



## THE NEED FOR OPENNESS IN ART EDUCATION

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Can art education tolerate art? It looks more and more like the answer is no. Art requires imagination, play, openness and critical questioning. Art education, as an institution, tends to produce practices inconsistent with imagination, play, openness, and critical questioning. The dominant practices of the field tend to define, to reify, to certify, to enshrine.

The task of this paper is restorative, rather than indicting, so I will confine myself to a very brief evocation, in this paragraph, of what I mean by the anti-art tendencies of art education. Art education (the institution, not the concept in general or the practices of individuals) is increasingly concerned with systems, and disseminating those systems. Conferences are held to hear lieutenant experts discuss what the experts meant. Other conferences are held to package the understandings of what the lieutenants meant. Other conferences are held to make it law that classroom teachers should present those packages to children. In this process, art is reduced and often misconstrued. But even when it is well construed, it is reified, which is to say, turned into something definite when it is not something definite at all. This is the single greatest problem in art education: reification. Other problems are quite obvious as well, such as magnifying the misconstruals with the support of great centers of money and power. The centers of money and power can disseminate constricting ways of thinking. But reification is of the most crucial concern because it underlies all of these problems and consequences.

Reification is a habit of thought, and it is antithetical to the spirit of art. Artists practice openness, and when they encounter an institution (art education) which practices definition and closure (which is to say, reification), they tend not to sympathize with that institution. Thus the historic rift between art and art education.

It is disturbing and saddening that the rift should be getting wider at this time. One of the dominant trends in current art education, "Discipline Based Art Education," is adding to the rift, even though it ostensibly seems to bring art education in closer touch with the history and practices of art. In its most idealistic formulation, DBAE wants to be about "art," the sort of thing Rembrandt and Van Gogh did: not about "school art," the sort of thing done with sponges and macaroni on Friday afternoons. DBAE proponents — i.e., the Getty Foundation — have posited a concept of art as a "discipline," but they have failed to join that concept to a larger understanding of the spirit that art depends on. As a result, DBAE has contradicted its own purpose, producing some new school art experiences that are contrary to the spirit of art, and repressing some old school art practices that were not really so bad. "Aesthetic meaning," the cursory defining of design ele-

ments, would be an example of the new practices; self-identification, Lowenfeld's blending of life experiences with art, would be an example of an old cherished practice. The new practice trivializes; the old one had both depth and authenticity.

The purpose of this essay is to attempt a clarification and restoration of the art spirit. It is hoped that the concepts that I present may be of some use in suggesting a path for art education that is more consistent with art.

Art education is a simple and generous idea. It is about sharing the experience of art with others. It thrives upon emotion and inspiration. It thrives upon good examples, in the form of inspired practices by committed teachers.

Art education seeks to engage others in their own experiencing of art. It seeks to engage them in a way that involves them thoroughly in their own inspired inquiry, exploration, and creation.

Openness is a quality of art experience. Openness does not define the art experience; but the art experience can not be realized without it. It is implicit in inquiry, in exploration, and in creation. The simplest summary of this essay is that art is about openness. Art is more about openness and less about reification than is typically evidenced in the practice of art education.

The identification of art with openness is a prominent idea in the literature of four separate fields: critical theory, studio painting, child art, and imagination and play. These are fields that rarely communicate with one another. Their ideas and their ways of expressing those ideas are very different, and so it is remarkable when a point of commonality shows up between all four of them. I would like to use the remainder of this essay to point to the several ways that these fields associate art with openness; and to use this commonality as a support for the idea that openness is so central to the art experience.

Critical theory has sought in the past twenty years to deal with its own tendency to put closure on a text. Traditional criticism applies a system to a text so as to extract a central meaning from it. Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and formalism, each had their irreducible loci of meaning, those centers which held the "core" of the work's import.

Deconstructive criticism has called into question this quest for ultimate meanings. Deconstructive criticism celebrated the playfulness and ambiguity of art (Leitch, 1983). Does the color red mean revolt, bleeding, or intensity of emotion in the abstract? Traditional critical systems would each point in their separate directions. Deconstructive criticism, in the tradition of Derrida (1976), sees both the signifier (red) and the signified (revolt, etc.) as floating and arbitrary; that is, the signifier comes in many variations, and so does the signified. A further example: Still, Rothko, and Newman each made an all-red monochrome painting, yet each was subtly different in form, and each referred to vastly different texts of philosophy and art history (Gibson, 1989). Neither the form they created nor the ideas to which the form refers are quite definable.

To the deconstructive critic, closure is to be avoided. Traditional criticism was betrayed by its logocentrism, its placing of its own reasonableness above the ambiguities of the text. Logocentrism supported the author, the voice, and the central meaning, and produced interpretations that arrested play while defining meaning. Deconstruction, in contrast, seeks to

identify signifier/ signified relations in the fullness of their manifestation in a text and in the relations of that text to other texts (i.e., the relation of a single painting to art history.) Criticism uses its own forms of imagination to trace the imaginative play of the signifier. Criticism thus supports openness; it recognizes that "the image produces pleasure precisely where it fixes meaning least" (Rankin, 1987).

Even while it is obtuse, critical theory remains passionately involved with the practice of art in the contemporary lifeworld. Presumably, this is also the concern of artists, and their form of expression is in their art. Artists do not speak and write as a professional requirement, but when they do their words carry a special weight because we sense that their heads are thoroughly immersed in the realities of the art experience and not merely in fashionable academic discourse. Their observations, from Van Gogh to De Kooning, are often profound but also obtuse or disconnected in their own ways. There has not been a strong tradition of exchange between critics and artists, as each perceives the other to be speaking a foreign language. Among the valuable but most ignored products of artists are the teaching notes of the great artist-teachers (for example, Henri, Itten, Nicolaides, Hoffman, Hawthorne, Shahn). Very often, these notes - see for example the *Art Spirit* by Robert Henri - are filled with detailed notes on brush sizes, anatomical consideration, and other technical concerns, concerns that seemingly place these notes in a technical genre and distance them from the philosophical concerns of the critic. Yet a careful reading of these notes reveals a second dimension, the dimension of experience. Because the writer is an artist, he stops himself from saying things that do not resonate with his own experience of art. He emphasizes exploration, but not rules or systems. As Henri (1960) says, "there can be no set rule laid down for the making of pictures." The typical advice of great artist-teachers is to see art as a search, as magic; to bring all of yourself to seeing openly and creating openly; to make many studies, attaching yourself to the larger process rather than the smaller product; to be open to the work rather than bring to it a prefabricated idea.

The artist-teacher is close to the studio, to hearing her picture beginning to sing, to seeing her picture in a new way after turning it upside down. She is close to the fickleness of the art process, and to the surprising and floating connections between art and life. S/he brings a special kind of insight to art teaching from the immediacy of her observations, and from her prudence in avoiding simplistic descriptions of the nature of art. The best art teaching has come out of these direct experiences with art. The best art teaching has been open to a process, not tied to a system, and in this respect it has practiced an approach remarkably similar to that arrived at by the deconstructive critics.

From the 1920s onward, art educators have recognized the wonderful capacity of young children to be open in their art work. The child is a natural artist. In the language of the deconstructionists, signifiers and signifieds float freely - and more than that, they play, they dance. The child looks at a cloud and sees an animal, a circus. The child receives both the fullness of the forms and its possible meanings. Through art, the child lets

the brush play out its own life, and enjoys the free play of associations that swirls and washes bring to mind. (That is why the wise art teacher engages the child in a discussion of his work, but does not ask for a definition of the subject).

Child-centered art education was solidly grounded in descriptive studies as early as the 1930s, and in Viktor Lowenfeld, found a charismatic theoretical guide. Rudolf Arnheim added corroboration of the validity of child art from an additional theoretical perspective (gestalt). Millions of imaginative and moving works of child art are a continuing testimony to the value of expressive works by children.

Given the delight and importance of children's art, it is curious to see how contemporary art educators have made child-centered art into a problem, and even more curious to hear their explanations of why it is a problem. In order to justify the more systematic side of DBAE (e.g., scan the design elements in a Miro, then "make your own" Miro), art educators have had to de-validate the Lowenfeldian connection between experience and art. How can they do this? The argument seems to be that child art and old master art share qualities of spontaneity, expressiveness, and creativity only through a charming but meaningless coincidence. For a child to make authentic art at eight is nice, the argument runs, but does not offer a base for a lifetime of understanding of art. Which is rather like saying that you shouldn't run fast at eight because you don't have Olympic form and you will be walking at fifty anyway. There is not sense to it. It children's art and master art resemble one another in certain respects (openness among them), then they resemble them; there is no such thing as a false resemblance. And it is one of the great joys of human development that it works out this way.

The experience of the critic, the artist, and the child all depend upon a quality of openness. These three perspectives should strongly support an approach to art education that also encourages openness. In educational philosophy, the closest term to what I am talking about is *imagination* (Nadaner, 1988). Imagination is a quality that attaches itself to and enlivens all forms of thinking. Imagination is inextricable from the larger purposes of education, which are to broaden horizons and create new possibilities of action that make a difference in the lifeworld. The earliest sites of imagination are play and dream. Child art continues play and dream in the form of visible symbols. Adult art and criticism keep play and dream alive in the midst of the increasing weight of logocentric reasoning and constrictive systems of thought. At the highest levels of education, artistic imagination is necessary to keep alive the connection between cultural production and life experience.

There is a way, then, for art education to tolerate art. It is to return to teaching art, rather than to the dissemination of systems. Art education should engage itself with art and the art spirit, in the fullness of its openness and ambiguity, for two reasons. One is that the disseminating of art instruction simply does not work. Proponents of hard-line DBAE argue that art must be simplified for mass art education, and that approximation is better than nothing at all. Thus impressionist paintings are seen as daubs of paint that merge at a distance, squiggly lines are pointed out in Van Gogh, and design elements are noted whenever possible. The problem with all of this is that it misses the generative core of the experience, the passionate

curiosity about new forms (new to the artist) and their surprising relations to the life of feeling. This is what comes out of reading Van Gogh or De Kooning as well as looking at their paintings. This passionate curiosity is what every human being feels in some measure, and it is with this curiosity that art teachers have to work.

Systems of art education confuse parroting of master works with getting at their core. An exercise in doing "something like DeChirico or Braque" can produce an attitude of passive mimicry, not of imagination. Authentic art is always imaginative, never passive. The second reason to engage in the art spirit is then, simply to bring out the authentic qualities of the art experience. Art is like walking or eating, very difficult to analyze but very rewarding when practiced. In the past, art educators have known how to creatively work with the student to bring out the art spirit, but we have stopped looking in the right places. This kind of teaching takes a delicate knowledge, a knowledge of give and take and respect for the student's own experience.

Closure, system and reification are not the way to go, because they are endpoints. Imagination, openness, and authenticity are not endpoints. They are engagements which make possible a future, which is what education is all about.

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