

Re-instating the *Amateur*: Holding Space for the Core Purpose of Art in the Classroom

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In her graphic-art reflection on her experience as Artist-in-Residence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the cartoonist and “accidental professor” Lynda Barry engages the question “What did art do for us before it was called art?” (2014, p. 166)—a question that surprisingly doesn’t surface often within traditional humanities or fine arts studies, despite being the basis of human pursuits in art. Speaking about music education, Thomas Regelski (2006) argues that it is actually essential to rethink what music—or arguably art in general—is and “is ‘good for’ in human life and society” (p. 10) if we wish to make arts education meaningful for our students and communities as a whole. Exploring different perspectives on art’s core purpose for humanity may indeed have profound effects not only on how we think of ourselves as art students and educators, but also as creators and lovers of the arts.

Regelski (2006), de Botton (2011, 2013), Wilhelm and Novak (2011), and others share a concern that our current objectives and methods for arts education are all too often disconnected from the primary reasons humans originally turned to the arts such as communicating the intangible, forming social bonds, or exploring and commemorating key life events (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011; Dissanayake, 1992; de Botton, 2011, 2013). This distance hurts the arts field by undermining its value in our society, and deprives our students and communities from an elemental means of navigating human life. Thus, while we often turn toward the professional artist or renowned academic as models for our educational goals in the arts education classroom, the figure of the ‘amateur’ artist could instead be seen as an embodiment of an individual pursuing art for its core human purpose, helping us explore how we can hold a place for this deep purpose within the classroom, in balance with and contributing to our traditional academic or skill-based pursuits.

What is art and why do we do it?

Over the centuries, philosophers, artists, and educators have offered a myriad of perspectives on and definitions of art. Some have concentrated on how to define what distinguishes ‘art’ from ‘craft,’ ‘propaganda,’ or other means of symbolic expression. Others have sought to describe and define the phenomenology or core experience of a particular art form, such as Vivian Sobchak’s (1992)’s description of film as “experience expressing experience” (p. 5), through which we can “see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved” (p. 10); or Rancière’s (2009) discussion on “all those forms of spectacle—drama, dance, performance art, mime and so on—that place bodies in action before an assembled audience” (p. 2). Others, meanwhile, have taken a more wide-angle lens to inquire into why we, as humans, *feel the need* to “see the seeing as well as the seen” or “place bodies in action before an assembled audience” ...beyond *what is art*, they ask *why art?*

Lynda Barry, for instance, describes the art process as transferring “something inside one person [...] to the inside of someone else” through the “external form” of the artistic medium (2014, p. 9). This “something” being transferred, which Barry calls “an image,” can exist equally in professional, high-class art as in the performance of Romeo and Juliet by “a squatting guy [...] using a cigarette butt and a bottle cap for the main characters” (2014, p. 15), or in what we consider to be a ‘good drawing’ or a ‘bad drawing.’ Even though Barry’s primary art form is visual, she asserts that the transferred “image” she speaks of is “more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive—a book, a song, a painting,” or even the blanket that a child becomes attached to (2014, p. 15). Art making, in sum, is a way of sharing this intangible, openly interpretable, and alive “something” to another human, who in turn is innately able to have a “sustained and interactive relationship with [the] object/image” (Barry, 2014, p. 15) as early as infancy.

Barry’s comparison between art and a childhood blanket remarkably echoes theories on the developmental and evolutionary origins of art. For example, drawing from developmental psychology, Wilhelm and Novak (2011) explain how art can be seen as a “transitional object” akin to children’s teddy bears that both symbolize the parent, creating an evolutionarily important secure parent-child attachment, and act as “playmates with which to make free meaning of their own” (p. 58). In both conceptions, art is seen as an object that carries symbolic, intangible meaning as it is transferred between two humans, as well as a pseudo-live entity –a “gift of life” that one can see as a “playmate” (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, p. 65, 58) or have an “interactive relationship” with (Barry, 2014, p. 15), through the act of interpretation and meaning-making.

The notion of art as way of transferring meaning suggests that art serves the broader purpose of communication; however, anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake notes that artistic behaviour is not exclusively found in instances of communication or other behaviours it has been associated with, such as display for sexual selection, or prestige. Nor are these behaviours exclusively done through art, raising the question of why humans have felt the need to communicate, attract mates, or assert social status *artistically* at times, and further make art in different contexts (Dissanayake, 1992). Dissanayake’s pioneering work on the evolutionary purpose of art instead argues that art, ritual, and imaginative play form a distinctive selective behaviour that she calls “making special” (1992). By elevating things and activities to the realm of the “non-ordinary,” art helps us make socially significant events physically, mentally, and emotionally gratifying (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 46, 54-5). Further, art encourages “mutual participation and shared emotion” (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 52) creating a sense of social unity and harmony that Dissanayake argues is as important for human survival as aggression and competitiveness. And as Wilhelm and Novak (2011) point out, art transcends the bonding role of a blanket or teddy bear because its power is not confined to the parent-child relationship; the art of a single person can be shared across space and time, allowing communication, attachment, and a sense of unity with wider humanity.

Wilhelm and Novak also discuss how the artist can be seen as an “*alloparent*”—an individual apart from the biological parent that serves the evolutionary purpose of

helping with both practical childcare and cultural parenting, introducing children to a wider range of cultural practices, character traits, or patterns of behavior than parents alone could pass on (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, p. 58). Indeed, our *allopuments* such as teachers or grandparents often use rhymes or stories as a means for cultural teachings. Art as an *allopument* arguably expands the potential for this role of cultural development two-fold. First, its imaginative capacity allows us to transform our culture for future generations, for as Elliot Eisner states, “A culture populated by people whose imagination is impoverished has a static future. In such a culture there will be little change because there will be little sense of possibility” (2002, p. 5). And further, since art can come from a completely different culture and worldview, it exponentially magnifies the diversity of human cultural practices, ideas, or values to which one is exposed (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). This enriches our capacity to navigate the complexities of life, and additionally forges empathy and understanding across personal and cultural differences. Here Wilhelm and Novak’s metaphor of art being a “gift of life” (2011, p. 65) is particularly important: while there are multitudes of historic and current instances where art and culture have been used—or rather, abused—to force a particular worldview unto others, when art is engaged with as a “playmate,” (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, p. 58), or in an “interactive relationship” (Barry, 2014, p. 15), the receiver of this gift remains free to interpret, respond to, accept, or reject the gift it brings.

Even when not shared with other humans, art can additionally act as a form of inquiry, a medium through which to explore and articulate something that is not fully defined or understood. Discussing different philosophical attempts at distinguishing art from craft, for example, Larry Shiner mentions how R. G. Collingwood felt that “the true artist does not know in advance the outcome of the process of discovery and creation” but will “use the medium [...] for imaginative self-discovery and creation” (Shiner, 2001, p. 264). In this sense, art-making can be seen as a way to voluntarily enter a liminal space, a state of doubt and wonder, opening with a question and using the metaphorical language of art’s many forms to explore different possible answers. This impulse to use art as a form of inquiry is not new, or relegated to the realms of research and education; Dissanayake notes how across cultures and centuries humans have turned to art to address important events that were “perceived as uncertain and troubling, requiring action beyond the simple fight or flight” and key concerns of the human condition such as “love, death, memory, suffering, power, fear, loss, desire, hope” (1992, p. 42, 51), a tradition that Alain de Botton seeks to continue in modern times by focusing art museums and classes on these very themes (2011, 2013).

Re-framing Art Making and Art Appreciation

Reflecting on the social and evolutionary purposes of art in human life naturally gives rise to a re-thinking of who in society can be an artist. As Barry points out, practices that we now call art are “much older than the word ART or the concept of ART” (2011, p. 166), and thus certainly older than our modern-day designation of certain individuals in society as ‘artists’ creating art for the rest of us. If we understand the essence of art to be way of exploring, expressing, and sharing an intangible facet of life, or a form of making processes ‘special,’ and especially if we consider this process to be

evolutionarily fundamental to human life, then the notion that ‘everyone is an artist’ takes on a much more literal and significant meaning than simply an attempt to encourage or patronize people who are not highly skilled in traditional art forms. We in fact *need* more people to be artists: we need each other to create in order to share diverse life experiences with each other, to build mutual understanding and relationships, and to transform society.

Art-making can be done with more or less frequency, conscious intention, or ‘skill’ in the sense of a capacity to use media in a variety of ways, and can be shared publically or kept private—but it remains a process we have all partaken in, if only in childhood. While ‘artists,’ in our modern use of the term, are particular individuals who pursue an art medium as a profession or primary activity, all humans have been making art for a variety of purposes since time immemorial (Dissanayake, 1992). Much Western art-making has become diluted over time, for example, ritualistic art-making such as singing the national anthem loses its significance as it becomes enshrined in routine, and ready-made art replaces what used to be hand-made such as gifts—however, the impulse and “predisposition” (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 35) to create remains, and can be deeply gratifying when exercised intentionally.

Reflecting on the role of art for humanity further invites a reconsideration of the role of the spectator or interpreter of art, and consequently the value of the humanities. If we think of art as the transference of an image, as *alloparenting*, as an evolutionary route to social bonding, or as a ‘playmate’ for the receiver, we are acknowledging that there are two equal subjects in the human process of art: the artist-creator and the art-receiver. Jacques Rancière speaks to this at length in his work *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) where he confronts what he calls “the paradox of the spectator”: i.e., the fact that the existence of a spectator is part of what defines various forms of performance art, yet the spectator is often negatively associated with passivity and ignorance (2009, p. 2). When we think of art, we tend to associate primary importance to the role of the artists; they are seen to be the ones ‘doing’ art, while the rest of us sit on the sidelines and watch. However, humans need art *precisely* because it allows us to express and communicate something intangible or ‘ghost-like’, to borrow Barry’s phrase, something that “has no fixed meaning” that invites and requires the receiver to “make free meaning of their own” (Wilhelm and Novak, 2011, p. 58) for the “interactive relationship” (Barry, 2014, p.15) of the aesthetic experience to be realized.

Elaborating on the way that the spectator of art is active in the artistic engagement, Rancière makes it clear that this activity transcends merely making meaning out of the sensory stimuli presented by the art object. He points out that the spectator is also the “actor” in her own life story (2009, p. 17), and that when engaging with the art piece,

she observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to

make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. (p. 13)

In this formulation, the experience of the art piece simultaneously is transformed by the spectator's previous life experience and provides a new insight that will help transform the spectator's life and future artistic engagements. Art interpretation becomes a different, but equally valuable process of aesthetic inquiry, where the spectator again voluntarily enters the liminal space of the art piece—a place in between their life experience and the artist's, with no fixed meaning—and is invited to explore different possibilities of life. What's more, Rancière's description of the spectator as a 'poet' and 'performer' in the above quotation breaks down the dialectic between artist and interpreter. The reception of an art piece can not only lead to a creative mental reflection like Rancière describes, but it can also turn into a very concrete creative process, as seen in Wilhelm & Novak's proposed poetic "re-creation" exercise, writing a new poem inspired by an existing one (2011, p. 60). What in literary studies we refer to as 'intertextuality,' or the appearance of a previous work to enrich meaning in a new one through allusion, quotation, parody, etc., is evidence of the existence and artistic value of this cyclical loop between interpretative and creative aesthetic experience.

The counter-point to this, of course, is that the artist is also the spectator. The art piece, Rancière explains, exists at a distance from both the "sensation or comprehension of the spectator" and the "idea of the artist" allowing the performer to observe the effects of their skills "in a new context among other spectators" (2009, p. 14, 22). Similarly, Eisner describes how in the process of creation "the work itself secures its own voice," allowing surprises to emerge that were not part of the artist's original idea so that, by the end, the artist becomes "part of a conversation that enables us to 'see what we have said'" (2009, p. 7, 11) as a spectator to their own work, reflecting on what has surfaced. This ability to approach one's work from an interpretative stance further enables the artist to edit their work, "paying attention to relationships and attending to details" so that the piece expresses their idea and achieves "the quality, the precision, and the power the creator desires" (Eisner, 2002, p. 6). Acknowledging the role of the interpreter in the aesthetic experience thus can help equalize creative or technical approaches to arts education with interpretative or theoretical ones, reinforcing the value of exposing students to a holistic educational experience that includes both forms of aesthetic inquiry.

Re-Instating the *Amateur*

As Regelski (2006) suggests, reflecting on these core questions about the meaning of art, art making, and art interpretation renews and clarifies one's perspective on the purpose of arts education as a whole: the role of the classroom, assignments, teachers, and students. Just like the meaning of art, the purpose of arts education has changed over the course of history—acting at times as the way to bring "High Culture to the masses" (Regelski, 2006, p. 4), or as a form of cultural colonization, a means to creating national unity through a shared culture, a site for subversive cultural criticism, or simply a vehicle to teach other skills and subjects (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). While

there are certainly many positive by-products of arts education, I echo Regelski's and Wilhelm and Novak's arguments that if for many school provides the primary or *only* geographically and financially viable access to art, it is the duty of arts educators to make schools a space for experiencing humanity's fundamental and evolutionary uses for art. As Regelski (2006) argues, the benchmark for success in arts education should not be focused on learning specific concepts, facts, and skills, developing a professional arts career, or vague notions of increasing "appreciation" (p. 4); rather arts education in schools should center on how equipped and interested students are in bringing practices of aesthetic creation or inquiry into "their adult lives [...] and social life of their communities" (p. 6).

So how do our educational practices change when we re-focus the goal of arts education towards improving the quality of student's *lifelong engagement* with the art form? Or when we consider the aesthetic experience to be an innate and evolutionary human capacity and impulse that begins in infancy, as Lynda Barry suggests? To begin with, I propose that the figure of the artistic 'amateur' needs to take prominence over, say, the graduate of art school with the highest GPA, as an inspirational model for the art student.

The term 'amateur' is often used disparagingly, suggesting ineptitude in contrast to the 'professional' or 'master' who is taught in a formal context or remunerated. In his *Narrative of a Residence in Algiers* (1818), Filippo Pananti speaks of "amateur performers" who "always practice at home" (p. 266), illustrating the second connotation of this term—that the art-making or appreciating of amateurs remains cloistered in private spaces and provides no significant contribution to the artistic life of the community. Even professional artists working with non-professionals in community spaces such as hospitals, care homes, prisons, or community centers are often told they are not making 'real' art (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Goldbard, 2006). In her analysis on the state of the field of community-engaged arts practice, Arlene Goldbard quotes a critic who, rejecting further support for this work that he pejoratively called "amateurism," argued that even participants "don't for a moment confuse what they're participating in with art itself" (Martin Friedman quoted in Goldbard, 2006, p. 165). The devaluing of the amateur has been contested, however.

In fact, the opposite is often true. Regelski (2006) cites studies on music education that found that self-taught musicians were more likely to continue to play music as adults, perhaps because their motivation to teach themselves an instrument came from a place of genuine interest in the art form and life-long learning. We see this, indeed, in many arts practices: instances of meaningful and transformative art-making and appreciating by adults in choirs, book clubs, or painting circles are often considered 'amateur' endeavors. Community-engaged arts involving 'amateur' community members have also been increasingly recognized as effective means for supporting social justice, health, community cohesion, innovation, and other social goals (Cohen Cruz 2005; Goldbard 2006). Instead of being valued as lesser, the amateur—whose name is French for *he who loves*—should be held in high regard for embodying the utmost goal of any arts education: to produce individuals who actively 'do' art and seek out art throughout their lives, with their community or alone, in order to express the intangible,

understand diversity, explore human issues, build relationships, ‘make special,’ and all the other fundamental purposes for art.

Valuing and seeking to emulate the amateur in our arts classrooms may even provide some answers to common flaws or drawbacks of traditional arts education. Regelski (2006), for example, speaks of the classic ‘hurdle jumpers’ of the arts classroom: students who find art to be “meaningless,” “childish,” and “irrelevant” to their lives because they don’t aspire to be professional artists or academics, and thus concentrate on ‘passing’ for credit (p. 5). Here Regelski suggests that students should participate in making choices around curriculum so that the art they engage in is of interest to them, and should further have “adult models of amateur musicking” as part of the “instructional plan” (2006, p. 7) instead of focusing arts education on trying to distance oneself from the negatively perceived amateur.

A second common problem in arts education involves the tendency toward elitism and unequal cultural representation. For example, a recurring concern within the field of World Literature is the persistent monopoly of Western voices and texts in the literary canon or syllabi, and in literary discourse in general. Much of the theoretical debate on inequality in the field of literature has proposed that more translation, or more advanced education in foreign languages would result in a more diverse canon; however, in practice this has proven to have little effect as it places the power to promote diversity on select, powerful figures that govern literary production and access to foreign language education, such as translators, publishers, and universities, and further tends to limit the practice of ‘world literature’ to a small, educated elite. Envisioning a day when “students will know how to read and will want to read” diverse literatures (Étiemble, 2013, p. 100), French writer and scholar René Étiemble highlights that one needs not only *knowledge*, but also a *desire* to change deep-set classist and ethnocentric traditions in arts education. Indeed, scholar Albert Guérard challenges the conception of world literature as a “formidable subject,” proposing instead that it begins “not in the graduate school, but in the nursery” (2013, p. 51) where children are exposed to diverse tales, just as Barry (2014) suggests that artistic behaviour begins in childhood before we have notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. If Guérard argues that “the common man retains this freedom from prejudice until he is [...] taught worse” (2013, p. 51), then the task of the art educator is to unteach such a lesson.

Proposing the Art Classroom as Venue for Aesthetic Inquiry

Instead of being seen as a professional training ground for future artists and academics, the art classroom should be re-framed as a venue that provides a time and space in modern day society for humans to deeply experience a variety of creative and interpretative aesthetic processes. It provides a safe container for a journey into liminal space; held within rituals of separation from and reincorporation into the everyday world and one’s personal story, one can allow oneself to be immersed in creation or response, to exist in a state of uncertainty and wonder, and possibly even to experience transformation. The classroom provides a common medium or thematic line of inquiry, and structured activities that expose and guide students through aesthetic inquiry,

creative composition, or reflective and analytic response, before producing a final artifact such as a piece of art or writing that encapsulates and communicates the class experience.

Additionally, by bringing together a community of people from their otherwise solitary art-making or art-interpreting activities, the arts classroom—like other forms of public art engagement—invites a level of communion or *communitas* during the liminal aesthetic experience that can be very profound. Regelski, for example, quotes cognitive scientist William Benzon in describing how

music ‘allows individuals to couple their nervous systems together,’ and thus ‘is a group activity in which the interactions between individuals are as precisely timed and orchestrated as those within a single brain. The individuals are physically separate but temporally integrated. It is one music, one dance. (quoted in Regelski, 2006, p. 10)

Similarly, Sobchak (1992) highlights film’s unique capacity to create an embodied experience that is the “mutual possession” of filmmaker and viewers (p. 5), uniting them in a single instance of “seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement” (p. 4). And in the case of literature, Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” expresses nostalgia for the communal aspect of oral storytelling—a practice that was lost when the print industry took predominance in society with its “lone artist-writer and solitary readers” (Shiner, 2001, p. 266), but that is recovered in the literature classroom as students come together to discuss their insights.

Teachers in this new exchange become ‘facilitators’ of student’s experiences, and perhaps ‘curators’ or ‘co-curators’ of the material. They encourage reflection on the core human meaning and value for art making, and share tools and strategies that may aid the student to engage in meaningful creative and receptive aesthetic experiences in new and different ways. In some instances this may mean introducing children to different ways of manipulating pastels to create a different kind of visual arts piece than they could achieve with crayons; in other cases this could mean leading university literature students through activities or dialogue that allow them to draw their attention to subtle but impactful aspects of a poem. And as Regelski (2006) and Wilhelm and Novak (2011) suggest, teachers should encourage students to pursue personal interests, express themselves, and experiment; and they should employ methods of assessment that emphasize life-long development over assigning value judgements on supposed quality.

While some of these educational practices or purposes may seemingly stand at odds with traditional academic or artistic interests of pursuing art ‘for art’s sake’—such as pushing the frontiers of artistic possibility and better understanding of art forms—one does not cancel out the other; nor do we have to “capture the weakest parts of the opposed forces,” to borrow from Regelski (2006, p. 8). By holding a place for the amateur in formal arts education we can instead achieve a “higher level of dialectical synthesis” between the figures of the amateur and the professional where “a creative tension remains, but in newly informed, newly focused, newly productive or newly relevant terms” (p. 8). The “professional” may have a narrow focus on the implications

of art beyond the immediate methods and concepts; however their concentrated pursuit and development of the creative and interpretative practice allows us to capitalize on the power of art to the fullest. In the meantime, the “amateur”—who may have a narrower range of ways to engage with art, or less metacognitive understanding of this engagement—is doing art meaningfully in the sense of *he who loves*, and we can draw from our inner amateur to seek out art in the classroom and in life as a means of developing interpersonal connections, and seeking personal transformation and a deeper understanding of life.

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