

Long obsessive about the shifting shapes of the American tradition and, more specifically, the relation between education and the arts, particularly imaginative literature, I taught the Arts and American Education for many years at Teachers College, wrote *THE PUBLIC SCHOOL AND THE PRIVATE VISION*, several essays on subject, am still fascinated in an increasingly problematic moment. The long Emersonian tradition about the need for a paradigmatic American voice (freed from the tyrannies and frameworks of Europe) and the corruptions of "trade" is present again in Whitman. With a clearer view of an emerging industrial nation, a silenced mass, intensified vulgarity and ignorance, he raises images of a kind of poetic superman and a questionably perfect woman which strangely overpower the visions of diversity and inclusiveness we have so long associated with Whitman. Still, this somehow tragic, deep-toned voice and the very term 'vistas' move me to reach beyond towards unfulfilled possibilities in education and the arts.

No one here has to be reminded of the darkness of these times, making some of us almost desperate in our desire to bring about changes, moving too many of us to retreat into apathy and hopelessness. We know that the arts cannot change the world, but, as Marcuse reminded us, those who can engage reflectively and authentically with the arts may be awakened in startling ways to the scars and flaws in our society and may be awakened to transform. Becoming fully present to the sense of heaviness and poverty and damaged beauty in Picasso's "Woman Ironing.", the release of human passion and promise in a flamenco dance, what it signifies to be told, as Sethe is told in *BELLOVED*. that she is 'a friend of my mind', hearing the pulse of change and longing in the blues, people may be imaginatively awakened and uniquely moved to choose themselves as actors committed to alter some corner of our suffering world.

I work, as some of you know, in aesthetic education, which is committed to process, to becoming, to change. When we think of education, even today, we think of honoring the distinctiveness of human beings as they come together in relationships--to move beyond where they are. We think of nurturing their efforts to make sense of their experiences by tapping capacities too often ignored; imagination, perception, feeling, the sense of the body in movement. And we want to do so by encouraging an awareness of lived situations, of perspectives contingent on gender, class, ethnic identity, the sense of being in whatever can be called the 'known world'.

Teaching artists, each with a history of personal creativity in a particular art form, work in workshops with teacher-learners to engage them in participatory involvements with specific works of art. Not only do they enable people to grasp particular works in relation to identifiable cultural moments. Not only do they help them see through their own eyes. They ask them to interpret from the vantage points of their experience, backgrounds, lived situations--to lend the works their lives. Aesthetic education clearly differs from art appreciation. Frequently, of course, appreciation has been coupled with practice--learning skills and techniques

fundamental to mastery of a craft. But, too often there has been the kind of stress on universality and formalism that has ignored or set aside ideas of perspectives. The notion that responses to art may be contingent on experience, group membership, and even class and gender raises fears of a threatening relativism and a neglect of standards. Moreover, there is now a renewed demand for respect for authority and, more and more often, a call for return to the 'canon' or what stands for the 'tried and true' in various artistic venues. The specters of censorship are already detected in schools; and, in some places, there is a new compliance, a seeping back of elitism---a belief that so-called "high art" is a possession of the ruling class. Political and cultural changes have affected all this to some degree; but, given the current advances of fundamentalism and right wing attitudes, objectivist approaches to art forms are on the rise again.

I mean by that the view that there is only one interpretation of a work of art, an authoritative interpretation. There are more and more attacks on constructivism (which some condemn as nothing but a disguised version of an outmoded progressivism). The very notion that ordinary people--including minorities and immigrants from unfamiliar places--can be asked to construct their own meanings instead of accepting predefined meanings offends those who see themselves as upholding what they call tradition or (sometimes) western civilization. We may be witnessing a public school enactment of what are called the "culture wars"; but I prefer to think of what is happening (and may happen) as a serious challenge to democracy. Our institute, with its respect for diversity, its attentiveness to multiple voices and perspectives, its interest in the many modes of artistic expression, its regard for individual dignity, not only tries to represent a community in the making, it embodies and (I believe) acts upon such democratic principles as freedom of thought and speech, regard for human rights (including the rights of women and children), human equality, and social justice.

What we call participatory approaches to works of art can be compared with or contrasted to the ancient view--Aristotle's, for instance, --that the arts must be seen as imitations of some universal order or (as in the tragedies) of the workings of destiny moving through the generations. Indeed, there are those today who believe that, if human beings scorn or disobey moral laws universal in their application and knowable by rational men, chaos and disorder would follow. The arts offered catharsis as they called attention to the eternal and to the ideal of justice. But each art object, a statue or a poem, was to be contemplated from a distance, its beauty intuited as directly as a logical proof. The disinterestedness accompanying this contemplative attitude led people to separate the art object in its purity from everyday life and the changing phases of experience. The romantics, in resistance to this, developed the idea of expressiveness--the work of art as an embodiment of feeling, a way of communicating emotion. Making the living, feeling individual central to an understanding of what came to be called the aesthetic experience, a number of

thinkers--viewing the live, perceiving, changing human being as central to an understanding of what happens when consciousness grasps an object or arrangement of sounds and, by means of its grasping or intention, transforms something neutral, simply there into what might be called a work of art. Everything depends, in this 'view' on what happens in the interplay between the live creature and that which becomes a work of art. I say all this in the context of "democratic vistas" because I hope you will join in wondering, in asking yourself what you actually think about the arts, why you are here, how you will explain your coming here to those in your school or region who still think of the arts as a fringe subject or as mere entertainment or as a slightly degrading way of thinking about things better left untouched. I only hope you will not justify your attendance by saying engagement with the arts will make us and our students better people or that the involvements that lie ahead will help children learn math or geography better.

I have not spoken of imagination, the capacity most crucial, perhaps, in bringing art forms to life. You certainly are aware that Shakespeare offers us a created world, a Hamlet or Twelfth Night. We are able to enter that world--to perceive it to feel it on our skin, because we have the potential to break with the everyday, the familiar and summon up alternative realities--to open towards untapped possibility, to think of what might be, perhaps what should be Emily Dickinson has written that "imagination lights the slow fuse of possibility." Paul Ricoeur called it a "passion for the possible," Adrienne Rich, deeply aware of the suffering, the injustices in the world, wrote that "poetry begins in dread and ends in possibility." I do not read that as a promise of fulfillment or completion or a necessarily positive possibility. In a workshop, the responses will be multiple, the teaching artist avoiding answers or solution, working for careful reading, pointing out figures of speech, honoring even the most unexpected answers. When it comes to the visual arts and participants are asked to look at paintings in Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series--to look closely at the lines and colors, the dark strained images of those clinging to the fences, those tearing themselves away, waiting in long lines for trains. Moving into it, letting imagination work upon it, how can we not relate it to the diasporas today, the people wandering across the world? How can we avoid feeling empathy and horror and outrage at once--refusing to stare at the paintings disinterestedly from across the room? All this activity occurs within experience--as worlds and landscapes and face come to life within experience, making new connections--and that means new meanings, new vistas upon the world. This is what aesthetic education can make possible if we participate imaginatively with others, look from many angles, discover dialogical agreements, feel our own realities changing, find something happening to our identity, as the world expands and we notice what is there to be noticed and what we have never noticed before.

It is best to end with a beginning. And what is a beginning? "A beginning." wrote Edward Said, "must be thought possible, it must be taken to be possible before it can

be one. The mind's work, in order to be done, occasionally requires the possibility of freedom, of a new cleanness, of prospective achievement, of special and novel appropriation." The mind's work, yes, if mind is seen as a verb and not a noun, a human mode of acting in and upon the world--of acting along with others or in response to others, since there can be no mindfulness without relationship, without culture or community. Returning to Walt Whitman:

*I have heard what the talkers were talking... the talk of the
beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.*

*There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

*Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.*