

ARTISTS IN SCHOOL

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London, French Institute and The Courtauld Gallery, June 2011

This lecture will report on research concerning artists in schools, and I will do it as much in a philosophical way, through a philosophical outlook. I am a philosopher, a philosopher of education, *in* education, and I am sure education to day needs philisophy more and more.

So I will begin by filling in on the background of this new approach to education. And then I will continue trying to highlight the real role of artists in schools through some findings from enquieries concerning artists in schools. I am sure your questions to finish will help me in engaging this discuss on more depth.

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Why is it so important to begin with the background ? As you know, art and artists were not always welcome in school and education, on the contrary. From Plato to Emile Durkheim, for instance, and even after, artists were always regarded not only with suspicion, they were regarded as dangerous for education. Remember Plato's sentences : If you want to built a strong and good and just society, one of the first decision you have to make is to refuse art and artists as educators. And Plato's condemnation has gone across through centuries until our time.

But times presently are changing. I must underline that this change is not a simple and normal improvement but truly a change in depth. Why ? Because what is now ongoing changing is the value and the sense of art according to the ends of education, and may be most generally its value and sense according to our present culture.

Let's see the place for art education in educational policy through the world. In many places today, in many schools from USA to Europe and farther, artists are more and more often required for education. And currently a lot of educationalists, a lot of teachers or of researchers in education strongly think that art and artists are able to change school and education. We must say more : they are convicted that only art and artists could change

school and education as they must be necessary changed. That is to say, I think you will agree to my purpose, that there is a close connexion between the new approach of education through arts, and the crisis of education, between educational expectations with respect to art and artists in school and this crisis Hannah Arendt had identified as one of the main effects of the crisis of modernity into education. I would insist by drawing your attention to this purpose : if there is through the world such a shared conviction concerning the role of artists in schools, if educational policies are getting more and more interested with the place and the role of art and aesthetic education, it is because everyone expects from art and artists a kind of solution to the crisis that affects and never stops to affect our present education. We have no time enough to day to try to understand and explain why. But it will be obvious for everyone that there must exist a strong connection between the values that art and artistic or aesthetic ways of thinking and doing promote, and the values and ways of thinking and doing witch typified our present culture, the post-modern culture as some sociologists and philosophers call it.

So, we are expecting more and more from artists as educators. But what are they really doing for education ? What do they bring for child development and education that is so important ? Why and how do they contribute to school learning ? If you listen to teachers who have experience and conviction in art and aesthetic education, and even if you take a look at educational research in this field, you will sometimes wonder if art education is not a kind of miracle, a kind of wonder drug for education ! Art and artists are required in order to improve imagination and creativity, of course, but also in order to improve cognitive development, to develop self-governing, open-mindedness and self-confidence, to help at-risk children and disable people, to interest in schooling pupils witch are not, to be a ground for literacy and numeracy, to stop the increasing of violence into schools of our towns, to contribute to the peace in the world, and so on. We must confess : to much is to much. As we speak in France, "la mariée est trop belle", the bride is sure too pretty ! Surely all those affects are not inventions. Everyone could remember for example a child – may be himself – who became more self-confidence through theatre practise. But such a true is always a particular true, an individual true, not a general true, and perhaps it may remains like this. So, if we pretend to evaluate the impact of Arts education, and specially the roles of artists in schools and their specific contributions to education, we have first to focus our observations and our investigations onto what arts and artists and only arts and artists may bring into education. As Nelson Goodman liked to repeat, art education needs

no proofs but intrinsic proofs.

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Therefore my second part will concern what artists as artists specifically offer to children when they are in school : I mean *aesthetic experience*. What happens when children are leaving a true aesthetic experience with an artist ? That is what you have first to observe, describe and think when you intend to examine the role of artists in education and to assess their educational effectiveness. Of course, it doesn't mean there is no link at all between art education and self-confidence or cognitive development; it means only that if such link does exist, you have to look at aesthetic experience to try to understand why and how.

I will now develop and illustrate this basic idea. What is aesthetic experience? The anecdote of a Chinese emperor as reported by Régis Debray in *Vie et mort de l'image* (Life and Death of Image) is a case in point. It is said that one day a Chinese emperor asked the chief painter of his court to erase the cascade he painted on the wall of the palace because the noise of water kept him awake. A girl who had a passion for Chinese art and culture told me a similar experience once back from China. While she was staying and studying in Taipei, she had the great opportunity to meet an old painting master who accepted guiding her in her regular visits to the museum. It was each time a wonderful lesson of painting. The master once stopped in front of a roll and shut up. It was up to her then to talk of the work of art. She did her best to explain how she had become familiar with the work of art, the experience she gained, what she saw and felt but to the growing dissatisfaction of her master who was losing patience and stamping his feet. He then pointed to a lyre in the landscape and asked her: "you speak well of what you are seeing but don't you hear anything?"

It reminds me of what Maria Montessori, the great Italian pedagogue and founder of the *Casa dei Bambini*, was practicing in her classroom: the *lesson of silence*. It consisted first in listening to the loudest close sounds, then paying attention to the more distant and forgotten ones, the murmur of the class next door, trees rustling in the playground, the train rushing past – living nature in the surrounding forest – that is simply learning to listen and feel and taking children to the clearing, listening, touching, looking, smelling trees, barks, and foliage, birds twittering, and insects buzzing. In a word, what is the point of going to the museum if the painting is not expected and captured as the crystallization of an experience of the world relevant to mine? What is the point of dance and choreography if the motion of dancers on the stage does not somehow extend the movement of my own

body in ordinary experience? Whatever the work of art, there is a binding relation to the world that should be educated in the first place. This education combines culture and sensitivity; it makes aesthetic experience the foundation of education for the arts and even one of the bases of education.

John Dewey too pushed for the necessary and salutary desacralization of aesthetic experience when he invited to find it first in “crude experience”. He illustrated his advice with examples ostensibly borrowed from “the sights that hold the crowd – the fire-engine rushing by, the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts”. I remember the answer of a farmer who was interviewed for a TV show on art and culture: “When I am in my fields ploughing, my attention is sometimes drawn by a stone and stops me because of its singular shape. Was it made by nature or by man’s hand? It looks like a heart. I wonder...It’s magnificent, it’s moving...” The moment before, there was only a stone and now, after a change in behaviour, there is a sort of aesthetic meditation and emotion – the stone in the way recalls a story common to the whole humanity, an experience of the world shared since the dawn of time. The account of this “common man” refers in its own way to John Dewey’s analyses and assumptions as part of his pragmatist aesthetics: not only aesthetic experience is not limited to the experience of art works, not only art works have no monopoly on aesthetic experience but it takes root in ordinary experience. According to Dewey, “even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience” Dewey J., 1934, p. 9).

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There is however something common to the great variety of aesthetic experience – a specific form of attention and more particularly, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer wrote, “an intentional structure that is the same in all situations” (2000, p.14). In other words, aesthetic behaviour should be considered a core anthropological data and aesthetic attention a “core component of human mental profile” (p. 15). Aesthetic experience combines concentration and pleasure, attention and pleasure. As a result, aesthetic experience, as any authentic experience, is similar to the child’s playful experience. The similarity between aesthetic and playful behaviour is also obvious when many artists mention their training path. One might object that these experiences only concern future great artists. But the part of childhood is no less obvious in John Dewey’s most ordinary examples above. They are all part of these sights that have a great impact on childhood and are a source of delight.

I draw two conclusions that I think are of considerable importance: 1) it is in the child’s aesthetic experience that one can best appreciate what aesthetic experience is. 2) Education for the arts as core education and means of change in education should be based on aesthetic experience and human aptitude to aesthetic behaviour inherent in each child. Nurturing the time of aesthetic experience in childhood first to the benefit of childhood and then of our adult aesthetic life may be the real ambition of the educational mission in this field. Aesthetic education firstly presupposes the recognition of aesthetic behaviour in its anthropological foundations.

So, as educators, let us start from this philosophical and pedagogical principle: aesthetic behaviour is one of the very first human behaviours. Pedagogy has to do with anthropology. I draw on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s thoughts on contemporary art to go further into the knowledge of aesthetic experience. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues for a return to the *anthropological*

foundations of art and aesthetic experience in play, symbols, and celebration. And that is exactly what artists are doing when they work as *artists* with children.

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To finish, Can this anthropological conception of aesthetic experience pave the way for art instruction as educational basis or as core education or even as change model? I do think so. Observing children when they are engaged in true aesthetic experience confirms this conviction on many counts. The experience of artists in residence at nursery schools in Lyon will illustrate the pedagogical benefit of the play/symbol/celebration trilogy. I have no time enough to develop and strongly illustrate. So just a few words to finish about attention and concentration within aesthetic experience

I'll just mention a few photographs of children shown during an exhibition on this experience of artists in residence. What strikes the observer is the seriousness of children engaged in work with the artist. These pictures are in clear contrast with the somewhat conventional image of child joy and radiance. They show attentive faces, happy concentration, and quiet penetration – a very particular form of child play when play absorbs children wholly. This is one of the fine surprises of this exhibition: *art can be a powerful lever to educate attention.* Aesthetic experience is another experience of time, not the time of bustling activity but that of celebration. Learning to suspend time comes down to learning to focus the attention of the body and senses as well as that of thought. If culture, art, and artists can contribute to education, there is no need to instrument them. They just need to provide access to this alternative time and experience. And surely on this way artists as artists are and remain the best guides.

Observing children, their approaches, and works in interaction with artists teaches us that *aesthetic behaviour is based in symbolic experience.* To go further into aesthetic experience, it is necessary to rediscover symbolic experience as sense-filled and founding human experience. The example of the child then becomes a lesson and a reminder for adults.