

Report of the NAEA Commission on Art Education

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Chapter 2

What We Believe and Why

Introduction

The problem of formulating purpose in art education is not an easy one. One is often lured into the search for the single perennial grounding that can be used through the millenia to justify the work that art educators are engaged in daily. Such simple aims or justifications are alluring because they can function as a substitute for the kind of critical reflection that should characterize the profession. Once one has grasped The Truth, the need to push further, to examine it critically, to question its validity, to determine its appropriateness to particular contexts appears superfluous; once having grasped the philosopher's stone, inquiry terminates.

It is for these reasons and for others that will become apparent that the commission believes that there is no single, adequate, comprehensive, and perennial purpose for the teaching of art. There are purposes, and these purposes change in importance with time and context.

To say that purposes shift, that they are contextual in character, is not to leave the field rudderless, but to invite art educators to participate actively in the search for those purposes that are appropriate for the times and places within which they work. It is to invite a level of critical thought that should be a characteristic of any professional's work. Given this view, purposes become problematic and contingent, a product of inquiry, the offspring of reflection, and perhaps most of all, fallible. But if fallibility is the price one pays for a conception of purpose that is not timeless, it purchases one's escape from the seductive comforts of dogma. Indeed, critical reflection upon purpose makes

it possible to understand what one embraces and why. Uncriticized purposes are blind. What we invite, first of all, is the critical reflection upon purposes, in context, in time. This is our first value premise.

But once having said that, it is still possible to identify those purposes of art education that appear to be defensible, in general, for the situations in which most art educators work. We offer these purposes with both a conviction that they are important and an invitation to the field to critically challenge them. They are not intended to function as a declaration of certainties, but as deeply held values embraced in a spirit of tentativeness. We recognize that some, or even all, might be inappropriate for some contexts at some time.

Art Education as a Source of Aesthetic Experience

One justification for art education is intimately connected with the nature of art and the forms of experience that art makes possible, namely, aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is qualitatively different from the kind of experience that characterizes life in general. Indeed, aesthetic experience is characterized by a quality of existence that is sufficiently special to warrant a special name: aesthetic. Although such experience can be secured in some degree in virtually every form of intercourse humans have with the world, it is intercourse with those forms, events, objects, and ideas typically regarded as art that have the capacity to provide such experience in its deepest, most moving form.

This view of aesthetic experience as one of the aims of art education is itself based upon a belief in the interactive nature of human experience. Although some forms, objects, events, and ideas are structured to provide or elicit such experience, whether or not such experience occurs will depend upon the extent to which those forms can be appropriately "read." By this we mean that works of art typically are complex structures whose contributions to experience are secured only if one brings to them some form of intelligent perception. Unlike the messages of the mass media whose codes are easily decipherable — "All in the Family," "Maude," or *Jaws*, after all, require no special tuition — the messages of works of art often are not as easily read.

To experience the aesthetic quality of a building by Van der Rohe, a painting by Klee, a sculpture by Maillol, is not a trivial achievement. Such forms are demanding. They require a special form of attention and an increasingly cultivated eye. Art education has as one of its aims the cultivation or development of the forms of perception that will make that experience possible. To this extent art education is concerned with the education of vision, but not simply the form of vision that a biologist might use to identify some forms of biological life or that of an astronomer who is intent on classifying a new star. The forms of perception with which we are concerned are those that seek the aesthetic meaning of things so that the product of such a search is a form of experience that is itself aesthetic.

The search for aesthetic experience through a cultivated form of perception

is not limited to works of art. One can secure aspects of such experience with any form encountered in the phenomenal world. The forms of nature as well as the forms of culture are proper candidates for aesthetic experience. Art education as one aspect of education seeks to enable people to learn how to regard that world so that aesthetic experience is possible — even with the most mundane or prosaic.

Yet to say that aesthetic experience is possible, in principle, in all our encounters with the world, is not to say that all objects, ideas, or events have the same capacity to evoke such experience. Some forms have greater complexity or more profundity, or may reorganize our conception of reality in ways that are more significant and enduring than others. A lovely beach pebble is not, after all, the same as a sculpture by Moore, Arp, or Brancusi. Just as we do not wish to limit aesthetic experience only to those objects or events certified as art, neither do we wish to regard all things as equal. The former view leads, in our opinion, to aesthetic narrowness and is contradicted by the facts of our everyday experience; the latter view leads to a mindless form of artistic egalitarianism. Let's give the world its aesthetic due, but let's not feel compelled to regard everything as of equal worth.

Now, the pedagogical implications of such a view of one purpose for art education relate directly to the kinds of experience students have in art education programs, and to what they learn to do in such programs. If at least one justification for art education is to increase the students' ability to have aesthetic experience by extending its range and depth, then we can ask whether or not this has occurred. Indeed, if art itself is conceived of as a form of experience, then we can ask about the extent to which it is secured in classrooms in which art is taught. It seems perfectly reasonable to us to expect that some children in all classrooms, and all children in some classrooms, will have nothing whatsoever that approaches aesthetic experience within the aegis of that class. Making objects might or might not yield a form of experience that one can justifiably regard as aesthetic. Insofar as it goes unsecured, one of the aims of art education goes unrealized. The same argument holds, *a fortiori*, in a course concerned with art appreciation or art history. These are not arguments against making, seeing, or understanding art, but simply a caution against assuming that because students engage in these activities aesthetic experience is being secured.

Art Education as a Source of Human Understanding

Knowledge is not given, but made. Whatever we believe we know is the result of our efforts to inquire, to organize, and finally, to build structures of conception that illuminate and forms of expression that can be made public and therefore shared. In the culture of the United States, and in particular the culture that pervades American schools, the overriding conception of knowledge and the dominant forms of conception and expression are linguistic. To know in America, particularly in American schools, is to be able to put something into words. This belief is so ubiquitous that until

recently it was considered philosophically weak-minded to think of knowledge or understanding in terms that were not propositional. The quintessence of knowledge was to be found in physics and the other sciences. As for the arts, well, they crossed from the arena of knowledge and understanding to that of catharsis and mere expression.

The consequences of these pervasive views upon schools has been tragic; they have skewed the curriculum in such a way that important forms of understanding are neglected or omitted entirely, biased the criteria through which human competency is appraised, and even begun to define what will count in the conception and assessment of human intelligence.

Yet any thoughtful reflection upon the culture at large will reveal that not only is knowledge the product of structures humans create, but that the form of those structures are varied. What we know is shaped by and shapes the forms we have learned to use. Take as an example our conception of human affection; each of us has such a conception, and it is one that is formed in visual and kinesthetic terms as well as in linguistic ones. As a matter of fact, knowledge of human affection may have precious little to do with propositions, but a great deal to do with images that have no name.

Our conception of human affection, we are arguing, need not be discursive. If we choose to express what we know about human affection we have a range of options available. One of these options is linguistic, but only one. The others take form in dance, in music, in poetic forms of expression, and in the visual arts. Historically, artists have shared with us their concepts of human affection, and of human misery, avarice, and strength through the expressive structures they have created. These structures have been informative; they have made possible modes of understanding that are indigenous to the form itself. What Beethoven says about the human spirit in the last movement of his Ninth Symphony, what Goya says about death and dying, can only be said and understood within the expressive structures that they have used. These structures harbor their own limits and their own potentialities; their content is not literally translatable. Insofar as education as an enterprise has something to do with fostering the human's ability to conceptualize, to understand, and to express, the relevance of the arts as forms of conception, understanding, and expression is clear. If one function of art is to enable individuals to vicariously participate in forms of experience not had directly, and through such participation to know an aspect of life, the importance of art as a source of understanding appears clear. To know about simplicity, tenderness, speed, the tempo of city life, the magic of fantasy in discursive theoretical terms is to know a slender slice of their reality. It is to look at the world through a limited lens. Art provides the structures that open new perspectives.

Now, this view of art's function in education is not very salient in the literature of the field. Art, within the context of art education, has seldom been viewed as one of the vehicles through which humans come to know the world. Yet art does provide insight; it expresses and makes public the life of

feeling. Susanne Langer puts it this way:

What does art seek to express? (Here again, I can only state my own notions dogmatically): I think every work of art expresses, more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions which the artist has, but feelings and emotions which the artist knows; his insight into the nature of sentience, his picture of vital experience, physical and emotive and fantastic.

Such knowledge is not expressible in ordinary discourse. The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are too high, too spiritual, or too anything-else, but that the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concepts of feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language. Verbal statement, which is our normal and most reliable means of communication, is almost useless for conveying knowledge about the precise character of the affective life. Crude designations like "joy," "sorrow," "fear," tell us little about vital experience as general words like "thing," "being," or "place," tell us about the world of our perceptions. Any more precise reference to feeling is usually made by mentioning the circumstance that suggests it — "a mood of autumn evening," "a holiday feeling." The problem of logic here involved is one I cannot go into; suffice it to say that what some people call "significant form," and others "expressiveness," "plastic value" in visual art or "secondary meaning" in poetry, "creative design" or "interpretation" or what you will, is the power of certain qualitative effects to express the great forms and the rare intricacies of the life of feeling.¹

It seems to us the contributions of art to human understanding have for too long been neglected by art educators. Art is more than pleasant decoration, sensory stimulation, and the opportunity for the catharsis of feeling. Art is a rendering of the world and one's experience within it. In this process of making art forms, that world and one's experience with it must be tapped, probed, and penetrated. The search is both inward and outward and the effort to transform the products of that search into a public medium is as challenging and difficult as anything expressed discursively.

The appreciation of the epistemological contributions of art should be one aim of art education programs. This aim we believe to be important not because art should be made to imitate science, but because we believe that the polity should expand its conceptions of mind and knowledge.

One place in which to begin is the schools. Art educators can help create a public that has some appropriate sense for art and for the functions it performs in understanding the world.

Art Education as a Means of Developing Critical Consciousness

All of us live in a culture whose messages and objects are designed. The creation of these forms has done much to enhance the quality of our lives by touching the architecture we inhabit, the objects we use, the magazines and films we read and see. These forms pervade our culture and are so ubiquitous that we often take them for granted, almost as natural entities. If the forms of the vernacular are designed to comfort and inform, they are also designed to persuade, to motivate, to create "needs" and to stimulate interest. Some of the messages we receive are intended to serve our interests, but certainly not all. Indeed, the advertising industry in the United States has one dominant function: to sell the products that their clients produce. The skills of the artist create forms for television, film, magazines, billboards, and the like that continually bombard us with subtle and not-so-subtle forms of persuasion. Deodorants will transform our love life, the blue color of the water in the toilet bowl will mark one as a caring housewife, the right kind of cigarettes will contribute to our sense of well-being, almost as if lung cancer were certain if we didn't smoke Brand X.

Although these particular messages are blatant, the forms that influence our attitudes, buying patterns, aspirations, and beliefs are often more subtle; consider the structure and ambiance of the new shopping center, the location of items on store shelves, the images created through the latest in fashion, the associations engendered by the style of the car we drive. While these messages and the others provide some of the forces that drive our economy and thus contribute to our nation's economic well-being, the arts of the vernacular can also exact a toll. Eventually one can become so inured to the impact of such messages that the ability to resist is radically diminished, and one can no longer withstand the ways in which others manipulate our "needs."

Art education as a field concerned with enabling individuals to read the messages of the public forms that they encounter need not restrict its attention to those expressive forms called "works of art." While works of art represent the quintessence of human expression, the forms that surround us might in fact have a far more profound effect on the lives that most people lead. The commission believes that the public arts — the arts of the vernacular, the forms that expand human choice and awareness as well as those that are simply intended to persuade for the profit of others — are proper candidates for educational attention. We take this position not to advocate a particular political or economic philosophy, but because we believe that citizens should develop the kind of critical consciousness that expands their awareness of the world and of the sort of influences with which they need to cope. To exclude from the purview of art education those pervasive and persuasive forms created by artists and designers but encountered outside of museums is to exclude too much. And to attend to the vernacular arts only in terms of their formal properties and to neglect how they function in society and what messages they convey is to attend to too little. We propose,

therefore, that art programs examine the arts of the vernacular, those forms that populate our culture, so that citizens can come to appreciate the genuinely high achievements of the forms created by artists as well as those whose end is to habituate and control, to lure the populace into states of dependency that serve the interests of a small portion of the public.

Art Education as a Means of Developing Creative and Flexible Forms of Thinking

Thinking requires both a process and a content. To think at all requires that one think about something. To think about something requires one to use one of several of a variety of intellectual processes. Art education programs have a unique contribution to make to children by providing them with opportunities to encounter content absent in other areas of the curriculum and by eliciting thinking processes that are free from the constraints of logic and strictly defined rules. Take as an example the opportunity to work with a three-dimensional form — say a sculpture made of clay. Consider also the child's need to express an idea, image, or feeling he or she has had through this material. Somehow the child must not only formulate a conception that can be rendered public, but rendered public within the child's conception of the limits and opportunities provided by the clay. Artistic problems seldom post a single route that one must tread. The forms one can use, the techniques one might apply, the scale, the style are open. Furthermore, the criteria for determining when one is finished is a matter of making a judgment rather than applying a standard. An equation is solved when certain rules are applied; art forms have no such analog.

To deal with such problems is to have the opportunity to cultivate forms of thinking that might otherwise go undeveloped. Since children's ability to think is influenced by the types of tasks they encounter and the practice they receive, the absence of such tasks constitutes a form of intellectual deprivation that can diminish the child's development.

Work in art makes a special contribution to the development of a form of consciousness that functions as the basis of knowledge in all fields. That contribution deals with the cultivation of intuition, the development of holistic, non-discursive images that underlie those expressive forms we call "the intellectual disciplines." Initial explorations in the human's efforts to know are efforts to give form to what is ineffable, to see in one mind's eye the shape of things, to notice connections, to perceive the relationships that exist within a field of interest. These efforts take shape in visual images that articulate forms of complexity and types of relationships that subsequently get worked out through a public medium. The problem initially is to grasp the whole, to form a structure that hangs together or possesses an aesthetic, a sense of closure that enables one to make sense of what previously was not understood.

The use of such visual formulations is powerful because unlike conceptions that must be expressed in time, the visual image presents to the consciousness

a form in which both patterns and complexity can exist simultaneously. In the mind's eye one can grasp — intuitively — relationships *at once*.

The formulation of such vital forms — visual structures held in the mind's eye — reside at the basis not only of the creation of art forms, but of the forms of science and mathematics as well. Einstein described such a process in his work, as did Poincare. Indeed, our word *insight* is telling in its revelation of the importance of the immediate visualization of complex structures prior to their formal expression in a public medium.

One of the lessons children learn through art is the importance of attending to the whole, the need to create a structure whose parts hang together, the importance of not allowing fascination with detail to distract one from the creation of a sound overall form. Art education also cultivates cognitive elasticity by encouraging a playful attitude towards work, through its lack of highly prescriptive conventional rules, and through its encouragement of risk-taking and intellectual adventure in the process of forming. These attributes of the teaching of art are some of the reasons why art education in particular has eschewed strictly defined behavioral objectives and predetermined outcomes in teaching. The cultivation of surprise, the willingness to take risks, the formulation of insight, are alien in spirit to a preoccupation with prepackaged outcomes.

Art education, the commission believes, can be regarded as the most fundamental aspect of a child's intellectual development, a development concerned with moral as well as academic values. For example, the sense of proportion, harmony, beauty, and rightness that work in art makes possible not only provides the basis of what we know, but also of what we value. The conceptual aspects of art helps to form the initial realization, and the expressive aspects cultivate a respect for the quality of action. Neither knowledge nor morality can exist without them. Indeed, as Whitehead himself said:

The appreciation of the structure of ideas is that side of a cultured mind which can only grow under the influence of a special study. I mean that eye for the whole chessboard, for the bearing of one set of ideas on another. Nothing but a special study can give any appreciation for the exact formulation of general ideas, for their relations when formulated, for their service in the comprehension of life. A mind so disciplined should be both more abstract and more concrete. It has been trained in the comprehension of abstract thought and in the analysis of facts.

Finally, there should grow the most austere of all mental qualities; I mean the sense for style. It is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste. Style in art, style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution have fundamentally the same aesthetic

qualities, namely, attainment and restraint. The love of a subject in itself and for itself, where it is not the sleepy pleasure of pacing a mental quarterdeck, is the love of style as manifested in that study.

Here we are brought back to the position from which we started, the utility of education. Style, in its finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It pervades the whole being. The administrator with a sense for style hates waste; the engineer with a sense for style economises his material; the artisan with a sense for style prefers good work. Style is the ultimate morality of mind.²

Art Education as a Means of Helping Students Understand and Appreciate Art

One of the major functions of the school is to initiate children into the great traditions and ideas that are a part of human culture. This tradition and these ideas are defined, in part, by the great disciplines that for convenience's sake we call the arts, the humanities, and the sciences. Becoming educated means, at least in part, becoming aware of these traditions and being able to participate in the conversations that each one of them provides. These traditions or disciplines are also defined by certain assumptions, certain rules, certain languages that one must be able to read in order to understand them. Furthermore, these traditions of which art is an important part have profound things to say to those who can bring to them an intelligent and informed mind. The great concepts and theories of physics, the world view of biology, the elegance of mathematics, the moral perspectives of philosophy, the lessons of history, and the models of reality articulated so eloquently by the arts are there to be had for those who know how to encounter them on the plane of meaning.

But the ability to deal with such forms, whether in the sciences, the humanities, or the arts is not the natural offspring of maturation. We don't come to grasp what they have to offer simply by getting older. Understanding such forms and the ability to participate in the dialogue they initiate requires tuition; it requires guidance from those who cherish their messages and are interested in enabling others also to participate. Art education is a part of that turf. Art education is aimed at initiating the young into the world of art forms that is their heritage as humans, as people who share a common human heritage with others throughout the world.

That this heritage is significant there can be little doubt; even those blind to the qualities and content of the arts recognize their importance, if only in a quizzical way. That they are not widely appreciated and used to enrich our lives is testified to by even a cursory examination of our culture. The *TV Guide* and the *Sears-Roebuck Catalog* are perhaps the most telling indicators of the level of our aesthetic values.

Are the arts of high culture to be the private preserve of the few? Are the majority of the fifty million students attending the public schools of America genetically incapable of participating in the conversation we alluded to earlier? Are most people condemned to a life of TV pap, happy endings, and newer, more elaborate automobile grills?

Art education as a field provides a negative reply to these questions. As a field and as a profession we seek through education a higher quality of life. We seek the creation of a culture whose pervasive aesthetic quality is more satisfying, more sensitive, richer in content than the one we have at present. The great works of art and the effort to make such forms are places in which to begin that journey. And the schools of America are the institutions in which the second step, if not the first step, must be taken. Art education is concerned with the aims that we have described earlier, but it is also concerned with helping the young learn about and through the arts themselves. We are concerned that school programs too often exclude such opportunities from children. We are concerned that schools too often foreclose the opportunity to acquire the insights, the forms of feeling, the models of reality and of value that works of art and that work in art makes possible. We are concerned that we too often amputate the quintessence of human culture in our efforts to efficiently "educate" students.

That our aspirations are important few people in the field will doubt. Will we succeed in realizing them? Well, that's another matter. Yet, our aspirations are worth our effort — even if we fail. Education is itself an optimistic enterprise, and we are a part of it. For these aspirations and for the efforts we make in their behalf, no one in the field need ever feel the need to apologize.

Notes

¹Susanne Langer, "Imitation and Transformation in the Arts," in *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 91-92.

²Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: A Mentor Book, 1957), p. 24.