

Learning to Live with Art

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How to prepare for one for whom the only adequate preparation is to confess that we cannot be prepared for what is coming?!

INTRODUCTION

If education is preparation for living in and with the world, art education is preparation for living in and with the world of art. In this essay I address the preparation for works of art so unfamiliar and radically “other,” that the only adequate preparation may be to confess that we cannot be prepared for what is coming. This education is aimed at learning to live with art, in the sense of learning to live with the uncertainty and barriers to transparent meaning presented by otherness. By looking at George Steiner’s discussion on ontological difficulty, Richard Rorty’s distinction between live and dead metaphor, and Roland Barthes’s distinction between pleasure and bliss, I argue that learning to live with art-that-is-other deserves more attention in education today.

Although it carries beyond the scope of this essay to address fully the question *why* we ought to learn to live with art, I argue that we have a responsibility, both as human beings in general, and as teachers more specifically, to let ourselves be disrupted by otherness. This responsibility is rooted in Jacques Derrida’s critique of the Western metaphysics of presence, which has unquestioningly privileged the present (self) over the absent (other). Instead of letting the self-evidence of that which is present go unquestioned, Derrida examines the absence (of the other) in which this presence (of the self) is rooted. Our sameness (in the sense of the assumed coherence and continuity of self) is founded on otherness, hence we have a responsibility to live with and face otherness.

ART EDUCATION AND AESTHETIC EDUCATION

The works of art I refer to in this essay are works that provide occasions for aesthetic experience, the “serious perception” of and “intense engagement with what is immediately presented or invoked by the [work], with *its* world.”² Although much of the literature on aesthetic experience speaks of “the object,” this serious perception of and intense engagement with a work and its world applies to two-dimensional and three-dimensional visual art, as well as to literature and poetry, and to performances of music, theatre, and dance. The aesthetic experience is an *aesthetizing* experience, which offers new ways of perceiving.³ In contrast, *anaesthetizing* experiences numb and impoverish our ways of perceiving.⁴ But not only do I speak of works of art as those works that provide occasions for aesthetic experience, I speak specifically of those works of art that address us from, as it were, another shore, from across the boundaries that we have created to separate self from other. They are works that are called “difficult,” “strange” or “unfamiliar,” works that we can *ingest* but not *digest*, that we roll around uncomfortably in our perception, like a hot potato in our mouth. The kind of art education, then, that I am referring to would be called “aesthetic education” by some. It involves the use of

works of art *as works of art*, that is, for the aesthetic experiences they provide. This is not the only valid use of works of art in education, nor is it the only valid definition of art education. But this way of going about art education is significant and deserves more attention in North American primary and secondary education.

Art-that-is-other does not denote and represent the world in a direct, easily decodable way, does not reach out to offer us new interpretive frameworks and ways of seeing. An example is Rebecca Horn's site-specific piece "Concert for Buchenwald," in Weimar, 1999. This installation consists of two parts: one inside the tram depot of a disused power plant, and one in the White Salon of Schloss Ettersburg. In the White Salon, beehives are suspended from the ornamental ceiling. Light shines down from the beehives and is reflected in round, rotating mirrors on the wooden floor. One mirror is shattered by a falling stone. A cello plays itself with two bows. The sound mingles with the humming of bees and, at intervals, with the stone crashing onto the mirror. I could go on describing details, but no words can capture the experience evoked by this installation. More importantly, the installation cannot be "read" or "decoded." Assuming that the beehives symbolize X, the cello symbolizes Y and the mirror symbolizes Z is much too simplistic. Stéphane Mallarmé wrote "peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit. [paint not the object, but the effect it produces]." ⁵ "Concert for Buchenwald" cannot be decoded, and those seeking what the installation or its components represent or refer to will be left at a loss. Art-that-is-other, such as Horn's or Mallarmé's, is often unsettling. We may be tempted to reject it as nonsensical and useless, but by doing so we miss out on the opportunity for experiencing and appreciating what the work of art *presents* rather than what it *represents*, for experiencing and appreciating *how* it means rather than *what* it means. ⁶

STEINER ON DIFFICULTY

Steiner provides a classification of "modes of difficulty" commonly encountered in post-Renaissance Western poetry. ⁷ The purpose of this typology is to gain a better understanding of what readers may mean when they call a certain poem or poetical passage "difficult." Although Steiner speaks specifically of poetry, the typology is helpful for other art forms as well. *Contingent* difficulty is the most common mode of difficulty and can be overcome by looking up the word, phrase or reference which at first escapes our understanding. Once we have looked up the archaic word, the technical jargon or the etymology of a word, we can get on with our reading and interpretation. *Modal* difficulty tends to be more serious, and may at times even be impossible to overcome. It arises when the work reaches our rational understanding, but escapes the reach of our feelings. We can study a poem, understand the meaning of the sentences, but "we cannot coerce our own sensibility into the relevant frame of perception." ⁸ *Tactical* difficulties are, for all kinds of reasons, intentionally created by the poet. Poets may need to hide the meaning of the poem for political reasons. Or they may want to rejuvenate and intensify language itself.

I will not address contingent, modal, and tactical difficulty further here, because central to my discussion is the fourth mode of difficulty Steiner outlines: *ontological* difficulty. It arises when "the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility

between poet and reader, between text and meaning” is wholly or partly broken.⁹ The reader runs into ontological difficulty when the poem ceases to be a poem accessible with traditional hermeneutics, when the poet lets the language be all there is. A poem of ontological difficulty cannot be “read” as that word is commonly understood. Steiner invokes Derrida’s deconstruction, which insists “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” [there is nothing outside of text]. In contrast to the traditional Western view that language is a transparent medium by which the reader can come to know what is, deconstruction and works of ontological difficulty call into question this presumed transparency and referentiality of language. Contemporary art-that-is-other often poses ontological difficulty, because it can only be understood in terms of itself, that is, in terms of a framework that is by definition unknown to us.

The work of the French poet Mallarmé, for example, often poses ontological difficulty. Steiner refers to Mallarmé’s “L’absente de tous bouquets” as the “operative metaphor” for works of ontological difficulty.¹⁰ With “l’absente de tous bouquets” Mallarmé expressed “that his aim was to describe not a real flower, but the ideal flower that can never be found in this world.”¹¹ Mallarmé’s poetry poses ontological difficulty because its language does not refer to a reality outside language. It is not a completely hermetic language, or we would not even be able to *ingest* the individual words and phrases. But each time we try to *digest* the language, thinking we understand its meaning, we are faced with the slippage of the text. Mallarmé’s text can only exist because of other text, and it refers, in unstable and indirect ways, to other text, but there can be no direct translation of one text into another text, let alone into a reality outside language. “A writing referring only to itself *simultaneously* refers us, indefinitely and systematically, to another writing.”¹²

RORTY ON METAPHOR AND DEAD METAPHOR

Rorty follows Donald Davidson in his distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in spoken and written language,

as a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks. The literal uses of noises and marks are the uses we can handle by our old theories.... Their metaphorical use is the sort which makes us get busy developing a new theory.¹³

We can look at metaphor as the first step in the generation of new meaning, but the metaphor itself, when it is a metaphor, has no meaning, because the system within which it would have meaning does not exist yet. A metaphor is an “illegal move,” a move that would be disqualified by the rules of existing language games (Wittgenstein), a move in a language game that does not exist yet. Because we do not understand the metaphor, we “get busy” developing the language game which will make sense of the metaphor. Once the metaphor has been appropriated by a language game, however, it ceases to be a metaphor. It becomes what Rorty calls a “dead” metaphor and he uses the analogy of the coral reef to explain how language keeps itself alive: “Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors.”¹⁴ A living metaphor can be considered productively ambiguous or “semantically impertinent.”¹⁵

A living metaphor, by virtue of its newness, cannot be understood in terms of dead metaphors. The unfamiliar cannot be paraphrased by the familiar. For “the

unparaphrasability of metaphor is just the unsuitability of any such familiar sentence for one's purpose."¹⁶ Jeanette Winterson describes how she finds herself at a loss to capture in words other than those in her work itself, what her work is about. "It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did."¹⁷ Too often, the arts used in education are dead metaphors. If teachers and curriculum developers are afraid of introducing images, sounds, and texts that that cannot be "explained," they stay away from live metaphors and from creating the conditions which allow for the experience and reception of art-that-is-other. In the last section I will address these conditions, which in Derridean terms can be described as being prepared for that which one cannot prepare for, more extensively.

BARTHES ON PLEASURE AND BLISS

Roland Barthes distinguishes between pleasure (*plaisir*) and bliss (*jouissance*).¹⁸ He describes the text of pleasure as "the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (*PT*, 14).¹⁹ The text of bliss, on the other hand, is not comfortable but "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" (*PT*, 14). Because in texts of bliss we find the moves for language games that do not exist yet, because we do not yet have the framework within which bliss would make sense, Barthes asserts that "pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot" (*PT*, 21). As soon as the reading of the text can be expressed in words, the spell is broken, the metaphor is dead, bliss vanishes.

If we want the possibility of new meaning, we have no choice but to embrace the threat and incomprehensibility of bliss. Barthes speaks of bliss as cut, tear, cleavage, rupture (Heidegger's *Riss*), "the abrupt loss of sociality" (*PT*, 39). The cut is both painful and erotic, both wound and seduction. We tend to settle for the comfort of pleasure, for what is nice and satisfying rather than what is blissful and glorious because, in the land of pleasure, things can at worst get unpleasant, whereas in the land of bliss, real pain and anxiety can strike.

"No significance (no bliss) can occur... in a mass culture... for the model of this culture is *petit bourgeois*... [B]liss may come only with the absolutely new, for only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness" (*PT*, 39-40). Steiner similarly contrasts works of ontological difficulty with the products of mass culture.²⁰ He indicates that ontological difficulty is typically "an expression of the poet's rebellion against the constraints of influences of canon and tradition, or against the erosion of language in a "technocratic and mass-consumer society."²¹ Coming back to "Concert for Buchenwald," Bernd Kauffmann describes the installation in Schloss Ettersburg as "indicating a realm of other possibilities that find increasingly reduced space in our lacklustre daily lives."²² Lacklustre—an evocative term: dull, lacking shine, brilliance, fire. We could also speak of "our anaesthetic daily lives," where anaesthetic indicates the numbness resulting from the absence or exclusion of the aesthetic. "Aesthetic" is distinct from "pleasurable," as Barthes distinguishes bliss from pleasure. Horn's work "does not offer the kind of pleasurable entertainment we might, as others would say, look forward to visiting."²³ And it is not only the uncomfortable directness of this work's reference to the horrors of concentration

camp Buchenwald that make “pleasurable entertainment” an unsuitable description of Horn’s work. It is also the unapologetic force and boldness of the images and sounds that make an encounter with this work an aesthetic experience.

What Barthes wrote in 1973 still holds true today, that is that “all official institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words” (*PT*, 40). If we want the arts in education to be more than decoration and entertainment, in fact to counter a culture of decoration and entertainment, we cannot stay safely within the conformity of pleasure but must venture out and seek the disruption of bliss. This does not mean that we must seek “newness for newness’s sake.” As I will address in the last section, an understanding of history and tradition is necessary for the radically new to emerge. Quite simply put: we cannot move beyond where we have not been. It is the oscillation between tradition and innovation that the conformity of entertainment hinders.

BAUDRILLARD ON SEDUCTION AND OBSCENITY

Baudrillard addresses the obscenity in today’s information and communication society, of the immediately visible and transparent, which leaves nothing hidden or secret. Barthes asks “Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes?” (*PT*, 9) and Baudrillard agrees—only to conclude that gaping garments are rare these days and have been replaced by fully exposed bodies. Although I do believe the erotic has a place in education, this is not the point here. Baudrillard points out that our ability to be seduced, to be led into and unto unfamiliar terrain, to suspend the desire to know and to understand, is becoming seriously impaired in a culture obsessed with scientific explanations and determinate answers. The dominant Western culture is intent on keeping the scientific and economic machines running smoothly. The unexpected, unsettling character of the arts—and I mean live metaphors, not dead ones, that is works of bliss, not of pleasure—is the grain of sand that threatens to grind those machines to a halt. “Today the scene and the mirror have given way to a screen and network. There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication.”²⁴

Douglas Aoki has addressed the “pedagogical politics of clarity.”²⁵ Texts—and I would argue, works of art—that elude easy translation and hence disrupt this smooth and functional surface of communication are too often excluded from the curriculum. Works of art-that-is-other do not disguise their difficulty, or the necessary incompleteness of interpretation. They do not concede their meaning, they do not let themselves be translated into an easily accessible idea or theme. This is precisely the unparaphrasability of the live metaphor as mentioned by Rorty.²⁶ In an order of teaching that prides itself on its pragmatism, works of art that do not disclose a meaning that fits well, or that do not disclose a meaning at all, are useless.²⁷ As Jean-François Lyotard wrote with treacherous clarity in his 1986 *Le Postmoderne Expliqué aux Enfants*, “in a world that identifies success with saving time, Ö thinking has a fatal flaw: it wastes time.”²⁸ Art-that-is-other is definitely a waste of time.

Looking at such a work of art is hard; it does not carry its “essence” on the surface. Like reading a difficult text, the only way in is *in*. Winterson describes how the constant bombardment of the media’s watered down images, sounds, and texts “both deadens our sensibilities and makes us fear what is not instant, approachable, consumable. The solid presence of art demands from us significant effort.”²⁹ Clearly, this presupposes a view of education that is not about offering bite-size chunks, but about an enterprise which requires and allows time—time, for instance, for works of art to do their work.

HOW TO PREPARE

Art is a guest that may not behave properly. Yet for the work to do its work, I will have to learn how to properly receive this guest, “how to welcome the other into my home, how to be a good ‘host,’ which means how both to make the other at home while still retaining the home as mine.”³⁰ I cannot enter the work of art, become part of it, and I cannot make the work of art become part of me. Looking at a work of art means being constantly reminded of its otherness. Having two systems of meaning exist side by side, irreducible to one another, is uneasy, but it is exactly what art-that-is-other asks us to do. “Hospitality...means to put your home at risk, which simultaneously requires both having a home and risking it.”³¹ Education largely stays away from these strange guests, from images, sounds and texts that cannot be “explained.”

“Whatever the modalities may later be, living is living with.”³² Living just with the sameness of ourselves is not living. Living is inevitably living with otherness—and that is what learning to live with art means. We may not understand art, but we ought to befriend it nevertheless. Learning to be a friend of art is learning not to appropriate it—on the contrary, it is learning to keep one’s distance. Derrida reminds us of “the warning accompanying the discourse on ‘good friendship’: not to give in to proximity or identification, to the fusion or the permutation of you and me. But, rather to place, maintain or keep an infinite distance within ‘good friendship’.”³³ In keeping my distance from art, I can see and respect it. I do not turn my back, but live with the work of art in its otherness.

The educational question we are left with is how to prepare for receiving this strange guest of art, without the preparation denying its alterity and forcing it into a framework of the expected.³⁴ Clearly, it is not the work itself, in its specificity and alterity for which students can be prepared. But Caputo’s insistence on “both having a home and risking it” tells us that although students may not be able to prepare for the actual incoming of the other, they can work on having a home. Paradoxical as it may seem, students need to understand their traditions as a place from which they can welcome otherness. As Anne Michaels observes about the celebration of foreign literature in the small Italian town of Castel Goffredo,

It could be that their awareness of the past is so engrained that’s it’s a given, so that they’re not threatened by bringing another culture right into their heart in that way....[T]hat sense of openness seems to come from a profound knowledge of one’s own place.³⁵

Derrida’s emphasis on the respect for tradition required for transgressing that tradition, on the importance of understanding what one proceeds to deconstruct, is a strong educational imperative.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

What would this preparation look like in actual teaching practice, inside or outside of a classroom? Let me introduce the first pedagogical implication with a brief anecdote. In elementary school, I used to like visiting my friend Daniel's house, because it was full of strange images and objects. His stepfather Peter was (and is) an artist. One day, Peter saw me frowning at an abstract work in their hallway. It was a small work, with black images of a line, a dot and a hook against a white background. "What is it?" I asked. Peter called Daniel to explain it to me. "It is a line, a dot and a hook," Daniel replied. "Well yes, I can see that," I said indignantly, "but what is it supposed to mean?" "It is supposed to mean a line, a dot and a hook," Daniel said. Instead of *looking* at the work for what it was, I wanted to get away from the actual looking as soon as possible, to *understand* the meaning of the work.

Welcoming art-that-is-other as a guest into the classroom requires space—literally and metaphorically. By pre-structuring the space, we pre-structure the way the guest is supposed to behave, and we constrain the interactions with the guest. Leaving the space unstructured means taking a risk, especially in an educational context, but it is the only way to show true hospitality to art. This means, for example, that a teacher does *not* establish a focus for listening to, looking at, or reading the work. Students are given the freedom—and responsibility—to "be with" the work. Guidance and structure may be required later on for learning more about the work and for reflecting upon it, but these activities should not shape and limit the actual perception of the work. That "perceiving" and "receiving" is harder to measure than "responding," and that this sits uneasily with the behavioral terms in which learning outcomes are commonly phrased, does not take away from the importance of learning to live with art-that-is-other.

The second implication for teaching practice flows from the assertion that learning to be a friend of art is learning not to appropriate it, but to keep one's distance. The work of art addresses us as other, and we can only perceive the work if we re-spect it. In this way, learning to live with art is paradigmatic for learning to live with otherness. Keeping one's distance is possible only when one has a place *from which* to keep distance. The understanding of one's place, of one's history and tradition and their contingent and constructed nature, is a condition for the ability to hear art's address. An encounter with a work of art in an educational setting is

a scene of pedagogical address in which I am obliged to listen without knowing why, without understanding, and before I know what I will hear. In this scene, I speak and listen not because I recognize myself or aspects of self reflected in the other (whom I therefore find respectable)—but because I owe respect to an absolutely different other, an unrecognizable other, an other irreducibly different from myself.³⁶

Some may object that this assertion of art's otherness throws us into solipsism. On the contrary, art-that-is-other addresses us and demands our attention. The address may be uncomfortable if we expect to have our interpretive frameworks confirmed, or to have solid bridges built between new experiences and existing frameworks. Art of ontological difficulty, new metaphor, art of bliss addresses us and asks us to venture onto a bridge of perception, where we stand in the uncomfortable awareness that the established connection may not last. This requires courage, especially of

teachers, if they take on the responsibility of guiding students onto this “rackety bridge between self and other.”³⁷

1. John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 59.
2. Ralph Smith, *Excellence II: The Continuing Quest in Art Education* (Reston: National Art Education Association, 1995), 204 and 60.
3. “New” here means new to the perceiver, who is not an isolated but a culturally and historically situated subject.
4. “Aesthetic” comes from the Greek *aisthanesthai*: to feel, to perceive.
5. As cited in Julia Kristeva, “The Revolt of Mallarmé,” in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Greer Cohn (London: Associate University Presses, 1998), 34.
6. Geoffrey Madoc-Jones and Anne Guthrie-Warman, “Imagination in Action” (Paper delivered at WestCAST 2002, Vancouver, B.C., 22 February 2002).
7. George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 19.
8. *Ibid.*, 33.
9. *Ibid.*, 40.
10. *Ibid.*, 46.
11. Charles Chadwick, *The Meaning of Mallarmé* (Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996), 6.
12. Jacques Derrida, as cited in Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 50.
13. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17.
14. *Ibid.*, 16.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 47-51
16. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 18.
17. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996), 165.
18. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). This book will be cited as *PT* in the text for all subsequent references.
19. Barthes uses “text” not so much literally as “written word,” but more metaphorically as the fabric or texture of experience.
20. “Mass culture” is *not* an indication of genre. The contrast between bliss and pleasure does not represent any presumed contrast between “classical music” and “pop music,” to use two ridiculously general categories. It indicates, rather, the contrast between the blissfully disruptive live metaphor, and the pleasant conformity of the dead metaphor—in any genre of art.
21. Steiner, *On Difficulty*, 42.
22. Bernd Kaufmann, “Preface,” in Rebecca Horn, *The Colonies of Bees Undermining the Moles’ Subversive Effort Through Time: Concert for Buchenwald* (Zurich: Scalo Verlag, 2000), 9.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 12.
25. Douglas Aoki, “The Thing Never Speaks for Itself: Lacan and the Pedagogical Politics of Clarity,” *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 3 (2000): 347-69.
26. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 18.
27. Aoki, “The Thing Never Speaks for Itself,” 358.

28. As cited in Nigel Blake et al., *Thinking Again: Education after Postmodernism* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1998), 1.
29. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 15-16.
30. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 57.
31. Ibid.
32. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 20.
33. Ibid., 65.
34. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 41.
35. Cited in John Allemang, "The Town that Reads Together...", *The Globe and Mail* (23 February 2002), D6.
36. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "A Third Paradox: Teaching as a Performance Suspended in the Space between Self and Other," in *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 162.
37. Cited in Ellsworth, "A Third Paradox," 158.