

It is difficult to speak or write about the arts and art education today without a troublesome awareness, not only of recent catastrophic events, but also of a continually eroding support for the arts. Surely, looked at from the present vantage point, they are related, even as the preoccupation with "homeland security" is related to the neglect of social supports--of education, health, problems of equity, personal freedoms and of democracy itself. We cannot repress the memories of the World Trade Center tragedies (the widowed women, the fatherless children, the broken words on the cell phones before death). Nor can we avoid the repetitive sound of "9/11," like the endless toll of a bell that cannot be stilled. There are the suicide bombings that capture our attention as well, the shattered houses, the refugees on so many borders. There is the lengthening shadow of war along with chilling warnings of attacks by terrorists--bioterrorists, nuclear terrorists, faceless experts with poison and gas. Never wholly out of sight as well are the children with their arms cut off, men and women made skeletal by AIDS, parched farmlands, the ghosts of buildings and shacks. I think of Anselm Kiefer's renderings of scorched landscapes and almost feel them on my skin. I stare at the face of Delacroix's refugee woman outside the gates of Constantinople; I think of Turner's slave adrift on a raft in an empty sea, of Goya's "Disasters of War," of the Guernica and Picasso's "Weeping Women," of a mute pile of grey army overcoats at a Beuys exhibition. Each one offers an experience different from hearing "about" or knowing "about." If we release our imaginations, if we allow ourselves to move out to such works, we may well find them becoming part of our lived reality. We may wonder; we may ache; we may want to refuse. But we may also ask, "What next?" or "What can be done?" or "How does it affect what I make of my life?"

I think of the judge at The World Court in The Hague, required to deal with the

massacres committed in Bosnia not long ago. A reporter asked him how he could bear the unending accounts of cruelty and suffering. He said that he went to see the Vermeers. Why? Because, at another moment of violence and cruelty, Vermeer was trying to stave off chaos with images of order--women's faces, windows, wine glasses, light.

How, given something utterly new in our lives, can we speak about young people and the arts? I remember, as you must do, the pictures youngsters drew of the twin towers falling, what one called "the birds on fire." To lock the images in, to have no way of expressing what was felt or perceived or imagined would have been to give in to the kind of chaos even Vermeer feared so many years ago.

Several events occurred on the days before I wrote these words; and they somehow helped me put my own thoughts in a kind of order, even as they made me feel (or at least hope) that I was part of a community that cared about and reflected on what remains, on some level, a mystery: the arts and the aesthetic, art education and aesthetic education, and our own distinctive involvements with what are believed to be works of art. One was the death of the painter, Larry Rivers; another, some words spoken and written by Arthur Miller; still another, an exhibition of Mexican art. I choose them, because they have to do with different dimensions of the artistic-aesthetic domain; and they call upon us for differing responses. Indeed, they remind us that there can be no conclusive definition of "art," nor any final word as to what an adequate engagement with an art form ought to be. We who are willing to attend are left reflecting on our own experiences with particular shapes and sounds and words. We may find memories flooding forth, emotions unexpectedly aroused, desires made palpable, or hopelessness, even despair.

Adrienne

Rich once said that poetry begins in dread very often and ends in a sense of possibility. She did not have in mind a specific fear but a feeling of anxiety familiar to all of us; and I think it can be said of all the arts, when authentically explored, that something opens when we turn away or stop reading or shut off the CD--a new vision, perhaps, work still unfinished, a road branching off, a goal still to be pursued. In earlier times, an aesthetic encounter was expected to culminate in a feeling of coherence, harmony, finitude. Today, seldom looking for solutions or resolutions, we seek a sense of aliveness, of wide-awakeness. We relish incompleteness, because that signifies that something still lies ahead.

I could not but pay special heed when Larry Rivers died, in part because I could never imagine him laying down his brushes or saying he was finished. And I must add that I was moved to pay heed because .Dr. Prabha Sahasrabudhe persuaded me to share a platform with Rivers at a conference in a Catskill hotel. We were assigned to what was called, appropriately or not, the Stardust Ballroom, and I recall pleading with Larry Rivers to let me go first, because I could not see myself following him with a solemn academic lecture. He refused, of course, but said seriously that I could give my paper before his 13th Street Band went on. Michael Kimmelman, writing in the New York Times about Rivers

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invented for himself was neither thoughtless nor careless. He thought about what he was doing; and, moreover, he never stopped taking care. It is clear that he worked hard to overcome the visual stereotypes that demean so many people: the aged, for instance, women who do not resemble fashion models or other ideals of female loveliness, as well as images of false piety.

John Dewey, it may be recalled, wrote of the power of art to break through the “crust of conventionality;” and Rivers’ particular style certainly accomplished what Dewey thought so significant: rejection of the static, the automatic, the merely habitual. The opposite of “aesthetic,” wrote Dewey, was “anaesthetic,” meaning numb, unperturbable, unmoveable. He spoke about the ways in which ideas and feelings were presented being matters of art. Our conscious life, he went on, of opinion and judgment, “often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But our lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means by which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, the drama and the novel are proofs that the problem of present action is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation.”

When we take into account the effects of media and commercial language on the young, not to speak of certain songs and poetry emanating from the rap or hip-hop traditions, we cannot but confront the ways in which some of the language-in-use prevents people from coming in touch with those “deeper levels” Dewey was trying to describe. Without suggesting that there are positive sides to the fears we suffer now, I still believe that the destruction of our felt invulnerability, our sudden consciousness of what can neither be known or controlled, has made many of us aware of our mortality, indeed, of the human condition itself. Learning things we never suspected before about chance and necessity, about the lack of guarantees (even for Americans, who once thought us to be “exceptional”) cannot but make it difficult to live in accord with denial or false confidence. When we add to that the current feelings of powerlessness with regard to a war many of us find unjustifiable, the “desire and thought” that may now spring up from the depths can be nourished by encounters with the arts, even as they can be infused by imagination--the

capacity to summon up new connections and alternative possibilities. Whether it is a Larry Rivers cigar box or a row of Monet's poplars or an Ingres *Odalisque*, something new and revealing may radiate through the being of the perceiver, as that perceiver finds herself or himself in a changed relation to the world. Concerned as I am for attacks on freedom, equality and justice, coupled with eroding support for education (along, with its newly emergent technicism and presumed moral neutrality), I am not saying that only works with social or political subjects can be counted upon to inflame a sense of injustice or lead to a desire to transform. It is partly a matter of resisting fixities, seeking the openings that can become visible in a view of Cezanne's rooftops in Aix-en-Provence, or by looking into Rembrandt's eyes in one of the self-portraits or pondering the strange alienation in Hopper's "Nighthawks." The drama that may mark the transaction between viewer and painter does not have to be social or political for eyes to be opened, for viewers to be brought to see and to experience through the experience of another. The paintings mentioned earlier, with their picturing of war, abandonment, cruelty, even violence, call attention to specific injustices that demand resistance or repair. But many aesthetic encounters open spaces in consciousness; they offer a sense of a receding horizon, a reaching out for a completion that always eludes somehow. It is this effort to reach beyond, to fill the space or the emptiness that often gives rise to the desire I have spoken of--to transform, to render existence more tolerable, more vital, more humane. Consider Giacometti's elongations, giving what Sartre calls "perceptible expression to pure presence." He captures movement, a unity of action. "Much has been done," Sartre goes on, "but now he must do a little better. And then just a little better still." He keeps envisioning an ideal in the light of which he judges his work to be imperfect. There is a light, a kind of grail he keeps pursuing and will never be able to reach. He will never finish because a man--any creative person, I would say-- "always transcends what he does." This is the kind of energy, of desire, that connects the maker of art to the pursuit of a better way of life, of justice and of freedom.

Nothing could be further, as you surely see, from a product orientation or a morality of consumerism. Things, objects, are attainable, measurable; they can be held in the hands, stored away. The search, the reaching out, stops with having, stops at the checkout counter--beyond creating or appreciating, apart from what is wide-awake, vital, alive. I am reminded of the closing passage in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. It has to do with an unexpected rearrangement of the shelves in a

supermarket and the confusion and anxiety of the customers, wandering, looking at labels, “taken to the edge.”

But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of each item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A long slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extra-terrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead.

Decoding, infallibility, slowly moving lines: a Kafkaesque distancing and, at once, a dread uniformity. None of the uncertainties, the moments of restlessness, the endless striving, the ironies, the parodies, the entanglements, the shapes and colors of the artistic-aesthetic domain. People find themselves savoring those crusts of conventionality when the shelves are so unexpectedly rearranged.

There are those, however, mainly artists (including aged artists) who will not wait in line. I mentioned Arthur Miller at the start, the playwright and indomitable social critic, an artist who makes no apology for his need to protest persecution and injustice. Just before thinking through this paper, I read an announcement of a new play written by Miller. There is something deeply moving and exciting about a successful writer at eighty six years old still being so capable of anger and compassion, both demanding what Dewey called
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successful writer at eighty six years old still being so capable of anger and compassion, both demanding what Dewey called “presentation” by means of an art form. Who can forget the emotion infusing such works as *Death of a Salesman*? His work has seldom been didactic or ideological, in spite of its power to arouse audiences to recognition of deficiencies, disillusionments, the Dream swallowed by despair. “Attention must be paid,” says Mrs. Loman at Willy’s graveside; and that may be one of the strongest contributions the arts can make to a consciousness of what is wrong, what requires repair.

At the end of his autobiography, Arthur Miller writes of “making myself possible.” Like the existentialist, like John Dewey, like Paulo Freire, Miller means that the self (any self) is never predetermined. It is created, made possible by choice of action or choice of a project. I recall the philosopher Paul Ricoeur describing imagination as “the passion for the possible.” Our life projects--teaching, perhaps, playwriting, painting--must be imagined as possible and cared about enough to move us to hard and committed work. I read recently about the kind of teaching done by the late and wonderful poet, Kenneth Koch, who was so active in teaching children poetry, in enabling them to pose the difficult questions and find ways of articulating them in verse. There are others in all of our lives, models, if you like, embodiments (we hope) of what might be possible for us. Miller reminds us at the end of his book, what must be held in mind: “The truth, the first truth, probably, is that we are all connected, watching each other. Even the trees.” When we allow ourselves to move out or into a painting or a carving or full-sized sculpture, the experience may become a kind of dialogue with two centers of energy in transaction with one another. After all, a Caravaggio painting, say, or a Manet, when grasped as a work of art, an object of experience, is much more than an immovable thing. Perceived or imagined, it is always in process, always beginning. There are always levels not reached, shadows unexplored, shapes not yet complete. Think how Cezanne’s “Mount St. Victoire” changes as we look through the diverse perspectives that give it its strange solidity and, at once, its movement in space. Or the Bonnard paintings of the figure in the bathtub or with the strange suggestion of someone behind the parlor door. As for being “connected, watching each other....” think back if you are fortunate enough, to your first sight of Michelangelo’s “David” or his “Moses”, or to an Ingres *Odalisque*, or to Manet’s “*Olympia*.” Cannot you sense their watching you if you watch them attentively enough? I keep remembering looking into Bacchus’ eyes, into the eyes of those

surrounding Dr. Gross in the Eakins painting, the weary eyes of the soldiers in Homer's "Prisoners at the Front." There are still lifes that watch as well: Van Gogh's "Sunflowers," Redon's bouquets, the fearful chill of "The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian" that makes it almost a still life of dark blue uniformed backs lined up, with rifles raised. The eyes are hidden, but, somewhat like Miller's tree, the picture stares.

It is the connection made possible that seems so important in the arts. Miller lamented the absence of "conscience" in contemporary theatre. Lamenting, he makes us want to move, to recapture conscience and morality in the arts, the several arts. Writer and director Kenneth Lonergan wrote in the same issue of the Times a paragraph of great relevance for our argument on behalf of all the arts:

I think we live so much in our imaginations--not just artist types but everyone--that in some ways the imaginative connection you get between a play or movie or book or painting or piece of music and its respective audience is as close as we ever get to each other. And all right, with all the suffering and misery and death and destruction raining down on people all over the world, and all the stupidity and ignorance and bullying and intolerance, and all the people running around in a panic trying to choke off the breath of life wherever and in whomever they find it--are those pursuits important and the theatre isn't?

He meant all the arts, of course; and he spoke of the theatre as a place where imaginations can meet, "where you can glimpse what it might be like to be someone else." Here is significant connectedness, not merging with one another but understanding in some deep way, coming in touch (as Cynthia Ozick wrote) "with the familiar heart of the stranger." And Edward Said wrote, with reference to T.S. Eliot and others, that survival is about connection between all things.

I am sure it is clear that the orders created by the visual arts and the new vantage points provide not only examples of "the miracle of relationships." They open opportunities for the making of community in classrooms. This may be especially the case when young persons come in reflective and appreciative contact with the arts through their own slow mastery of the craft and the discipline involved. Seeking their own perceptual orders, seeking patterns of meaning as they make their own imprints on the world, they may be freed to feel the paintings watching as they themselves learn how to see and bring paintings to life by lending them

their own. It is the dialogue, the emergent connectedness that people become aware of the need for regard of the other, of the need to look into the other's face and deal justly with her or him, no matter where his or her point of origin, no matter what difference there is in modes of worship--or modes of expressing and creating and moving, no matter what the difference in the way whatever deity or force is yearned towards. It is difficult to hope for harmony or resolution; but the arts are not founded in the hunger for harmony, certainly not in modern times. There can be outrage evoked and bitterness and desolation, as well as joy, as well as visions of the sublime; and it is our commitment to help these experiences feed into a quest for decency and social justice.

There was a Mexican exhibition in New York when I presented this paper. I saw those haunting, impassioned self-portraits by Frida Kahlo, the stuff of some of my experience, feeling connected and, at once, disconnected and striving with a kind of delight to resolve the tensions she created with her eyes, her wound, her monkeys, her birds, on those deep levels Dewey had in mind. Struggling to do so, I believe some of what I discovered did spring up as new desire and thought; and I was differently in the world with sufferings and passions almost unknown before; and I was moved once again, with a clear intention but no clear comprehension, to find some way to transform. And there were Jacob Lawrence's migrants in a nearby gallery, those strangely linear, haunting figures leaning over fences, boarding trains in their great and often failing migration to the north. Lawrence himself reminds us to attend to form and color and texture, not lose the art in the subject matter. We could relish the wonders of his compositions, the startling blacks and oranges and yellows, the vistas behind the vistas--and, at once, the desperation and the soon to be dashed hopes--appearing to our indignation as well as to our wonder, even our awe at a vision, an African-American vision of the human condition. I could go on in this world of seeking and making, but I will refer only to one more: an Orozco painting of a prisoner being beaten, a guerilla fighter probably, agitated, alive, and, on the other side, the image of a soldier or a policeman or prison guard, an embodiment of rigidity and lack of care, an icon representing those who issue orders and preside over suffering without feeling a relation with the one they torture--the official as imperturbable as the prison wall. Seeing that, I am moved to resist walls and barricades, to discover openings somehow, to bring in sight the visions of justice and freedom that preoccupy me--and to do it without impinging on the dignity, the integrity of art forms we are working--for their sake and our

sakes, to bring alive, to make present, to shine in the world.

I choose to end with a poem that is probably familiar: the last verse of Marge Piercy's "To Be of Use." There is something about being of use in these dark moments that links us together, as does the connection between the "work of the world" and works of art.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
Has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn are put in museums
But you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries out for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Out of the rubble and the panic we can create new shapes, new pitchers; our work, breaking through the crusts, can be (as seldom before) "real."