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Art, Creativity, Art Education and Civil Society

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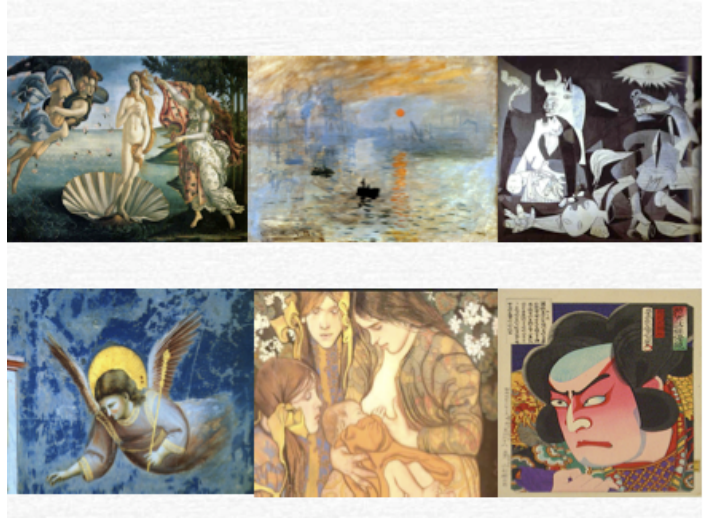
Introduction

The terms embedded in the title of my paper: *Art, Creativity, Art Education and Civil Society* seem intrinsically linked. In art history, theory and education literature there are abundant references describing art as a powerful manifestation of the human creative potential. The role and value of art in a society have traditionally been emphasized with the power of art to both cater to as well as nurture desires and aspirations relevant to the wellbeing of a collective and promoting civility and peace in human interactions. The field of Art Education has long argued the merits of its existence using the rationale of both the intrinsic value of art as well as the extrinsic benefits to a broader realm of human condition through its contribution to quality of life of individuals and societies. Claims that art has the capacity to uplift the spirit, support civility, and provide impetus for moral conduct through its probing appeal to the human psyche have become commonplace.

These historical connections among art, creativity, civility and art education have been perpetuated through scholarly discourse as well as through a common folklore; it has become almost unthinkable to question their contemporary validity. Yet, throughout history, the concept of art, the understanding of the nature of creativity, the ambitions of the educational

enterprise and the ways in which civil societies are defined have undergone tremendous transformations.

In this paper, I argue that in order to meaningfully consider the contemporary place and role of “Art Education” it is necessary to re-visit and carefully scrutinize a number of long standing assumptions about art and creativity as well as about art and its current societal influence. I am not convinced that art, as a product of human creativity in many of its twenty-first century manifestations, is still true to the values of, or brings the benefits that we have long claimed to be unique to, its fabric. Consequently, I suggest that it may be necessary to examine how art continues – or not - to make societal contributions that can justify its presence in a mainstream public education. I suggest that what may be needed today is a new form of visual education, that allows us to develop unique sensitivities, understandings and skills that draw on the human potential to access more fully the realm of human experience.



At the 2008 Convention of the National Art Education Association in New Orleans, there was standing room only in the large lecture hall where Professor Elliott Eisner delivered the annual Lowenfeld Lecture. His talk centred around the value and role of the arts (and in particular visual arts) in education. Pointing to the importance of learning to see and fully experience the world visually to do justice to its intricate qualities, Eisner talked about the significance of nuances (“God is in nuance”); the processes involved in a careful modulation of a form; the looking and exploration of delicate relationships among entities in visual environments; the working “at the rim of incompetence” to arrive at solutions that often emerge as a results of a surprise rather than systematic pre-planning; the acknowledgment and ability to sensitively select from a multitude of possible solutions; the slowing down perception to fully experience the world that seems to be obsessed with the quick and the efficient.

I fully concur with Eisner that we indeed have the capacity to “know more than we can tell” and that this cognitive potential draws on and realizes itself through sensitivities and practices that Eisner outlined in his speech. I am, however, not convinced that art in the 21st century is still intrinsically true to these values and thus has the capacity to engage people in ways that deliver on the promise of the traditional claims regarding its value.

Art and creativity in the 21st century



It is a truism to say that Art has changed. Art educators around the world are well aware of the ever-expanding category of art, and the role that the community of “art experts:” art connoisseurs, curators, critics, collectors, and theorists plays in continually reframing its boundaries. Yet, I believe that when we say “art” in our attempts to justify importance of art education, we often defer to art as it used to be – rather than to art as it is today - when we exonerate its virtues. I

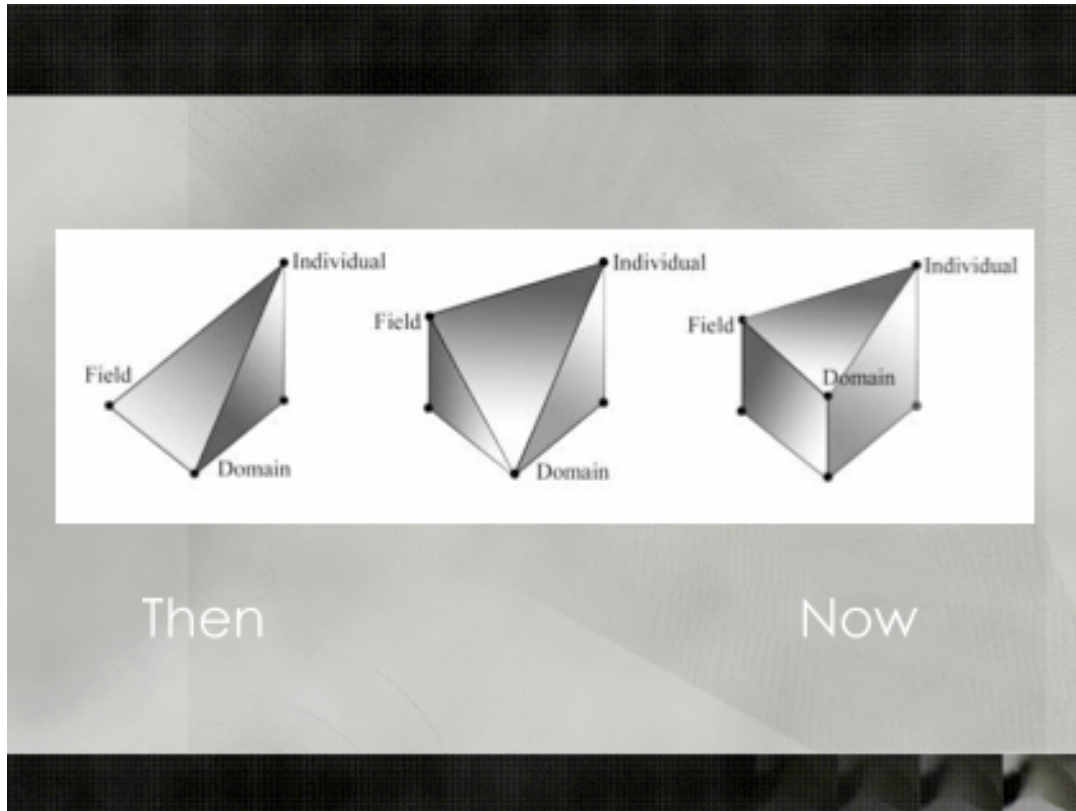
also believe that we hold a rather romanticized notion of creativity, and in particular artistic creativity, blindsided to the fact that the reality of the contemporary artistic production may be quite distant from this ideal.

I attribute at least part of this confusion to the fact that we tend to see art and creativity as discrete concepts that have been built around their “best exemplars” from the past, rather than approaching them from a systems perspective and acknowledging the spectacular range of what people refer to as “art” and the vast universe of human creativity: from their most noble to the most troubling manifestations.

When George Dickie (1974) first proposed an institutional theory of art, he acknowledged the power of what Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1999) refers to as “the field” in his discourse on creativity. To put it simply, both Dickie and Csikszentmihalyi posit that there is no “objective” art or creativity but that these categories are socially constructed by the field of experts within their respective domains. In other words, neither art nor creativity can be defined through its attributes and/or past exemplars. Rather, art and creativity emerge at the intersection of the attributes of objects or behaviours that have a potential to be deemed artistic or creative and the field’s willingness to consider them as such within a domain, based on a wide range of considerations.

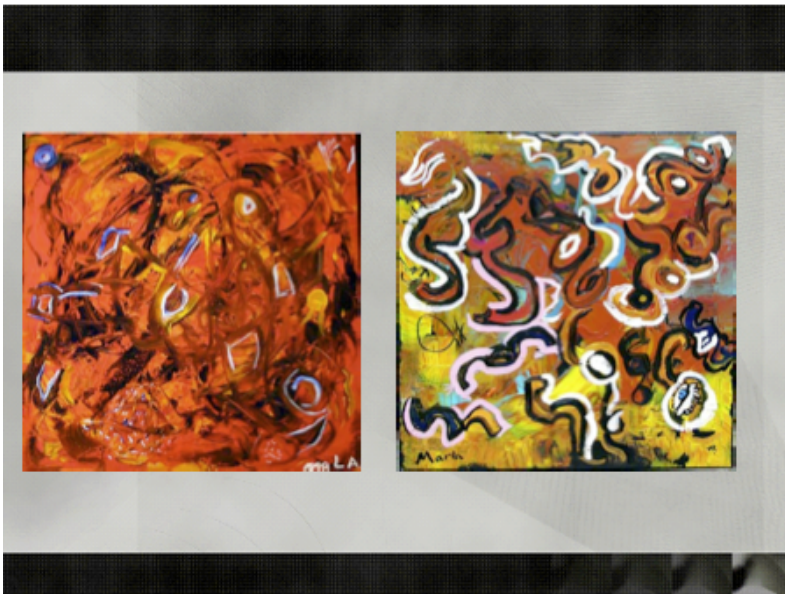
Csikszentmihalyi’s model of creativity points to the dynamic relationships among the domain, the field and the individual in making these determinations. I have argued (e.g., Kindler 2004, 2007) that Csikszentmihalyi’s model of creativity is also very applicable to the category of art. I have extended this model in my work on artistic development by adding a dimension of

time, to illustrate how this dynamic problematizes the search for a static model of artistic development that could be used over time and how it puts in question the relevance of models that emerged within the constraints of specific artistic frameworks and traditions to other contexts and times in history.



The above illustration, using arbitrary values, attempts to graph the change in what artistic development (or, for that matter, artistic achievement) may amount to as the field and the domain evolve over time. This rather abstract illustration is helpful here in showing how, while continuing to use the same labels of “art” and “creativity,” we refer to very different entities over time and, thus, how past assumptions regarding their nature and value may require an ongoing re-evaluation.

Let me share some examples that well illustrate the workings of this intricate dynamic system; that demonstrate how the concept of art (or creativity) are intrinsically linked to their “fields” - and how the criteria that the field of art applies today have little to do with the concerns and values that art educators continue to consider in justifying the value of art in education.



Some of you may already be familiar with the work of Marla Omstead. Marla rose to fame overnight when she was discovered and featured by the Anthony Brunelli Gallery in Binghamton, New York and her story attracted the world's attention through articles in the *New York Times*, and appearance on the David Letterman show. Within weeks Marla Omstead's paintings were selling for up to \$25,000 dollars a piece. The secret to

Marla's amazing success, however, turned out to be only marginally rooted in the undeniable aesthetic appeal of her work. This success was founded on the acknowledgement of Marla's precocious talent (as she was only 4 year old when the paintings were produced) and the fact that her parents effectively connected with a gallery owner.

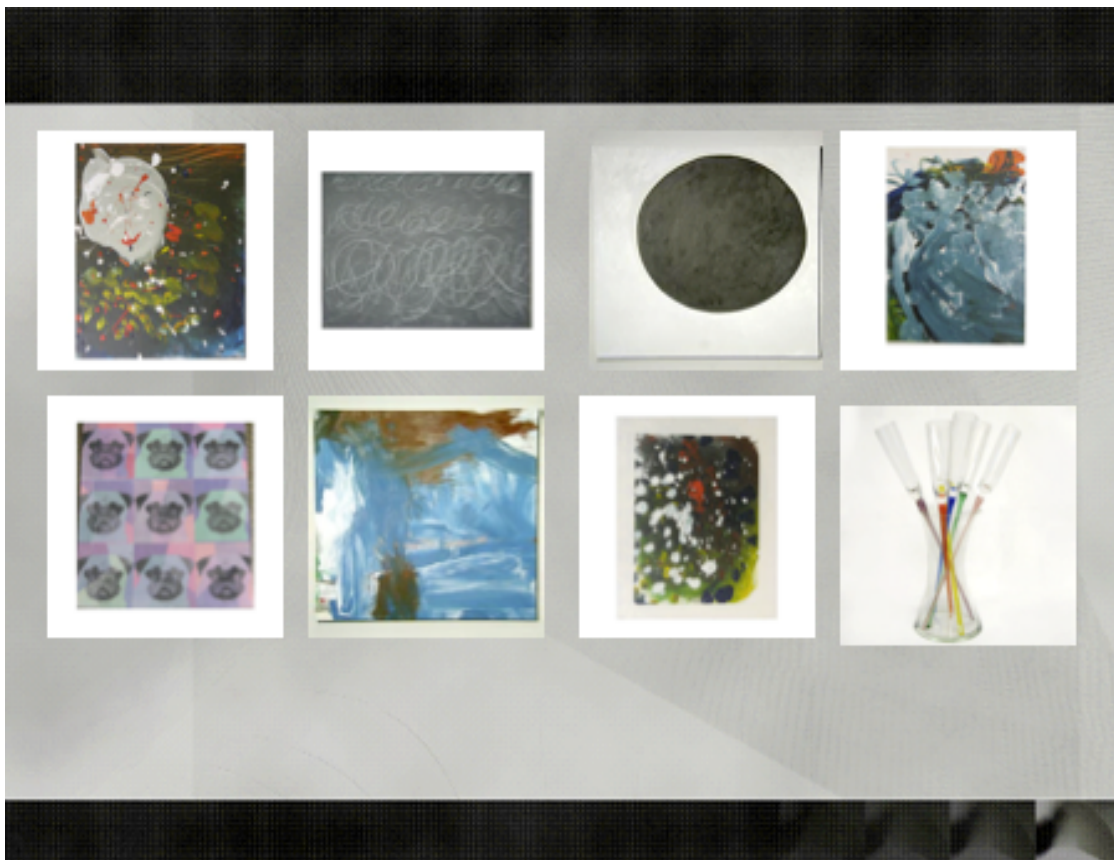
The value of the paintings plummeted as quickly as it rose when doubts were raised about Marla's contribution to the creation of these visually appealing images and accusations that it was actually her father, a manager in a Frito Lay chips factory, who executed the paintings. The same body of experts who raved about the aesthetic qualities of the paintings suddenly found the works to be without merit. What made the paintings "art" was how unexpected this production appeared within the realization that it resulted from a pictorial engagement of a small child.

This example illustrates how art has become not only different in its expanded repertoire of possible manifestations, but how it has become about something very different than what it used to be, how the artist rather than the work, have moved to the centre, and how arbitrary and fragile the art designation has become. Art does not rest anymore in the work that can be visually shared, but in the complicated web of supposed intentions of the artists



(often disclosed, if at all, to very few and masterfully hidden beneath the visual interface of the work) and in the art critics' interest and ability to comment on them in ways that capture attention.

The fact that increasingly only those who are “art insiders” can recognize “real art” exemplifies this shift. But I would argue that today this distinction does not separate only experts from ignorants. I believe that the “cult of the artist” perpetuated by the “cult of the field” has now pushed the arbitrary dimension of the judgment so far, that today even those with an extensive knowledge and exposure to art can be hard pressed to make a correct determination. While well-known Modernist works can be easily recognized by art connoisseurs, even though for an untrained eye they may be confused with pictorial work of a child or a novice, less prominent examples are often difficult to distinguish even for people with significant experience with art. In other words, unless you know the artist and the work, even if you are knowledgeable in art, you may not be able to deduce artistic merit from the artwork itself. This challenge prompted development of a website (see <http://abcnews.go.com>) where people may test their ability to separate art from non art.





As a prelude to the kind of a task you would face should you wish to take this test, let me ask:

Of the two images presented above one is a fragment of a highly valued work of art entitled *jpeg sak01*. Can you tell which one it is? Those of you who voted for the image on the left are correct. It is a digital image by Thomas Ruff, a celebrated German photographer. The image on the right was contributed by my father, Andrzej Jan Wroblewski, industrial designer and retired professor of design, who captured a screen of his TV set during a recent windstorm that distorted the quality of the digital signal. While of course there are differences between the two images, it can be argued that they both have a significant aesthetic appeal and that both could be inscribed with meaning. My point here is, that just like with Marla Omstead paintings, the key factor that makes the image on the left a work of art worth thousands of dollars and the one on the right not, is its attribution to a particular individual who has been acclaimed by the field.

Two important conclusions, somewhat troubling for the field of Art Education, can be drawn from these examples. The first is that in the twenty-first century, a work of art has become fundamentally secondary to the artist. In the context of the Csikszentmihalyi's model or my extension of it to the artistic realm, the "field" factor has now become more salient than ever

taking away from the “individual” factor – which Art Education had long had at its centre. To put it bluntly, in order to effectively connect and contribute to the contemporary art scene and respond to the increasing criticism of art education being out of touch with the world of art, it would take a significant shift in Art Education - from the developing and nurturing of qualities of seeing, interpreting and representing the world that Art Education (and its rationale) have long been founded on to the promotion of individuals and their creative ideas within the field of art experts.

Secondly, I would argue that because of this shift from art to the artist, the artists have become relieved from the need to engage with the visual and with the aesthetic in ways through which “the universal language of art” used to operate – while at the same time feeling pressured to create works that are unlike anything else that had been produced before. This pursuit of the new, the unconventional, the unusual, and the unexpected, essential for the artist to build his or her name, has, in my view, twisted and crippled the legacy of artistic creativity. I would argue that it has changed its meaning so profoundly that it is increasingly difficult to see it anymore as a virtue.

Let me offer you some recent examples of how the world of art has fallen in love with this misguided, in my view, notion of creativity, the one that entices artists to push the boundaries at all cost, including the boundaries of respect, dignity and decency, in the search of artistic fame.



Guillermo Habacuc Vargas has recently achieved his moment in the spotlight when he tied a stray dog on a short leash in an art gallery placing food and water far enough so the dog could not reach it and over a period of several days starved the dog to death. Faced with the pressure of a public outrage, the artist, who initially dismissed animal rights activists’ concerns by saying that the dog featured in the exhibit was a sick dog to begin with and would have perished

anyway, subsequently claimed that the dog survived the ordeal (although no one has since seen the dog) and that this was only a hoax necessary for him to expose, through his art, human hypocrisy.

Those who defended Vargas argued that the artist was indeed successful in making a point about people not paying attention to stray dogs unless they see one starve in an art gallery. However, for all the outcry that this exhibit has generated (and the fame that it brought to the artist) there is no evidence that this act of cruelty on display has actually prompted the desired reflection on human hypocrisy or changed in any way the fate of stray animals in Costa Rica. But one thing is for sure: no one



before was as “creative” as Vargas to torture a dog for several days in front of an art gallery audience, so the otherwise invisible and insignificant artist indeed gained notoriety.

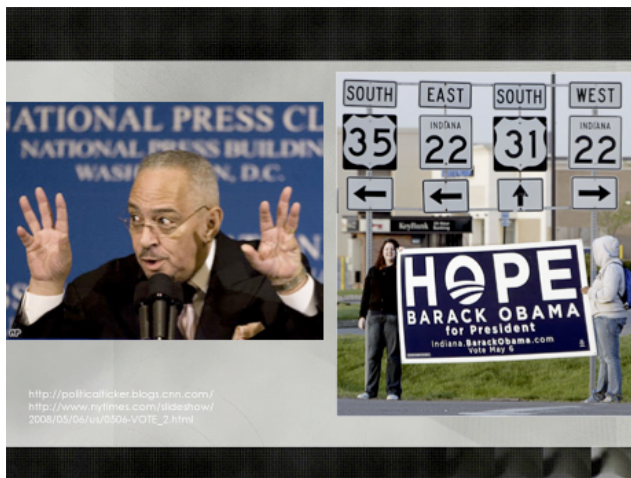
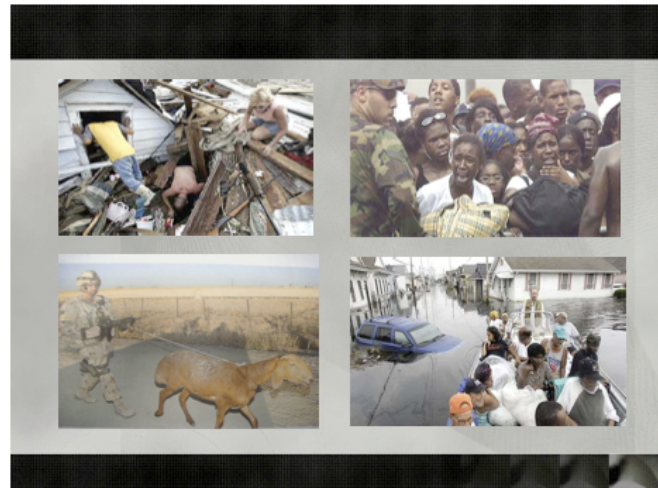
Of course not all artistic careers that had been built on the “outrageous as creative” argument have come at the expense of a life, although many required offending (*Piss Christ* by Andrew Serrano, 1989), mocking (Gilles Barbier’s *l’Orgue à Pets*, 1996), disgusting (Tracey Emin, *Soba Sex*, 1999; *My bed*, 1998, *The history of Painting*, 1998 and *My cunt is wet with fear*, 1998) or shocking (*Flesh dress*, 1987 by Jana Sterback) the audience with effects that hardly brought any benefit outside of the artist’s (and the art world’s) own gratification.



absorbed and often so offensive that they lose the ability to engage the public with their intended meaning and they only generate the art world’s self-serving controversy.

Although artists and their promoters often claim that these shocking displays of the “I dare you” creativity have some societal value by bringing important social matters to the viewer’s attention – I would argue that while they do generate fuss that powers the artistic enterprise (and it has been high powered in recent years with the record breaking art trades) – they seldom result in any positive social outcomes. The disturbing and provoking images are so self

Yet, the power of images is today as potent as ever and their ability to broadly influence human thought and action remains fully open to exploration. Interestingly, it is journalists and other art-novices, rather than artists who currently build most effectively on this potential. When major calamities strike people throughout the world, images depicting their tragedy shared through the mass media have been a powerful tool in triggering waves of public support and eventually bringing some comfort to the victims.



In the currently unfolding political process in the United States to elect presidential nominees, images play an important role as words, when the candidates' campaigns fight for voters' support. And images shared on the internet – often produced by “art novices” – or by artists outside the world of art enterprise seem to share more promptly and in more positively engaging ways, important messages about the current significant world issues.

An internet posted image that hundreds of people around the world click on every day and which often operates through the traditional “language of art” vocabulary (even if it is done with a limited level of skill) has immeasurably more power than an artistic production confined to gallery walls.

The appeal of this power to reach a worldwide audience combined with the self-serving need to seek celebrity – the latter very much perpetuated through the current



ethos of the twenty-century world of art, has in recent years lead not only to a form of public exhibitionism where people's private lives, in their most intimate detail, become a part of the public domain, but also to actions that are unquestionably problematic from a societal perspective.



A good example are pictures that were recently posted on the Youtube.com showing a beating of a young women by a group of her teenage peers – the act of violence that was prompted by the group's interest in creating some images “worthy” to be posted on the internet – images of something shocking enough to attract attention – a reasoning not unlike what lies behind much of the contemporary artistic production.

The merits of being “creative” at all cost trump a moral judgment – and the artists seem to be publicly absolved from engaging in any moral considerations or from responsibility for their actions – as long as they act in the name of art. This is why Vargas is free to torture a dog in the gallery with the world of art backing his rights of freedom of expression – sadly without any reference to any responsibility that may accompany this right.

Art? Education and Civil Society

This brings me to the consideration of the relationship between art, creativity and art education and the notion of a civil society. In Spring 2008, the *Vancouver Sun* featured a series of articles focused on the concept of a civil society. The series began with a front page feature listing

Ten Rules of Engagement for a Civil Society

1. Pay attention to what's going on
2. Practice compassion
3. Act
4. Hold individuals accountable for what they do
5. Be clear in stating your case
6. Listen
7. Be prepared to change
8. Avoid violence (physical and emotional)
9. Remain genuine
10. Treat others with respect with which you'd like to be treated

This list captures, in my view, some common beliefs about what founds societal civility that transcend more sharply defined theories to which only members of a specific scholarly or artistic community may subscribe. I also find this list appealing, because I believe that it refers to many forms of engagement that could be found in artistic practices from the time when art and its creation were characterized by the attributes highlighted in Elliot Eisner's speech.

I would also like to present a somewhat revised list – a list of possible attributes that could be reflected in what I will call here a “Visual Education” – an education that draws on the art and art education positive legacy and one which, in my view, would be worthwhile of our continued commitment and advocacy.

Eleven Rules of Engagement for “Visual Education”

1. Pay attention to what's going on (**notice nuance**)
2. Practice compassion (**in production and interpretation of visual imagery**)
3. Act (**with thoughtfulness, integrity and skill**)
4. Hold individuals accountable for what they do (**including yourself**)
5. Be clear in stating your case (**through visual means**)
6. Listen (**and look – “slow down perception”**)
7. Be prepared to change (**understand the past**)
8. Avoid violence (**physical and emotional and graphic**)
9. Remain genuine
10. Treat others with respect with which you'd like to be treated (**make your work convey that respect**)
11. Engage with visual imagery in ways that allow yourself and others achieve these goals

To be sure, the proposed “Visual Education” would include art as one of its concerns – that art of the past, the present and the future – as a form of learning about the human artistic heritage and applying to it a critical perspective. I would like for this form of education to engage students in a discourse about the ethical and moral issues embedded in the forms of expression, communication and persuasion through the visual means. I would like it to especially engage learners with art that can rise above the “cult of the artist” and is capable of transcending the art world's obsession with the “creativity at all cost.” Most of all, however, I would like it to encompass learning to engage with the visual world in a broad spectrum of its manifestations that demonstrate human capacity to be profound, thoughtful, sensitive, curious, nuanced and courageous enough to insist that art in the twenty-first century may still benefit from coming closer rather than distancing itself from goodness and morality, and where one may be encouraged to search for creativity in the best and not the worst of what humanity has to offer.



I have shared in this paper some doubts about the appropriateness of rationalizing art education based on the claims that have their roots in the past rather than the present of art. As an art educator, art education researcher and a practicing artist, I have to confess that I am personally uncomfortable with these claims. I find it impossible to believe that art world today – the professional one that trades art as an attractive new commodity next to stocks, bonds, horses or wine – still fulfills the personal and social needs that used to be addressed, in many shapes and forms, by its historical predecessors. I also struggle with the arguments that suggest that this art that can guide us towards the betterment of civil societies – as I am not sure that one can indeed achieve such goals through generating confusion, shocking the senses, appealing to vulgarity or drawing on ridicule - the means to which artists resort to so often these days in an attempt to create impact. I am increasingly inclined to think that by perpetuating the myth of art as intrinsically and unquestionably worthwhile in all of its contemporary manifestations we are actually contributing to a demise of the values and sensitivities that we have claimed our goal is to nurture.

I recognize, of course, that not all art of the twenty-first century that has been acclaimed and valued by the world of art lacks the ability to connect directly with the viewer, shares the troubling characteristics described earlier in this paper, or is void of the potential to positively contribute to the life of a society. However, I believe that we have now have a sufficient critical mass of exemplars of contemporary art not conforming to, and often contradicting, the traditional rationale for art in education that it has become inappropriate to argue for art education based on these claims.

As we consider the educational enterprise in this context, we may do well by articulating first what is it that may indeed be justifiable to teach in the schools that draw on the legacy of the visual arts that is still relevant today, meritorious to individuals and contributing towards

advancement of civil societies. We may then come closer to designing and effectively advocating educational programs that will indeed allow our students to transcend the limits of language in their cognition, to fully and sensitively engage in the visual world, and to draw on this engagement in transformative ways towards the betterment of the human condition and the environment entrusted to our stewardship.

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Author's note:

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About the Author

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