholarly world of gerontologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary authors who focus on analyzing aging in U.S. culture. This realization begins to destabilize the long-held claim that the art world is a counterculture, or a place of distinct rebellion.

Methodology

The majority of this fieldwork was conducted via formal and informal interviews. The formal interviews took place via Skype, phone conversations, and in-person. They included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, some of which were considered beforehand, and some of which were created during the interview. Interviews were arranged at a time and place chosen by the interviewee, such as the interviewee’s place of residence, workplace, a café, restaurant, or art gallery. An interview guide served as a starting point for conversation, but in an unstructured, ethnographic interview the subject is often the guide – the researcher will go where the subject takes her. It is possible that not all questions on the guide were asked. Interviews were recorded through written notes and/or a digital audio recorder.

Informal interviews took place at gallery openings of shows about aging and were anonymous; I did not record any biographical information about the interviewees. When interviewees were directly standing in front of pieces, I asked for general reactions to the show and to specific works of art. I also drew on questions about aging asked in formal interviews. Further, the facial and bodily reactions of interviewees were considered in the context of interviewee’s reactions. Informal interviews were recorded mostly by written notes. Aside from the direct fieldwork I completed, I encountered the comparative scholarly books and articles via library and e-brary resources.

The writing style of this work is highly inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod’s 1993 Writing Women’s Worlds in that it hopes to mimic her use of narrative ethnography. As is the case in Abu-Lughod’s writing, the narrative chapters are led by a chapter written in a more conventionally academic manner (Abu-Lughod 1993: xvii). I was particularly impacted by Abu-Lughod’s argument against the strict interpretive/analytical mode of writing as she comments, “pronouncing the lessons of all these rich and complex stories would have... reestablished the familiar authority of the expert’s voice, and, most troubling, would inevitably have contained the stories” (1993: xviii). It is particularly this “expert’s voice” that troubles me. Ethnographies are too often read as textbooks about a culture instead of one anthropologist’s experience interacting with a group. To mediate this expert mentality, my research is completed with an emphasis on allowing quotations to speak for themselves as much as possible. I consciously separated the quotations
from their analysis in order to allow for their raw impact to exist for the reader and for the studied group to be allowed to use their own words to speak for themselves as much as possible. My work is a platform for the gallery-goers, artists, and gallerists with whom I spoke more than it is my own.

Another way in which I hoped to mediate the impression that the anthropologist speaks all knowing truth is through using “I” as much as possible; the writing is very personal to me. I completed the fieldwork, and I analyzed the materials within the framework of anthropological/gerontological theories. Perhaps, had a different anthropologist undergone this research, its results may have varied based on different interpretations of texts, and distinct interactions with interviewees. This research hopes to emphasize the idea that the anthropologist’s ideas can be used as an informed perspective, but cannot be regarded as wholesale truth. The anthropologist is an individual with her or his own life experiences and perspectives that guide interpersonal interactions. Though there are ample ways in which anthropologists endeavor to separate their own opinions from those of the studied culture including constant self-reflection and affirmation of conclusions with the applicable group, there is no guarantee of full division between the mind of the anthropologist and that of the studied culture. The ways in which an anthropologist interprets a situation are personal to her or him.

By using as many quotations as possible, and by allowing those quotations to largely stand on their own allows for a power shift; the chain of expertise clarifies. My interpretations then exist as readings of circumstances, and the true experts (those from within the studied culture) are given full reigns to share their expertise. Following this thought, this research will also only provide scholarly analysis at the work’s outset in the form of a wide review of Western views on aging from academia, literature and popular visual media, and in the conclusion chapter in the form of comparative analysis. This method will allow readers to follow along the path that my research took. But, more importantly, it will also allow for readers to be shocked, surprised, excited, saddened, and otherwise moved by the narratives and quotations in the same way I was. Though my personal experiences conducting the interviews are clearly explicated, and notwithstanding the fact that scholarly ideas are provided at the outset in a general sense to provide framework, the narrative chapters can live wholly in the world of reader reaction. It is only after all of the reader’s personal reactions and my reactions are compiled that comparative analysis between the quotations from the narratives and scholarly insights may conscientiously take place. It is in this way that the narratives can live to their full extents and proper attention can be paid to the opinion of the expert: those from within the studied culture.

Though the roles of the anthropologist and the studied culture have been explicated insofar, the role of the reader has been only marginally discussed. It must be noted that I am making a number of assumptions about said reader. Namely, I am assuming that the reader is likely to either be Western or to have a relationship with Western culture as the chain of access to this work largely runs in Western circles. Also, the work being written solely in English automatically limits its reader base to those who read English. But more than demographics, I hope that the reader of this work encounters this writing actively. When presented with first-hand quotations
from gallery-goers, artists, and/or gallerists, I hope that readers will think to themselves, how does this quotation make me feel? How does this quotation coincide with and/or push up against my ideas about aging and about individuals in the art world? Much as the impacts of the quotations on me are clearly explicated, I would hope that readers might begin to create their own ideas about these quotations. This active approach serves to support the idea that the included quotations are extraordinarily rich and many others can and perhaps should consider them from within the reader’s own ideas, boundaries, and limitations. It is unlikely that a reader will agree with all of the ideas from the quotations as they wildly vary, but please interpret the following as a call: if and when a quotation hits you in your chest, I would hope that you would stop and take a moment to conjure why that is the case. We all age, at least to a certain extent, so there is not one reader to whom these quotations do not apply. Take a moment to think how they might regard, or perhaps disregard, you.
It is common in my experience of colloquial discourse regarding older people to hear “he/she looks great for her age!” And usually following that comment, I encounter a list of appearances and/or abilities that the speaking person equates with a positive manifestation of an age. I hear this the most with my seventy-two-year-old father who has but a few wrinkles on his face, and who is known for being able to stand on his head during yoga class twice as long as the students in their twenties. But what fewer realize when making such comments is that they are inherently critiquing age: they are feeding in to the system that problematizes aging. The discussed individual does not look good point blank, he or she looks good for his or her age. The underlying assumption might either be that he or she should not look as good as they do being at that specific chronological point, or that he or she does not look that good, but only looks good in relation to their age (at which, assumedly, people should not look good).

This critical approach to the aging body has not always held true; in many cultures of the ancient world, there was a premium placed on filial piety and a specific respect paid to the elderly. As Malcolm Johnson confirms, “In the great religious and associated ethical literature of the past three millennia, old age holds a place of dignity, authority, and respect. It is depicted as a repository of wisdom and the life-stage of accumulated seniority” (2005: 563). The aforementioned “religious and associated ethical literature” applies to the underlying moral structure of Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist ideals (monastic structures notwithstanding), as well as the scruples of many African and South American tribal systems before imperialism. But, underlying these demonstrations of reverence was often a power structure that was quite contentious. The “intergenerational contract” that followed was littered with tension. Vies for wealth, inheritance, and control began to play a significant role in intergenerational interactions.

Until the mid sixteenth-century, few people knew their exact chronological age (Johnson 2005: 565). The chronological lifespan was created as a reaction to the medieval system of thought: life as a cycle. In Shakespeare’s As You Like It, he writes an influential passage that is commonly referred to as “The Seven Ages of Man.” It follows:
All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

(quoted in Cole and Winkler 1994: 30)

This passage chronicles a life course in seven stages. Shakespeare argues that life can be divided into 1) infancy, 2) school age, 3) entry into adolescence (as dictated by one’s infatuation with others), 4) early work age (in this case, the hypothetical person works in the military), 5) later work age (dictated by one’s progression in their field), 6) the beginnings of the physical manifestations of old age (“big manly voice turning again towards childish tremble”), and 7) a “second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” Shakespeare did not only argue for a linear system point blank, but he imported many cultural ideas onto the life course that might not have existed in a cyclical model. Most notably, he writes in a decline in old age, and a feeling that life’s climax takes place in between infancy and old age, but not at those stages. Life, in other words, is a “journey towards death” (Johnson 2005: 566). Particularly notably, Shakespeare describes this oldest point in life in terms of lack instead of in terms of gain and/or merit. Many of Shakespeare’s ideas seem to sustain to this day.

Returning to the historical trajectory, in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, following the inception of agricultural reform, the physical and cultural
The makeup of many societies began to reconfigure. People poured into cities from rural communities, culture entered in to a new era of public health including many new diseases and hazards, but there was equally a significant increase in living standards and medical care. The role of old age, at this moment, remained fairly consistent with the ideals of previous generations. But, only those who could afford to engage with the advancements of medical care could reap its fruits. In turn, “Command over economic resources, superior living conditions and elevated status enable some to evade the label ‘old’, whilst their poorer contemporaries, disabled by harder lives, become sick and dependent – the enduring signifiers of oldness” (Johnson 2005: 565).

The nineteenth century was defined by a number of different movements, many of which focused on the importance of bodily health, rooted in scientific and quasi-scientific ideas. One such example, the ‘hygiene movement’, advocated for physical perfection “believing that disease was the price of moral transgression and ungodliness” (Johnson 2005: 566). At the same time, the nineteenth century was characterized by a larger laboring class (four-fifths of Western people) who were socioeconomically pressured to work “until they died or became so disabled by industrial and chronic diseases that they entered a short period of dependency prior to death” (Johnson 2005: 566). Retirement schemes only began around 1860 in Germany and subsequently throughout Europe, and were initially reserved exclusively for senior civil servants. Clearly, class continued to play a significant role in determining ones experience of old age.

The twentieth century saw an explosion in the number of people who lived to experience old age. In the UK in 1901, five percent of the population was over sixty-five years old. By the end of the century, that percentage had increased fourfold. And the number of people over seventy-five years old (twenty-one percent of the 2.4 million elderly people in 1901) was now 10 million (41% of which were over 75). In discourse, this event was referred to as “‘an impending disaster’, ‘the burden of an aging population’, ‘the rising tide’” (Johnson 2005: 567). These choices of phrase did not only apply to the exact issue at hand, they also seemed to begin defining what it meant to be elderly. To be older is to be part of the problem. In the twenty-first century, advances in health care continue to flourish and people are continually living longer. Moreover, advances in retirement allocations encourage culture to rethink the life course: in old age, who gets to experience what, when, and how?

Many thinkers have endeavored to understand what it means to age today. Simone de Beauvoir asserts that “Generally speaking, [society] does not look upon the aged as belonging to one clearly-defined category” (1972: 8). Though aging is a term that many claim to understand, few are able to confidently assert a distinguishable boundary between those who are aged and those who are not. Through interviews I have conducted, I have found that the most reoccurring distinguisher is having or not having mental and physical health; those who seem mentally and physically capable are deemed aging but not aged. Those who are experiencing mental and/or physical decline in later years are often socially categorized as aged or elderly. Though few were able to concretely assert an age at which one becomes elderly, many reinforced 65-years-of-age being a marker of aging as it is the legal age of retirement in the United States.
Further continuing on the topic of liminal experiences in older age, Catherine Silver adds that gender-based expectations are altered in advanced age and there is a trend towards "(de)gendering." Fundamentally, she notes, "Gender structure makes a difference in the way the aging body is understood. Older women's bodies are more likely to be perceived as deformed, ridiculous looking, and desexualized. They become frightening, 'crones,' and 'witch like,' as imagined in children's books and fairy tales" (Silver 2003: 385). Instead of being representative of sexuality and fertility, women’s’ bodies have "become a reminder of death to come" (Silver 2003: 386). In this way, women's bodies are no longer primarily defined in terms of their distinguishing female elements (i.e., female body parts/structures and personal/cultural associations with femininity in garb and pronouns) and more defined in terms of a frightening other.

Many older individuals actively combat this process of "(de)gendering" by consciously wearing feminine garb and otherwise accentuating their continual femininity. Such is the case for the women in Advanced Style, a 2014 documentary chronicling the experiences of seven fashionable older women in New York City. The tales of these women began as a blog and were subsequently translated into a feature film. For these women, continuing to emphasize femininity in dress and an interest in fashion is central to their identities and therefore also emblematic of their attitudes about gender in older age. In fact, a number of the women in Advanced Style became more interested in appearance and showing femininity as their age progressed. As one of the seven women, Joyce Carpati, notes at the age of 80, "I never wanted to look young. I wanted to look great."

Some older individuals also use anti-ageing technologies provided through the cosmetic and Western surgical industries to continue to assert their youth and gender identity. As Abigail Brooks comments in the context of her study on women's reaction to the influx of anti-ageing surgical and medical-procedural technologies, "My respondents articulate an aesthetic anti-ageing surgery-and-technology-driven paradigm that edges out successful ageing in favour of a kind of feminised agelessness – health work on the body in the context of ageing is subsumed into youth / beauty work on the body that aims to minimise, reverse, and even prevent signs of ageing altogether" (2010: 251). Notably, Brooks uses the phrase “feminized agelessness” thereby confirming that the goal is not only to look young point blank, but to look young within the constraints and expectations of the individual's particular gender.

Though the above analyses of aging begin to provide a framework through which to think about aging bodies and the physical and cultural changes that occur with the passing of time, they do not provide a next step. How can one most effectively mediate these shifts? How can one age successfully? In 1998, as part of a MacArthur Foundation study on this topic, John Rowe and Robert Kahn took on the task of codifying this definition. Ultimately, they claim, successful aging can be reduced to three primary goals: 1) avoiding disease (and disease-related disability), 2) maintaining high cognitive and physical function, and 3) active engagement with life (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 37-39). This paradigm of successful aging was derived as a reaction against the previously popular "disengagement theory" which argued that "old age was a time at which people were required to give up their jobs, could no
longer take part in the more strenuous form of recreation, and sadly, had to say farewell to many old friends and family members” (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 46).

Rowe and Kahn’s rendition of successful aging, however, is imperfect. By drawing the boundaries of successful aging at good physical and mental health, this construct isolates those who become physically or mentally ill. Is it truly fair to argue that those who are not in top physical and mental condition should not be able to age successfully? Moreover, Rowe and Kahn’s emphasis on “active engagement” is similarly biased. But, some older individuals are unable to be active or productive in the sense of participating in any activity “paid or unpaid, that creates goods or services of value” (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 47). Perhaps, one’s physical or mental state might not allow for such engagement. In these cases, should those who are unable to actively engage in such a specific fashion not be considered to be aging successfully?

Further, Rowe and Kahn offer a deathless model of aging in which dying is not acknowledged. This type of construct, Cosco et al argue, is problematic. As they note, “Excluding death and dying from models of successful aging is a substantial oversight, inhibiting research into events preceding death and the prediction and accommodation of terminal decline, as well as the opportunity to facilitate more positive experiences of death and dying” (2013: 751). Instead, Cosco et al argue, “Making the best of dying does not necessarily mean staving off death at all costs, but finding the means through which positive mental and physical states can be fostered” (Cosco et al 2013: 752). In other words, Cosco et al recognize that dying is inevitable and that by ignoring this reality individuals are feeding into its taboo. By pushing the topic of death out of the realm of normal conversation, individuals are further marginalizing those who are entering a stage in which they are soon to be faced with this inevitability. Moreover, few tangible steps can be taken to optimize the individual and his/her loved ones’ experiences of death if conversations on the topic are ostracized.

Comparatively, as Lamb notes in her 2014 article, death is a topic of common discourse in the West Bengal region of northeast India. Lamb recalls hearing many casual comments about death including “I hope I’ll see you next year when I come back... Who knows if I’ll still be here then or not? I may die before then” (2014: 41-42). And, “When you next come back, I will probably be dead. I’m already more than seventy years! How much longer will I live, you tell me?” (Lamb 2014: 42). The North American predisposition to sideline conversations of death is far from a universal bias; models of life that incorporate death are alive and well in other cultural contexts.

To combat the biases in the Rowe and Kahn model, Harry Moody offers the “decrement with compensation” model, which argues that “the goal of positive aging is not to stay healthy longer and longer but, rather, to adapt, to make the best of our situation, even if it means chronic illness and decline” (Moody 2009: 72). It is important to clarify that Moody does not see this decline as inherently negative; his argument is not to make the most out of a bad situation. Differently, he affirms, “Instead of postponing decline, we recognize that decline is to be expected, and so we compensate for it and adapt to it” (Moody 2009: 72).
How do ideas of aging enter our discourse? Alongside the scholarly approaches considered above, one might argue that the media also plays a significant role in the creation, affirmation, and propagation of cultural ideas. For the purposes of this work, visual media will be specifically addressed. In other words, the following will focus on visual media representations of aging, as opposed to written incarnations.

**Aging in Visual Media**

Aging and its manifestations are often portrayed in visual media. Analysts have found that most often, though, “advertisements aimed at adults... have often depicted old bodies as problems, in decline, and miserable” (Calasanti, Sorensen, and King 2012: 20). One particularly repeating example of such visual media lies in advertisements for anti-aging products and services. Sociologist Toni Calasanti, in “Bodacious Berry, Potency Wood and the Aging Monster: Gender and Age Relations in Anti-Aging Ads,” explores anti-aging internet advertisements. Many of these commercials imply that if one is old, one must necessarily be of “poor health” (Calasanti 2007: 341) and therefore require “expensive cures” (Calasanti 2007: 339). The translated social effects of poor health include the cultural stigma that the aged are “deserving of exclusion” (Calasanti 2007: 352) in social circumstances.

Similarly, Calasanti and two of her colleagues, Sorensen and King, conducted a study analyzing 96 anti-aging websites “that draw upon images of old age in order to market their wares.” (Calasanti, Sorensen, and King 2012: 21) As the authors comment, “[These] ads portray older adults as active, travelling, looking and dressing youthfully and enjoying sex.” (Calasanti, Sorensen and King 2012: 19) Such advertisements overlap the same emphases as those of Rowe and Kahn: the essentialness of optimal physical health (to be able to travel) and the importance of active engagement with life (in being able to follow youth trends of dress and enjoying sex). Therefore, one could argue that these types of advertisements could be critiqued in a similar manner to the discourse of Rowe and Kahn. The ongoing bombardment of anti-aging television and print advertisements reinforce the cultural pressure to adhere to these ideals.

One can feasibly trace the cultural and individual effects of such advertisements. As the anti-aging industry grows, the morals it propagates might logically grow in influence at a proportional rate, even though some might recognize its flaws. By literally and metaphorically buying into these products, people are equally investing in one’s individual power to affect one’s aging process. Ultimately, as Calasanti, Sorensen and King argue, people “foster images of ageing that preclude prideful claims to any such identity, as they struggle to hold onto their professional status and physical capital.” Essentially, these people dig themselves increasingly deeper into a pit of self-denial and, perhaps in extreme cases, self-hate. People begin to believe that they did not begin anti-aging treatments soon enough or that they are merely not working hard enough at stopping their aging process when, in fact, aging can never be truly halted.

Advertisements do not encompass the entirety of visual media: one might also consider television representations of aging in order to understand the breadth of applicable material that informs aging discourse. In order to perform such an
analysis, I have chosen an episode from a television show targeted at children: SpongeBob SquarePants. This program chronicles the life of a sea sponge named SpongeBob SquarePants and his friends (Patrick Starr, a sea star, Sandy Cheeks, a sea squirrel, Eugene Krabs, a crab, and Squidward Tentacles, a squid). This show is geared primarily towards children aged 6-11. Specifically, I will consider the 15th episode of season 3 entitled “Mid-Life Crustacean”. By choosing a television show that appeals to children, this analysis hopes to reaffirm the breadth of anti-aging discourse, and the ways in which such ideas infiltrate visual media geared towards people of all ages. Moreover, by targeting anti-age sentiments towards children, society is encouraging the youth to internalize these ideas before they have a chance to concoct their own conceptions about what it means to age. It is likely, then, that at least an element of such influence carries with these youth into later years.

The SpongeBob SquarePants episode entitled “Mid-Life Crustacean” is laden with remarks about aging; these comments begin at the inset of the episode. The first uttered line is spoken by an alarm clock/radio set to an “oldies” station named K-O-L-D, The All Oldies Station. The announcer speaks, “Here’s a little something you may remember from the good old days,” and then begins to play an applicable song that follows “You’re old, groaning like a geezer… Look at yourself old man! You’ve got multiple chins of your own!” Presumably the oldest character in the show, Mr. Krabs, acts out the commands as the singer pronounces them. Most notably, when Mr. Krabs first opens his eyes he is forced to pry them open through a thick layer of crust, depicted particularly repulsively. And when the singer talks about groaning, Mr. Krabs’ back cracks violently, and his facial expression emotes pain. In the first moments of the episode, age is shown as physically unappealing, and associated with poor health (groans from back pains and overweightness).

In the next scene, the viewer notices Mr. Krabs’ daughter, Pearl, approaching his side. “Open up, it’s time for the pill!” she notes. “Oh barnacles, I hate the pill!” Mr. Krabs follows. This section of the show further reiterates the bias that old people are inherently unhealthy and need many pills and cures to counteract disease. A discussion then ensues between the two of them. “Pearl, do you think I’m old?” Mr. Krabs asks. “Well of course I do! But that’s okay, daddies are supposed to be old.” Pearl answers. “But I’m still cool, right? Your old man is cool?” Mr. Krabs continues. “See, no one says cool anymore, that’s such an old person thing. Now we say coral. As in, that nose job is so coral.” Pearl retorts. “Coral, eh?” Mr. Krabs confirms. “Ew, when you say it it sounds so un-coral.” Pearl finishes. Upon exiting the room Mr. Krabs says, “Have a coral day, honey!” Pearl then immediately calls her friend and says, “Jenny? It’s Pearl. Coral is definitely out.” The implication stands that because Mr. Krabs is older, his iteration of “coral” is so uncool that the new generation must reject its use because of the older generation’s adoption of it. Moreover, this scene implies that the old generation has a vested interest in adopting at least the discourse of the youth. Within less than two minutes of the episode (1:52), many negative comments about aging have been expressed. And interestingly, none seemed to have been expressed to the contrary.

In the following scene, the viewer sees Mr. Krabs crossing the street. “Ha, old? What was I thinking! I ain’t old!” The camera then pans down to a little boy holding Mr. Krabs’ hand. The boy says, “Don’t worry pops, we are almost across the
street.” Mr. Krabs then responds, “Hey, get away from me! I don’t need no snot nosed little...” and his arm then pops off of his body as the little kid continues to hold his hand. “Sorry you had to see that.” Mr. Krabs sadly notes. This section portrays the aged as mean/grumpy towards the youth (the viewing constituency), and in need of help from others, even if the older individual denies that fact. And for a third time, the episode emphasizes a lack of health.

Next, the viewer notices Mr. Krabs walking along a path. A presumably younger fish walks behind him. The latter comments, “Come on... move it! Could you be any slower?” His inflection becomes increasingly annoyed as time passes. “And you’ve had your blinker on for the last five blocks!” he finishes. Mr. Krabs then turns around to show check his behind and to notice his blinking turn signal (reminiscent to that which one might find in a car). He then turns to face forward and wears an embarrassed countenance. In this incarnation, the elderly are portrayed as annoying to the youth, inherently slow (perhaps another manifestation of poor or declining health), and oblivious. Following the same path, Mr. Krabs then comes across a beach ball. The view pans to three very young children, one of whom says, “Hey mister, could you throw the ball back over here?” Mr. Krabs then excitedly continues, “Hey! How’s about I join you kids?” The three children look at each other, and one says, “Uh, that’s okay. You can keep it. Why do old people always have to ruin all the fun?” In this example, older individuals are depicted not only as uncool, but also as actively quelling the fun of children.

As Mr. Krabs continues along the path, he passes by a line of clearly older individuals with heavily wrinkled faces and sagging skin. “Hey, you gotta wait your turn!” one man exclaims. The camera then pans out to the full line, which is leading to the Bikini Bottom Cemetery. Mr. Krabs consequently exclaims, “No, no! I ain’t old like you! I ain’t old! I ain’t old!” as he runs away. The viewer later learns that the line was for an ice cream truck parked next to the cemetery. But nonetheless, the implication is clear. This segment argues that old people can be contextualized within the framework of death, and being old is closely related to dying. Though some might argue that this connection is common, one might equally note that it is unfair to automatically associate older people with death as many individuals die at a variety of ages. And some people associated with older age (individuals in their 60s or 70s) might have an additional 30-40 years of life.

Mr. Krabs next enters his restaurant and overhears a conversation between a little boy and his mother. The little boy says, “Mommy, this krabby patty tastes funny.” The mother responds, “Well, no wonder. It’s all old and dried out like that man right there [points to Mr. Krabs]. Now put that thing where it belongs, in the garbage.” This section of the episode directly relates old people to trash. The remainder of the episode continues to reinforce such stereotypes, though it ends arguing that age is relative. After Mr. Krabs agrees to venture into the nightlife of Bikini Bottom (his town), he is convinced to “pantry raid” a home. After stealing a pair of underwear out of the chosen house’s drawer, he finds out that he has stolen his mother’s underwear. His mother then implements consequences by sending Mr. Krabs to his childhood room, and forces him to sleep in his car-shaped bed. She then instructs him to turn the lights out, thereby diminishing Mr. Krabs’ authority over...
himself. This scene ends the episode. This slight nod to age being relative, though, does not overcast the vast amount of anti-aging sentiment encompassing the show.

Interestingly, many ideas propagated to adults in the anti-aging advertisements are similarly pertinent in this SpongeBob SquarePants episode. Both point to aging as a time of disease, alienation, and uselessness. Both also seem to respond to these symptoms: the anti-aging advertisements offer creams and cures, and the SpongeBob episode alludes to the idea that aging is not inherent; it is relative. But, in the latter case, this insinuation is quite subtle, and notably more indirect than the anti-aging comments that it includes. One could feasibly argue that the ultimate moral of the aforementioned episode is the reaffirmation of old age stereotypes. In the most general sense, both forms of discourse, albeit for adults and for children, seem to feed into the negative discourse about aging.

As the above suggested, many interested parties have explored the ways in which representations of aging manifest in visual media. But, there seems to have been less assessment of representations of aging in another form of visual culture: that of contemporary art. Going forward, this work hopes to contribute to the investigation of aging in visual culture through focusing on the ways in which aging is and is not represented in contemporary art.
Art Spaces: Who Are the Players and What Is the Game?

In understanding contemporary artworks, it is important to realize that these pieces live in a network of interactions. These works cannot be examined alone or at face value. Instead, contemporary artworks must be understood as a product of an artist who creates work that combines thought-provoking, and/or reaction-inducing concepts with a particular style of aesthetics. That artist is then culturally vied by a gallerist whose gallery falls at a point along the spectrum of commercial to intellectual, and from small to large. Collectors and critics then approach the gallery to purchase and critique work, respectively. The monetary value and critical significance of an artwork is tightly linked to this system, and no artwork can be understood without at least a rudimentary understanding of its physical and cultural journey.

There are many places in which art lives: museums, galleries, non-profit art spaces, art fairs, and private collections, to name a few. But, the ultimate intellectual stop for art is the art museum. As defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica, the museum’s goal is the “preservation and interpretation of some material aspect of society’s cultural consciousness,” (Lewis 2014) a pointedly cerebral purpose with little else. To this end, many museums offer educational programs and fill their walls with significant amounts of explanatory text.

To diverge for a moment, and to further consider the above quotation, museums hope to present ideas, objects, and arguments that highlight a “cultural consciousness.” Which “culture” is assumed here? One might correctly argue that there are many types of art museums that serve distinct purposes in different cultural circumstances; some museums might offer specifically the art of one indigenous culture, whereas another might consider the art of a certain geographical region, such as Latin America. But, applying this comment to the wider contemporary art context, it seems that one could argue for the existence of one overarching culture encompassing the contemporary art world, albeit permeable and constantly in flux. This community is quite international (though not completely globally inclusionary for reasons of access and perhaps also of bias). As was mentioned at this work’s outset, the “contemporary art world” is comprised of artists, gallerists, critics, collectors, as well as other professionals working in art spaces. More than a geographically based group, this “culture” is linked through personal interconnections, art spaces, and a shared interest in art.

Important galleries take on similar goals to those of the museum, but they are additionally tasked with selling artworks. An artist does not have a museum show, or even have work in the collection of a museum, before he or she spends
time showing at and being promoted by a gallery. Dorothy Spears of the *New York Times* comments, “One season’s penchant for abstract paintings may be another’s fascination with chocolate Santas, or lead balloons, comic strips, or a less-is-more aesthetic. Steering through this weather are commercial galleries, in the thick of things, taking the art world’s pulse” (Spears 2013). And to further substantiate her claim, Spears entitles her article “Galleries as the Art World’s Leading Indicators.” I would agree; commercial art galleries play a significant role in the art world. In its most basic incarnation, commercial art galleries find established and/or emerging artists and are tasked to promote and sell the artwork. These artists can be found from a bevy of MFA (Master of Fine Arts) graduate shows, through recommendations by other important artists, critics, gallerists or collectors, or, more recently, through online searching. A gallerist may not always choose to represent an artist that he or she chooses to show. Some gallerists include particular works in group shows, or have one-person shows with artists on temporary terms.

Each gallery is different. Some galleries prioritize artworks with certain concepts or aesthetics over others, and all galleries represent different artists. Also, each gallery has a distinct core of minds that run the operation; these driving forces include owners, directors, and employees, listed in descending order of decision-making power. A gallery’s roster of artists, referred to as its “program,” combined with the specific personalities and priorities of gallery owners, directors, and employees create the unique environment of a gallery. In order to more tangibly understand the inner workings of a contemporary art gallery and the way in which the aforementioned elements of a gallery’s culture manifest, this work will explore the inner workings of Stux Gallery, including in-depth interviews with Stux artists, its owner and its director.

There is one applicable category of person that has insofar been overlooked: that of the gallery-goer. This group includes all those who engage with the work in an active way by entering art spaces and fulfilling the art’s purpose: to be seen. Some gallery-goers will enter a gallery to purchase work, but more often than not this is not the case. Regardless of purchasing power, this category of person plays a significant role in the contemporary art world system in that this is the group that the artist hopes to anger, excite, sadden, or just satiate. This gallery-goer perspective will be currently explored.

**The Gallery-Goers**

I walk into a medium sized art gallery that is about halfway filled with people. “Stux Gallery” is written in black lettering next to the door, and the title of the show “VIEWER DISCRETION... Children of Bataille” follows below. Some are conversing while others stand like statues in contrapposto and contemplate the art hanging on the walls. Following the ruminators’ gazes, I see vividly sexual work. There are renditions of both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse, and some depictions of self-love. The work is not supposed to be viewed as lewdly pornographic; it is meant to be an examination of “the depths and permutations of our own desires,” an exploration of where our edges of comfort lie. The show “begs
us to surrender our self-imposed limits of modesty.”¹ In more plain terms, this show was about sexuality, including scenes of intercourse with others as well as personal explorations of the body. There did not seem to be any specifically targeted age that was represented, though the exception to this rule was the inclusion of a few young women’s faces in sexual circumstances. Many of the works abstracted the figures making their age more ambiguous, and other works included extreme close-ups of the sexual acts thereby leaving the rest of the body’s manifestation up to the viewer’s imagination.

It is interesting to me that so many onlookers approach this explicitly confrontational work with such poise and seriousness. It is as though bringing this type of nakedness into a gallery space inherently changes its manifestation from an awkward game of averted gazes into “don’t laugh or shirk; you will seem immature.” Nonetheless, this environment was set as one to contemplate cultural limits, and many such conversations followed.

“Some think that when people age it is an ugly experience. But I think that it is beautiful! It happens to all of us, so why must all of us go through a period of being ugly?” mentioned one female gallery goer, middle-aged, blonde, dressed in a mid-length denim skirt and a white blouse while examining a piece depicting a young

woman smoking a cigarette in a coffin. “So do you think the photograph would be more beautiful if the woman in that coffin was older?” I asked. The woman looked somewhat stumped. After a few moments she commented, “Not sure... but I think I would appreciate the authenticity if it was an older lady in there. But I guess everyone is already trying to put older women in the grave, so maybe it would be less interesting after all.” This woman’s words were particularly highlighted in my mind as they conveyed much of the confusion that I feel about culturally appropriate engagements with aging. I feel pulls towards feminism and towards loving my body as is, but I equally feel that aging is somehow inherently dirty and that I should make sure to have a bottle of hair dye on hand if and when my hair begins to grey.

Max Snow’s 2010 work entitled *Untitled (Coffin II)* is a 31 x 40 inch black and white photograph, a fiber print mounted on dibond. It is horizontally oriented and focuses on a black shiny coffin that has its upper body flap open. Inside, we see a young nude woman, exposed from the top of her head until her very upper thigh. She lies on a white ribbed interior. The woman is positioned with her right hand tucked underneath her head, and her left arm outstretched and holding an open beer bottle. Her eyes are open, but it is unclear if she is alive or otherwise. Her body is thin and her bones show through her skin, but she does not seem clearly emaciated. I decided to linger longer around this piece, as it seemed to incite interesting conversations.

The next woman I encountered looked to be in her late 30s or 40s, and she was standing in front of the work while holding a mirror and fixing her lipstick with her other hand. Once the mirror was away, and she had a few moments to consider the piece, she began to walk away. Before she could get too far, I loudly said, “Did
you think this work was interesting?" “Yeah, it’s... beautiful. I like the black and white aesthetic.” I agreed and continued, “But did you like the content?” “It’s always about trying to look young, and there is nothing that makes you look younger than putting yourself in a coffin. When people look into the coffin they are expecting some old person, eyes closed and with a body that has given up. Instead, you look into this one and you see an attractive young girl drinking a beer. The surprise element definitely contributes to how young she looks.” I looked down and loosely smiled. “I don’t think that she would want to look that young because otherwise people might question if she can even be drinking that beer!” The woman agreed and moved to the next work.

“It’s interesting that the woman in there is young, don’t you think?” I asked an older woman who had been remaining near the photograph. “Well... isn’t that all we see nowadays? I’m not sure that I would use the word interesting...” This woman seemed to be in her 60s or 70s and was dressed in a distinguished though still artistic manner; she was wearing a large-brimmed black hat with a feather sticking out, a boxy black dress, and orange shoes with a short thick heel. “But she is in the grave! Don’t you think that fact makes it at least somewhat interesting?” I went on. “I think it just goes to show that there are really images of the youth everywhere nowadays. That is all people want to see! The youth even took our spot in the grave!” I chuckle and leave the site of the photograph.

A couple minutes later, I return to a middle-aged white man wearing a navy blue suit with a white button down shirt standing in front of the work. I try to make eye contact with him, but he only quickly glances at me and then looks back away. “Do you like this piece?” I asked him while looking directly forward at the work, myself. “Not very much, honestly...” he responded. “Why not?” I further enquired. “Well, to me it doesn’t look like this piece is about death. But I also feel like I am supposed to think of death when I look at this so really I just end up confused.” “What do you think it is about, then?” I continued. “I think it is about an obnoxious teenager who is trying to hop on the next cool fad. One day it’s smoking cigarettes, the next day it’s putting leeches in your mouth, and today it is lying in graves!” I was somewhat surprised by this comment and continued, “have you actually ever seen anyone lie in a grave for fun? I definitely have not!” “I haven’t either,” he added but then went on to say, “but with people your age nowadays, you never know!” This was the first conversation I had at the gallery that made me aware of my own age. In this moment, the conversations shifted from being emotionally open encounters of objects that I shared with another to critical conversations about what it means for me, a young-looking woman, to encounter this specific object with a man of his age. This man had taken his (not particularly positive) ideas of the youth and pinned them on me! I realized that these artistic conversations were just as much about me and the other person in the conversation as they were about the content of the work. From this point on, my initial questions changed slightly.

“Don’t you think she is cold?” I ask. I quickly realize the bizarre nature of that question; I think to myself that the wine may be getting to my head. "Um... possibly?” A young-looking woman responds. She seems to be around my age. “I was just saying that because the blackness of the background paired with the shiny nature of the coffin makes me think of black ice. And if I were in a room of black ice
I’d be cold!” I fumble and she laughs and continues. “I think that the girl looks young enough that she could just shake it off. If it was a real old person in there, one that is not dead of course, they would probably be more affected by the cold, if it was cold in there.” “How do you know what it is like to be old and cold? You have never been old!” I retort. “True, but when I think of old people I just think of frailness... their blood doesn’t pump through their veins as vigorously so they get cold easier!” “Hmm” I say while hesitantly nodding my head. “I’m going to keep looking around,” she says. “Enjoy!” I exclaim. This conversation in particular offended me. I am not sure if it was her inclusion of the pseudoscientific conversation about blood pressure or if it was just the mass of ageist comments I had encountered over the course of the night, the straw that broke the camel’s back. I am not surprised that I might feel personally invested in conversations about aging as my closest family is all above 70 years old. I sat down on a nearby couch, and looked through my phone.

“Alva!” I hear from the other side of the room. I turn to see a good male friend of mine from high school. “Hi! Thanks for coming!” I say while giving him a hug. “Take a look around and let me know what you think!” I continue. “Will do,” he reassures. Half an hour later he returns to me with ideas. “So I will ask you the age old question that my father always asks me, which one is your favorite?” I enquire. He walks me over to a red boom-box in the opposite corner of the room. “This one,” he asserts. To experience this work, one must put on the attached headphones and listen to the CD. One hears a man (the artist) calling a phone sex hotline and talking to one of the attendants. She asks him what sort of conversation he is interested in having, and he responds “red.” This word then becomes the only word that he repeats for the entirety of the session. The girl on the other end tries to sexually excite the artist, but the artist’s only contribution for fodder is the word “red.” The entirety of the conversation plays out as such. The core of this work is the recording, though the color of the device plays into the message. “What is it about this one?” I ask. “It’s just funny!” he answers. “And I like that it is not only critical of the sex industry, but it is also trying to find a funny and positive message to add.”

“I think it might be time for me to get all anthropological on you,” I joke. “Why am I not surprised,” he responds. He is a true friend. “How old do you think that girl on the other side of the phone call is?” I ask. “Hmm... maybe mid 20s? I would definitely not go up to 30s,” he comments. “What if I told you that the woman was 65?” I asked. “She is?” he asked, very surprised. “Well, what if I told you she was?” I pushed. “Then this would be a totally different piece!” he exclaimed. “Why?” I continued. “Because then it wouldn’t be about the sex industry and making good of a questionable situation. Then, it would be about a cougar begging for the attention of this young man.” I was surprised at the amount that the story changed with a mere shift of age. His narrative went from a young woman struggling with her life decision to be a sex worker to an old woman begging for the attention of a young man. I did not push him further on this comment, but I felt that this immediate shift in moral underpinning was very much characteristic of the conversations that I had that night with many.

At most of the previous openings that I have attended, the majority of the conversations centered on my life, the other person’s life, and future plans. These deeper conversations about content are usually more rare as protocol calls for me to
be a good gallerist’s daughter and show my accomplishments. But thinking forward, I would like to commit more to those heady conversations. I learned a lot that night.

Tyler Moore, *Epispasm*, 2015, boombox with recording, 12 x 22 x 11 in. (31 x 56 x 28 cm)
4

Carmi and Adalsteinsdottir: Two Artists’ Perspectives on Aging and Art

Miki Carmi

As I walk down 36th street in New York City, I see an awning with the words “Han-Bat” written along the side. This is the Korean restaurant at which Miki Carmi and I had planned to meet. Carmi is a contemporary artist who was born in Jerusalem, Israel and who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He is 39 years old. Miki Carmi’s work centers on depictions of “old” men and women; Carmi would assert that those “above 80 years old” fall into this category. Many of Carmi’s works are oil on canvas, but they evoke an almost drawn quality because of their commitment to detail. Each vein, liver spot, and wrinkle is meticulously painted as though it might have been drawn or carved from a flat plane. His palates are natural, and many of his formal constructions are similar; he is most known for depicting only faces (countenances without a neck, hair, or other garb or embellishments) either from the left or right profile view or from a three-quarter left or right perspective. Most faces are placed on a white background and centered on the canvas. These profiles range from large to oversized; some faces look as though they could almost be spilling off of the canvas.

I turn in to the restaurant and notice Carmi sitting at a table waiting patiently. “How have you been?” I approach him and give him a hug. He smiles quietly and mutters, “Well. It’s exciting that this interview is about content... that is not usually the case. Most of the time, I am asked to speak about the context of my shows instead.” I was surprised; how could the content of an artist’s work be overlooked in an interview? Isn’t the basis of conceptual art that content reigns supreme? This note was particularly interesting to me as it supported the strong ties that contemporary works of art maintain to galleries and museums; it is not only what you are showing, but also where you are showing it. “And how might you define your subject matter?” I ask. “I represent everything that is the opposite of healthy and powerful and strong and a bright future. It’s like an allegory for the end.” “Is that an easy subject matter to grapple with?” I further enquire. “Not at all.” Carmi asserts. “The art world today has a lot of gambling, and who would like to gamble on someone who is ninety-five years old?”

Carmi initially became interested in depicting “old” men and women in supreme detail because he was fascinated by “deformities,” and depicting physical manifestations of corporeal maladies. As he mentioned in our interview, “In the
beginning I used to gain inspiration from the deformity section of biology books. I used to look specifically at deformed things and deformed people, just the way that the body could be completely broken apart is really fascinating. But then I became obsessed with skin problems, the changes in the color of the skin and everything that would make you puke, you know?” For him, depictions of the “old” fell in to the category of skin deformity and maladies.

Carmi’s initial source of inspiration was particularly interesting to me as I had never before considered reducing the aged to their skin in order to draw a link between older people and those with physical deformations. If Carmi could feel comfortable grouping “old” people with the deformed, he must believe that, at least to a certain extent, the two are related. And considering that he claims that the aforementioned changes in skin associated with aging could “make you puke,” it might then be argued that Carmi believes that there is some disgust inherent to the appearance of the advanced aged. To clarify Carmi’s link between the aged and the deformed I asked, “So do you think that aging and deformation are linked?” Carmi quickly responded, “Yes, yes. Definitely.” “In what way?” I continued. Carmi uttered, “It has a lot to do with identity. In a broader sense, I also think that my topic has a lot to do with the idea of the outcast.” This comment was an introduction into Carmi’s view of the aged in society; the elderly’s relationship with the deformed cannot be strictly reduced to shared appearances. It also includes a similar sense of social stigmatization.

Carmi adds his thoughts on the place of the elderly in society by commenting, “[The elderly] are pushed out of the center.” When asked to elaborate he continued, “In Western culture, getting old is a very political issue. Removing this biological process from our lives is one of the biggest tasks of contemporary Western culture. An old lady is absolutely not considered beautiful.” When asked to speak more specifically about whom he believes is cast aside Carmi notes, “Even if you get older than thirty or forty you already feel that society needs you less than it did when you were younger than thirty.” Implicit in this statement, it seems that Carmi feels that being needed is a positive feature of life, as he asserts that this feeling seems to be regrettably lost in older age. Carmi comments that the importance of activity and being needed to perform tasks is a product of Western culture’s emphasis on youth. As he mentions, “It is very hard to understand that we should not only be supporting the healthy [young] ones who have a bright future and who can make a lot of money and get a mortgage because they have another fifty years.” The foundation of the previous statement and Carmi’s general perception of aging in Western culture seems to be that the West emphasizes youth because of the assumption that younger people can be more active and can produce more tangible and intangible value for others. Conversely, the aged are marginalized because of the assumption that they are less willing and/or able to produce for others. And, as Carmi implies in the latter quotation, this may not be the most fair or logical division of society.

Carmi is a strong advocate for older individuals’ integration into society and their right to enjoy the emotional spectrum, with an emphasis on being happy, equally to those who are younger. Carmi’s according inclinations are particularly exemplified in his 2015 work entitled Smiling Grandmother. This oil on canvas work is large, measuring 56 x 47 inches. It depicts an “old” woman’s left profile.
unnamed woman’s face stands alone and is centered on a white textured background. “In your work, I notice a lot of faces standing alone. Does that have anything to do with cultural ideas? Why wouldn’t you choose to put seven faces in one work?” I ask. Carmi responded, “It has something to do with the subject matter, with emphasizing the singularity of those people in society.” The face is depicted in supreme detail; she is bald, and all of her veins, wrinkles, darkened or otherwise discolored patches, sagged skin, and protrusions are completely visible. The woman’s under eye bags droop low and glow red. Her ambiguously colored eye protrudes significantly from her face and almost points to a liver spot on her nose. The grandmother’s facial specificities act as brush strokes and aid the viewer’s eyes in moving around the piece.

Miki Carmi, Smiling Grandmother, oil on canvas, 2015.

Most notably for the present causes, the “old” woman is smiling. When I asked why Carmi would depict this character as smiling, he responded, “For the past couple years, I have been struggling with making all of these characters smiling. I succeeded in a few but you might look at them and think, no they are not smiling.” In this comment, I assume that Carmi is referring to the subtle and natural depiction of
the smile in this recent work. “In your ultimate work, would you have a smiling face? Or a different expression?” I asked. “Definitely smiling. My newest work in 2015 is called Smiling Grandmother for a reason.” Carmi ended. This comment, paired with Carmi’s previous assertions about the need to increasingly assimilate the elderly into the general public, seemed to affirm Carmi’s concrete commitment to his pro-integration ideas and his belief that the elderly should live as rich an emotional life as the young.

As our conversation progressed, it became increasingly clear that Carmi’s interest in depicting aged skin is not purely a personal aesthetic or socio-political interest; the artist acknowledged that feelings of discomfort with the aged are not singular to himself. “What is the most common opinion that you get from others about your work?” I asked in order to begin to gauge public reaction to his pieces. “[I often hear that] my work is very tough, it is disgusting. Most people don’t say anything, because I think they want to get away from it as fast as possible. Even if you ask my grandmother, she would say that I am doing a very terrible thing because I represent, like, monsters,” Carmi comments. “Is there any particular reaction to your work that sticks out in your mind?” I asked. Carmi then began to recall a specific instance during which a little girl was particularly taken by the work. He recollects, “During a previous show of mine in Tel-Aviv, there was a girl who refused to enter the gallery and who asked her mom to take down the paintings.” “Take them down, why?” I enquired. “Because she was very scared,” Carmi continues. “She was freaking out. She wouldn’t even enter the gallery space. She just kept repeating that she wouldn’t go in.” “Do you often get that severe a reaction?” I asked. “People usually at least look at it! But some ignore it. Some people struggle to see that my work can be more than just a mirror of reality, which is disappointing,” Carmi closed.

At this point in the interview, I felt that I had a pretty fair grasp of Carmi’s personal thoughts on aging and what he believed to be the most prominent societal responses as well, as they manifested in responses to his work. Therefore, I continued to delve into his relationship with the idea that he, himself, will age. “What do you think is the scariest part of aging?” I asked Carmi. “I don’t think aging is the scariest part. The scarier part is what happens after you get buried and everything,” Carmi responded. “So do you think that people automatically think of death when they look at your work and maybe even when they see old people in general?” I probed. “Yeah, yeah,” Carmi confirmed. “If you had the ability in your own life to age or not, would you choose to get older?” I continued. “For the sake of my painting I would like to age as fast as possible because I am competing with the clock in a way, because all of my models are dying slowly. Right now, I have another two and a half models. Soon I will only have two, and then in time I will use myself. But of course, I know there are social consequences,” Carmi confirmed.

Interestingly, Carmi does not view aging as strictly biological or chronological; Carmi seems to assert that some of aging is based on character and/or personality as well. As he notes, “On a metaphorical level, some people are born old. And some people never get old. My mother is seventy-five, but she has the mentality of a thirteen year old. Her body is very old but her mind is very young. And I feel the opposite, always very old.” Carmi further elaborates this argument to
encompass one’s relationship with death as an indicator of one’s age. As Carmi comments, “I think old age is something that is beyond your chronological age that has a lot to do with your relationship with death. If you are five years old, but you think about death already, it means you have an old soul.”

**Thordis Adalsteinsdottir**

I have known Thordis for many years as my father has been exhibiting her work since 2003 when I was about ten years old. This is in part the reason I feel comfortable referring to her by her first name though artists are most commonly referred to by their last name; my relationship with her is personal. She is thin, blonde, and tall, with particularly large blue eyes. She is a fairly quiet woman; she is not one to express her opinion if she is not asked. Her visible emotions are controlled as she slyly upturns and downturns the corners of her mouth. She looks at you when you speak to her, and you feel that she is genuinely listening to you, but her responses are consistently uttered in hushed tones.

Thordis was born in Reykjavik, Iceland in 1975 (she is currently 40 years old) and attended the Icelandic Academy of Arts to receive her BFA from 1996-1999. She then enrolled in the Universidad de Barcelona from 1999-2000 and received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York from 2001-2003. In short, Thordis’ education alone allowed her a range of multicultural experiences and opportunities to interact with a variety of cultural arrangements and ideas. As is noted on the Stux Gallery website regarding her works, they “present emotionally charged moments in a weightless manner. Her personable narratives are often hilariously sinister and casually violent.” Her figures are painted relatively plainly, with only small details being added with pencil allowing the characters to be relatable; aren't people in essence quite similar if particular facial and corporeal details are removed? One can similarly relate to many of her narrative contexts as they include people in beds, near dressers, or near recognizable foliage.

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Moreover, the website later continues, “Her male and female protagonists are androgynously painted in a near crude physicality with loose stringy strands of hair, knobby limbs, and contemporary modish clothing that often float in space.”3 One could argue that many of her figures are ageless, but one could equally assert that many her figures are frozen in a time of middle or perhaps older age, in particular examples. This assertion is supported by the flatness of her figures; it is as though they have perhaps never lived in 3d space and experienced the effects of cultural ideas about aging and gravity to support their chronological progression. In certain examples to the contrary, Thordis adds details of aging such as wrinkles of the face and a sagging of the facial skin. Though one might comment that her painted offerings are examples of possible lived experiences, others might equivalently comment that her figures have not lived. Thordis offers snapshots of life that live between the abstracted idea of the action and the lived experience of the action itself.

When I asked her if she would be interested in being interviewed for the present writing, she was not in the least bit hesitant. But, when given the option to write her answers as opposed to speak them, she took that offer immediately. Being that she is a quiet woman with much to say, this decision was far from out of character. Thordis’ work is about a lot of topics, one of which is aging, but not all of her works directly speak exclusively about that topic. When I asked her, “How do you define your work in terms of theme?” she answered, “Life in general is the theme. It’s all equally important and pointless.” With this in mind, and to more comprehensively understand her answers, I wanted to make sure that she and I were both thinking of similar work. So, I sent her a folder of images of her works that I felt pertained to aging and encouraged her to refer to additional works if more were of interest to her with regards to this topic. She did not ultimately add any images. Now that she and I were on the same page, we were prepared to begin the interview.

I began the interview by asking Thordis to define her culture. She commented, “My culture in Iceland is pretty open and relaxed I have learned through the years. It has a lot of prejudice and horribleness to it but in general and in comparison it is liberal.” She begins by defining her culture as Icelandic. But beyond that, how can a culture be simultaneously prejudicial and liberal? She is clearly recognizing the prejudice within her culture. But, perhaps, she might also be comparing her Icelandic context to the American one in which she currently resides and finding that the former is much more liberal than the latter.

After this introductory phase, the first group of questions pertained to her personal experiences with art. I asked, “At what age did you begin to become interested in art? Why?” To this, she wrote, ”Around 12. I wanted to be a writer or a photographer at that age. It was exciting to me, and I enjoyed writing and taking photos, and I also enjoyed the response I received from my stories. My paintings now are stories as well.” This was her first mention of the importance of narrative to her work, but she later confirmed, “My works are often stories, or parts of wondering and conversation. I am more seeing my work as having a conversation
with viewers than sending a message.” Continuing on the topic of her current interest in being an artist she commented, “[I like] everything [about being an artist]. I like being at my studio and thinking about art. I like the people I meet and hang out with and conversations about art and society. Seeing art, reading, socializing within art enriches existence and makes me slightly less lonely and depressed.” This idea that art is a solace from loneliness is a theme that she later discusses as well in the context of aging.

“Do you believe you are making work that goes with or against the norms of your culture?” I then went on to ask. Thordis responded, “My work used to go against the norm of the art scene in Iceland just by choice of medium, painting was not considered a part of real art when I started painting, but then became fashionable and is now pretty much normal.” In this moment, Thordis is defining herself as an outsider artist within her cultural context of Iceland. “Do you think ideas of aging are similar in your cultural context of Iceland and in New York?” I followed up. She continued, “There is not a big generation gap in the Icelandic culture, not as much as in NY.”

The conversation then moved on to Thordis’ experience of her own aging. On this matter she noted, “I have a relatively positive attitude towards my own aging. Ideal way of aging would be with family and friends. Central to that would be to stay on good terms with friends and family, especially the funny ones. I think it is nice to age as an artist; you aren’t waiting to retire to start doing what you want. I have a negative attitude towards my husbands aging though, he used to look like a teenager and all of a sudden now he looks like an old teenager.” Interestingly, Thordis firmly asserts her own positivity about her aging, but jokes about her husband’s experience of the process. Though her final sentence is intentioned to be comical, I believe that every joke has some truth. It is clear that the shift in her husband’s appearance is not only noticeable to her, but it is worthy of comment. Perhaps, even further, one might argue that his physical change bothers her as she uses the word “negative” to describe her feelings towards this shift in appearance.

Thordis then continues to elaborate on her experience of others’ aging. She comments, “Aside from illness and death, I’ve had great experiences of other peoples aging. I have a fun and close relationship with my grandparents, and I have friends pushing sixty but I would never think of them as aging since their lifestyle is ageless.” As a continuation of the previous paragraph, Thordis elaborates on the possibility of a positive attitude in aging as is dictated by positive and “fun” relationships. In a more general sense, she seems to be noting the importance of constant interpersonal engagement in older age as is mediated by relationships. Though she singles out illness and death as inherently negative which is not a cross-culturally consistent point, the remainder of her outlook on aging seems fairly positive. And she seems to firmly support the notion that ones experience of aging is largely guided by attitude, though appearance may argue to the contrary.

When asked about the origins of her ideas about aging and the ways in which she feels pressured to feel and/or not to feel certain ways about her own and others’ aging she notes, “I don’t really feel [societal pressures] so much. I realize there is that kind of pressure in society, and mainstream culture but so far I feel pretty removed from it. But I’m probably much more controlled by society’s pressure than
I realize.” Though Thordis notes that she does not actively feel societal pressures swaying her towards and/or against any particular ideas about aging, she does recognize that they exist, and does also acknowledge that she may be more prone to their effects than she consciously recognizes. As ideas about aging are relayed to the public through complex marketing systems conveyed via the media and public discourse, it is understandable that the forces of culture are not always straightforwardly discernable. The best way to understand our own culture is through comparing it to other cultures whose ways are distinct from ours.

I then asked questions that combined Thordis’ experience of art and her understanding of aging. “As an artist, why would you create work that is interested in old age/aging?” I asked. Thordis responded, “Age and aging is a part of life’s themes. I also sometimes paint drunk babies, and people of all ages in between, depending on the story.” Her emphasis on narrative fits well with the theme of aging; both are based on a movement of time and a chronology. “When did you first begin to create work that dealt with aging, and why?” I enquired. Thordis continued, “I think my first painting of an old person was of my grandmother. I loved her very much and had a great time with her. [I] still have a great time thinking about things we talked about. Many of my first paintings were of my boyfriends or of my grandparents.” Here, Thordis shows a close affinity towards those who are aging by asserting that she began her painting career by depicting her grandmother, an older individual with whom she felt very close. Being that an artist can paint any topic they please, it is quite telling that Thordis chose her grandmother.

“Do you think it is important for artists to make work about aging?” I then probed. She responded, “I do think it is important, it is part of life and interesting. My friend made a performance with performers who were 50-80 years old, and audience of all ages were crying at the performance. It was not a sad performance at all, but very poetic and romantic. It is interesting that people were so touched by it.” The level of emotion that arises when I talk to others about aging is consistently interesting to me. Aging is rarely a bland topic; many conversations are accompanied by passionate love, deep contemplation, frowns, and sometimes tears.

I will end this recapitulation of our interview in the way Thordis wanted me to end the interview itself. I asked, “What else would you like to tell me, if anything, about aging, art, or both together?” Thordis said, “Art should intersect/act completely with all ages. I see how fulfilling it is for my grandparents who are very active in going to theaters, reading, seeing live music, they go to exhibitions and follow to some extent what is going on in the visual art world. That way they are still partaking in society and conversation at the age of ninety. Like I said earlier, I think one nice thing about being an artist is that you don’t ‘stop’ being an artist at any certain age. I was teaching a workshop for retired Rockaway residents a couple of years ago, and it was inspiring to feel the passion and directness that they approached the projects with.” Thordis ended with a plea for the elderly to be actively engaged with society, of course, through art.
I sit on a pink felt blanket covering a rough plastic chair. I often sit on this chair in front of my mirror to do my makeup in the mornings as I live in a house with three other people and with only one bathroom. I turn the chair to face the side of my desk and hear a knock on my door. “Come in,” I say. I had been awaiting that knock. A man with a protruding stomach and thin legs enters the room; his body is reminiscent of a chicken. He is wearing an all-white suit with a black t-shirt underneath and white leather shoes. He is holding a white Borsalino brand straw hat in fedora style and with a black ribbon trim. He walks over to my white desk and places down the hat. He takes a seat in a clear chair close by and turns to look at me. “I’m ready when you are!” He comments. This character is my father, Stefan Stux.

My father and I had planned this interview a while back and he knew a fair amount about my project, as whenever an interesting contemporary art and aging idea popped into my head, he was the first to know. Though I often enjoy interviews, I was especially excited about conducting this interview for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I always feel that there is more to know about my father. He speaks very little, unless you catch him thinking about something in which he is truly interested. In that case, he could talk indefinitely. Time and time again I hear people in his circle commenting about his intellect and his thoughtfulness. “He definitely thinks like a scientist,” one of his former artists, Vik Muniz, once said to me. “He always tries to think through how small details interact with each other,” Muniz finished. I agree; it is a lot to live up to. But more than being an interesting fellow, I was looking forward to interviewing my father because he, in many ways, is an embodiment of my topic: he lives, eats, and breathes contemporary art, and he has also reached a progressing stage of aging. At 73 years old, and with over 35 years of gallery experience, my father provides a unique perspective.

When asked to define his “culture,” Stefan answered, “I am an Eastern European Jew who has escaped by a hairline fascism, first, communism, second, and who eventually made way to the freedom of the West. I have a strong background in European culture and on top of that the American culture has also been applied.”

“What do you mean when you say that the American culture was applied on top of your European one?” I further enquire. Stefan responded, “When I came to this country at the age of 22, I was pretty much completely intellectually and culturally developed. And then on top of that came the American part. By the time I came [to America], I had to do undergraduate studies all over again and then I got my master’s degree and eventually a PhD in science, immunology. I went through a lot of schooling in America, but I was intellectually and emotionally formed in Europe.”
“And how would you define your experience with art?” I further probed. He continued, “As far as art is concerned, I am pretty much self-taught, self-educated. But self-educated in depth and by using the same research tools I learned in science.” I was curious to know more about the overlap between the seemingly polar opposite fields of art and science; at many universities, students are asked choose between a degree in one or the other. So I continue, “Do you think art and science overlap? And if so, how?” Stefan responded, “People quite often wonder how I could go from science to art. I find it very easy because both are very much engaged with the unknown. As a scientist I was doing research, and as a gallerist/art dealer I am doing very much the same sort of thing. I’m mining the unknown or the lesser-known trying to find connections, and using my intuition, my eye, my soul to delve into other people’s dreams, hopes, aspirations and, in general, the entire humanity.”

This grand influence, which Stefan seemed to feel lived in art, was just as royal as it was made to seem in my art history courses. “He must have some deeper mission or calling,” I thought to myself. In turn, I asked, “What do you feel the role of art is? Or maybe, what should it be?” Stefan considered this idea and started to speak, “Well I have my own view on art and why we spend so much time and effort and money on artworks. I would say that countries in the past have even gone to war over art. So what is it about art that makes it so compelling? What is it that energizes at least some people to such an extreme degree?” It seemed almost as if he was asking the question to himself such that he could better internalize it. He then continued, “The way I see it is that we all have this inner need and desire to mirror our image. It relates to the idea of self-understanding. For our physical appearance, we can always look at a reflective object to reassure our existence in this kind of un-understandable universe you may say. But what about what is inside you? How do you mirror your soul? I would propose that when you look at an artwork you are mirroring your soul through that artwork. Art acts as a bridge between the un-understandable universe and ourselves. In looking at it, you somehow understand yourself better.”

“But you are a little eccentric,” I joked. “Do you think it is just you and maybe an additional elite few who would agree with you? Don’t you think that many people just walk into a gallery, don’t understand what they are seeing, and walk out?” I probed. “I remember many conversations in which people said that their perspective was changed based on the art that we put up. And they would even give me specific examples of works and parts of works that were meaningful to them. You know the old biblical saying, "spread your bread along the water”. So that’s what we are doing. Hopefully our viewers will come and consume from our bread. And of course we are talking about a spiritual bread. And hopefully people will be changed for the better.” Stefan seems to feel that his aggrandizing of art is acceptable, and that anyone can be touched by a piece of art.

Doesn’t that take a lot of explaining, though? I asked myself. I knew that titles of specific works, show titles, and press releases all provided information about the shown material, but is that enough? I believe that people might read a title of a work or of a show, but do people still take the time to read one-page single-spaced press releases? If not, doesn’t someone have to verbally explain work that is not
necessarily self-explanatory? To this point Stefan commented, "People don't want to be lectured. When I go to shows I don't want someone to jump out from behind a curtain and start talking blah blah blah blah blah, I mean I don't want to hear this. I can just blink and I already know the whole sort of thing. And I have another ten galleries to go and see." It seemed to be that Stefan believes art can largely speak for itself to an informed public. I am not sure I agree with this statement as my previous experiences with contemporary art, particularly conceptual art, make me think otherwise. But, I also believe that people are allowed to filter anything out of art, regardless of the artist's intent. Though one might learn more knowing the artist's intent, my father's point is nonetheless well taken; those who want to know more about the artist's original ideas will ask.

“How do you fit into the puzzle, though? What do you think the role of the gallery in this whole message-making and propagating cycle?” I asked. Stefan continued, “Each branch of these [art world] divisions, whether it’s a museum or a gallery or a non-profit art space, has their own role to play. As far as galleries are concerned, being something I know more about, I feel like the most important role of the gallery is to connect the artist to the larger public. We are like a central telephone switchboard. But beyond all of that, the role of the gallery is also to find, let’s say, a market for [the artist’s pieces] so that they can sell their work so that they can live off of their work and so they can develop further on. At a gallery, we have to help feed the artist (physically, emotionally and intellectually), but at the same time bring all of that to the larger public. You have to act as a mediator, and a very successful one at that, if you want both the artists and the collectors to stay with you.” This comment made quite clear to me the extent to which the gallerist must juggle interests; the gallerist is not only responsible for keeping the artist alive and fed, but he or she is also tasked with bringing the artist and his or her art to the public and, assumedly in addition, having a convincing-enough argument for doing so. With regards to Stefan's final sentence, it seems that interests do not always align; being a mediator is being an intermediary for two contradictory sides. The artist’s side is that of an opinion, and the public’s side is centered on a choice to engage with that opinion or not. The gallerist must bring these two opposing sides together.

“Regarding the side of the gallerists work in which you have to keep the artist fed, how do you build a market?” I asked my father. He answered, “Well, the larger public is a heterogeneous group so your job is to get the attention of, as far as collectors are concerned, the so-called "taste makers". There is a very small elite of collectors who obviously their eyes and minds are very highly trained, and they also usually have a sizable budget to spend on art. So these people start to buy art, and other people watch what these people are doing and then they follow. So, convincing some of the so-called "taste makers" in collecting is an ideal situation. You have to cultivate their respect for you and their trust in you and your eye.” “And what happens once you get all of these taste-makers on board?” I probed. “Your job is really to build a consensus. And the more you build a consensus the more solidly the artist advances. As a consequence, the demand goes up, the prices go up, he has more leisurely time to do his work, and he might be able to pay his rent also so he doesn't have to have a second job doing nails or waitressing.” This tongue-in-cheek
answer felt quite complete to me; it might have been a great first line in *How to Build a Gallery for Dummies.* I felt it was important to follow up on this commercial point as it seemed to me that my father was looking to emphasize the idea that the gallery is half intellectual and half economic. Ignoring the second half of the business scenario in favor of thinking about the first (which is largely my interest in this thesis) would be telling an incomplete story.

Going back to the artists, though, I asked, “And how do you choose to take on the battle with certain artists over others?” I further enquired. Stefan responded, “When I go to a studio of an artist that I haven’t seen the work before, and who perhaps isn’t as well known, I hope to always have the shock of the new. And when I say ”the new“ it doesn’t necessarily mean only visually new, but also intellectually, in conversation and the whole new world revealing itself to you.” This, I could understand as my most revealing and exciting moments in my art history courses were those instances in which I began to see the matter with which the work is dealing in a new light, or conceivably, for the first time. Interestingly, this is the same experience I encountered in my anthropology courses. When endeavoring to understand a culture’s practices, I arguably learned more about myself and my ideas/missings/limitations/allowances than I did about those of the discussed culture. Perhaps, I am a junkie for the feeling of inspiration. Or perhaps, most of us are.

I continued on the topic of artists by noting, “Why would you choose to represent artists whose work is about aging?” I was surprised by how uncomfortable I felt bringing up the topic of aging with my father. Perhaps this is because I see him as old. I was nervous that by talking about aging with him, he might feel pressured to acknowledge his later chronological age, a facet of his being that he had never previously allowed himself to admit to me. I even feel uncomfortable bluntly writing that my father is old. I also thought, could there be a large enough constituency that is looking to face aging (literally and figuratively) head on? Stefan delved in, “Aging is one of those difficult subjects that sensitive people like artists, well some artists, would tackle. And I, as a dealer, to my own detriment sometimes, I would tackle the same sort of thing. If I look at work and it doesn’t hit me really hard in my chest so-to-speak, doesn’t make me really feel dizzy for whatever reason, then I don’t really want to go on and try to figure it out on an intellectual level. Not my style, though some people might proceed that way. These works do that for me.” But, he equally commented, “I would say that a subject like that would appeal to fewer people. As a consequence on the buyer end, there are probably also fewer so they are harder to deal. It is less financially rewarding and harder for artists and for everyone else.” Clearly, showing works about aging is not what seems to keep the doors open.

But, Stefan continued to advocate for the importance of showing such work. As he mentioned, “On the other hand, there are certain things that you cannot avoid dealing with. I mean, one could make the argument that life is a terminal disease. Life is a fatal disease. If you are born, you will end up dead. But, of course, if you confront your mortality, it makes your life so much more powerful.” These ruminations on aging were equally personal as they were pervasive. In short, Stefan said that though death is inevitable, and though that fact can be quite scary,
recognizing that time is limited can be very empowering and might even enhance one’s life. Living under the auspices of mortality might make one want to live every day as it is their last. And it is art about aging that helped inspire many of these considerations.

“What other sorts of things have work about aging made you think about?” I asked for an example. Stefan decided to speak about the work of Miki Carmi as an example towards this end. As he commented, “[Carmi] paints people as they progress and as they deteriorate or transform from physical to spiritual because ultimately, if you think about it, when the physical is gone, it is only the spiritual that is left.” This comment again instigated trailing thoughts about aging. Stefan noted, “When you see very young people, there is this kind of exuberance there, but the spirituality is kind of lacking. Not that they don’t have it, but maybe they don’t show it or it isn’t on the foreground. As time goes by, it is the spiritual that becomes more and more powerful.” Stefan then turned to the role of art in this mission, “It is hard to put it all in words because all of these things are too elusive. That’s where art comes in and he actually conveys that by the presence of art. You can see what the work is producing and then you can mirror your own soul into that.”

Continuing to contemplate aging Stefan commented, “But old age does not have to be so negative all the time. There is a certain kind of beauty in that. And I feel personally attracted to that. Maybe also I am getting older myself, but I must say that I was attracted to this sort of thing when I was very young already. It has to do with my personal mystical inclination and my personal inquiring mind, this kind of research into life through art.” In other words, aging is not all bad, Stefan claims, there can be a “beauty” in aging as well. And, as he mentioned earlier, it seems to be a goal of my father’s to understand every stage of life through art, inclusively.

“Do you think that most people share your experience in encountering works about aging?” I asked. Stefan replied, “With the work of Carmi, we’ve had people walking into the gallery and they try to get out of it as quickly as they can in horror. I’ve heard reactions from women who have said "oh my God, is this how I am going to look like?" Or they just cannot confront that. But, most of them would confront it even though it might make them more uneasy.” He continued on this trend of gender-based reactions by commenting, “Probably men would be less reluctant to look at it than women. Especially older women, and by older I mean women in their sixties, lets say, and beyond. That is a very sensitive age when their anatomy is also changing. They are probably the ones that are most horrified and reluctant although the more sophisticated ones are actually attracted to precisely that difficulty.” Part of this response may be attributed to my father’s male gender and his according perspective. But, I might also add, if one is to mirror one’s self and one’s soul into work, then being a woman looking at older naked women is likely a very different experience than being a man looking at older naked women.

After discussing aging within the context of contemporary art, I decided to enter into the questions regarding Stefan’s personal experience of aging. As a side note, I am continually perplexed by the often-hesitant way in which both my formal interviewees and more informal commentators interpret my questions about aging. Body language changes from open and intellectually engaged, positioned with arms by ones side, much direct eye contact, and broad and frontally faced shoulders, to
closed, timid, and sometimes defensive when issues of one’s own aging arise. As an exception to this rule, Stefan took on these questions in an honest and confident manner. I am not sure if me being his daughter helped him feel at ease, or perhaps, he interpreted this moment as educational, as a way of teaching the next generation. Regardless, I was pleasantly surprised. “How would you categorize the life course?” I began. I felt that this question was an appropriate starting point as it is not too direct, but it still allows interviewees to begin thinking about the considerations at hand. Stefan responded, “I would say that life is obviously a continuum. But artists freeze a moment in time. So that’s what it is; it’s a freezing of moments in time. But you can freeze many different moments at different times. Besides that, the life course divisions are arbitrary. I mean not completely arbitrary, I know that I’m not 20 anymore, but when I came to this country I was 22, same age as you.”

I then delved deeper into the realm of personal questions. “When you think of your own aging, is it a positive or negative feeling? Or perhaps both? And maybe neither?” I asked. Stefan answered, “It’s both negative and positive. But you have to accept it as a fact of life. In some weird way, I realize that when I look at my calendar I am now in my early 70s, but I strangely enough sometimes feel like I am only 20 and I think in the same way. But not totally. In other words, the way you feel and you think isn’t necessarily translatable to your actual age.” “What would be your ideal way of aging?” I further ask. He answers shortly, “Accept aging, but still live as a young person and as long as you can.” This answer was very interesting to me as it was very generic. After the many interesting and complex answers my father gave when considering aging in the context of art, his personal ideas about aging seemed to align more with the norm. So I probed further, “What does that mean to you?” And he continued, “What I mean is don’t give up your ideals, try to, as long as you have the physical and mental strength, act as a participant in life. And of course you have to realize that when you go to work out at the gym you can’t do the same things as the 20 year olds do, and the same is true for other types of activities. But you have to do them gracefully, and exist with that. Nothing wrong with that.” This answer was very much Moody-esque in terms of its adaptive approach in defining successful aging in terms of ones ability to most successfully age in their physical and/or mental state, and unlike his Rowe and Kahn-esque beginning in which he emphasized physical and mental health and active engagement with life as the primary modes of successfully aging.

“Do you have a specific story of an experience of your own aging?” I asked in order to clarify my father’s standpoint. Fortunately, he did. Stefan mentioned, “I remember going through life, when I came to this country and I was at a laboratory doing research, I was always the youngest person there. You know? And as I went through my life I always felt like I was the youngest. All of a sudden, today, I find myself that I am actually the oldest in my organization and other organizations too. And I ask myself, how did this happen? I remember I was the youngest and that was normal, and then all of a sudden I am here in the blink of an eye I am the oldest, and people see me as the old guy. Nobody is older than me! Whether I am at my business or going to a yoga class. How did this happen?” Interestingly, though, he continues, “And at the same time, I do not feel that I am that different than how I was when I was in my 20s. Interestingly enough, in my 20s, considering my European
upbringing and my values, that is still who I am today. Of course there are other things that came on top of that. So there is that continuum: how old you look to other people might be very very different from how you feel yourself. And, as I said, this kind of surprised me. Yesterday I was the youngest, today I am the oldest! How come? Weird, isn’t it. It just creeps upon you, almost unnoticeably.”

“Do you think you are pressured into feeling any particular way about aging?” I asked to understand the influences he perceived. He answered, “I would say that in this country, it is a youth culture. As far as older people, I guess they are allowed and even esteemed, but in a very selective way. Hillary Rodham Clinton is accepted, although she is very old, to be president. But if she were to work in a regular job, they probably wouldn’t touch her because she is too old. And so in general, there are a lot of disadvantages to being perceived as old. So there is a sense of discrimination against those people in our culture, sadly enough.” I picked up on his use of the word “perceived” and followed, “How do you think people ‘perceive’ others as old?” Stefan responded, “They look at you physically, they look at your face. As a matter of fact, I can also say that sometimes I look at myself in the mirror, from a profile, because I’m accustomed to seeing myself frontally, and I say "Wow! Do I look that old? Mamma mia! Is this how I really look to other people? That’s scary! That’s even scary to me to see that guy! Wow. I don’t see myself looking like that!" The discrepancy between how others view him and how he views himself is a continuous thread running through our conversation, I was not surprised to hear it reinforced another time.

“And where do you feel those pressures to feel as you do about aging?” I asked. Stefan’s controversial answer was quite telling. “Well, I mean, if you approach a young girl in her 20s, your peers might say you are a dirty old man. But I don’t have any problems approaching a girl in her 20s! And I might be attracted to her, but the public says I shouldn’t be doing that because socially that is not okay. Unless she is a movie star, in which case you can do whatever you want.” This comment made me think about the amount of cultural clout placed on labels, and how strong these bonds of cultural expectancies tie to chronological age. Might we be allowed to act differently if we lived without the constraints of chronological age? Might we be happier if we were allowed to act as we would like, regardless of age? Why must one’s age dictate one’s ability to participate in certain facets of life and/or engage people in specific ways? At present, I am starting to lose faith in the merits of chronological age.
Andrea Schnabl, Stux Gallery’s director and co-owner, was next in line after my father. My door was open; she entered without a knock. She was wearing head-to-toe black clothing, with heavy silver bracelets as embellishments. Her hair was past shoulder length and dyed light blonde, and her eyes were large and blue. As a matter of impression, I felt that Andrea was chic.

“What are the different ways that you feel you are a part of the art world?” I began the conversation. “Well, I am promoting artists, I am promoting art, I promote what I think has value and what can contribute to society. I try to make it accessible, through the gallery, to a broader audience,” Andrea responded. “What interests you about art now?” I continued. “Anything. Anything goes in art. There are so many ways of expressing ideas; and arts are not just visual arts: It could be music, it could be poetry, painting, sculpture (which is more our field), science, even, could branch into art. It’s all a way of a creative process and that’s what interests me, basically,” Andrea ended. I continue finding out about Andrea’s history with art. “When did you become interested in art? And why?” I asked. She continues, “From the day I was born. I just grew up in an environment which was always very artistic. I had no real artists in the family, but everything was done with an eye to the visual. And I was always a visual person, myself. I am not a very verbal person, but I see things, I can visualize things, and I was around a lot of stuff that was very visually engaging growing up.”

With her upbringing in mind, I transitioned into talking about her role as a gallery director. “My immediate active role is to sustain a gallery like ours by making sales. I mean, we are not a non-for-profit institution, we are a commercial gallery. And I think that’s always a big aspect of it. Now, being able to do that is great. You are in this environment, you have this dialogue with the artists, and you even can provide a living for them by selling their work. So that is my main task other than having a part in the curatorial issues including which artists we represent, who do we show,” she said. This was the first time of many in which the commercial aspect of the gallery showed through in our interview. She continued, “If you look at contemporary art today, it has become sort of a new commercial engine, which kind of drifted away from what art should be. Now [art] becomes an investment to many. There are many new collectors which are the ultra rich who are going ‘trophy hunting’ to buy the big names; they are buying what they think is an investment and now it becomes suddenly less about the art, but about money. And that’s a thing that’s a bit sad to watch.” This comment is not to say that content and aesthetic appeal are not important in today’s art climate, but it is rather to say that there is an
increased emphasis on commercialization. It is my hope that a thesis such as this one, and continued writing about contemporary art, can combat this commercialization trend; hopefully, education about contemporary art will help sprout a new generation of collectors whose emphases are shifted more towards interesting content and illuminating aesthetic experiences.

What is the alternative to a heavily commercialized system? Where should the emphasis lie? I wondered to myself. “What do you think the role of art should be?” I prompted her. “I think the role of art is to keep us mentally engaged and open minded, most of all. Not being stuck on rigid ideas or ideals. Especially to understand contemporary art today you have to be extremely open minded, and it’s almost an educational process just to understand what you are looking at. There has always been a need for visual expression, even in cave paintings. And we still need that today. I think that is what [art] is, and what it should be,” she responded. I thought of moments in which I had a feeling that I was unable to put into words. I, too, would agree that visual expression is one mode of filling such holes. “Aside from being able to fulfill those goals, what do you think makes an artist a hit?” I asked.

Andrea said, “Consensus. It needs a whole bunch of people who come together and agree on it being great. You need an artist, a gallerist, a collector or many, critics, museum directors (though they are later in line), and then all these people coming together. And then conflict! When critics argue about art it is the best because it creates dialogue, and that is what art is supposed to do. This process can make or break an artist, for sure.” I already knew that for a work to be great, it does not have to be easy to comprehend and/or internalize. It must evoke newness or a deeper sense of understanding to many different people. Or, perhaps, an artist only needs a few important backers. That point remains for contemplation.

I then shifted the conversation from general gallery ideas to ones that pertain more specifically to the relationship between art and aging. I began, “Why did you, as a gallerist, choose to show work about aging?” Andrea responded, “For me, it wasn’t about the fact of age or aging. For me it was again purely the visual appeal of what I saw. The creases, and the wrinkles, and the posture…-- it’s very visual. This very much applies to the work of Miki Carmi; these big huge sometimes grotesque hideous faces. I don’t necessarily see them as a process or as a result of age although it is or it could be, but just purely a visual map.”

I mentally noted Andrea’s choice to use the word “landscape” to describe older faces. Interestingly, this is the same word Carmi used to describe the older faces he painted. I probed further on this topic. “What makes you compare an older person’s face to a landscape?” I asked. She answered, “Because if you look at some youthful creature, there isn’t much to see beyond that. But if the age comes in, yes, the body can be a landscape. [The older people] become shapes, they become a landscape, sometimes a story even. What story do you have to tell when you are so young?” She referred this association back to her artist background as she noted, “I can also give you the reverse example. When I am walking in the park or in the forest and I look at a root or at a tree trunk, I see a nude in there, a person or a face. For me, I was trained as a sculptor; it’s all about shapes. That’s why I actually find these topics more interesting, because they are so much more complex. They are not
necessarily just a landscape, they are an intense complexity of shapes.” Again, Andrea’s aesthetic bend surfaced.

“It’s interesting that when one sees a young person they usually don’t see an apple, for instance,” I continued. She retorted, “Maybe in the case of a baby (chuckles). But we do make associations all the time. People say that bodies have a pear shape, or an apple shape. I think that sometimes, and this is again where contemporary art comes into the picture, we engage people to just look with no judgments. Just look at the art and see what it does to you. Even an abstract painting, or Malevich’s black square, what are you really looking at?” To me, Andrea’s comment hinted at a point that was also important to Stefan Stux; art has an inherent aesthetic value that does not always need to be translated into words. One’s gut reaction to a work, with no knowledge of the artist or the context, is a legitimate experience. One must not always base one’s experience of art on intellectual rigor or argument. A work can be engaging on a purely aesthetic level, perhaps also considering one’s personal association with what they see. A black square can spur a long trajectory of associative chains, or could spur nothing. Both experiences are telling.

“And what about those works do you think is grotesque or scary?” I asked to further probe her comment regarding older faces inheriting those adjectives. Except, I accidentally added “scary”. Andrea followed, “I wouldn’t say they are scary. To me, they are not. To many people they are, especially when we had [Carmi’s] show and I see the public coming in and how they react to the works.” “Could you talk a little more about those reactions?” I continued. “Could be very negative reactions;” Andrea mentioned. And she went on to reenact a smattering of popular reactions including, “Oh why are you showing this? Or, this is gross. Or, oh my God this is disgusting; why would you show such a thing?”

Reflecting, she continued, “And only then I realized that it is actually the people who are so youth oriented. You go out on the street, you look at the billboards, you open a magazine, no one even has a speck on their cheek and everything is wrinkle free and youth oriented. The situation is almost to a point that when you do see something like [art about aging], these people experience a sense of shock.” “Shock?” I questioned. Andrea explained, “Sometimes with shocking works like the ones we have been talking about, sensationalism comes into play. Then, it is a welcome to the freak show. Like, see this bearded lady, or this guy with five arms. So there is a fine line.” It was interesting that Andrea related showing works about older people to circuses with bearded ladies and men with five arms. Clearly, her use of the word ‘shock’ was not an exaggeration.

I felt that this moment was an interesting transition into talking about Andrea’s experience of aging, as I was curious as to how her thoughts might line up with the extreme characterization of reactions to works about aging. So, I continued in that direction. “How do you feel about the fact that you are going to age?” I asked. “I don’t like it! (chuckles). I don’t like it, no, of course not! I mean, I am now 46 and I remember when I was 20, when I was 14, I can even remember some fractions of when I was 3. It is absolutely the case that time accelerates as we get older. And then, of course, you see your body change, you see your energy levels change... You
could artificially manipulate that process, but in the end it is all falsifying it because we all have to die,” Andrea responded.

Her immediate jump to thinking about death was interesting as it reinforced her relation of death to aging. Not all interviewees brought up death when thinking about aging. Without further prompting Andrea continued, “I am not terrified of dying because to me it is a part of life. But the fact of aging is that I also look in the mirror and say ‘Oh, there is a new wrinkle on my forehead,’ and it becomes like my own canvas that suddenly does its own thing to itself and you can see suddenly some creases forming on your face or some flop under your underarm. And then we all try to fight that, but at the same time I find it interesting to try and see how we eventually wilt. But you can also wilt with grace.” This comment was very telling as to Andrea’s ideas about aging. It seemed to me that aging was scarier to her than death. And though she endeavored to fight her concession that aging is scary by adding the final sentence, the sentiment remained. Between death and aging, could aging really be the scarier of the two? Later in the interview, Andrea reasserted the questions that I had been thinking about. She commented, “Are they really afraid of aging or are they afraid of dying? That’s the big question. Maybe both, maybe one or the other, maybe not dying but aging... I call it pruning. I don’t know, I really don’t know. You should ask them!”

To more deeply understand her view of aging I probed her previous quotation. “What do you think, specifically, makes you associate aging with wilting?” I asked. “Wilting, yeah, like a beautiful flower. Physically, though, not mentally, necessarily. I mean, you get wiser, you get more knowledge, you really acquire a lot of things as time goes by. There is so much that goes into aging that is not just negative. I mean even getting a crease on your forehead is not necessarily negative.” she answered. I played devil’s advocate by further probing, “What wouldn’t make it negative?” “It creates character. It’s authentic, it’s real. It’s like a river stream that flows away, it’s time passing and aging is just part of life. Such is birth, such is death, such is renewal. And I’ve seen some incredible looking old people that I actually would probably not have looked at when they were younger! Character can develop more with age.” I was excited by this refreshingly positive view of aging. I found it quite beautiful to think about the ways in which character can develop as age progresses.

But, this positivity did not last for long. Andrea mentioned, “Sometimes, I see people who are already only in their 60s or 70s, and they already start to become hunchbacked and they already have their knee problems. I don’t want to look like them when I get there. And I know that can be avoided. So that’s something I am working on.” This Rowe and Kahn approach to aging, thinking about the experience as avoidable instead of manageable, as Moody might counter, seemed like a setback to me in the context of all of the positive comments she had previously made about aging. But it is understandable to have mixed feelings about aging. Most of us, I think, do.

Continuing, I commented, “I notice you emphasized physical health in aging. To add to that, are there any other specific attributes or actions that would be central to an ideal way of aging?” Andrea brought the conversation back to art by saying, “Art is a big part of that! Contemporary art. And that’s why I am so drawn to
it. Because it keeps you mentally engaged which is, again, a part of aging and decline.” Andrea seemed to most emphasize generalized health, physical and mental. She went on to further ruminate about aging by noting, “I mean, [aging] is a decline no matter how we look at it. But, it is also important for me to be self-sufficient, to keep my mental and physical abilities to the best I can. I would not want to be ridden by some disease or mental decline, and I probably would rather fast myself into a different stage, if it’s really a point where I am still physically and mentally able to do that, if I was faced with such a rapid and brutal decline.” I was shocked by the resemblance of this comment to Rowe and Kahn’s assertions. Perhaps, I thought to myself, people in the art world are not immune to the cultural pressures inherent to aging in Western culture.

I went on to try to understand the influences that affected Andrea’s perception of aging. I began the conversation by generally enquiring, “Do you think that culture or society pressures you into feeling any particular way about aging?” She quickly retorted, “No. Not at all. But I feel surprised or saddened how the industry is always pushing that issue and to see how many people are feeling pressured by it. Especially in the gallery world, I come across a lot of face-lifts.” I further pressed this point by asking, “What do you think the main pressures are that guide other people’s thinking about aging?” Well, it’s all this youth oriented society. This is what we get fed. This is what we see. Health, youth, vitality, those are all things which everybody is supposed to be, or feel, or live. I mean, somebody 50 years older has a harder time getting rehired somewhere and disregarding, maybe, the amount of wisdom that they could bring to the table. But I think people are pressured by media. We are not loners, we are monkeys. We see we do, and I think it is just what we are being fed. And sure, some people have their own mind and brilliant ideas, but they are very influenced by society.”

I found it interesting that Andrea felt comfortable generalizing about “people” and their tendencies and influences, though she did not feel as though she is a part of that group; she is not pressured, but most others are. In turn I asked, “But you mentioned you don’t feel that you are. Why do you think that is?” She answered, “I don’t have a husband, I don’t have to be nervous that he runs off with a younger one (loud laughs). I’m just not because there is so much more to life and that is actually where it brings me back to the art. There is so much stimulus out there and just listening to ideas, and there is so much great stuff that we can encounter, that it is not just about how we look now and how we are going to look in 10 years from now. I mean the body is just a vehicle.” Bringing the conversation back to older people Andrea continued, “Their bodies mean almost nothing to them at that stage. But they still have a spirit, they have a soul, and they are fantastic people. And their appearance becomes almost irrelevant. I mean, not to them, not to other people, but they still have a right to a spiritual high and it is not just physical.” The idea of body-as-vehicle fit well with Andrea’s earlier comments about the body being a landscape. It seems that she had significant difficulty acknowledging that the older body is just that; an older body can be a vehicle, it can be a landscape, but it can’t be an older body. Or, at least, it can’t be just an older body.

I concluded our interview by asking, “Is there any last comment you’d like to make, anything you haven’t gotten a chance to say yet?” Andrea replied, “I think
everybody who is aging should keep engaged in the arts because that is what keeps me mentally engaged and always thinking of new ideas. That’s so important in our society.” Though I did not much relate to her Rowe and Kahn-esque nod to mental health being central to successful aging, I appreciated her underlying sentiment. Art is a powerful tool that can be central in helping any person challenge and/or expand their minds, older people included. In a culture where aging is often marginalized, and in which aged people are asked to retire from their professions and sometimes relocate from their homes to reside elsewhere, art can be a way for individuals to continue thinking about the issues facing humanity and our world.
Concluding Reflections and Comparisons: Art World Ideas and Scholars on Aging

In order to allow for quotations to speak for themselves and for readers to be given space to consider the ways in which the offered narratives interact with the reader’s own ideas, little analysis has been insofar offered. Presently, the quotations cited from gallery-goers, artists, and gallerists will be contextualized. As was mentioned at the outset of this work, this research hopes to compare the ideas propagated by members of the art world to those propagated in scholarly and public cultural contexts. This evaluation hopes to further probe the assertion that the art world is a counterculture; if scholarly writings and the ideas propagated by artists, gallerists and gallery-goers are symmetrical, can one confidently assert that the art world is a place of dissent from the norm?

In order to complete this comparison, five primary theoretical ideas will be considered: those produced by Catherine Silver, Cosco et al, John Rowe and Robert Kahn, Abigail Brooks, and Harry Moody. The ideas of these theorists will be used comparatively to more deeply understand the comments produced by the primary four interviewed art world professionals: Miki Carmi, Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, Stefan Stux, and Andrea Schnabl. Ultimately, these categories of ideas will be compared with an eye towards specific similarities and differences.

(De)gendering in Old Age?

Catherine Silver argues in her “Gendered Identities in Old Age” that gender-based expectations are altered in advanced age and there is a trend towards “(de)gendering” in older stages of life. Fundamentally, she notes, “Gender structure makes a difference in the way the aging body is understood. Older women’s bodies are more likely to be perceived as deformed, ridiculous looking, and desexualized. They become frightening, ‘crones,’ and ‘witch like,’ as imagined in children’s books and fairy tales” (Silver 2003: 385). Many gallery-goers provided comments that seem to align with Silver’s assertion that the older body changes from a gendered being to something other. As one female noted with regards to the Max Snow work mentioned in the gallery-goer chapter, “When I think of old people I just think of frailness... their blood doesn’t pump through their veins as vigorously so they get cold easier!” This woman noted “frailness” as the primary distinguisher of “old people” as opposed to any gendered notion; her genderless choice of adjective supports Silver’s end.
Carmi also contextualized the older body within the constraints of the “deformed”. As he comments, “In the beginning I used to gain inspiration from the deformity section of biology books. I used to look specifically at deformed things and deformed people, just the way that the body could be completely broken apart is really fascinating. But then I became obsessed with skin problems, the changes in the color of the skin and everything that would make you puke, you know?” This association between older bodies and deformities supports the cultural making of older bodies into something other. But, it does not seem that only Carmi feels this way about his topic and perhaps his subsequent work. When asked about reactions to his paintings Carmi commented, “[I often hear that] my work is very tough, it is disgusting. Most people don’t say anything, because I think they want to get away from it as fast as possible. Even if you ask my grandmother, she would say that I am doing a very terrible thing because I represent, like, monsters.” It is not only Carmi or his viewers alone who draw Silver’s distinction; even Carmi’s grandmother, an individual living within the category of older bodies, related older faces to “monsters”. Here, it seems that the ideas of the anthropologist and those of the art community are not too different.

Andrea Schnabl also provided content relating to the making of older bodies into something other than just an older body. As she commented regarding her feelings on older faces and on the work of Carmi, “The creases, and the wrinkles, and the posture... it’s very visual. This very much applies to the work of Miki Carmi. These big huge sometimes grotesque hideous faces. I don’t necessarily see them as a process or as a result of age although it is or it could be, but just purely a visual map.” She even continued on to assert that, “Sometimes with shocking works like the ones we have been talking about, sensationalism comes into play. Then, it is a welcome to the freak show. Like, see this bearded lady, or this guy with five arms. So there is a fine line.” Andrea’s decision to refer to older faces as a “map” or equivalent to a “bearded lady” is very reminiscent of Silver’s point.

Moreover, other gallery goer’s quotations seem to support the desexualization that Silver notes. As I recalled my conversation with a gallery-goer further regarding the Max Snow work, “What if I told you that the woman was 65?” I asked. “She is?” he asked, very surprised. “Well, what if I told you she was?” I pushed. “Then this would be a totally different piece!” he exclaimed. “Why?” I continued. “Because then it wouldn’t be about the sex industry and making good of a questionable situation. Then, it would be about a cougar begging for the attention of this young man.” The abrupt change that took place in the narrative that the gallery-goer had created for himself, specifically the shift from a young sex worker struggling to make a living to an old “cougar” luring in a young man, is very much related to the dip in the amount older individuals are assumed to be/culturally allowed to be sexual.

The Role of Death in Models of Aging

Another common theme throughout my interviews was death and its role in aging. As Carmi asserts, “I don’t think aging is the scariest part. The scarier part is what happens after you get buried and everything.” And as Thordis comments, “Aside from illness and death, I’ve had great experiences of other people’s aging.” As
a theoretical framework, this conversation will be contextualized within Cosco et al.’s work entitled “Deathless Models of Aging and the Importance of Acknowledging the Dying Process.” In this piece, the authors argue that “Making the best of dying does not necessarily mean staving off death at all costs, but finding the means through which positive mental and physical states can be fostered” (Cosco et al 2013: 752). Carmi comments on what he views as the relationship between aging and death when he notes, “I think old age is something that is beyond your chronological age that has a lot to do with your relationship with death. If you are five years old, but you think about death already, it means you have an old soul.” If one is to flip this statement it might read, one has an old soul only if they think about death at a younger age. Carmi’s relating of aging and death so closely reinforces Cosco et al’s call to include death in models of aging. It might be asserted that Carmi and Cosco are at least partially in agreement about the role of death in the life course.

Stefan Stux also seems to feel that death should be considered a part of the aging narrative. As he comments, “One could make the argument that life is a terminal disease. Life is a fatal disease. If you are born, you will end up dead. But, of course, if you confront your mortality, it makes your life so much more powerful.” Stefan not only includes death as a part of aging and seems to consider life a cycle of sorts, but he also supports the conscious confronting of death’s existence and universality in order to lead a richer life. Andrea Schnabl similarly feels that death should be a part of aging rhetoric. As she comments, “[Wrinkles] create character… [Life is] like a river stream that flows away, it’s time passing and aging is just part of life. Such is birth, such is death, such is renewal.” Both of these perspectives align with Cosco et al’s call to include death in, and to find ways to positively contextualize mortality and to follow the course of aging gracefully.

**Successful Aging: Physical and Mental Health and Active Engagement with Life**

Next, the successful aging models will be comparatively presented. John Rowe and Robert Kahn claim in their book entitled *Successful Aging* that successful aging can be reduced to three primary goals: 1) avoiding disease (and disease-related disability), 2) maintaining high cognitive and physical function, and 3) active engagement with life (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 37-39). At present, this conception of successful aging is arguably the most influential scholarly model. Each of these elements was highlighted both individually and collectively at moments throughout my art world interviews. In terms of artist comments, Carmi mentions that he paints “everything that is the opposite of healthy and powerful and strong and a bright future. It’s like an allegory for the end.” When thinking of aging, Carmi seems to think of a lack of heath, power, and strength, all reminiscent of Rowe and Kahn’s association with aging, and their subsequent call for avoiding disease and maintaining high mental and physical health.

Stefan Stux seemed to almost wholesale regurgitate the findings of Rowe and Kahn. As he comments, “don’t give up your ideals, try to, as long as you have the physical and mental strength, act as a participant in life.” Stux highlighted all three elements of Rowe and Kahn’s theories of successful aging: the importance of physical and mental strength (or health), which would necessitate the avoidance of
disease, and active participation in life. Similarly, Andrea Schnabl emphasized the importance of health and active engagement with life. As she notes, "I mean, [aging] is a decline no matter how we look at it. But, it is also important for me to be self-sufficient, to keep my mental and physical abilities to the best I can. I would not want to be ridden by some disease or mental decline..." One could argue that her interest in an active participation in life lies in self-sufficiency.

Andrea also further reinforces the importance of active engagement with society later in her interview by commenting, “I think everybody who is aging should keep engaged in the arts because that is what keeps me mentally engaged and always thinking of new ideas. That’s so important in our society." Thordis seemed to agree with Rowe and Kahn’s emphasis on an active engagement with life being central to successful aging. As she comments, “Art should intersect/act completely with all ages. I see how fulfilling it is for my grandparents who are very active in going to theaters, reading, seeing live music, they go to exhibitions and follow to some extent what is going on in the visual art world. That way they are still partaking in society and conversation at the age of ninety.” In short, many art world professionals reiterated comments reminiscent of those important to Rowe and Kahn, though none of them had previously encountered the theorists’ work.

**The Visual Aesthetics of Anti-Aging**

Moreover, Abigail Brooks in her article entitled “Aesthetic Anti-Ageing Surgery and Technology: Women’s Friend or Foe?” finds that looking young is a fundamental element of the Western successful aging paradigm. As she comments, “My respondents articulate an aesthetic anti-ageing surgery-and-technology-driven paradigm that edges out successful ageing in favour of a kind of feminised agelessness – health work on the body in the context of ageing is subsumed into youth / beauty work on the body that aims to minimise, reverse, and even prevent signs of ageing altogether” (2010: 251). In essence, Brooks comments that less emphasis is being placed on the experience of aging successfully and individuals are more conscious of looking like they are aging successfully with a pointed emphasis on youth.

After discussing the Max Snow work with a gallery-goer, I recalled the following conversation. “But did you like the content?” I asked. “It’s always about trying to look young, and there is nothing that makes you look younger than putting yourself in a coffin. When people look into the coffin they are expecting some old person, eyes closed and with a body that has given up. Instead, you look into this one and you see an attractive young girl drinking a beer. The surprise element definitely contributes to how young she looks.” Particularly relevant to the present purpose, the gallery-goer’s decision to say, “It’s always about trying to look young” makes her priorities quite clear. A similar conversation about the Max Snow work with another gallery-goer followed suit. “But she is in the grave! Don’t you think that fact makes it at least somewhat interesting?” I asked. “I think it just goes to show that there are really images of the youth everywhere nowadays. That is all people want to see! The youth even took our spot in the grave!” This comment strongly reinforces the overwhelming pressure towards youth-oriented aesthetic and activity that many seem to feel.
Carmi made the grand comment that “In Western culture, getting old is a very political issue. Removing this biological process from our lives is one of the biggest tasks of contemporary Western culture. An old lady is absolutely not considered beautiful.” This is almost a direct restatement of Brooks’ argument; both note that this “removal” of aging, perhaps more symbolic than tangible, is a particular mission of Western culture, at any cost. Both Carmi and Brooks leave little room for aging to be contextualized as beautiful. Even Thordis showed disdain for the aging body when she commented, “I have a negative attitude towards my husbands aging... he used to look like a teenager and all of a sudden now he looks like an old teenager.” She, perhaps, might also have a preference for youth over aging in terms of how one looks. Andrea Schnabl brings the point full circle as she comments, “Especially in the gallery world, I come across a lot of face-lifts.”

Alternative Successful Aging Models: Decrement with Compensation

As an alternative to Rowe and Kahn’s model, and arguably as an alternative to the pressures to look young described by Brooks, Harry Moody offers the “decrement with compensation” model in his article entitled “From Successful Aging to Conscious Aging.” This work argues that “the goal of positive aging is not to stay healthy longer and longer but, rather, to adapt, to make the best of our situation, even if it means chronic illness and decline” (Moody 2009: 72). Many art world professionals offered comments that remind me of those iterated by Moody. Carmi commented on the way in which he feels his mother’s personality transcends chronological age. As he comments, “On a metaphorical level, some people are born old. And some people never get old. My mother is seventy-five, but she has the mentality of a thirteen year old. Her body is very old but her mind is very young. And I feel the opposite, always very old.” In Carmi’s view, one can use personality to shift chronological boundaries.

Thordis offered a similar comment to that of Carmi with regard to her grandparents. As she comments, “I have a fun and close relationship with my grandparents, and I have friends pushing sixty but I would never think of them as aging since their lifestyle is ageless.” Again, for Thordis, the way in which one chooses to live one’s life is central in determining age. Though she recognizes chronology by noting they are “pushing sixty,” she ends her comment by acknowledging that their lifestyle is “ageless.”

When asked about his experience of aging, Stefan offered a comment that was very Moody-esque. As he notes, “[My experience of aging is] both negative and positive. But you have to accept it as a fact of life. In some weird way, I realize that when I look at my calendar I am now in my early 70s, but I strangely enough sometimes feel like I am only 20 and I think in the same way. But not totally. In other words, the way you feel and you think isn’t necessarily translatable to your actual age.” He continues, “of course you have to realize that when you go to work out at the gym you can’t do the same things as the 20 year olds do, and the same is true for other types of activities. But you have to do them gracefully, and exist with that. Nothing wrong with that.” Lifestyle is again emphasized here. But further, he realizes that he is aging and accepts that fact and how it makes him feel. He seems to
be adapting to his situation in the best way he knows how, with little denial of his physical shifts.

Andrea also offers a comment that is particularly reminiscent of Moody. As she says regarding what aging is, “Wilting, yeah, like a beautiful flower. Physically, though, not mentally, necessarily. I mean, you get wiser, you get more knowledge, you really acquire a lot of things as time goes by. There is so much that goes into aging that is not just negative. I mean even getting a crease on your forehead is not necessarily negative.” Andrea is recognizing that there are physical differences that begin to surface as one ages. But, this does not seem to have any inherent meaning for her; there are many positives that aging has to offer, including more knowledge, and no physical change is inextricably tied to any positive or negative feelings.

Through comparing scholarly material about aging to the ideas propagated by art world professionals on the topic, one notices the striking similarity of the viewpoints. Though not all ideas are identical, and though each comment has its own details and implications, there is ample opportunity to provide substantial comparisons between the ideas of one group and the other. It must be noted that not all quotations offered in the body sections of this work were categorized, and there were many offered perspectives that do not perfectly align with scholarly positions. But, this acknowledgement does not lighten the weight of the presented similarities. Perhaps, one could argue, each individual internalizes unique ideas about their own and others’ aging experiences. But, there also seems to be a number of schools of thought to which many individuals subscribe. Though ideas about aging are unique in detailed ways, many views of aging overlap when considered from a broader perspective.

Is the Art World Still a Counterculture?

I asked Stefan, “Do you think that artists are propagating a counterculture?” Stefan answered, “I would say that artists, by enlarge, especially in this day and age, are known to be troublemakers. Some of these are troublemakers (meaning they do go against that culture or at least they probe those issues), but some of them do it in a more subtle way and some do it in a more blatant way. But, actually, unless you walk away from a piece of artwork and it has changed you in some ways, it is probably not a very interesting sort of thing to spend time with.” In short, Stefan seemed to say that his answer would be maybe yes or maybe no, but if it was obviously the same as what we see everywhere else, wouldn’t that be boring?

I equally asked Andrea, "Do you think that you are showing work that goes with or against the grain of your culture?" She answered, "Very often, we take on the role of pioneers. We put out something regardless of the trend today. Sometimes things click, sometimes not. We then see how it interacts with our culture through reactions." I continued, “Do you think that important artists today tend to make work that goes with or against the grain of culture?” And Andrea responded, “Depends which artists! I always feel like art is actually a straight reflection out of the culture we live in. In that way, I don’t see them going against it. They have reactions living within it and process it in a certain way using the language they are given. Artists are a straight product of culture. They are very sensitive people who
are maybe processing and absorbing more than maybe somebody else. They have a voice and a language and can also be quite activist with their art.”

Stefan and Andrea offer two answers to the question of the art world as a counterculture. Stefan notes that artists are often troublemakers, while Andrea comments that artists are merely reiterating what exists in society. In my view, both seem to be true. Those in the art world do probe issues that exist in society; they do not merely reiterate what they see in a complete act of acceptance. But, the ideas that artists and art world professionals seem to be conveying are not too different from those ideas propagated by prominent anthropologists and gerontologists. From the above analysis, in other words by comparing the ideas of theorists to those of artists, gallery-goers, and art world-professionals, one notices that there are not too many differences. If theorists, artists, gallery-goers, and art world professionals are approaching the topic of aging from a similar perspective, can one conscientiously call the art world a counterculture? This is a question that might be interesting to probe further.

In short, many contemporary US notions about aging are highly pervasive; they seem to permeate academic and artistic circles through scholarly writing and artistic production, but they also seem to influence much of everyday opinion, as is evident by the gallery-goer and art world professionals’ quotations. But nonetheless, to reiterate an earlier point, individuals have agency. Once one recognizes that there are many ways to interpret the act of growing older, and many ways to understand the life course and its progression, one realizes that one is not bound to any number of aging models. One can craft one’s own perception. One can interpret chronological age as plainly a number of years of life, void of assumptions. One can live life as one feels most comfortable regardless of age and cultural pressures to act in a certain fashion at particular chronological points. This lesson, namely that one’s perception of the world is wholly a matter of interpretation and perspective, not a matter of truth and falseness, is the one that made me fall in love with anthropology in the first place. And one anthropology thesis later, here I am.
Bibliography


