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Reconsidering Our Valuing of a Visual Arts Education

by Christopher Willard

Abstract: This article is a think piece that asks educators to reexamine ideas around outcomes of visual arts programs. The view that the value of a visual arts education consists primarily in transferrable skills, defined as those valued by business, is, the author suggests, not the appropriate metric. Instead, a number of outcomes are presented and rationalized.

Not long ago I was scheduled to help present to a large group of high school guidance counselors. When I showed up, one of the guidance counselors was pressing a student services staff member about the jobs awaiting BFA and MFA graduates in the visual arts. The counselor said that people in her office were routinely pressured by parents about job prospects, and so she felt it was her job to sell our university program on the basis of possible vocations. Our student services staff member was struggling to explain correlative jobs, but the guidance counselor became adamant in wanting to know exactly what jobs awaited visual arts education graduates. Here's where I felt I had to jump in. I raised my hand and said, "Let's be clear. There are no jobs waiting for BFA or MFA graduates in the visual arts. None." A sort of gasp arose from both the guidance counselors and our student services staff.

But let's think about it: No jobs that I am aware of in North America allow artists to freely undertake self-directed inquiry, to freely express themselves, and to get paid a livable wage for doing so. Sure, artists can draw on a chalkboard at a coffee shop, learn to make frames at a print store, or sell art supplies. But these jobs have little to do with what artists learn in formal visual arts programs.

The problem here is that the value of a visual arts education is being questioned in a misguided manner, using the lens of capitalism. Literary critic and political theorist Frederic Jameson is credited with saying, "It has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." In North America, we continue to broadly apply capitalist agendas and myths to art that in turn skews perceptions of visual arts education. For example, if art sells for high prices, it's touted as being of high quality. Or, if young artists work hard, have talent, and are decent people, it is said they have a good chance at hitting it big.

The reality is that many artists who become successful are often excellent marketers, have influential connections, or get lucky in a market driven environment. To be blunt, these realities have absolutely no correlation to free expression, depth of inquiry, or studio work ethic. Creation does not entail monetization. Neither should creation demand monetization. So long as we continue to tie capitalist agendas to studio practices, we are looking past the real value of a formal visual arts education. Here's a spoiler: The value of a visual arts education is not found in transferrable skills, defined as skills appropriate for or useful to the business world. Yet, this is a common justification for the value of a visual arts education, one that even universities use when promoting their program.

The first thing to realize is that most often artists are artists. Artists know they are artists and early on they discover that their need to be artistic is greater than they are. Attempts to squelch their interest only fuels their

interest. They will turn into artists somehow, no matter what, with or without us, and they're ready to take on the challenge of not just doing artistic things but of being an artist.

In this, artists are confronting the normative system of working one's way up the corporate ladder to better jobs, owning a couple of cars and a big house, and so forth. Opting out of the norms becomes a life choice. Or to put it another way, being an artist is a political action, something like a protest. What is their agenda? To create without external reasons, goals, and pressures.

I teach a couple hundred visual arts students each year at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and I ask them, "Who are you and what do you need to say about your world?" First year students don't quite understand the question. Upper level and graduate students live and breathe the answers. The question is entirely loaded. "Who are you?" asks for autoethnographic self-reflection on the artist's personal, lived experience, because all art starts with the self. "What do you *need* to say?" is very different than "What do you *want* to say?" Student answers to "What do you *want* to say?" often involve a desire to make things that their family or friends like, or to make something they think will sell. I ask them to move beyond this. I ask them to figure out what they must say, to get in touch with deeply felt emotions and views. They find it tough work, but what they end up saying is usually extremely profound. Finally, "in your world" recognizes both the need for students to situate their work in today's art worlds, plural. It also recognizes that the individual artist has a limited viewpoint about those worlds. Thus, artists learn that creating is about expressing oneself.

Mostly, the creation of visual art is a labor-intensive activity. To get work done, artists develop a highly efficient work ethic. They manage time and carve out hours for their studio practice amidst hectic lives. They learn how to sustain focus and to create a routine.

Over time artists are able to switch on their artistic juices on demand when they enter the studio. They do not have to sit around waiting for inspiration as the myths suggest.

A work of art does not simply arise uninformed. Artists learn to engage in broad and deep research, however invisible this may be in the finished work of art. They are informed by a history of global art and ideas. They draw upon other domains of inquiry, such as color theory, philosophy, science, sociology, and so forth. They are able to synthesize their research into focused support for their own investigations and creations.

Artists have ideas for a work of art, but these ideas are probably better defined as problems. Here are a few: How does an artist turn the merest

hint of an idea into tangible form? What form should this take, given the myriad media available today? What exact take on a concept is the meaningful one? Which ways and means, which materials and constructions will best present the artist's idea so it is conveyed most clearly? Questions like these consume much of an artist's studio time. As a result, artists are comfortable working with unknown outcomes and delayed resolution. Artists tend to set up the unpredictable, often considering the predictable to be dangerous territory.

Throughout the creative process, artists frequently cultivate and often exploit the layered meanings that arise, some of which are yet unclear, some of which both support or contradict their intended message. As a result, artists learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. Artists recognize the power of interpretation and fluid meaning. Due to this, their works may provoke more than reassure, may raise more questions than they answer.

"You're daydreaming again," people say to artists. Yes they are. Artists usually have, and certainly learn, excellent associative thinking skills. They are able to take unrelated ideas from their research and put it on the metaphoric back burner to simmer. Here, new associations are formed that in turn prompt the artist to test combinations and to figure out more complex ways in which disparate ideas might unify.

Artists are experts in applying analytical skills. They can easily dissect elements in a work of visual art, whether these be syntactic, iconographic, or formal. They can, with very few clues, hone in on a work of art's conceptual underpinnings. They perform visual SWOT analyses with ease. A SWOT analysis is a strategic model for focusing upon the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats with respect to a project. Artists are able to deconstruct visual images in terms of their less obvious messages.

Artists question what equates to knowledge in the domain of visual research. They know they are researching and learning, but they know that biases toward discursive dissemination of knowledge is prevalent. So with their visual outputs and their practices, artists question what knowledge can be, and whether it must be disseminated, or even made tangible. In this, they seek out the norms and test the boundaries of knowledge economies.

As artists learn more about global worlds of art, about the diversity of art throughout the world, they learn there simply is no umbrella metric by which to value art. People everywhere create art, and they have done so all through history. Artists learn about art that differs in every respect from their own work, they gain a broader awareness, and they become more globally-minded citizens who value different ways and means of knowing, creating, and valuing. They understand their own ways and means are but

one out of millions. Artists are comfortable giving up rules of good and bad, replacing such conversations with discourses about purposes and contexts.

With respect to ethics, artists think about the representation of others, of the possible implications of public dissemination of works of art, of social norms they align with or confront. Artists are able to sort through ethical issues that arise in the presentation of complex and layered situations.

A natural result from all of these outcomes is that each artist generally arrives at something new and individual, the artist's own possible solution to a creative problem. Artists develop a unique voice in doing so. They work over time to clarify this voice and to present it with authority.

Artists operate at higher levels on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, which generally we see as a goal in both K-12 and graduate levels of education. The careful reader will notice that I've left out artistic technical and how-to skills. Many people, young artists too, think that learning visual art is entirely about the transfer of such skills. It is not. And it certainly is not in formal visual arts programs at the university level, where in some domains technical skills are not taught at all.

I doubt concerned parents will care a whit about Bloom's Revised Taxonomy in which creating, generating, and hypothesizing are at the top of the list of cognitive processes. After all, they might say, who gets paid for hypothesizing. And that's my point. We can't use the criteria of bottom line driven economies to realize the value of a visual arts education. Ultimately, the aim of education is education. Or at least it should be.

If parents still need convincing, maybe they can think of it this way, a BFA is a first degree. Yes, that's right. Master's degrees in art are now expected, if not required. To teach at the university level in a visual arts program, one must have a Master's degree, and today professors may also have a PhD. While many of the proficiencies listed above can be transferrable, the first degree, as a credential, is what is actually highly transferrable, arguably more so than some set of low level business oriented skills. Graduates from BFA programs who choose not to stay with visual art head into all sorts of Master's programs, in architecture, psychology, law, literature, education, and many others. It should then be easy for parents to support their child's passion during an undergraduate education, especially if this passion increases the likelihood of first degree completion.

