Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education

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A Project of the National Art Education Association
A large number of public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private sector companies are engaged in arts and arts education advocacy campaigns. A broad range of assertions about the capacity of the arts to assist in spiritual and moral development, improve academic performance, and induce psychological and even physiological well-being are used to promote support for all types of arts and arts education programming. Federal arts groups characterize the services of artists and arts organizations as being indispensable to successful school-based arts instruction. This chapter analyzes the interests of various arts groups in arts education, the motivations behind various advocacy claims, and the likely repercussions of hard-driving marketing on K-12 arts education. The author concludes that state and municipal commitment to K-12 arts education will further erode as a direct result of failure to distinguish between the purposes and capabilities of schools and those of arts organizations with regard to student learning in the arts. The responsibilities and jurisdiction of schools must be delineated clearly and firmly, the outcome of which must be assured support for programs and research designed specifically for the advancement of school-based arts study. Arts educators are urged to proclaim those distinctions in the public arena just as they also must differentiate between more and less credible arts education advocacy claims.

In the spring of 2001, I was asked to contribute a chapter addressing the relationship of advocacy and K-12 art education to this Handbook. I had recently completed a chapter on the impact of various types of advocacy on music education for a research compendium similar to this one but organized by MENC, The National Association for Music Education (Gee, 2002). After having spent many months examining a broad range of arts education advocacy materials and reflecting on the intended and unintended consequences of various advocacy campaign promises and priorities for K-12 music education, I resisted emerging myself in a visual arts view of the same subject. I had read and reread every variation of the proof and promise that arts education raises SAT scores; improves reading, math, and spatial skills; increases overall academic performance; and builds self-esteem, self-discipline, creativity, community
cohesion, and greater tolerance for difference. I had read that those qualities and achievements bolstered “workforce readiness” among America’s young people and that a strong and ready workforce ensured our global competitiveness, a condition critical to our national security. Like others who have analyzed the proliferation of such justifications for arts education (Chapman, 2001; Eisner, 1998; Hope, 1985, 2002; Smith, 2002), I had come to believe that those claims and the techniques used to market them were seriously eroding the field’s identity, credibility, and purpose (Gee, 1999b). But unlike others of greater faith and longer memory, I had accepted the inevitability of the destruction. I had arrived at the sad conclusion that, try as we might to brake its forward motion, the momentum of the marketing machine was so powerful as to be unstoppable and, that ultimately it would flatten every dissenter or counter any idea that stood in its path.

It is terribly difficult to write in defense of a belief or idea once faith in one’s ability to make a difference has been lost. But although faith may be absent, hope lingers wistfully. Thus, I set about this task much like the Peanuts character, “Repeat” (the younger brother of Lucy and Linus), approached a drawing assignment in his first-grade art class. Seated at his side, Repeat’s pig-tailed classmate turns to inform him, “We’re suppose to draw each other’s face.” “Well, turn your head...I can only draw a side view face,” he replies. Striking a pensive pose, she says, “I’m trying to have an expression of someone looking to the future with hope.” “That’s all right,” replies Repeat, “I’m just drawing your ear.”

And so I began to draw an ear, just an ear.

UNDERSTANDING THE WWW OF ARTS EDUCATION ADVOCACY

There is—to paraphrase Jerry Lee Lewis—a whole lotta arts education advocacy going on. Typing “arts education advocacy” into Google Search in August 2001 linked you to 234,000 Web sites; entering the same command in August 2002 links you to 309,000. Represented among those sites are state and local arts agencies; state alliances for arts education, artist alliances, arts centers, museums, performing arts organizations, national and state arts education associations, school districts, arts lobbyist groups; and private individuals advertising their capacities in arts advocacy, marketing, and conference speaking. There are 501(c)(3) performing, visual, and media art organizations that combine advocacy activities with the provision of “arts and education” or “arts in education” or just plain arts education programs and workshops. There are 501(c)(4) tax-exempt groups that lobby city council members and state and federal legislators on behalf of the arts education advocacy and programming efforts of 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations; of school districts; and of local, state, and federal public arts and cultural agencies. Public grant-making agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and state and local arts councils advocate for arts education and for recognition and support of their own role and of the roles of arts organizations and artists in ensuring the success of arts education programming. Private philanthropic organizations and community foundations advocate for broad support of arts education. Along with public arts agencies, they seek to influence arts education policy, funding, programming, and practice through grant making for arts education-related projects and research, through the sponsorship of symposia, and through the publication and promotion of symposia proceedings and sponsored research. This information can be downloaded at the blink of an eye.

Chief among Washington-based publishers and distributors of arts education advocacy materials are Americans for the Arts, the NEA, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education, the Arts Education Partnership, and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. These federal arts agencies and federalized arts organizations, virtually one and the same with shared administrative staff, board
6. SPIRIT, MIND, AND BODY

Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development (Arts Education Partnership, 2002) is the federal arts cooperative’s latest attempt to influence public policy by way of channeling arts education funding and research toward math, reading, and social service agenda. Financed by the NEA and the U.S. Department of Education, Critical Links was published in answer to the Arts Education Partnership’s charge by its own research task force to create such a compendium. Weighted heavily with educational psychologists, Critical Links research reviewers and project advisors decided that the compendium would include “studies of the academic and social effects of arts learning experiences” rather than studies focused on learning in the arts (p. ii). The stated purpose of the compendium is to “recommend to researchers and funders of research promising lines of inquiry and study suggested by recent, strong studies of the academic and social effects of learning in the arts.” A “parallel purpose” was to influence designers of arts education curriculum and instruction to attend more specifically to “the arts learning experiences that are required to achieve those effects” (p. iii).

Critical Links also serves as a vehicle for another more clandestine purpose, that is, the advancement of federal arts’ decades-old practice of using arts education as a means to sustain political support and public funding. Whereas public arts subsidies are always in question and may be viewed as a political liability, no politician has been heard to say that education in the

1See Gee (2002, pp. 944–945) for a description of the intimate interconnectedness of the NEA and other Washington-based arts organizations and advocacy groups and the U.S. Department of Education.

2Gaining the Arts Advantage (President’s Committee on the Arts & the Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership, 1999) provides a ready-made example of the arts bureaucracy’s aggrandizement of various elements of the arts community as being front and center in K-12 arts education. The report’s “central finding” asserts: “The single most critical factor in sustaining arts education in . . . schools is the active involvement of influential segments of the community in shaping and implementing the policies and programs of the district.” Influential segments of the community is translated to mean “…individuals and groups from the broader community actively engage[d] with one another in arts and arts education activities inside and outside of the schools” (p. 9). The number one “critical success factor” is reported as being: “The Community—broadly defined as parents and families, artists, arts organizations, businesses, local civic and cultural leaders and institutions” (p. 11). Champions of Change (President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities & the Arts Education Partnership, 1996) promotes seven arts intervention projects as replicable “models of excellence” for improved student achievement and education reform. The in-school and “nonschool” projects focused entirely on the work and contributions of “outside providers” of arts education—that is, local artists and arts groups that provide services within or outside of the school setting, during or after school hours. An Americans for the Arts advocacy pamphlet (2001a) queries: “Who works to ensure that arts education enriches the life of every child in America? Answer: Americans for the Arts” (p. 3). The pamphlet explains that Americans for the Arts ensures every American child an arts education through the distribution of its YouthARTS Tool Kit ($75) “to hundreds of local organizations to provide ideas and strategies for creating successful ['afterschool'] youth arts programs in their communities” (p. 3).

One might rightly wonder about the invisibility of the professional arts educator in these celebratory reports of arts education victories. It is clear these organizations are very much about the business of making it appear that they (and their sister organizations at the state and local levels) drive all steps forward in arts education. It is not difficult to understand their political motivations. Although the arts bureaucracy has used arts education as a public relations tool for decades, the practice intensified dramatically in the mid-1990s when Congressional intimidation of the NEA was at its most severe. See Gee (2002) for a more detailed description and analysis of the promotional activities of these organizations.
arts for young people is unworthy of support. Thus, high-profile association with “bringing the arts to America’s children,” while attaching the purpose of such programming to whatever social or educational cause is currently revving up the media, is a smart and effective means to generate political goodwill. Advocacy publications such as Critical Links are useful in legitimizing such maneuvering and posturing.

The publication, however, is really a transparent and unabashed attempt to portray methodologically weak studies as “strong” research. In other cases, the intent is to transform tenuous correlations into highly significant ones that might, if no one pays much attention, slither toward causation. Most of the studies were recycled from previous federal arts advocacy publications including Champions of Change (President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership, 1996) and Eloquent Evidence (Murfee, 1995). No part of any of the 62 studies included in Critical Links is reprinted; instead, each of the studies is summarized by 1 of 14 research reviewers. A second reviewer joins the primary reviewer in commentary on the study’s “contribution to the field of arts education and its implications for future research and/or practice” (p. ii). Yet, another hand is evident in what was selected from each of these commentaries for excerpt. This relay of summarizing and editing makes it difficult to determine the merit and tenor of the original study. The careful reader notices the almost total disconnection between reported noneffects and cautionary language found in the summaries and the cocksure tone of the excerpts. The busy political aid or school board member would be greeted with the dazzling good news that arts students “earned better grades and scores, were less likely to drop out of school, watched fewer hours of television, were less likely to report boredom in school, had a more positive self-concept, and were more involved in community service” (p. 69). Critical Links concludes with an inventory of 53 “core relationships” between arts learning and academic and social outcomes, all of which are said to “show evidence of transfer in the sense that learning activities in the arts have various effects beyond the initial conditions of learning” (Catterall, 2002, p. 154). Using this criterion for evidence of transfer, one might wonder if it is possible to identify any type or smidgen of learning that cannot be linked to improved academic and behavioral outcomes.

Other organizations prominent in the arts education advocacy business include the American Symphony Orchestra League, the American Association of Museums, the American Arts Alliance (comprised of the Association of Art Museum Directors, Association of Performing Arts Presenters, Dance/USA, OPERA America, and the Theatre Communications Group), and the National Coalition for Music Education (comprised of MENC, The National Association for Music Education, National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, and National Association of Music Merchants [NAMM]). The National Coalition for Music Education and VH-1 Save the Music Foundation produced The Music Education Advocacy Kit (1999) complete with a video, a CD-ROM, an advocacy guidebook, posters, and several packets of pamphlets for distribution. A drawing of Albert Einstein playing a violin covers the front of the kit and all the accompanying materials. The co-opted Dr. Einstein makes the point that “Music makes you smarter!”

The Walt Disney Company appears to have persuaded an infantile Dr. Einstein to join corporate America in enlisting other deceased geniuses in the arts education enterprise. Having already produced Baby Mozart, Baby Beethoven, and Baby Bach, The Baby Einstein Company recently released Baby Vivaldi (Entertainment Wire, 2002). Baby Van Gogh and Baby Shakespeare attest as well to Baby Einstein’s interest in the visual and literary arts. Information on the benefits of music on brain development is packaged with each CD courtesy of the

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American Music Conference, the public relations arm of NAMM and a consultant for *The Music Education Advocacy Kit*.\(^5\)

Upstaging Albert Einstein as a caring and glamorous proponent of arts education is Barbie Queen of the Prom, reincarnated most recently as Art Teacher Barbie. Trying to make a living in Los Angeles as an elementary art teacher, Barbie is truly concerned about arts education.\(^6\)

Her Barbie Cares Supporting Children in the Arts Web site states that “kids engaged in the arts score better on standardized tests. . . [and] perform better in core subjects like reading and math” (Mattel, Inc., 2002). Supermodel Cindy Crawford seconds Barbie, adding that “the arts build self-confidence and encourage kids to be more active in community affairs and promote creative expression and individuality” (Entertainment Industry Foundation, 2002). Both are spokespersons for the Entertainment Industry Foundation’s National Arts Education Initiative of which the Arts Education Partnership was an initial beneficiary.

The National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices in cooperation with the NEA and with “significant research assistance” from the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies published an issue brief encouraging the use of arts-based education “as a money- and time-saving option for states looking to build skills, increase academic success, heighten standardized test scores, and lower the incidence of crime among general and at-risk populations” (NGA, 2002, p. 1). Reported successes of “arts-based” educational programs among at-risk and incarcerated youth appear to be of particular interest to the NGA. According to the report, arts involvement provides an avenue “by which at-risk youth can acquire the various competencies necessary to become economically self-sufficient over the long term, rather than becoming a financial strain on their states and communities” (p. 1).

Americans for the Arts and the Advertising Council have mounted a multiyear *National Arts Education Public Awareness Campaign* (Americans for the Arts & the Advertising Council, 2002) that promises to “secure approximately $28 million annually in donated television, radio, print, and online advertising time and space” (p. 2) for sponsors, most of which are state and local arts agencies.\(^7\) The official campaign theme is: *The Less Art Kids Get, The More It Shows. Are Yours Getting Enough? Art. Ask for More.* The convoluted justification for the campaign hinges on the response to a question included in the *National Arts Education Public Awareness Campaign Survey* commissioned by Americans for the Arts (2001b). When parents were asked whether they were “satisfied with the amount of arts education that their children receive at both their local school and through community arts organizations” (p. 8), schools received a 68% approval rating and community arts organizations received a 70% approval rating. Thus, the campaign organizers’ “creative strategy” is to convince parents “that there is a problem with the small amount of art their children are getting. . . [and] to move parents and concerned citizens from being complacent with what they have to demanding even more art for

\(^5\)See Gee (2002, pp. 945–947) for a more detailed description of the content and character of the music education advocacy conducted by various music associations.

\(^6\)Art Teacher Barbie is lucky to have a job, as there are only 29 full-time elementary visual arts teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for the 2002–2003 school year. There are 476 elementary schools in the LAUSD. Each teacher serves 5 to 7 schools on a rotating basis. This means that 154 or 32% of LAUSD’s elementary schools have a few weeks access to a visual arts teacher. However, things are looking up for Barbie and her art teacher colleagues; there were no LAUSD elementary art teachers in the 1999–2000 school year. Music Teacher Barbie is more fortunate; she has 146 colleagues and is only required to serve in 5 schools each year. (Richard Burrows, Director of Arts Education, LAUSD, telephone interview, August 21, 2002).

\(^7\)Sponsors or “official partners” are allowed to join the campaign at one of three levels: “basic” with access to print ads, “intermediate” with access to print and radio ads, or “premiere” with access to print, radio, and television ads. The sponsoring organization is provided ready-made ads and public service announcements to which it can attach its logo or dub in its name in affiliation with Americans for the Arts and the Ad Council. It is the responsibility of the sponsor to seek out and secure local marketing spots. State arts education organizations can participate in the print and radio portions of the campaign but not in the televised portion.
children” (Americans for the Arts & the Advertising Council, 2002, p. 2). The “main idea” to be conveyed to parents is “that some art is not enough” and that “their children are missing out because [they are not getting enough] of it” (p. 2). The six-page Official Partnership Fact Sheet does not mention what type of art is important for kids to “get” or what desirable knowledge or experience is to be had by getting more art. “Reasons to Join as an Official Partner” focus exclusively on opportunities for press coverage and media exposure. Again, no explanation is offered of the value or purpose of getting more art for kids other than to “gain local media attention for your organization” (p. 3). Media attention will (according to the fact sheet) lead to “more support and funding for the arts and arts education in your community” (p. 3).

The Congressional Recognition for Excellence in Arts Education Act (Senate Bill 2789, United States Congress, 2000) stands as a recent example of legislated arts advocacy. As reported in *Adviso* by the American Association of Museums (2001, January), which assisted the Arts Education Partnership in developing the legislation, S.2789, it “creates a congressional board and a citizens advisory board to establish an award for schools that demonstrate excellence in arts education curriculum” (p. 2). The advisory board is to be appointed by the congressional board based on recommendations from the Arts Education Partnership steering committee and from the arts and cultural organizations with which schools partner (S.2789, sec. 206). The first-listed awards criterion is that “the community serving the school [e.g., artists, arts organizations, businesses, and cultural leaders] is actively involved in shaping and implementing the arts policies and programs of the school” (sec. 205). The Arts Education Partnership is cited in the bill as “an excellent example of one organization that has demonstrated its...capacity and credibility to administer arts education programs of national significance” (sec. 202). As of November 2002, S.2789 (now Public Law No: 106-533) awaited a budget appropriation of $1 million.

Two fundamental premises drive arts education advocacy as it is currently coined and circulated. The first premise is that all arts programming is educational. The second is that most everyone involved in arts programming is considered to be an educator in the arts. Arts participation, arts learning, arts experience, arts encounters, and arts involvement—all considered to be arts education—can be obtained at community recreation centers, museums, performing arts venues, summer camps, day care centers, fairgrounds, schools, churches, prisons, hospitals, and via the Internet. Arts education services are provided by artists and artisans, K-12 arts specialists, elementary classroom teachers, state and local arts agency staff, and visual and performing arts institution personnel. Professionally credited arts educators hold no special purview within the World Wide Web of arts education advocacy. K-12 arts education holds no superior claim to fiscal or political support. As one ponders the political presence and interests of all of the various players engaged in arts education advocacy, it is important to be mindful that the purpose of the types of advocacy cited previously is to influence policy, attain position, define programs, and redirect funding.

### 3 FOR 3: AN ARTS EDUCATION ADVOCACY CONTENT PRIMER

Reasons given to support arts education and those who provide it fall under three broad categories of societal interest and purpose. Arts education is justified and marketed as a means to improve (a) the individual as a person, (b) the individual as a contributing member of society, and (c) the human community. Three interlacing advocacy themes further define arts education’s contributions to these basic concerns of civil society. Arts education’s earliest and broadest realm of proclaimed influence was and continues to be on human spirituality and morality. Closely related to spiritual and moral development is emotional maturation, another area of personal improvement that arts education is said to assist. Arts education’s ability
to contribute to brain and skill development has become a second and ever more popular advocacy theme in our intensely competitive, market-centered society. The notion of arts education/experience qua arts therapy as a means to improve one’s emotional and physical well-being is a third overarching advocacy theme that is fast gaining momentum. Over the years, I have come to regard the trinity, Spirit, Mind, and Body, as the “YMCA Approach” to arts education.8

Building Better Moral Values

There are abundant variations on the commonly voiced claim that arts education contributes to the spiritual and moral development of the individual, an outcome that in turn makes for a more virtuous citizenry and principled society.9 A virtuous person is self-aware and self-disciplined, kind to others and respectful of their beliefs and ideas, and dutiful and cheerful in tasks undertaken. The following advocacy statements proffer that view of the value of arts education:

- Arts learning experiences help students to better know themselves and to better relate to those around them.
- Arts education fosters tolerance of and appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity.
- Arts education improves children’s attitudes toward school.
- In-school and “nonschool” arts programming improves self-esteem, curbs delinquent behavior, teaches discipline, and helps students to better perform academically.
- Arts education teaches children to communicate more effectively with adults and peers.

At-risk students from low-income families—a type and class of individuals most threatening to a moral and ordered society—are said to benefit most from arts participation. Another fervent and frequent claim is that K-12 education can be “transformed through the arts.” Arts programs are said to improve the school culture as a whole by breaking down barriers between subject areas, energizing teachers, motivating students, and improving the physical appearance of school buildings. Broad-scale transformation of our nation’s schools into more humane, open, and uplifting places of learning is perceived as being the moral duty of a good society.

Building Better Minds and Workplace Skills

The capacity of arts education to more fully develop the human mind and improve dispositions toward learning is another essential arts advocacy theme. Frequently made claims proffering that vision of the value of arts education include:

- Students with high levels of arts participation outperform “arts-poor” students on virtually every academic performance measure.

8“Spirit, Mind, Body” is the motto of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).
9See Jacques Barzun (1974) for an enlightened perspective on our age-old predilection to associate knowledge and support of the arts with heightened spiritual sensibilities and superior moral character. In From Dawn to Decadence (2000), Barzun recounts a popular argument for greater support of and participation in the arts in Renaissance Italy—“that art was conducive to order and harmony in private life and the state” (p. 156). Although renowned for its advances in the arts, the temperament of Renaissance Italy was anything but peaceful. “The melancholic and the moralists,” Barzun writes, “as well as the devout, read the times as wicked and bound for perdition. Endless wars, recurrent plague, the new curse syphilis, and the readiness to murder for gain or revenge—all these frequently depicted in the Dance of Death—justified gloom. In any period it is hard to believe in the maxim Emollit musica mores—music makes behavior gentler” (p. 161).
• Students who study or participate in the arts score higher on standardized tests.
• Music study improves math scores and spatial skills; reading skills are enhanced by arts learning, particularly through theater and the visual arts.
• Arts education stimulates creativity, builds communications skills, promotes teamwork, and engenders “love of learning” in all subject areas.
• Arts education teaches critical thinking and higher order thinking skills, providing a competitive edge for getting a job in the future.

The frequently heard claim that “arts education improves overall academic performance” capitalizes on the collective, hazy angst that our public schools are somehow failing us. The complex concept of academic performance is most commonly understood as the ability to cipher and read at grade level, attainments valued first and foremost as prerequisites for gainful employment. The popularized notion of workforce readiness calls forth a gamut of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a smooth and efficient transition from student to worker. Of course the value assigned to various workforce attributes depends largely on which workforce one is expected to enter. As one moves up the socioeconomic chain—from employee to employer, from job to career, from laborer to professional—emphases placed on basic math and reading skills and on working well within a group shift toward the need for independent and critical thinking, creative problem solving, and individualism. Arts education is said to contribute in a significant and effective manner to all of those learning and socialization goals.

Building Better Psyches and Physiques

“Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast.” “[M]oods and attitudes that come from the realm of the mind transform themselves into the physical realm through the emotions.” “[T]here is overwhelming evidence that hormones and neurotransmitters can influence the activities of the immune system, and that products of the immune system can influence the brain.” “Attending and enjoying the arts, specifically live arts experiences, is good for your health.” “Making music makes you smarter and healthier and happier and helps you live longer.” The first statement was written by William Congreve in 1697; it is the first line in his play, The Mourning Bride. The second and third statements were made, respectively, by neuroscientist Candace Pert and neurobiologist David Felten during Bill Moyer’s public television series Healing and the Mind (Moyer, 1993, pp. 189, 215). The fourth statement was the thesis of a Hospital Audiences, Inc. (HAI) monograph funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Spencer, 1996). The fifth statement currently headlines the one-page “research” section of the NAMM Web site (2002) and has been circulated widely since the 1999 production of “The Einstein Kit” (i.e., The Music Education Advocacy Kit) by the National Coalition for Music Education and VH-1 Save the Music Foundation.

Philosophers, healers, spiritual leaders, and artists across cultures and centuries have expressed their conviction in art’s power to refresh the spirit and calm the mind. The power of art to stimulate as well as soothe is also well extolled. As John Dryden (1687), Congreve’s friend and mentor, penned: “What Passion cannot Musick raise and quell!” (p. 2). Art, it is believed fervently, speaks to and cultivates our sensibilities; it helps us to “get in touch” with and express our “inner feelings.”

According to adherents of mind/body medicine, it is our feelings or emotions that bridge the mental and physical, the physical and mental. Repression of emotion is not only believed to be detrimental psychologically but also thought to contribute to or even cause physical disease. Release of emotion, especially within the safe confines of a support group, is believed to have a positive impact on the immune system. According to Pert, “A common ingredient in the healing practices of native cultures is catharsis, complete release of emotion” (Moyer, 1993,
p. 191). In this context and for these purposes, emotions are not something to be controlled or disciplined, but acknowledged, legitimized, and nurtured. This is precisely the role of arts education when used to provide “creative outlets” for self-expression. Arts education advocates posit further that being able to creatively and effectively express oneself leads to a sense of empowerment, a decidedly positive feeling that in turn leads to a more positive overall mental state. NAMM, whose member organizations sell musical instruments, asserts that making music makes you healthier and increases your longevity (2002). HAI director Michael Jon Spencer, whose organization sells programs and performances, insists that attending an arts event is beneficial to health and wellness. Effortlessly bridging art with physical health and good medicine he asserts: “The gateway to good health starts with a healthy immune system. Positive mental and emotional states are pivotal to maintaining and strengthening this immune system. The enjoyment of the arts usually starts with the experience of pleasure, relaxation, and relief from tension and stress” (1996, p. 1).

The rationale for arts education qua arts therapy snowballs along from a first principle about the nature of art into a seemingly self-evident truth about human mind/body functions into a reasonable enough statement about a basic purpose of and justification for arts education into a broadly generalized assumption about the impact of art on health that a lot of people want and need to believe. Thus:

- Art speaks directly to our emotions; it excites, soothes, and helps us to connect with our feelings.
- Acknowledgement and release of emotion are good for our mental and physical health.
- Art education is important because it provides a creative (and safe) outlet for self-expression (i.e., the release and communication of emotion and ideas) resulting in greater self-awareness and self-worth.
- Making and experiencing art has a positive effect on our physiological well-being. As a consequence we feel better about ourselves and more empathetic toward others, dispositions which make us happier and help us to live not only fuller but also longer lives.

The logic of the sequence is far from flawless, but the conclusions are highly appealing to a broad audience; and appeal is the most important attribute of any rationale in the world of marketing, public relations, and advocacy. No advocacy group, to my knowledge, is campaigning (yet) under the banner, “Arts education is good for your immune system!” However, the close


Stories of Art’s curative powers fill our history books, from the Greek royal whose cracked hip was cured by a fresco to the noted American President whose lower-back pain disappeared while viewing Velázquez’s beautiful and inspiring “Water Seller of Seville.” While we all know that Art can deliver us from illness, its powers have always seemed random and hidden in mystery. Too often we want to benefit from Art, but we simply do not know where to begin. . . . Customized for the great museums of the world, each Healing Power of Art™ book features a detailed, annotated floor plan, indicating the best periods, artists and paintings for a wide spectrum of afflictions. The accompanying cassette tapes guide you through the museum, making your visit (and recuperation!) speedier.

Exposure to Seurat banishes pimples, Pollack assists with blood disorders, Rubens is good for the liver, and Macedonian handicrafts stop nosebleeds. (Readers who, at this point, are experiencing nausea may want to proceed to the Asian wing of Metropolitan Museum of Art for a dose of Korin.)

The ironic sting of Komar and Melamid’s art caper is its “gotcha” quality. Chances are that many of the most art worldly and wary of *The New York Times* subscribers, paused, if only for a moment, thinking: Is this for real? Undoubtedly, tens of thousands of less suspicious souls glanced at the tongue-in-cheek advertisement with bland acceptance.
association of health and human service rationales for support of arts programming coupled with arts education’s touted success as a self-esteem builder and therapeutic vent for self-expression offers grand incentive for protuberance of advocacy theme number 3.

PERSONAL TRUTHS AND PULP FICTION

Arts education is good for the spirit, the mind, and the body. Arts education is good for the individual, the citizenry, and the world. Variations and spin-offs of these grand themes and public purposes are the stuff of arts education advocacy efforts big and small. Whether one is a true believer in the religion of art with only the betterment of humankind in mind or an opportunist seeking to align oneself with the current doctrine of political and fiscal survival, or somewhere in between, a combination of these rewards is likely to be proffered to potential arts education proselytes (particularly proselytes with purses).

Certainly there are basic truths about the nature of art and needs of human beings and societies embedded in some of the arts education advocacy slogans. For example, the frequently heard statement that arts learning experiences help students to better know themselves and better relate to those around them speaks directly to our fundamental psychological need to connect with others and feel part of a greater whole. Attainment of a deeper knowledge of oneself and greater empathy for one’s fellow classmates and citizens would seem to be important and sensible rationales for support of arts education, if in truth those are the effects of arts experience and learning. Unfortunately, proof of this assumption is not readily evident in the day-to-day business of the artworld. Robert Hughes (1993) writes, “We know, in our heart of hearts, that the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art is a pious fiction. . . . There is just no generalizing about the moral effects of art, because it just doesn’t seem to have any. If it did, people who are constantly exposed to it, including all curators and critics, would be saints, and we are not” (p. 178).

Further afield from the centuries-old spiritual and moral development homilies about the value of arts study and exposure to the individual and society stand more recent claims of heightened academic performance, improved test scores, and healthier minds and bodies. It is by now common knowledge that most of the assertions about the effects of arts study/experience/exposure on math, reading, and test taking are much more assumption than fact.11 A second fact is that nobody much seems to care. The marketing potential in equating correlation with causation is just too tempting; the short-term rewards are too tasty.

When the World Trade Towers fell, America’s hyped-up recovery movement ricocheted off the rubble. Suddenly the entire country was in need of solace and therapy. Art the Healer, hustled along by arts agency handlers, rose up to meet those needs. Arts and Living sections of newspapers were filled with stories of art events and projects that were uniting the nation and healing individuals and communities. Americans for the Arts responded immediately creating an Arts Healing America section on its Web site, where hundreds of stories about the healing power of art were posted. A special preconference, Art Heals, was planned for Americans for the Arts’ annual arts advocacy convention. As Americans for the Arts president

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11There has been ongoing debate over the extent to which arts study affects achievement in core academic subjects such as math, reading, and science since the Sputnik-inspired 1950s push to improve K-12 math and science education. The findings of the Reviewing Education and the Arts Project (REAP), published first in a special issue of the Journal of Aesthetic Education, greatly intensified the debate (Winner & Hetland, 2000). Also see Winner and Hetland (2001) and Arts Education Policy Review (2001).
and CEO Robert Lynch (2001, p. 1) put it, art was no longer for art’s sake; it was now “Art for the Nation’s Sake.” An elite group of university visual arts educators dedicated their annual meeting to discussion of “post-cataclysmic art education” and to the development of policy statements that addressed “September 11th and the need for more practical, immediate, and humane work related to the global crisis and art education’s role in promoting healing and survival through policy designed to improve global social ecology for peace [sic]” (Council on Policy Studies in Art Education, 2002).

Exhibiting remarkable courage amidst this feverish, nationwide art therapy epidemic, Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight asked the question: “What Exactly Can Art Heal?” (November, 2001). The idea that art is “useful for the treatment of social, spiritual or emotional disorders,” Knight wrote, is “a secular version of venerating the healing power of religious paintings and statues” (p. 1). While Grunewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece is “one heck of a painting,” it did not cure those afflicted with gangrene as was its purpose. Knight cites the Arts Recovery Program, launched by the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department in the wake of the 1992 riots, as a latter-day version of this same idea. “Nearly a half-million dollars in scarce civic arts money was spent—and mostly wasted—on funding for nearly 150 projects that ostensibly would help to heal the battered city. That few today can quite remember what those projects were is just one measure of the program’s inadequacy” (p. 2). According to Knight, public arts therapy is often more beneficial for the therapist than the patient:

[It’s instructive that politicians and the political class are the ones who so often champion this old-timey conception of art’s purpose and value. Extolling “the healing power of art” in the face of massive social trauma handily fudges the failure of politics, and the failure of politics is at the root of things like the ’92 riots and the current terrorist nightmare. . . . There’s also an economic dimension to the [arts] institutional urge. Back in 1992, for example, the Arts Recovery Program was the leading edge of a larger effort on the part of the Cultural Affairs Department to transform art into a social service. With the arts under ferocious attack from conservative anti-government forces in the culture war, and with a simultaneous recession in the California economy creating fierce competition for public and philanthropic money, [arts institution] survival was at stake. . . . An alignment of the arts with social welfare projects would make the arts appear to be an indispensable humanitarian service. (p. 2)

Art the Psychotherapist specializes in self-esteem building, and of course Arts Education hangs up a shingle right next door. It is a profitable business. “The self is now the sacred cow of American culture,” wrote Hughes (1993), “self-esteem is sacrosanct, and so we labor to turn arts education into a system in which no-one can fail” (p. 7). Mental health professionals (as well as cantankerous cultural critics) are (finally) questioning such ingrained assumptions. In a recent New York Times Magazine article psychologist Lauren Slater (2002) discussed America’s “quasi-religion” of self-esteem. She summed up the shared central conclusions of three “withering” studies released in 2001: “[P]eople with high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than people with low self-esteem and feeling bad about yourself is not the cause of our country’s biggest, most expensive social problems” (p. 46). “The psychotherapy industry. . . . would take a huge hit were self-esteem to be re-examined,” she added.

After all, psychology and psychiatry are predicated upon the notion of the self, and its enhancement is the primary purpose of treatment. . . . There is a profound tension here between psychotherapy as a business that needs to retain its customers and psychotherapy as a practice that has the health of its patients at heart. . . . If you look at psychotherapy in other cultures, you get a glimpse into the obsessions of our own. You also see what a marketing fiasco we would have on our hands were
we to dial down our self-esteem beliefs. In Japan, there is a popular form of psychotherapeutic treatment that does not focus on the self, and its worth [but instead] holds as its central premise that neurotic suffering comes, quite literally, from extreme self-awareness. (p. 47)

Arts education as self-esteem therapy is riddled with the same tensions and failings. And in our heart of hearts, we know it. Knight (2001) concluded, “Art can be put to all kinds of uses but intrinsically it’s amoral. The unctuous presumption of art’s essential ‘goodness’ is a political fiction. Just about the last thing we need at a time of national emergency is yet one more political fiction” (p. 2). We also do not need any more educational fiction.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ARTS EDUCATION ADVOCACY FOR K-12 VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

So what does this kaleidoscope of more and less credible claims mean for K-12 visual arts education? Beyond engendering confusion in some and cynicism in others, it does not mean much of anything for the fundamentals of teaching and learning. All the marketing slogans in the world cannot change our basic relationship with art. Art is a part of our lives because it brings us pleasure, not simply casual pleasure but the pleasure of engagement. Art makes us feel; it makes us feel alive sensuously, emotionally, and intellectually. Such pleasures are for the most part intensely personal, especially with regards to visual and literary art forms. The made-for-public-consumption rewards of arts education that headline arts advocacy campaigns are quite beside the point of why art teachers teach and why students take their courses. Nevertheless, the energy spent jumping from one bandwagon to another in the arts education advocacy parade is an unfortunate waste of resources; the dust clouds of confusion kicked up by this unceasing procession take their toll on our intellectual environment. It would be foolish to disregard the wasting effects of cynicism and disorientation on spirit and intellect.

Misspent energies and professional folly are as evident within the art education professeorate as they are within the arts bureaucracy. That is where lies the field’s greatest danger for disorientation and dissolution. Eagerly we wrench art education inside out to make it about healing and survival. We squander our energies making up imaginary policies for art education “to improve global social ecology for peace.” If the field’s best and brightest indulge in such histrionics how can we expect arts lobbyists and marketeers to show greater restraint and good sense?

So much for the anguish and hyperbole about why arts education should be supported. What is the significance of the less overt but insistent message that arts programming per se is educational and that as a consequence most everyone involved in arts programming is an arts educator? It probably means that funding for school arts programs will continue to erode as legislators, community leaders, and parents become increasingly uncertain of the value and need of school-based arts instruction. Ultimately it may mean that “arts education” will cease to stand for much of anything.

Almost 2 decades ago an editorial in Design for Arts In Education (1985a) stated:

[S]o much talk about the arts now seems focused on funding and the politics of funding, so much activity about art now seems based on what every possible group is doing to support it that the central importance of the individual activities of making art, teaching it, and learning about it seems increasingly lost in an orgy of advocacy and self-congratulations. (p. 2)

Since the late 1960s, the arts education community has watched a proliferating arts bureaucracy make increasingly aggressive claims on and on behalf of arts education. Comprised of
public arts agencies and associations, arts service organizations, and arts lobbyist groups, this coterie portrays itself as the primary force behind arts education improvement and reform. This stance is evident in *Coming Up Taller* (President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities & the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, 1996), where the perception is promoted that genuine arts learning is had through “frequent, direct contact with the artists and scholars themselves” (p. 35). The presence of “adults who are experts”, in contrast to art teachers, is touted as a primary differentiating characteristic between out-of-school and in-school arts programs. Featured prominently in *Coming Up Taller*, Robert Capanna, executive director of the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia, offers an all too ready example: “Artists process their environment differently. When you put an artist in a teaching environment, they stay an artist. When you put a teacher in that environment and give them some art skills, they are a teacher with some art skills [sic]. And the kids know the difference” (p. 35). This is but one of many such examples found throughout decades of NEA publications and echoed by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Americans for the Arts, the Arts Education Partnership, and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Such claims are made at the expense of tens of thousands of K-12 arts educators whose daily efforts in the classroom (and personal artistic qualifications) are often ignored completely or contrasted unfavorably with the youth-oriented outreach programming of arts organizations and services of visiting artists.

The National Art Education Association (NAEA) has spent considerable resources trying to lessen the impact of these claims and attacks on arts education and arts educators. In 1997, the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations (of which the NAEA is a member) with assistance from the National Association of Music Merchants organized a resistance movement. The impetus for this defiance was a barrage of intentionally misleading assertions about arts education that were being circulated by the NEA and its lobbyists in preparation for the 1997 Congressional reauthorization and budget hearings. Desperately trying to change the unhappy direction of the NEA’s political fortunes, federal arts lobbyists sought to tie the wounded agency closer to arts education by way of equating the merits of high-quality K-12 arts education programming with NEA-sponsored arts exposure activities. Their goal was to capture for the Endowment any political goodwill that arts education might garner and to portray the NEA’s marginal involvement with arts education as being the driving force behind any positive outcomes (real or imagined) associated with K-12 arts instruction. The vehicle for this plan to generate support for the NEA was Senate Bill 1020. Its passage would have awarded the NEA and its constituent organizations significant power over arts education funding, policymaking, and programming primarily through adoption of a federally legislated definition of arts education that made no distinction between the most inconsequential of arts-exposure activities and sequential, comprehensive school-based arts instruction. Ultimately the Consortium won the protracted and energy-consuming battle over S.1020. A subsequent telephone and fax campaign convinced the Interiors Appropriations Committee not to use the term *arts education* in conjunction with NEA appropriation language and conditions.13

In 1998, the NAEA broadened its efforts to alert its membership and key school administrators to the dangers inherent in the federal arts bureaucracy’s claims on arts education and to curtail the escalating ballyhoo about the positive effects of arts study/experience on math,

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12For a history of the denigration of K-12 arts teachers by the arts bureaucracy see Gee (1999b).
13See Gee (1999a, pp. 10–15) for an account of the battle over S.1020 between the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations and its supporters and the NEA and its supporters.
reading, and SAT scores. E-mail and fax missives called attention to the intent of federal arts groups to influence important areas within K-12 arts education such as teacher preparation and certification and the focus and funding of instructional programs. This cadre of federal arts groups sought one goal over all others—that is, more control and cash for itself and its supporting constituency of artists and arts organizations. Gary Larson (1997), author of the NEA publication American Canvas, summed it up matter of factly in identifying K-12 arts education as a “revenue stream” and fiscal and political “escape route” for a persecuted nonprofit arts community. Involvement with arts education would provide “immediate payoffs, in the form of work for artists and arts organizations.” Larson also proposed generating additional revenue for arts organizations through increased involvement in youth programs and crime prevention (p. 49).

More recently, the NAEA has shifted from a defensive to an offensive advocacy strategy. Recognizing the seriousness of the arts bureaucracy’s challenge in the arts education policy arena, the NAEA is actively seeking to educate its members about the importance of their attentiveness to and engagement in policy formulation and implementation. At the same time, the NAEA works to maintain the field’s focus on the areas and issues that it sees as being most critical to the continuing progress of visual arts teaching and learning. Through its “Where’s the Art?” campaign, it hammers home the need to focus on the “nation’s arts education policy and program deficiencies” (NAEA, 15 August 2002, p. 1). This message is sent to every member of Congress and to every governor; and to tens of thousands of local and state school officials, state legislators, school principals, and Parent–Teacher Association leaders across the country. A “Where’s the Art?” poster features an “arts education policy fact sheet” and provides directives as to ways for art teachers, parents, legislators, state officials, and arts councils to correct policies adversely affecting K-12 arts education. The fact sheet provides information on the poor standing of the arts in terms of high school graduation and university admissions requirements, its exclusion from a large majority of college and university admissions’ grade point average computations, and its omission from most state learning assessment and teacher licensure programs. Instructions for art education activism make the point repeatedly that the focus must be kept on policies and strategies that lead to student learning in art—not math or reading or science. Teacher preparation; learning standards; curriculum design and development; time within the school day; graduation requirements; teaching materials, equipment, and facilities; professional development; student assessment; and teacher evaluation are the subjects of the “Where’s the Art?” campaign and of its charge to “Support Improving Art Education Policies.” Steady streams of leaflets, posters, postcards, e-mails, and faxes attempt to keep these pivotal

14 A series of self-mailers and faxes (NAEA, 1998a) made the point:

In arts education many lay-artists, amateurs, and philanthropists want to decide who should teach art, what curriculum content should be taught. . . . Too often, their arts education isn’t necessarily your arts education. Chances are it will turn out to be a visiting artist, a performance, a visit to a gallery or exhibit, or perhaps just pure entertainment. . . . In fact, the mission of some arts groups and organizations is simple exposure to the arts.

Another leaflet (NAEA, 1998b) read:

Although millions enjoy riding in airplanes without understanding airfoil dynamics no one would seriously suggest that ‘plane rides’ should be substituted for school-based study of math and physics. Unfortunately, such substitutions are explicitly and implicitly made all the time with respect to arts activities that provide entertainment, exposure, and enrichment, but not education. . . . Advocacy is important, but it is not the reason for or the content of arts education. Advocacy works to convince and encourage belief. Education works to teach and encourages individual learning and competence.

arts education policy issues in the sightline of local and state education and legislative decision makers nationwide.

NAEA leadership is also angling to wedge in a chair at the federal arts education policy table with a determination heretofore unseen. Meeting with Susan Sclafini, chief counselor to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, NAEA President MacArthur Goodwin tried to ensure that the NAEA’s voice would be heard in future policy discussions about “improving student learning in general and visual arts education in particular” (NAEA, August 14, 2002). If past is prescient, the sharp elbows of the federal arts players will keep the NAEA pressed into the back of its seat even if it does manage somehow to push a chair up to the club table.

A large percentage of the professional art education field’s advocacy efforts are conceived and conducted as a countercheck to the advocacy messages and aims of the federal arts bureaucracy. As advocacy reports such as Critical Links and Gaining the Arts Advantage make all too clear, federal arts groups are intent on directing arts education policymaking, research, and funding toward support of the types of programs and ends that best serve the needs and interests of arts agencies and organizations. These are not the same types of programs and ends that keep art educators, school officials, and political leaders focused on what it takes to best encourage student learning in art.

THE COST OF NOT MAKING DISTINCTIONS

Many arts and arts education advocates will disagree vehemently with my characterization of the arts education-related activities of entities such as the NEA, Americans for the Arts, the Arts Education Partnership, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Many will argue that arts education is not being diffused but infused into and throughout communities. They will say that the advocacy campaigns of the organizations mentioned previously support K-12 arts education by encouraging the involvement of the community (arts organization administration and staff, artists, parents, local arts patrons, and business and civic leaders) in school policymaking and instructional programs. They will counter that although K-12 arts teachers make important contributions to the education of children, so do local artists and arts organizations; and that although K-12 arts programming is important and desirable, so are after-school, weekend, and summer arts learning opportunities. After all, school is in session only 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, 9 months out of the year. Life and art are always in session (both with a distinct preference for non-school hours and environs).

Perhaps it is possible to assent to four basic convictions. First, a strong public school system is fundamental to a democratic society. Second, knowledge of an art form contributes greatly to the cultivation and pleasures of life. Third, a substantive arts education curriculum contributes significantly to the quality of the school curriculum as a whole. Moreover, as long as it is generally mandated that children attend school up to 16 years of age, American’s public schools provide the most effective and democratic means by which to ensure that the greatest number of students have the opportunity to attain in-depth knowledge of an art form.

I do not doubt that most arts education advocates honor convictions about both the importance of a strong public education system in a democratic society and the role the arts can and ought to play in the education and life of the individual. There is unanimity among arts and arts education advocates of all persuasions on these points. It is the fourth conviction or, perhaps more accurately, the intensity of commitment and focus it demands, that brings disillusion and divisiveness. The belief that the best chance to cultivate a citizenry broadly educated in the arts resides within the school curriculum and the school day requires that the improvement
of school-based arts instruction be the clear and primary focus of arts education funding and research. This fourth conviction is disillusioning because the institutionalization of regularly offered, sequentially instructed arts programming in our nation’s schools has proven to be unattainable after almost a century of effort by arts educators, artists, and concerned parents. It is divisive because it demands an unadulterated focus on K-12 arts education, a perspective that in practice narrows significantly the meaning of the term arts education to school-based programming.

In the World Wide Web of arts advocacy, a truly incredible assortment of spirit–mind–body benefits spill forth from a cornucopia of “working partnerships” among arts agencies and institutions, arts and social service organizations, corporations, local businesses, school districts, and individual schools. This grand vision stakes out the moral high ground with its inclusiveness while standing tall as a golden example of the American entrepreneurial spirit and can-do attitude. In contrast, skepticism about the sense and truth of the promised rewards or the credibility of the promise makers seems small-minded, mean spirited, and shortsighted. Yet many questions concerning the content and consequences of full-throttle arts and arts education advocacy ought to be posed, just as questions should be raised about the specific costs, benefits, and possible unintended consequences of all grand-scale policymaking. Two questions seem central:

- Wherein lies the impetus for state and local governments to allocate the budget and expend the effort that is required to improve the quality of school arts instruction and to make the study of an art form part of the regular K-12 curricula if arts education is portrayed as being available in venues throughout the community and in after-school, weekend, and summer programs; and if artists and arts organization staff are portrayed as being ready and willing to provide arts experiences, arts exposure, arts involvement, arts learning, and arts education?
- If arts education is or can be made available so well and readily throughout the community, then why should people of social and political influence—people whose own children already have various opportunities for arts study and experience—concern themselves over the establishment, maintenance, and steady improvement of regularly offered elementary, middle, and high school arts programs?

A realistic assessment of the numerous and competing program and funding demands on state and local governments and of the unceasing requests for time and money from civic leaders provides the answers to these questions. The harsh truth is that arts education when compared to other societal needs and political interests is not and will not ever be an educational or social welfare priority for state or local governments or for most people of influence. There are simply too many more pressing claims on public and private resources. Arts education advocates promise a fantastic and unattainable assortment of returns in exchange for a fantastic and unavailable span of investment. Consequently, civic leaders and politicians shrink further away as the stated needs of the arts education enterprise become increasingly consuming and complex and as workable solutions appear to stretch further over the horizon. Diffusion of focus and scattering of energies make it less likely that arts programming of educational substance will be broadly institutionalized. By refusing to make distinctions among the programming responsibilities, parameters, and capabilities of schools and those of arts organizations, the greater decline the field will suffer and the more ineffectual and invisible it will become.

Granted, our unrelenting push to be or appear to be all things to all people is only one factor in the breaking apart and further diminishment of K-12 art education. Our university art education community has failed to establish and sustain a critical mass of high-quality
preservice and in-service teacher education programs. One frequently hears academicians who are paid to teach within departments of art education proclaim that art education is no longer relevant to student learning. They argue that the study of “visual culture” or “visual culture art education” should supplant the now stale (and worse) hierarchical concept of art education. Fervent disagreement about why, what, and how to teach and how to define art education as a professional field—or perhaps even more fundamentally if an attempt at definition should be made—mirrors the artworld infighting among cutting-edge, traditionalists, modernists, and postmodernists. Mimicking the trends and adopting the values of the artworld do make for a perplexing if not (oxy)moronic coupling of the word art with the word education.

The promotion of visual culture studies over the study of something called “art” has emerged from an acknowledgment of the inevitable technological saturation of our society with infinite varieties of popular culture and electronic and print images. Ironically, it is that same profuse availability of coded visual stimuli and multimedia sensory experience that makes its inclusion as a school subject seem unnecessarily redundant. The overt sociopolitical agendas of many of its proponents call to question the legitimacy and sustainability of visual cultural studies within the K-12 curriculum. Art education also becomes increasingly difficult to justify as part of formal schooling as it becomes more associated with popular culture and visual culture studies. Of course at this point the school classroom would seem to offer the least conducive environment for learning to occur of this nature and scope.

Spiritless Redemption

Arts education, as characterized by arts activists, promises not only the salvation of individuals but also the path to redemption for art itself. Thirty years ago, Jacques Barzun (1974) identified in characteristic manner the growing momentum of the idea of art as redeemer. “The final paradox is that after 150 years of despising society and giving signs of despising itself, art now more than ever wants to be a social force, revolutionary, therapeutic, or simply popular. Its handicaps for this ambition are as great as those that made it fail as a religion” (p. 96). He argued that “to be valid, the idea of redemption by art would have to be popular and democratic. Secular salvation, like religious, must be open to all who seek it” (p. 89). That is, widespread secular salvation via art is not possible because of (a) the demanding and difficult (and hence exclusionary) nature of some art, particularly high art, in terms of technical mastery and deep understanding; and (b) the diversity and plurality of art which precludes the development of a unifying theology—the foundation of any religion.

The primary purpose of including art in the public school curriculum has always been to make whatever skills and benefits art is believed to provide more accessible to more people. One of the main goals of most school arts programming has been to enable students to take their first steps toward the communion table of high art. The purpose has not been the democratization of art but rather the democratization of the opportunity to get what art offers. As long as arts educators kept their gaze on the face of high art, the enterprise of arts education was able to offer the unifying theology that art could not. Arts education was able to be selective, culling from art only what it deemed most worthy of attention (or adoration), study, interpretation, and imitation. Of course the catch-22 for arts education has been the inherently elite nature of art that is brilliantly conceived and masterfully executed. Thus, arts education that has kept the study of demanding works of art at its center and rigorous expectations for teacher and student performance as its standard becomes almost as exclusionary as the art around which teaching and learning is organized. The salvation offered—that is, deliverance from ignorance about that specific art form in particular and from a mundane world view more abstractly—is neither widely attractive nor easily attained.
Will a less defined, more inclusive arts education be able to provide the widespread secular salvation that has eluded its more upright sister? It is difficult to conceive of a more appealing and accessible theology than one that proffers deliverance of spirit, mind, and body through the arts. Interconnectivity and inclusiveness provide the anti-doctrine doctrine through which grace is given and salvation attained; content parameters and performance standards are worldly limitations to be transcended. All are invited to take communion and all will be uplifted, not only to a higher plane of art awareness but also to a higher reading, writing, and math consciousness (resulting in higher SAT score percentiles); enlightened and enlarged multicultural understandings; and elevated interpersonal skills, problem solving abilities, graduation rates, and self-esteem. Barzun’s intellectual notions about what art can and cannot deliver because of its inherently undemocratic, pluralist nature are of no consequence when one believes in the benign omnipotence and omnipresence of arts education. Prodigal Art, chastened and domesticated, is brought safely into the fold (its sheep’s clothing surgically fastened). Equally important, perhaps more so, is the political shelter (however unstable) provided arts agencies and organizations that have proven their allegiance to the common cause and convinced detractors of their indispensability in the delivery of a more popularly grounded, self-helping arts education. This is the broad, bland path to secular, soulless salvation.

TRYING TO HAVE AN EXPRESSION OF LOOKING TO THE FUTURE WITH HOPE

It will require an enormous amount of resolve by individual visual arts educators to keep the field intact and, to succeed, they will have to make unpopular distinctions between programs of study that have more or less or no real worth to art learning and, therefore, for art teaching. They will need to distinguish between what art education is marketed as being able to accomplish and what it actually can accomplish. And they will need to make those distinctions of merit and truth in the public arena. This does not mean the dismissal of ideas or suppression of debate; those are the tactics of overzealous advocates, not of educators. It means working conscientiously to achieve what Monroe Beardsley described “that most difficult intellectual stance which keeps us open to everything that may have worth or seeds of worth, yet without relinquishing all distinctions that give order to our thought” (1982, p. 91). The path and purposes of the contemporary artworld and of arts advocates need not be the path and purposes of art educators. The path and purposes of art and those of art education are not one and the same.

Hughes wrote, “Democracy’s task in the field of art is to make the world safe for elitism. Not an elitism based on race or money or social position, but on skill and imagination. The embodiment of high ability and intense vision is the only thing that makes art popular” (1993, p. 202). Quality arts education does not seek to democratize art. It seeks to democratize the opportunity to experience the personal pleasures and special understandings gained only through knowledge of art by teaching us about art. Such teaching may not produce better, more tolerant, mentally and physically in-tune people who do well on standardized tests; but if the education is sound, people will end up knowing more about art. In all truth, that is the most that can be promised and delivered. Public life is more about promising than delivering, but art education ought not to be.

Present conditions present serious strategic choices to the art education field. If care is not taken, the field will talk itself out of a place in many schools either by promoting theories that deny the value of art on its own terms or by embracing the ever-changing advocacy agenda that promotes the kind of art in schools that requires no special professional competence in art itself and, at base, is not about student art learning at all. It will be interesting to see if the field can overcome various social and political pressures and massive psychological manipulations and
maintain its integrity both philosophically and operationally. If it cannot, one of the greatest opportunities for mass art education in the history of the world will have been philosophized and propagandized away.

“Reminds me of Sputnik,” an art education elder scribbled across an arts advocacy publication. There is solace and (yes!) hope to be found in her cynical observation because art education does not look anymore like science education today than it did half a century ago. Art education is still with us, and most of it is still about art. Good art teachers still strive to share with their students that which they love most about art—the masterful articulation of form, the far-reaching view, the heart-quickening vista.

I find that at the close of this chapter I have indeed sketched “just an ear.” There is much more body and much more soul to be rendered if you have the will; rendered well if you have the expertise; rendered beautifully if you have the sensibility.

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