

The Humanities and What Matters—Visual Arts
February 15, 2011

I too would like to thank Pat Johnson for inviting me to participate in this symposium. I thank her in spite of the fact that it has caused more than one restless night thinking about just what I might have to offer this panel. My original thought was to poll the Visual Art faculty to get a cross section of ideas that I would organize into a cohesive presentation. I ultimately rejected that idea for two reasons. One, as I'm sure all of you that are a part of an academic unit know, trying to organize anything based on a survey of faculty that results in cohesiveness is a daunting task. And that is the way it should be. Finding a common voice could be especially difficult in a diverse department such as ours where we offer specific degrees in Art Education, Art History, Fine Arts Studio, Photography, and Visual Communication Design, as well as, a general degree in Visual Arts. To further delineate, we offer what is considered a "professional" degree, the BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) and a "liberal" degree, the BA (Bachelor of Arts). My second reason for not conducting a survey was given this opportunity, why not use it to explore my own ideas and express my personal views. Therefore, I am taking this opportunity while I have it.

In his address Dean Benson has stated, "It is hardly clear what the humanities are". How true this statement is, especially when related to the visual arts. All would seem to agree that Art History belongs within the

humanities realm. However, it is seldom that one finds art practice, the actual making of art, to be included. My remarks today will be mostly concerned with “What Matters” when it comes to art practice. Although some of what I say today might be applied to the Arts in general my intent is to put my remarks in the context of the visual arts. Issues important to this discussion are: professional vs. liberal education; arts education vs. educating the artist; and the intellectual vs. the emotional response to works of art.

From his remarks it is clear that Dean Benson includes *arts education* as an integral part humanities study. To refresh your memory he states:

The humanities are natural allies to the fine and performing arts, in part because the latter eschew the pretension to be wholly scientific, and also because, as in the arts, the ways in which the humanities enter into what we value at the same time express normative commitments, ideals, practices, and responsibilities that are themselves subjects of humanistic study and scrutiny. The humanities study what matters to human beings in such a manner that such study becomes implicated in the very subject; for the humanities inherently take positions about what is meaningful, valuable, or has significance which then come under the critical lens of humanistic study.

The importance of an education inclusive of education in the arts is justified by a 1996 NEA study, Effects of Art Education on Participation in the Arts. This study revealed that the effects of general education changed, depending on how much arts education one had received. Specifically, those people with high levels of general education *and* a more extensive arts

education experience were much higher in their arts attendance and consumption than were those with comparable general education but little or no arts-specific education.

The implication is, and I believe it to be true, that by attending and being a consumer of the arts one is going to lead a more personally fulfilling and meaningful life.

This all paints a rather rosy picture for the visual arts. So, is there a problem? Perhaps! In her address to the 2006 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, Valuing Arts on their Own Terms, Vanderbilt University Professor Constance Bumgarner Gee, states:

Most of us involved in arts programming and arts education K-university think and talk about the arts as they affect a) the individual as a person, b) the individual as a contributing member of society, and c) the human community. Valuing the arts on their own merits, that is, for the sensorial, intellectual, and emotional nourishment derived from deep engagement with an art form is, I believe, the most fundamental and genuine way we *think* about the affects of art ... on the individual, *ourselves* first and foremost.

She later states:

As you well know, it demands deep knowledge of a subject to present it wholly, that is, from various perspectives embedded in historical, socio-political, and, in the case of art and design, aesthetic context. To teach comprehensively and connectively is a challenging task even if one's focus remains primarily within the extended visual arts field. As we reach across the map of visual culture and into adjacent disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, world history, political science, and economics we need to critically reassess our own and our colleagues' professional and

intellectual capabilities. Individually and collectively we are in serious trouble when we degenerate from scholar to dilettante.

If we find merit in Professor Gee's assessments then it behooves those of us in the arts to be cautious as we approach what I might characterize as a "degree without borders". I do not wish to imply that we not explore new ways of pursuing and organizing study in the humanities as Dean Benson has invited us to do. However, I do wish to defend, when it comes to the arts, the inclusion of a "professional" component within the framework of the humanities.

Earlier I spoke of the NEA study that indicated those individuals that have been exposed to an expanded arts education as a part of their general education were more likely to attend and consume the arts as a part of their life. If we have a consumer it stands to reason we must have a supplier—the artist. How then do we educate this individual? Do we leave it to the "professional" schools of art? I think not for I believe artists occupy a unique position within the humanities. They both benefit from and contribute to humanities study. On the one hand artists are students of the humanities utilizing what is learned as possible contributing factors for creating their art. On the other hand, artists become teachers through presenting work that the viewer has an opportunity react to and learn from.

Two weeks ago, here in Sears Auditorium, Dayton artist, Bing Davis, who had a retrospective exhibition of his art in the Rike Gallery, at ArtStreet, and at the Dayton Art Institute, gave a talk about his life and education.

He related that, in college, as he became technically proficient in several art media, his professors implored him to “find your voice”. That did not mean choose a media or develop a style. Rather it required that he find what he wished to “say” with his art. What is the content? What does it mean? This begs the question, how does an artist “find their voice”.

Certainly it is through studying other artists, art movements, and through their life experiences. However, what better way than by combining technical (dare I use that word) training with study in the humanities. Bing Davis found his voice by paying attention to history and by learning about and responding to his African heritage. We, in turn, have the opportunity to be made conscious of this culture, and to learn from it, by witnessing his creative endeavors.

Before closing I would like to address one other element that, to me, is critical— the viewers response to a work of visual art. In most cases this is an experience unencumbered by sounds or words, either written or spoken. We know that much can be learned, intellectually, about aesthetic values, and social, cultural and economic issues by this experience. But if by humanities we mean what it means to be human we cannot ignore ones emotional response. I was reminded of this last Thursday evening. One of our faculty members Kyle Phelps, along with his brother Kelly, is exhibiting work in the Rike Gallery. By the way, if you

haven't already, you should all go see this exhibition. As I was standing outside the gallery, Enrique Romaguera, exited and immediately exclaimed, "Wow! That hits you right in the gut". I was reminded of my first visit to the Museum of Modern art, many more years ago than I would like to think about. On that visit I rounded a corner and was immediately stopped dead in my tracks. It was Picassos painting, Guernica that confronted me. There was nothing intellectual about my response. No thoughts were given to the paintings subject matter, the Spanish Civil War. It was simply an unexplainable feeling that came over me in reaction to this most powerful work of art. Of course, there has been an endless analysis of both the form and meaning of this painting since it was first displayed in 1937. This intellectual analysis is, undoubtedly important. However, the real meaning for me is that powerful emotional response that I had all those years ago and that remains with me today. In my view, this is "What Matters".

References

Valuing the Arts on Their Own Terms? (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*)
Constance Bumgarner Gee[®], Vanderbilt University, NASAD Annual Meeting,
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Effects of Art Education on Participation in the Arts, National Endowment for the
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