

## Find the Poles in 'Blue Poles'

Christina Slade and Maryanne del Gigante



'BLUE POLES,' Jackson Pollock, 1952. Oil, enamel and aluminium paint on canvas. Used with permission of the National gallery of Australia, Canberra

*This paper describes a program developed at the National Gallery of Australia, in which the discussion of art with students is presented quite differently from the traditional gallery teaching model. Rather than telling students about the context of art works, or setting them such tasks as finding the "blue poles", the model is taken from the Philosophy for Children community of inquiry. We seek to show teachers how apparently "difficult" art naturally gives rise to questions about reality, reference, beauty and the importance*

*of art works. We illustrate the process with works of Anselm Kiefer, Jim Dine and Andy Warhol.*

### PREAMBLE

The controversial purchase in 1974 by the Director of the new National Gallery of Australia, James Mollison, of Jackson's Pollock's landmark work *Blue Poles* for \$1.2 million gave rise to predictable comments: "My four year old can paint better than that," is perhaps the most frequent and still current remark. Works of contemporary art, which do not obey conventional and traditional modes of representation, very often draw on features which appear childish. Part of our thesis today is that this very "childishness" makes contemporary art particularly apt for the introduction of questions of aesthetics for children. All artistic production, classical or contemporary, high or low, gives rise to philosophical questions. In the Philosophy for Children program, we find the issues raised in Lisa, episode 17, in Suki and so on. Our contention is that children have a particular ability with respect to contemporary art - an ability we should draw on.

It would be misleading to describe Pollock's painting as non-representational. There are, indeed, 'blue poles' across the painting - the lines of blue left by the stick or pole covered in blue paint, which he superimposed over layers of paint dribbled onto the canvas. Yet it is absurd to seek a particular significance in the poles, outside the context of the painting itself. This attitude to art - and to art education, which we have caricatured as "find the poles in *Blue Poles*" - fails to perceive that understanding the painting involves more than finding a crude representational key. Pollock did not create the illusionist space of the traditional representationalist. Not only is there no 'photographic' component: his endeavour is one of mapping the surface of the canvas itself. He painted the canvas flat on the ground - there is no top or bottom, in its traditional sense. He dribbles and spatters paint, rather than layering it on with a hand-held brush. The poles serve to give a rhythmical pattern to paint, to create a sense of the indefinite extensions of the painting over the edge of the canvas. As one of the students said of the painting: "This is a window on inner reality." Pollock's endeavour is a different one from that of representing an external reality, but it is representation nonetheless.

This paper speaks in two voices. Christina Slade begins with an introduction to issues in philosophy of childhood and the art gallery. Maryanne del Gigante, who designed teaching programs in the Hirschorn Museum in Washington, goes on to give the particular flavour of the introduction of Philosophy to the

National Gallery of Australia. The lesson plans she devised are in the appendix. Both were inspired by the work of Eulalia Bosch and her colleagues in the Catalan Centre for Philosophy for Children who work with contemporary art as the beginning of a process of philosophical inquiry.

## CHILDREN, ART AND PERCEPTION

Christina Slade

It is commonplace for those of us working with Philosophy for Children to remark that children's philosophical perceptions have a freshness and clarity that university students and scholars may well lack. Not only do children have a capacity for wonder; they perceive the world from an angle that may well give us, as adults, a clearer understanding of the world. As the Biblical image puts it: we see as through a glass darkly. This is not so for children: as Robert Graves says "the wide glare of the children's day" allows them clearer vision.

These images have a particular relevance to children's artistic vision. Children do, quite literally, see the world from a different angle. We have very clear evidence of this in their own artistic output - an output that has, in consequence a particular value. Consider a drawing by a three-year-old child, made in the South Australian art classes of Ruth Tuck, an eighty-year-old artist and theorist of children's art. In her lecture accompanying an exhibition of children's art (1990), she argues for the artistic validity of child art in terms of children's abilities to see the world differently from adults. According to Tuck, a three-year-old's vision of an adult, eyes high in the head and enlarged, with arms sprouting from the neck or the head and with hugely exaggerated hands and fingers, is true to the child's experience.

Ruth Tuck also makes the point that painters may base their art on children's vision. Just as Picasso used African primitive sculpture as one of his starting points, so, for instance, Klee, Chagall, Henri Rousseau and - to take an Australian example, John Olsen's "Samana Santa" (Art Gallery of South Australia), based on the work of his six-year-old daughter - draw on children's art. Olsen's gouache shows the typical hands and foreshortened face and body of children's work. The child's vision helps us to understand and the artist to create a new image of the world. We find an elaborated version of this too, in the 1909 remark of Roger Fry about Matisse, cited in the recent catalogue of the Matisse exhibition (Taylor, et. al., p 48) that he is one of the neo, neo Impressionists, quite interesting and lots of talent but very queer. He does things very much like Pamela (a seven-year-old). (Taylor, p48)

This remark, while recognising the childlikeness and talent of Matisse's art, has a certain derogatory sound. Fry goes on by 1910 to explain:

*Like the work of the primitive artist, the pictures children draw are often extraordinarily expressive. But what delights them is to find they are acquiring more and more skill in producing a deceptive likeness of the object itself. ... [The true artist] subordinates] consciously his power of representing the parts of his picture as plausibly as possible, to the expressiveness of the whole design.*

Fry, R. (1910) Introduction to Manet and the Post Impressionists

Unlike Tuck or Fry, we cannot simply say that the art of children has value. The mature artist drawing on children's work is able to explore further and intentionally simplify in a fashion children are not capable of. Yet, insofar as it gives adults access to fresh ways of perceiving the world, children's vision is of value, for it allows adults to see in "the wide glare of the children's day". This claim is directly related to a recent book by Gareth Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*. Matthews has written several works about children and philosophy. He claims that the project of *The Philosophy of Childhood* is to develop a philosophy of childhood, with an analogous relationship to the development of children that philosophy of mathematics has to mathematics or philosophy of religion to religion. The idea was, he says, originally suggested by Matthew Lipman, the founder of Philosophy for Children, but is quite distinct from doing philosophy with children. The rationale of philosophy of childhood would be to raise philosophical, rather than medical, psychological or pedagogical questions about childhood. For Matthews, the impassioned wonder and naivete that children preserve about the world may be a key to philosophical inquiry. While good adult philosophy has a discipline and rigour not available to young children, children may have insights adults lack.

This is not mere romanticism, but a sustained view about the nature of child development. For Matthews,

children are not to be conceived as pre-moral, or as immature adults whose full intellectual, moral and creative power only develops in the prime of life. Instead, children contribute a unique perspective on issues of human concern. Children are not just beings passing through stages en route to adulthood, but are different species from adults, rather as gender and ethnicity produce difference. Of course, children do mature into adults, but Matthews is arguing that we need to conceive of children not just as beings passing through stages en route to adulthood, but as timeslices with views as valid as those of their adult counterparts.

We can locate our project of investigation of contemporary art within this framework of philosophy of childhood. Children have a unique understanding of art - and it is this we wish to refine when we discuss philosophical issues with them. This is not yet to say that children have privileged access to all the truth about contemporary art: rather to say that they can, when properly led, develop a unique understanding and give adults access to it.

Matthews' own discussion of the value of children's art, which shares certain of the assumptions I have identified in the discussion of Ruth Tuck's ideas, suggests that he would share this view. There is, however, one difficulty

with Matthews' views. He supposes that philosophical inquiry is natural to children. Yet only a trained practitioner is in a position to judge - or ensure - that an inquiry is philosophical. Gareth Matthews himself does have an ability to hear the philosophical in a children's remarks - not so much to over interpret, as to listen very carefully. Indeed, one has the impression of a delightfully educated and intelligent parent and friend, thinking deep into the night about the import of his children's remarks. That skill, of listening and valuing his and other children's endeavours is, however, one he places less emphasis on than those of the children he observes. And yet it is a skill at least as important as theirs.

One suspects that Cambridge, Massachusetts, is uniquely well supplied with the right sort of parents for inculcating into children philosophical, rational and artistic inquiry. But is Matthews right in supposing that inquiry is natural to children? Would it be wiser to suppose that children can enquire if properly led? Even when children ask questions, they need to learn that there is more to a good question than being cute, or asking what the teacher wants asked. There is no guarantee that children will talk interestingly and philosophically in an art gallery. Children need to learn to listen to each other and respond to and criticise each others' ideas and to manipulate philosophical concepts. Indeed, children will be more adept in an art gallery if they have already begun philosophy. But if they have, then, properly led, they can derive enormous benefits from talk about contemporary art; and we too can learn an enormous amount from listening to them.

We should be wary of effacing children's perspectives on the world and replacing them with our own. The wide glare of their day is worth preserving. But we must equip children with the tools of expressing and questioning their own vision of the world. The only way of achieving this I know of is to teach children to talk reasonably - to look, listen and discuss works critically. It is this process Lipman has called the "community of inquiry", and it is this that we need to import into the art gallery and the discussion of contemporary art.

## DEVELOPING A DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Maryanne del Gigante

Two years ago, I began work on a Family Guide to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. I worked on a format and design for the guide and consulted the then recent market research on visitor perceptions of the Hirshhorn Museum to get a feel for how the museum's audiences related to the collection. At this time also, an ad hoc task force set up by museum professionals of the America Association of Museums had produced a new document, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, also dealing with research on museums and audiences.

I collected and researched material from public education publications produced by various American institutions. I read catalogues, museum education pamphlets, one-page typed activity sheets, ten-page glossies, concertina-fold four-colour throwaways, black and white throwaways, and a pop-up punch-out assembly-required four-inch thick art education masterpiece selling in museum gift shops and fine bookstores around the nation for forty-nine ninety five, plus tax.

And I think I understood why the studies showed that people said they felt excluded. I found children

being taken to museums and being asked to look at some of the masterpieces of Western art and count the number of red and yellow shapes they could see, or what sort of animal was in the bottom right hand corner, or find the crab and where do crabs live? or even 'what precautions do mothers take today to take care of their children in cars?' Children were told that certain works 'make us question the values of modern society,' or 'remind us' of this or that. They were told, and told and told, and they went away - I suspect - empty-handed and empty-hearted as a result.

For the Guide, I set myself a number of objectives, most importantly that of making a selection of contemporary works in the Hirschorn accessible to the visitor. The visit to the art museum could be an interesting and fulfilling experience, regardless of how much children or their parents knew about art or the 'difficult' paintings in a contemporary collection such as that of the Hirschorn. The questions were phrased to address five learning-preferences - narrational, quantitative, foundational, aesthetic, and experiential - so that young visitors might be offered a range of perspectives from which to construct meaning or understand in multiple ways. A trial tour using the guide with a group of fourth-graders from the Washington International School was indeed an enriching experience. (The sessions at the National Gallery of Australia used two cards based on paintings held in the National Gallery of Australia and which are similar to the cards developed for the Hirschorn.)

Back in Australia, I visited two blockbuster shows in an Australian institution and found: "*There are 53 paintings in this exhibition. Find those which contain the details below and then answer the questions about each painting. These questions will help you see more in the paintings.*" The questions included: "How many feathers can you count," (one of the keys to unlocking A Feasting Scene by Gerrit Von Honthorst). And: "This painting was made 100 years after the painting from which detail A is taken. Compare the poses of the figures in each painting, their hairstyles and clothes and the position of the tables," referring to a detail (detail B, obviously) from Jacob Jordaens' Supper at Emmaus. (They were not asked to compare menus at the two suppers or to calculate the value of the tip. They were, however, expected to know who 'Jesus' was.)

I wondered why museums would spend time and money and waste opportunity by sending children to play "spotto" in the gallery. Assuming, that is, that the intention is to include audiences rather than to exclude them.

In Canberra, I met Dr. Christina Slade who introduced me to Eulalia Bosch's exhibition, *Criatures Misterioses*. Like *Criatures*, our work with philosophy in museums rejects the idea that the interaction between art and the individual can or should be reduced to the passive experience of A data available on CD Rom (known as 'interactive' if you push a button), a set of slides, or reproduced in books. The Blue Poles project aims at enabling children to gain access to their own capacity for self-expression by participating in the arts, because the arts themselves are expressive forms of thinking that produce tangible outcomes - paintings, sculpture, symphonies. The Blue Poles workshop is based on the belief that children have a particular ability to come to an understanding of contemporary art. With its use of art as a stimulus material, this workshop, like *Criatures Misterioses*, "espouses the intimacy of observation and reading, the pleasure of dialogue, and desire as an end in itself."

In the preface to *Criatures*, Eulalia Bosch characterizes the exhibition as opening the doors to philosophy and the arts: "In terms of philosophy, it helps [them] become aware of their ideas and beliefs and live their lives as a personal adventure made up of choices, right and wrong. It is not enough to have ideas, one has to recognize them and know how to use them. In terms of the arts, it helps them expand the possibilities for expression and communication which make up the human universe."

Our approach was the familiar strategy of the Philosophy Children classroom, as found for instance, in Splitter & Sharp, 1995. We aimed to create a community of inquiry, with a particular focus on art. To this end, we began by introducing children to gallery protocol, or what we call 'Museum manners'. We then indicated the paintings to be looked at and discussed. We considered Jackson Pollock's 'Blue Poles'; Andy Warhol's "Electric Chair": Anselm Kiefer's "The Twilight of the West", Jim Dine's "Animal" and a classically realistic painting by an Australian painter, Arthur Streeton, from the late nineteenth century, to provide a contrast. The first four are by widely acknowledged artists of contemporary art, each with an idiosyncratic vision. Warhol's work, as we explained, is a screenprint actually done by his students - thereby raising obvious questions about the nature of artistic output.

Since there is little context with which to 'locate' the paintings, and since contemporary art has its own

conventions, with which many children are not familiar, I then gave a brief background information to 'locate' the artist. To this end, special sheets were prepared with a description of the work, year painted, materials, dimensions, a brief indication of the artist's place in art history. For instance, I indicate the relation between Warhol and Pop Art, Pollock and Action Painting, and so on, and provide a list of sample questions. The purpose of providing this information is to give children some of the tools used in discussing art - the equivalent of paragraphs, sentences, and other conventions in a text with which children are familiar, as they are familiar with rhyme and rhythm in poetry and quotation marks in prose. The language of art includes form, line, colour, shape, texture and these terms are introduced here so that the works can be addressed on their own terms. These sheets are found in Appendix A.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion of contemporary art is of inherent interest to children and serves a variety of purposes. They can learn to understand contemporary movements in art; to appreciate paintings; to derive pleasure. We have been arguing at another level for the incorporation of discussion of contemporary art as part of a curriculum. First, children are uniquely well placed to perceive aspects of contemporary art which may be less apparent to adults. Secondly, contemporary art is embedded in the philosophical and aesthetic debates which have immense importance for children: "What is a real picture?" for instance. Finally, children's own thinking about metaphysical issues is frequently expressed in visual terms. The use of visual images is educationally well established. What we argue for is the further step of using the visual as the basis for critical analytical thought. On the one hand we apply the philosophical debates to contemporary art in talking about the paintings; on the other hand, contemporary art is visual realisation of the philosophical questions themselves. In interweaving the two aspects of philosophical thought, we enrich each.

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## APPENDIX A : Teaching Materials

### JACKSON POLLOCK

*American, 1912-1956*

**BLUE POLES, 1952**

*Enamel and alluminium paint on canvas*

**Something to Know:** Jackson Pollock painted this canvas while it was on the floor. He did not want to use brushes or to push paint around on the canvas. He did something new. He dipped a stick into big buckets of paint and dripped and splashed it onto the canvas. (If that sounds easy, think about figuring out the right amount of paint to get on the stick to make a very long curve like those you see in the painting.) Why do you think the way he painted was called Action painting?

**Try it:** Walk around as if you were making a picture on the floor. Which part is the top when you make a picture that way? If you are working on the floor can you walk around in the painting while you're making it?

**Look and ask:** Which colors do you notice first? Are there other colors you don't notice right away? Are those colors put on the same way as the ones you noticed first? How do you think Pollock painted the blue and

the white? Pick one line of color such as the yellow or the orange and see where it goes. (Remember not to touch the painting.) Do the lines weave in and out of one another? Do they pile up on top of one another? Do the loops and curves and dribbles and splotches of paint move your eye around? Do you notice one part of the painting more than another?

**Think about this:** The name of the painting is 'Blue Poles.'

**Ask:** Does the painting look like blue poles? What kind of poles? Have you ever seen poles in a situation like this? Is it better if the artist makes the painting look like something realistic? What do you think of paintings like this one that don't seem to look like anything at all?

## ANDY WARHOL

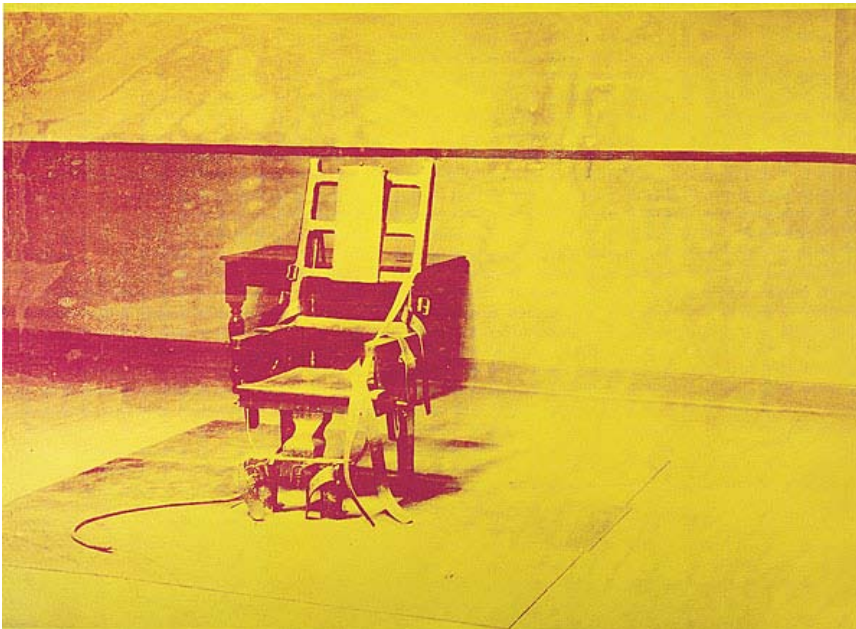
*American, 1928 –1987*

ELVIS, 1963

*Synthetic Polymer paint screen printed on canvas*

ELECTRIC CHAIR, 1967

*Synthetic Polymer paint screenprinted on canvas*



"ELECTRIC CHAIR," Andy Warhol, 1967. Synthetic polymer paint screenprinted onto canvas. Used with permission of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

**Something to Know:** Andy Warhol made Pop Art (popular art, art for everyone). He thought that today we see too many things, too many images. Millions of pictures from the television, movies, newspapers, billboards and advertisements surround us. He believed that because we see so much every day we notice things for only a few seconds or we don't even see them at all! Warhol copied everyday products like soup cans, soap packages and pictures from the newspapers and movies. He wanted us to really notice images and think about them in a different way. Warhol didn't like the idea that a "good artist" is one who makes a painting by hand. Warhol and his assistants made stencils from photographs. Then they used a squeegee to force paint through the stencil onto the canvas. With a stencil, the artist can make the same picture over and over again. The painting made this way doesn't have to be made by the artist himself, someone else can make it and it will still look the same.

**Look at this:** The artist used a silkscreen to make these images.

**Ask:** Do you think it would be easy to paint the same thing over and over by using a brush? What do you think about a picture that is made many times over? Do you think people notice something more when there are many pictures of it? Is saying something loud the same as saying it a hundred times softly?

**Think about this:** Can you think of other pictures that are made by machines so that they will all be the same? (Think about movies and newspapers, magazines and cereal boxes, and dollar bills.) What is the difference between things made by hand and things made by machine? Which of those is "art"? Now go and look at the Marcel Duchamps!

## ANSELM KEIFER

German, born 1945

ABEND LAND (The Twilight of the West), 1989

Oil, lead, paint and ash on canvas

**Something to Know:** Anselm Keifer is from Germany, and is very interested in the stories and legends of his country. He believes that the traditions of the past are still important today, and that the artist's imagination is very important. Keifer is also interested in the stories about people called alchemists who in ancient times looked for the secret of changing common materials (like lead, for example) into gold. Keifer thinks that artists act like alchemists because they change the way we see the world around us. Keifer's paintings are about the past, the landscape and the way we use the environment, but he wants us to see something about the world through our feelings. He uses various materials like straw, photographic paper, lead and thick, heavy paint. The Twilight of the West is painted and overlaid with sheets of lead.

**Look and ask:** What is the first thing that catches your eye when you see this painting? Do you think it is the most important thing about the painting?

**Make up a story:** What do you think happened to make a place like this? Do any people or animals live in this place?

**Look and ask:** What makes a painting beautiful? Is this a beautiful painting? What word describes your feelings about the painting? What do you think about the colors? How would you feel if the painting were made in bright colors like yellow or pink? Is there a sky? How far away from the sky are you? What do you see in the sky? Do you feel big, small or extra small in front of this painting? What makes you feel that way?

**Look and ask:** What material is the sky made from? Is the sky in paintings usually made of metal? (This sky is made of lead, the heaviest metal of all.) Why do you think Keifer made a lead sky? Why did he put the manhole cover right in the middle of the picture? Why did he use ash as a material? What do you think Keifer is telling us about the world with this painting? How would you have shown that?

## REALISM AND ART:

Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Chuck Close, Arthur Streeton

You are looking at a painting of an electric chair, a portrait of Elvis, a portrait of 'Bob', and a painting with the words "AN ANIMAL" on it. Do paintings need to be realistic? When you talk about a painting, what do you mean by realistic? Do you think the Warhol and the Close are realistic? Is the painting of Elvis real? Is it as real as Elvis himself? How are the paintings of the thing and the thing itself alike? How are they different? Can you think of times when a painting doesn't need to be realistic? Do you think the Jim Dine painting is realistic? Why do you think the artist put the words "AN ANIMAL" on this painting? Can you tell what animal this is? What do you think you know about an animal from the painting? What do labels tell you about works of art? How is this label ("AN ANIMAL") different from a label saying "The Coronation of Ferdinand the First" for example, or "Waterlilies"? Close your eyes and think about an animal, a wolf or a dog, for example. Do you hear it barking or panting in your mind? Do you "feel" its coat? Do you think this Jim Dine animal is like a real animal because it has fur attached to the canvas? Is it more or less like an animal than a traditional painting showing a complete animal with similar fur? Is a photograph of an animal more like an animal than this painting? What good is making a painting like this one by Jim Dine? Notice the way the paint is applied to the bottom of the canvas. Is it smooth or rough? Are the colours shaded or blended or just slapped on? Do you think the artist has shown something that a photograph might not show? (If your answer was "yes", what has he shown?) What if the fur is not real fur, but is synthetic fur? What about the Arthur Streeton? How is it different from the other paintings we are talking about?

## BEAUTY AND ART:

Ansel M. Keifer

How is a painting like a window? How is it not like a window? Thinking about this: What makes a painting beautiful? Is a painting beautiful if it shows a beautiful subject? What makes a subject beautiful? Can a painting be beautiful if it is about an ugly subject? Can a painting be ugly and show a beautiful subject? Is a painting of an ugly subject going to be an ugly painting? Can you like a painting that has an ugly subject? Can you dislike a painting that has a beautiful subject? Can a painting be good if the subject is beautiful but the colours are ugly? Are some paintings beautiful even if you can't tell what the subject is? Can something be a work of art if it is not carefully made?

## WHAT IS ART?

Jackson Pollock

Is something art if it is an imitation of something in the real world? Is something art if it is not an imitation of something in the real world? Is something art if it expresses how someone feels? Could something not be an expression of feeling and still be art? Did you ever draw a picture and feel you had expressed an idea in it, although it wasn't addressed to anyone in particular? But suppose someone came across your picture and enjoyed it. Would that person be a sort of friend to you? How can art be like a conversation with a friend? Can you ~~imagine something~~ imagine something entirely new? Can you think of an artist who imagined something entirely new? Was it a new subject? A new technique? Because computers are a recent invention, is computer art entirely new? When was oil painting "new"?

## ART AND VALUE:

Who Says It's Worth That Much?

This Pollock, "Blue Poles", cost a lot of money when it was purchased by the National Gallery. If the people who decide what the gallery buys were willing to spend so much on it, then it must be a good painting, right? But people are able to use words as they please - if it is to their advantage to do so they could apply the word "good" to things many people would not consider good at all. If words can be applied in any way, who has selected the meanings they currently have? What questions would you ask if you had to make that purchase?

## AUTHORS' NOTE

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