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# Art's Educational Value

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STUART RICHMOND

## Aspects of Value

As many writers now agree, the main ideological thrust of postmodernism has peaked, though we live with its legacy, principally a lingering distrust of value and a suspicion of significant ideas concerning, for example, knowledge and truth.<sup>1</sup> While it is still possible to encounter those who scoff at “enlightenment values,” there does appear to be some softening of attitudes. Beauty is once again a respectable topic of philosophical discussion, and in art schools, drawing and painting are back in the curriculum. Most serious artists want to do their own original work to a high standard, and they can be their own strongest critics.

In education, different subjects vie for precious curriculum space, prompting inevitable questions about their value. Value connotes worth, something that is prized. Value is often distinguished as being intrinsic in nature, meaning the worth is tied to an object's inherent qualities or defining character. An old growth forest, for example, could be valued intrinsically as a piece of wild nature. Thus, it would be possible to appreciate, among other things, its pristine qualities, the mighty trees, light falling on leaves, the variety of the flora, its organic density and profusion, sounds and smells, a sense of peace, and the unpredictable appearance of birds and other creatures. In an intrinsic sense, it is usual to say that something is attended to, or experienced, for its own sake. For the nature lover, a walk in an old forest carries its own justification. But such a conception can become hazy, for example, as when it is noted that the forest's natural qualities may be seen as instrumental to the gratifying of human ends such as aesthetic appreciation. Also, it is not always easy to distinguish intrinsic value unequivocally in a

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situation because conceptual boundaries may be loose or contested, as is the case with both art and education. What is deemed intrinsically valuable is inseparable from human purposes, needs, and experiences, implying a necessary element of judgment and instrumentality. Nevertheless, the concept can still be useful; indeed, despite such qualifications, the idea of intrinsic value is indispensable in weighing art's qualities and educational value and in contesting the bias toward technocratic rationality in our society. If the interest is in what art can best offer to education, however, both avenues to value need to be considered. Thus, art can be valued for the sake of artistic engagement itself and also in situations where art contributes to some other good, such as sensitizing students to nature or in vocational preparation. In this essay, however, I shall focus primarily on intrinsic values because it is of prior importance to identify what artistic engagement has to offer in itself to education and because varied instrumental applications are dependent on art's inherent qualities and achievements. The artistic skill of drawing, for example, and the study of drapery and the human figure become something useful in fashion design.

Value is also incommensurable, meaning that choosing one thing often means forgoing inclusion of something else that is different. Thus, educators need to have good reasons or justifications for doing one thing rather than another in the curriculum. As artists and educators we need to take stock constantly of what it is that makes art worthwhile in human life. Changing times and situations, the pressures of globalization, and the crisis over the environment are a few of the daunting indices that prompt questions about art's purpose in education.

Interestingly, while noting that worthwhile curriculum activities, such as science, history, and philosophy, promote knowledge and truth and provide endless opportunities for the exercise judgment and skill, illuminate life, and contribute broadly to its quality, philosopher of education R. S. Peters leaves out mention of visual art.<sup>2</sup> This exclusion is typical, in my view, of a persisting intellectual prejudice, probably deriving from Plato, against art as a valued part of education. Also, it is not uncommon for parents, for varying academic and economic reasons, to counsel their children to avoid art in school.

In this essay I want to identify a few key features in or related to art that can be defended as having value for education. I am thinking here about art seen as a component of a broad general education, mainly in the high school grades, though there will be relevance also for tertiary education. While I am in favor of the study of different artistic traditions, in this essay I shall limit my scope to the Western context in the belief that the Western artistic tradition, from the ancient Greeks to the present day, can still offer something good to the world.

## Features of Art

The place to begin in examining art's value is to look at what is meant by *art*. While few people working in the arts today worry overmuch about finding a general definition for art, it is still important to identify its key features, for these provide the framework for building the curriculum. Yet, as Wittgenstein recognized in his analysis of the concept of games, "if you look at them [games] you will not see something that is common to *all*";<sup>3</sup> rather, you will see, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail."<sup>4</sup> He uses the, by now, famous term, "family resemblances"<sup>5</sup> to characterize the similarities found among games—that is, in analogy with such family resemblances as eye color, gait, facial expressions, and temperament. Art, it could be argued—and this is not new—is a family resemblance concept, and this idea is an ingenious solution that shows the multifarious nature of art and language. But practically, educators need clarity regarding the important similarities that make up family resemblances, and this is just what is contentious since such qualities are picked out by a governing idea or concept.

The best anyone can do in this situation is to argue as carefully and convincingly as possible for a set of key features that can serve, if not strictly or necessarily, then at least usefully and appropriately, as orienting ideas from which reasonable notions of educational value can be inferred.

## Form and Understanding

Despite its recent fractious history, I would like to argue for the continuing importance to art of *form*, which means generally the shaping of materials and ideas into a coherent, meaningful pattern. A bird's nest gives a good idea of what a form can look like, the parts carefully interwoven to satisfy its purpose. Yet, form in art is a tricky concept because it can embrace the precise organization of shapes and materials evident in the work of Caravaggio, for example, the densely packed but less defined imagery of Jackson Pollock, or the more amorphous imagery of contemporary Vancouver artist Gathie Falk as seen in her oil paintings *Night Sky #3* (1979) and *Pieces of Water: Happy Ending* (1981). Fred Hertzog's color photographs of Vancouver city life made during the 1950s and 1960s are beautifully composed, but form does not dominate. His street pictures hang easily together and have the quality of a "lucky accident," to use an Asian term for spontaneity in art. Thus form, while connoting structure, can also be relatively loose and open. Nevertheless, as Phyllida Barlow, a professor of fine art at the Slade School in London, points out in a recent interview, "Subject matter has dominated over form and content for some time, whatever the chosen [art] discipline."<sup>6</sup>

There has been, undoubtedly, a kind of antiform, anti-aesthetic attitude in contemporary art, partly as a reaction against the art of the Academy, with its allegedly privileged aesthetic taste cultures, and partly because beauty and form are seen as distorting grand narratives to be deconstructed. As Sontag succinctly puts it:

The modern way of seeing is to see in fragments. It is felt that reality is essentially unlimited, and knowledge is open-ended. It follows that all boundaries, all unifying ideas have to be misleading; at best, provisional; almost always, in the long run, untrue. To see reality in light of certain unifying ideas has the undeniable advantage of giving shape and form to our experience. But it also—so the modern way of seeing instructs us—denies the infinite variety and complexity of the real.<sup>7</sup>

Sontag here gives the postmodern view and successfully implies something of the quality of the straw man. Concepts, shapes, and forms in art, as elsewhere, do serve to structure impressions and experience and selectively impose limitations on perception and knowledge, but they also provide a necessary framework for understanding. Also, as the work of Wittgenstein shows, language and conceptual boundaries, far from comprising a rigid unyielding system, *are* in many ways rough hewn and open textured, requiring the judgment and imagination of the user in practice. Wittgenstein argues convincingly that it is not possible to provide a complete set of rules governing the use of a word. Doubtful cases can always be constructed. Language thus has an element of indeterminacy.<sup>8</sup> This widely accepted analysis, though written fifty years ago, sounds rather postmodern. It is extreme, therefore, to suggest that there is little or no room for complexity and boundary breaking. The boundaries themselves are in varying degrees porous. Think also of the many rich and evolving movements and genres in art's history and the long legacy of social critique by so many modern artists.

While there may be objections to the idea of art as a visual language—namely, the lack of a clear analogous correspondence with the verbal—the idea is used regularly in artistic circles without great harm and with intelligibility. We speak, for example, of a particular artist's "visual language," by which we mean the approach, style, use of forms, coloration, etc. In learning to draw we learn ways of picturing three-dimensional bodies in space on a flat surface. If artists are to be understood, they must work with some common visual ideas and ways of making images, and nothing in this prevents experimentation, transformation, and change to engender new perspectives. Also, it is just misleading to think that artists working formally cannot show truth in their work. Sometimes it can be seen that a portrait is a true likeness of its subject while also depicting qualities of character. Yet again, for example, Artimesia Gentileschi's paintings *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) and *Lucretia* (1621) reveal truthful insights from the woman's perspective

on the nature of sexual harassment and its aftermath. Art *shows* its truths, which can be both particular and universal. Such truth as there is in art is subject to the judgment of time and place and is not, by being in part conceptual, “almost always” eventually untrue. As we know, art can have incredible staying power by virtue of its hold on our affections and the sense that it can speak authentically to our lives. Truth is a quality of a language, and language requires boundaries. Concepts, however, can go out of use, turn into metaphor, or be invented anew to capture the temper of a time. The provisional nature of language and form does not mean we cannot, or should not, as artists and thinkers, work toward stable ethical and epistemological foundations. The connection between language and the world is not necessarily strengthened, the world made more just by always working in disparate fragments or refusing to accept ethical norms.

Form is important in art because it shows the mind’s ability to create order, and order is the basis of making sense of, or understanding, the world. As Schiller points out in the Twelfth Letter from his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the “formal impulse”<sup>9</sup> maintains our freedom in the face of a multitude of impressions and changing circumstances. The formal impulse is shown in, and is necessary to, our ability to conceptualize, perceive, and create imagery and beauty.

Understanding is itself an elusive concept, with no model suitable for all occasions; as Mason shows in his *Understanding Understanding*,<sup>10</sup> understanding can be contextual, as in, for example, understanding a poem, a scientific theory, or a person. Understanding is mysterious and ambiguous. Understanding means both a power or ability and an achievement, as in the ability to understand and an understanding attained. Understanding has received little attention from philosophers, though indisputably, understanding requires knowledge. In art this means knowledge of the genre, media, technique, context, aesthetics, history, etc., but it is the way such knowledge is used and synthesized that is important. Wittgenstein’s remark about understanding consisting of “seeing connexions”<sup>11</sup>—that plus the idea of Whitehead’s that “understanding always involves the notion of composition”—are relevant for art.<sup>12</sup> To understand an art work is to perceive the relationship of its parts as a meaningful whole or composition: to see its subject as formed content and to see how the work connects with its context. An artist makes a work and uses his power of understanding by finding the most apt form for his or her subject or idea. This can be an activity of discovery in that both form and subject become clearer in process, but it is also an activity of imposition and imaginative construction. Thus, an artwork embodies an artist’s understanding of a phenomenon or experience in a form that can be contemplated and itself be understood and appreciated. Interpretation is closely allied with understanding and frequently overlaps, but usually it has a more textual and semantic implication. The idea of aesthetic interpretation does not sound quite right, as the aesthetic relates

more to taste than concepts. Understanding includes interpretation, as in the interpretation of a painting's iconic meaning and the interpretation of rules, but understanding is a more commodious concept in that it incorporates the aesthetic with all its implications of feeling, judgment, imagination, and sensibility. Understanding is altogether a more holistic, expansive, humane, and experiential concept than interpretation, though as with interpretation, there is no final or perfect understanding. The soundness of understanding in art is something to be ascertained by discussion in relation to relevant aesthetic criteria and the particularities of a work. Despite some indeterminacy of meaning, which is not just a matter of imprecise thinking, I value the somewhat old-fashioned idea of understanding over current notions such as thinking skills or cognitive tools because these are overly reductive and misleading. The mind is nothing so primitive as a piece of technology. For me, *understanding* is close to what is meant by mind or consciousness.

This is not to deny the importance of deconstruction in breaking open to view existing art forms in the discovery of relationships of power; layers of meaning in social arrangements, theories, and works of art; or in ways of presenting art—or that meaning may be found in fragments or in a collage of fragments. It is, rather, to note that such possibilities rest implicitly on an accepted background of ordered relationships. Silence in a piece of music, for example, depends for its significance on the fact of music as continuous organized sound. A fragment from a sculpture found in an archeological dig must be examined in detail and also traced to its cultural, historical, and aesthetic origins and placed in a larger design to be understood. So, too, with a collage: the various disparate elements need to be seen synoptically—that is, to get a sense of the whole. As well, the collage has to be understood in relation to its cultural context. And as noted earlier, though Plato might disagree, art is a rich and flexible form of visual understanding. Education, in my view, is about the development of various forms of understanding, represented in the liberal arts as established by scholars, artists, scientists, and writers over millennia.

### **Artistic Expression**

*Expression* refers chiefly to the manner in which a subject or theme in art is formally treated. Expression embodies and manifests a particular feeling or quality in a work. The photographs of Bill Brandt, for example, through his use of shadow, location, and composition, often have an air of mystery and foreboding. I have a painting of a swimmer seen from her right side from underwater. The artist used acrylic paint and inks of blue and green, blending them together to give an impression of translucent color and pockets of light and shadow in swirling water. The swimmer is painted and inscribed but is not fully distinguishable. The painting successfully evokes (expresses) the feeling of movement and submersion in a flickering blue and green

world; that is, the work shows, or represents, a swimmer in water, but the creative use of inks and drawing brings the work to life.

Art communicates visually, through images, in various learned and commonly understood ways, although art is constantly being adapted and remade. The language and subject matter of art are drawn from the community of practice, but expression is tied inseparably to the subjectivity of the artist. It is the artist's touch that gives a work its qualitative individuality. Looking at the work of painter Howard Hodgkin, for example, compared with that of say, Lucien Freud, it is possible to see the thick layering of paint by Hodgkin, the intense and vivid use of color, the fluid but abstract content all combining to invoke a meaning for his narrative titles, such as *In Paris With You* (1995). Freud's work, often portraiture, is much more figurative. The colors are more muted, the shapes somewhat contorted or exaggerated, and the content is often of human psychological suffering. Students learn through art, through the development of a visual language, to enter into dialogue on matters of common significance, and in so doing they acquire voice, style, and a sense of their own artistic identity.

Although I practice photography as my own art form, drawing remains the quintessential common discipline to be fostered in art, for drawing develops the capacity to see and render the world through the human touch, in its detail, proportion, structure, and qualities; to observe and consider what in this hurried life is significant; and to do justice to the visual realm. And drawing calls upon a person's interests—the resources of the eye, the hand, mind, and feeling. All art, in my view, requires the free play of such capacities: ideally, the disinterested (free) play. I understand *disinterested* to mean interested but unselfish, and *free play* to invite the notion that art comes about as much through exploration and serendipity as any definite intention.

Through the development of perception and skill, encounters become richer, and capacities for noticing and absorbing nuances and qualities are developed. From this development comes the capacity to respond and express the self's concerns and engagements artistically. The great advantage of drawing and other traditional media is in their inescapable demand for students and artists to connect personally and physically with the development of their subject. This means being guided not just by rules, skills, and technology but also by personal responsiveness, which is valuable whatever the medium.

Every work, while part of an oeuvre, is set in its own universe of contingency. Many artists say they never know whether they can make another work. It is this element of uncertainty and risk—the sense that the artist has brought something off with skill and verve, prevailed against the odds, transformed the mundane, the easily given—into a new realization that shows the life in and behind art.

Besides attention to visual realities, artists embrace aspects of experience that elude complete conceptualization. All experience is in some degree unique. The sensitive perception and skill of the artist are required to show the uniqueness of personhood, for example, or the beauty of an aging oak. Such qualities emerge expressively from the total form of the work and from the imaginative and nuanced use of a visual language, and, as such, they must be grasped partly through direct acquaintance. It is worth remembering that words are not a substitute for artistic experience. What can be grasped artistically cannot always or easily be made explicit verbally. Art that has little or no expressiveness risks becoming something generic and intellectual.

Expression has been as unfashionable as form in the contemporary arts. My impression is that as with beauty, it might be felt that to be expressive is somehow to be complicit with the embellishment of reality or possibly with the aesthetic taste of a wealthy elite, that is, in contrast with something more plainly descriptive. Better, then, hypothetically, just to strip away everything lyrical or poetic and go for the unvarnished truth. Photography, for example, has tended toward a more straightforward documentary approach. In the catalog foreword for the first major photography exhibition at Britain's Tate Modern Gallery in 2003, director Nicholas Serota writes, "*Cruel and Tender* [the exhibition title] examines a form of documentary photography that keeps within the limits of the medium stressing pure description . . . concentrating on a form of photography which explores the intrinsic aspects of the medium."<sup>13</sup> As Sontag aptly comments elsewhere, "often . . . a good deal of the most brilliant contemporary photography . . . simply invites us to stare at banality."<sup>14</sup> I must say, however, that I was impressed by many of the works in the exhibition catalog, especially pictures of the dust bowl of the 1930's by Walker Evans; Nicholas Nixon's *The Brown Sisters*, which consists of six black and white portraits of four sisters, standing in the same order relative to one another, as they age progressively during the period from 1975 to 2002; and photographs of industrial landscapes and factory workers in Ohio by Lee Friedlander, which to my eye were uniquely affecting. It may be asked, however, of photographs of water towers, cooling towers, gas tanks, and blast furnaces by Bernd and Hild Becher, at what point does a document become a work of art? Such pictures have the cold, informative quality of scientific illustrations. Also, I'm not sure what Serota could mean by the notion of keeping within the limits of the medium, as he is the one setting the supposed parameters, or what he could mean by the phrase "pure description," as any artistic medium requires human intervention and response. And finally, I wonder in what sense does documentary photography, or Serota's idea of it, "explore the intrinsic aspects of the medium?" The term "intrinsic" is being used to credit a preferred style of art, rather than an approach strictly required for logical or material reasons.

And finally, from the same exhibition, photographs of two young women by Rineke Dijkstra—*Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16 1994*, and *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994*—shown unsmiling and naked, holding their infants after just giving birth, standing full figure, facing the camera against plain white walls, have a vulnerable but undeniable beauty. Many examples from the exhibition show that it is difficult if not alien to exclude expression altogether since artists necessarily create work by means of their own emotional and perceptual resources. Even the work of Bernd and Hild Becher is not completely inert. Possibly it is the meticulousness of the photographs taken straight on to the subjects, with little room for ambiguity, the absence of human beings in what are obviously human constructions, and the utter calm, that conspire to express a decidedly surreal atmosphere.

Form and expression are essential to the character of art, as are the perceptual capacities, skills, and knowledge that such features can require in an artist. Expression is often allied with abstraction and representation.

### **Aesthetics**

Qualities of design, form, expression, beauty, personal style, and inflection continue to be important in art. Indeed, they are what many want to see in exhibitions, or in their own art, or in art adorning their own homes. Besides being sociopolitical animals, we are also sensual aesthetic creatures who respond to light, color, shape, rhythm, movement, etc. Small balcony gardens, dress, art as hobby, walking in the woods on a spring morning, the incredible popularity of photography, and other examples show the desire for aesthetic engagement. Inasmuch as education can inculcate a measure of disinterested interest, students are enabled to appreciate art as a worthy experience in itself. A particular work stops us for a moment as we become immersed appreciatively in its world and manner of being. In our own creative endeavors, the synthesis of feeling, form, and concept into a complete and satisfying whole gives a feeling of pleasure and accomplishment in a work that is replete and finely wrought, and this, I believe, prompts us, as artists, to keep working. For artists and viewers, the ability to engage with art aesthetically constitutes a small personal victory against the constant inroads of utility and media marketing. I have heard students and academics talk of the myth of the aesthetic or of beauty. My response here is to think there must be some odd mistake. To be untouched aesthetically by art and much else in the world is a terrible deprivation. This is a situation that calls for teaching as a kind of therapy, both to dispel misunderstanding and to motivate and enable a willingness to attend. Surely one can be a decent, politically aware citizen and still appreciate painting, or the close sighting of a raven. Indeed, care for the spirit is even more of an imperative in a confused

and angry world. As the Italian poet Maria Louisa Spaziani puts it in her poem titled "Protest on Principle":

Absolutely no writing of poetry  
 While one child is dying of hunger.  
 You're wrong, Sartre: so many children die  
 Because the world knows nothing of poetry.<sup>15</sup>

### Rules, Creativity, and Response

In learning to draw, paint, sculpt, and make photographs, students learn a language of forms and rules. The idea of rules in art may seem anathema, but without some rules, art as a serious enterprise could not continue. Think, for example, of the rule of thirds in composition, the rules for depicting drapery and perspective or volume and proportion in figure studies, the rules for mixing and using color in painting, or the rules of exposure in photography using aperture and shutter speed. Rules are guidelines, however, and are often imprecise and unsystematic; they come to an end in the spot aesthetic judgments. The rules of art, as in verbal language, have to be applied creatively as visual concepts are projected into new situations without recourse to further rules. This leaves space for originality, for the artist to imagine new, effective ways of bringing his or her ideas to form.

Artists develop their own creative approaches; yet, as Wittgenstein, argues, there can be no private language. All living languages depend on the possibility of shared meanings but also of correction, adaptation, and agreement in use by members of the artistic or speech community. Memory alone or strictly private responses or sensations do not allow for the surety or constancy needed for language to function. In short, a language requires some minimal public criteria and agreements in judgments.<sup>16</sup> Artists, within an aesthetic community, make meaning based on a vocabulary of learned forms that are imaginatively shaped and adapted, sometimes discarded and invented anew to satisfy personal interests, expressiveness, and vision. Hodgkin, as previously mentioned, provides a good example. He has painted a series of works that are vibrantly colorful, enigmatic, and abstract.<sup>17</sup> He uses narrative titles such as *View From Venice* (1984) and *Dinner in the Palazzo Albrizzi* (1984). One could say that he has his own artistic language; yet there are subtle representational clues, and his strong coloration conveys meaning. While Hodgkin's work is highly individual, radical perhaps, it is in the tradition of abstraction. His language works because it relies on the viewer's responses honed through previous experiences of art and life. Viewers rely on knowledge, imagination, memory, personal resources, and suggestiveness in the work to reach an understanding.

For artists, there is no rule for determining what constitutes a suitable and significant project, the most appropriate media or approach, the path

to completion, the point at which something is completed, nor for the balancing of feeling and aesthetics with the more rational, purposeful side of art. But there is knowledge of tradition, of assumptions and practices. Thus, in the studio students learn from history, examples, and trial and error what it means to think things out for themselves where there is no firmly set path, to express themselves, to be productive participants in the search for meaning, value, and, oftentimes, truth. Similarly, there is no fixed way to respond to art. Viewers must approach a work openly, distinguishing meaningful parts by means of visual concepts or schemas learned from their own studio work and from art history, finding relationships as form and content become apparent, feeling their way into what the artist is offering for view. While it is true that viewers bring their own histories with them in perceiving and valuing a work, through education they can learn to give sufficient attention and respect to the artist's efforts and achievements. All art is of course open to interpretation and personal affect, but there is a balance in what the viewer brings by way of background and constructive perception and what the work, if allowed sufficient autonomy, can convey. Response to art can gradually be refined to concentrate attention on a work's qualities—always a matter of judgment; but judgment and a disposition to be receptive can be honed through guided experience in education, excluding what is inimical to a work's content and purpose.

In both the creative and appreciative sides, art history cannot be over-emphasized, for it is from history that a sense of a longstanding community of practice can be derived. It is a truism that art makes no progress. Art simply brings us into intimate connection with what it means to be alive using the tools and materials currently at its disposal. As such, art is most conducive to the answering of questions concerning how we ought to live, for art above all explores the very pith of human existence.

### **Social and Historical Matters**

It is difficult, when faced with the daily onslaught of horrific news from around the world, to think anything really matters except power, or to keep faith with the ideals of beauty and achievement I have been discussing. Yet, ironically, our capacity to find meaning through art, to find some salvation in creative work or through the work of others, is, or can be, a source of sustaining value. The city, for example, offers endless opportunities for imaginative work that can lead to a renewed sense of appreciation for our local environment: finding beauty in unexpected places. Last summer, a student in one of my fourth-year classes created a photo essay of his explorations of streets, architecture, wire fencing, alleyways, the remains of billboards, patches of nature, etc., and the treatment made the work extraordinary by its unusual perspectives, close-ups, light qualities, composition, and the tone and texture of the black and white film. Art activities that explore nature

can draw students' attention to plant life and animal creatures and nature's cycles and rhythms. It is crucial in education to strengthen the human connection with the natural world and its qualities and limitations. If this is an instrumental use of art, so be it. Existing art work can be a source of moral inspiration. Artists can be social critics in the sense of showing or revealing, without hype, true states of affairs, with respect, for example, to urban and industrial devastation, the abuse of the earth and its wild creatures, poverty, psychological states, drug addiction, etc. In education this must be handled carefully for reasons of student maturity, well-being, and the necessary limitations on the mandate of education. Nevertheless, young artists can pursue their social concerns in various media under the guidance of the teacher. Art is not often involved in direct action, but images can have a powerful effect on the consciousness of makers and viewers. Art can in this sense work for the common good.

Most teachers consider the local context of their students, drawing upon their interests and experiences so as to give relevance and meaning to the work. Teaching high school in a small logging and cattle ranching town has a different ambiance from that in a large city. But the prevalent idea always of beginning educationally with, or incorporating, the students' own experiences can become a limiting mantra. Thus, it may seem that learning about medieval French architecture can have little value for North American students. Yet the reverse is true. History is always important. From history we learn that life is fleeting. We learn about different philosophies and ways of life, just as we do in studying the art of another culture. Through careful study of the times and historical context, it is possible to develop an appreciation for what motivated the designers and builders of the old abbeys and monasteries. Learning about the art of the Romanesque, we get a glimpse of twelfth-century design in stone and wood and the challenges of using hand tools and simple winches. We see the expression of a sensibility and the importance of the aesthetic. Even then the stone carvers left their own chiseled mark on their work. They were in their way artists. Through well-made slides, films, and virtual visits on Internet sites,<sup>18</sup> students see beauty in the effects of age and in an older form. What might at first sight appear alien can be made familiar and understandable. Most cities and geographic regions have their share of heritage buildings, and these, if not the Romanesque, can be visited and studied fairly easily. Students begin to see from the history of artistic practice both difference and continuity, and they grasp that in the social realm they are free and artistically able to make their own critical contributions.

### **Art and Education**

Education fosters the development of understanding in a range of liberal disciplines, and education, to expand on Schiller, sets us in freedom. This

much at least is central to its purpose. In visual art, understanding is richly layered to include knowledge, aesthetics, expressiveness, and a creative grasp of the rules of a visual language. Art requires skill, a responsiveness of mind and body, and the authenticity of an individual voice or vision. I am tempted to think that creativity is no more than the clear expression of a unique sensibility. Indeed, the creative habit once acquired has many applications beyond art, and this, too, is a component of human freedom. Art, in its guises of making and appreciation, develops consciousness, including feeling, which is a form of intelligible response. Thus, art education embraces a concern for the development of the whole person.

Art leads practitioners toward increasing self-awareness. Students' knowledge of self is revealed in the judgments and choices they make in their own work and in their preferences for certain subjects and the work of other artists. Indeed, art is particularly suited to develop students' selfhood by virtue of its capacity for the subjective fashioning of a common visual language. To have the means of artistic representation and expression, informed by a rich vocabulary of ideas, is to be enabled to enter into dialogue about the things that matter—not just to the artist but also to the life of a community. Art emancipates students from the inchoate and is easily given to a more independent vision, which is the basis of personal action and the subsequent shaping of a life of one's own.

Art requires aesthetic judgment in both making and appreciation. Through insight into the aesthetic, students realize the inherent satisfactions in engaging with art, which can provide a deeper, more profound sense of value than those prevalent in a consumer society. Additionally, the historic legacy of art is an education in itself as we learn about the struggle of artists in different times and places to render and convey the appearance and character of life. It is difficult to explain why someone would develop a love for medieval architecture, for example, but without education this possibility might never arise, leading to a deprivation, to potentialities unrealized. In their own artistic work, and through the study of present day and historical art, students come to grasp the underlying moral question of humanity, which is, How should we live?

It is within the contextual complexity of artistic understanding, richly empowering of the self, brought to bear on the realities and qualities of life in visual and expressive, aesthetic form, that art's distinctive educational value is to be found.

#### NOTES

1. See for example, Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); *Life. After. Theory*, ed. Michael Payne and John Schad (New York: Continuum, 2003).

2. R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (Oxford: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966).
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), para. 66.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, para. 67.
6. Phillida Barlow, "Learning Experience," interview, by Mark Godfrey, *Frieze*, issue 101, (September 2006): 172.
7. Susan Sontag, "Photographs: A Little Summa," in *At the Same Time: Issues and Speeches*, ed. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2007), 124-25.
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13. *Cruel and Tender: The Real in Twentieth Century Photography*, ed. Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski, foreword Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 8.
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15. Maria Luisa Spaziani, "Protest on Principle," in *Star of Free Will*, trans. Carol Lettieri and Irene Marchegiani (New York: Guernica, 1996), 95.
16. See, in particular, paras. 242 and 580 of Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.
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18. See, for example, <http://www.abbayedefontenay.com/abbayedefontenay.htm>.