

Dr. Philip Taylor  
School of Visual and Performing Arts Education  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville 3052

Telephone: (Office) 344 8356; (Home) 347 7864

AARE/NZARE CONFERENCE PAPER 1992

TITLE:RE-THINKING THE AESTHETIC IN ARTS EDUCATION

### Recasting the Aesthetic: Conceptions of Sensuous Knowing

When John Dewey (1934) claimed nearly sixty years ago that "the product of art is not the work of art" he shrewdly was challenging arts educators to radically re-appraise their understanding of an aesthetic experience. For Dewey, the product of art consists of more than the object perceived. Perception demands a complex interactive process between the watcher and the watched. The artwork, whether that occur in the form of a Wagner opera, a Seurat painting, a Shakespearean play, cannot be fully appreciated, in Dewey's mind, until it is experienced or constructed by art watchers. In other words, the watcher needs to have an intimate relationship with the artwork in order for it to generate aesthetic meaning.

Interestingly enough, Dewey's conception of an aesthetic experience is not far removed from the word's etymological roots. Aesthetic, as Peter Abbs (1987) reminds us, derives from the Greek *aisthetika* which refers to "things perceptible through the senses, with the verb stem *aisthe* meaning: to feel, to apprehend" (p.53). There is a dynamic relationship implied here between apprehending and feeling. Although the product of art is perceived through the senses, it demands an active mode of contemplation.

This view now holds wide currency among arts educators. Best (1989), for example, has written on the dangers of separating an emotional response from a cognitive one: feelings are always answerable to reason, in that they are always, in principle open to the possibility of being changed by reasons given for seeing and feeling about a work in different ways (p.79)

An aesthetic experience is therefore dialogic in nature. Such dialogue seems to occur on a variety of different levels: between watcher and watched, affect and cognition, product and work, subject and object. Abbs (1989b) usefully describes this aesthetic dynamic as a sensuous knowing. Sensuous knowing involves an intricate reciprocity between subjective and objective responses. "What is important is the event," Greene (1989) reminds us, "the situation out of which the aesthetic

object emerges." This event, she proceeds to claim: is not there, hanging on the wall; it is not here, in the attending mind. The situation is created by the transaction, by the grasping of a consciousness ... When this occurs, it may be possible for the beholder to take

his/her own journey through a world that discloses what he/she may never have suspected, much less seen (p.218)

Although a sixty year period separates the time in which both Dewey and Abbs were writing, there are clear parallels between them. Fundamental to each theorist is the shared understanding that an aesthetic experience demands a heightened consciousness which works on the watcher's physical senses through an arresting engagement. What is surprising however is that during the Dewey-Abbs interlude, practitioners within arts education have virtually avoided acknowledging this conception of the aesthetic.

### Misconceptions

Arts educators have historically rejected the notion that an aesthetic response requires an active and contemplative engagement with the artwork. While Dewey was arguing that aesthetic responses occur when each person engages and "cooperates" with the art product so that "the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and orderly properties" others were making quite different claims. These views ranged from the attitude that art experiences demanded a kind of hallucinated participation, to an avid belief that encountering art somehow transformed an individual into a more rounded and wholesome person (Landy, 1986). The sensuous knowing that is so fundamental to Dewey's and Abbs' understanding of an aesthetic experience had been overwhelmed by a therapeutic dimension or utilitarian element. It is worthwhile exploring some flaws in thinking about the aesthetic experience which these views seemed to promote.

It is clear that recent and contemporary practices of arts education have been the unfortunate beneficiaries of an eighteenth-century Romanticist's view of the aesthetic (Hornbrook, 1989). This view, championed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, encouraged the free and spontaneous artistic endeavors of the young. The privitisation of experience and the sanctity of consciousness meant that an aesthetic experience would be characterised by the extent to which the participant's involvement was sincere and absorbed. The work of Peter Slade in drama education is a particular example of such an attitude (Slade, 1954).

Aesthetic responses, in Slade's mind, could be individually determined and justified on the basis that they

were truly felt by the participant. Children's play therefore was beautiful to the extent that it released self-expression. This commitment to the sanctity of child's play unfortunately promoted a view of the aesthetic which prioritized endogenous behaviour. The moral legitimacy of self-indulgence encouraged arts educators to believe that as creativity grew or originated from within, it would be improper to publically place this work within an external aesthetic framework. "Nothing is more cruel," wrote Slade, "than to force Children to sit as audience when others are playing." In a bizarre twist of logic it was suggested that innate impulses to create would somehow be retarded if a public dimension was

introduced. Teachers were held accountable even if the children wanted to share their artwork. Such a desire revealed to Slade that children had been misled by their guides: "... things have gone very far wrong - we have already suppressed them" (p.58).

There are numerous other examples in the arts where this view of the aesthetic has been applied. In the field of visual art, for example, Hornbrook (1989) writes of the late nineteenth-century School of Applied Art in Vienna. There, young people under the guidance of Franz Cizek, would be encouraged to paint and draw as their inclinations took them. Within each individual, Cizek claimed, there lay "the unconscious art" which needed to be nurtured and encouraged. The teacher would be a gentle facilitator, never dismissive but quietly creating a mood wherein the "unconscious art" could be released (p.7). It would be improper for the leader to provide a theoretical or historical context for the participants' inner creativity. The aesthetic experience was independently felt and demanded no disciplinary framework and certainly no act of cognition.

Just as Slade's teacher would become the child's "loving ally" who directed their attention "to some little piece of beauty they may have missed" (quoted in Hornbrook, 1989, p.10), Cizek seemed to interpret aesthetic as whatever was pleasing to self. The grasping of consciousness which was integral to Dewey's and Abbs' aesthetic had been transformed into a type of masturbatory zeal. It has been argued that this latter interpretation dominated the practice and thinking of arts educators during the halcyon days of progressive education and in doing so denied students access to an informed aesthetic understanding (Hornbrook, 1989; Bolton, 1992).

#### Implications of Aesthetic Misconception

The view of the aesthetic field which solely promotes the attitude that creativity occurs at birth and only requires

gentle encouragement from a wise adult for it to fully come into bloom has had a number of important consequences in arts education. Less emphasis, for example, was placed on learning a specified content or technique, such as English grammar, Elizabethan dramaturgy, Georgian ballads, line drawing. Priority was given to developing pedagogical strategies in which individuals could find and develop their own personal voice. Isadora Duncan seemed to sum up this approach when she rejected technique as an end in itself. Although cognizant of the importance of being skilled, Duncan was interested in the expression of one's "being in gestures and movement" (Haynes, 1987, p.145).

The emphasis on being and doing denied the participants' induction into a skilled understanding of an aesthetic craft. The situation in English education, for instance, with its de-emphasis on a canon which all students should be submerged in, highlights trends that were occurring in other artforms: language is learnt in operation not by dummy runs. In English, pupils meet to share their encounters with life,

and to do this effectively they move freely between dialogue and monologue - between talk, drama and writing; and literature, by bringing new voices into the classroom, adds to the store of shared experience. Each pupil takes from the store what he can and what he needs. In so doing he learns to use language to build his own representational world and works to make his fit reality as he experiences it (Dixon, quoted in Webb, 1987, p.79)

Sensuous knowing is unimportant within this framework: access to "life" situations and being able to "operate" within them is rated more highly than a critical and informed response to what one can learn from them. Webb (1987) has shown how such an approach abused studies of literature in the English classroom, reducing reader response to its most limited and reductive. Literature became an instrument of service and was valued only in terms of how its social discourse aided the languaging contexts of the classroom: each individual "takes from the store what he (sic) can and what he needs." The English classroom was transformed into a bargain basement, a potpourri of goods and services which individual shoppers would privately negotiate and barter for on their own terms.

Within this kind of scaffold it is not surprising that skills, abilities, propositional knowledge had no place. If aesthetic response is construed as an individualistic freedom to express then it is inevitable that there are no constraints or rules being placed on that expression. In recent times, arts educators have questioned what students who have been exposed to the above pedagogy are learning about aesthetic

attention. One of the most vocal of these is Peter Abbs. In relation to the English classroom, (1989a):

The range of literature (in the 70s) became narrowed to fit the ruling assumption. Novels of a rather crude social realist kind became the inevitable fodder of thousands of adolescents. These were not seen as a particular form of genre which, like any other genre, abstracts and selects in terms of an artistic intention. They were seen to be, by implication, the heart of literature which was directly about life `out there`, to be instantly discussed in terms of politics, class, society. That such discussion has a place cannot be questioned; that it bypassed a prior aesthetic activity is what was invariably overlooked (p.59, my emphasis)

Abbs' belief that a "prior aesthetic activity" had been neglected in the English classroom is also an observation made of the other arts, especially dance (Haynes, 1987), music (Metcalf, 1987) and drama (Bolton, 1992). It is apparent that practitioners in arts education have failed to expose their clients to the aesthetic contexts in which the expression takes place. Aesthetic form, for example, has been overshadowed by a pedantic obsession with content.

The drama classroom is a typical illustration of this state. "Among teachers of drama," Abbs (1979) argued, "it

would seem that the central concern has become `social adaptation` rather than expression and realization of experience through the creation of symbolic form." It is informative to note how Sladian approaches to drama were seen as preventing children access to the symbolic terrain of their artform. Abbs cites a study conducted by Robert Witkin in the 1970s to strengthen his case that drama educators have denied students access to true aesthetic experiences:

a great many of the role-play situations improvised in drama sessions in schools have nothing whatever to do with drama although there is no doubt they are a good basis for practical sociology. The richness and imaginative wealth that we find in the young child we are loth to seek for in the adolescent ... On the basis of what was observed and what was said in interviews it must be concluded that these drama teachers' concept of personal development was largely restricted to the notion of progressive social adjustment. Those to whom we spoke invariably invoked social adjustment as a justification of their educational role when they offered any kind of personal development (Witkin quoted in Abbs, 1979, p.6)

What is revealing in the above study is the lack of reference to the aesthetic field as a rationale for the teaching of drama. Hornbrook (1991) has argued that dependence on the above pedagogy has meant that drama teachers have virtually no comprehension of their discipline's artistic roots. Abbs (1991), unsurprisingly, supports this view: "Devoid of art, devoid of the practices of theatre, devoid of artistic terminology drama became a method of teaching without a subject" (p.ix).

It is apparent that sensuous knowing is informed by a literate understanding of the aesthetic field. In drama, this literate understanding, Hornbrook (1992) suggests, would place a focus on "the centrality of a theatre culture." The aesthetic field in drama would, he believes, be informed by a thorough investigation of theatre history and dramatic criticism which would encompass "the work of all kinds of actors, directors and designers." Students would be introduced, for instance, to Kabuki, Japanese Noh, the Maoist operas of China and the Hindu dance dramas. Aesthetic consciousness, in Hornbrook's mind, demanded such a rigorous appraisal of one's theatrical heritage. "The pedagogic fundamentalism which mesmerized school drama in England in the 1970s and the 80s" would be replaced by a firm induction into "the wider world of arts education" (p.20). Hornbrook was demanding a more concentrated and involved stance and understanding of the teacher than had been described by Slade. And it is to these demands which I now turn.

#### A Consideration of Aesthetic Form

Both Abbs and Hornbrook have challenged arts educators to re-think what they understand by an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic moments do not happen in a vacuum, or by luck, but

are the result of a complex interaction between content and form. Such complexity requires the skills and understanding of artists sensitive to the materials they are manipulating. It is apparent that teachers imbued with the kind of practice which Peter Slade advocated did not consider themselves as artists structuring work with an overall aesthetic intent but rather saw themselves as unhappy interlopers who occasionally offered the necessary prods to creativity:

In the past, in some of the arts, teachers have been peculiarly reluctant to enter the creative act of the pupil. They have been ready to start the artistic process and then have uneasily stood back and waited, powerless observers of the mystery of creativity, or, more often, the anxious observers of lost and ship-wrecked souls

clinging to whatever obscure flotsam they can find (Abbs, 1989a, p.40)

Perhaps this standing back has occurred because of teachers' inability to comprehend the nature of their various art forms. Elliot Eisner (1991) suggests that teachers rarely view themselves as artists and, in fact, rarely view themselves at all! Eisner points to a general malaise among educators to critically reflect upon their own practice. What is required in arts education is for practitioners to explore what constitutes aesthetic meaning. If we agree with Abbs that an aesthetic experience requires a sensuous knowing, what are the circumstances which will promote a frame of reference for this knowing to occur?

Part of the solution seems to lie with arts educators rigorously analyzing what they understand by the aesthetic. If we take the example of drama education, whose development Abbs (1989b) suggests is not dissimilar from the other arts, this would involve practitioners critically reflecting upon their own conception of dramatic form. The research of Cecily O'Neill (1978, 1991a, 1991b), for example, has indicated that few drama teachers structure work with an informed understanding of the artistic medium. Drawing on the work of Beckerman (1970) and Langer (1953), O'Neill challenges drama specialists to contemplate how they can artfully layer in theatrical elements such as tension, contrast, surprise, space and time, so that drama might happen.

If practitioners believe that drama does not operate on the same lines as narrative, even though both are situated in the present drama moves "toward something beyond," this sense of artistry will inform the classroom event (Langer, 1953, p.306). It would seem that teachers need to be trained in the constitution of dramatic form. Knowledge of Sladian philosophy will not in itself assist teachers structuring work for sensuous knowing. It is significant that Abbs (1989a) applauds the work of drama leaders, such as Dorothy Heathcote, who deliberately worked within the fictional context, forging an imminent yet unknown future in their drama structures.

Abbs, correctly in my view, champions such active manipulation from the teacher/artist and believes its

application could be widely adopted across all the aesthetic disciplines:

Heathcote's technique becomes an instrument for the development of artistic work much needed after a long period of *laissez-faire* and the often uncritical acceptance of all creative work (however poor) as sacerdotal manifestations of the inviolable self (1989a, p.40)



It is therefore clear that there exists, and has always existed, a body of knowledge which empowers teachers shaping of an aesthetic experience. In drama, this knowledge is not all that different from the kind Hamlet demands the players employ during their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* for Claudius. "Speak the speech," Hamlet instructs, "trippingly on the tongue." Hamlet is aware of the aesthetic form which must be artfully employed if the content is to carry meaning. Hamlet knows that if the form is bastardized then the work will have lost its intent. "Let your own discretion be your tutor," appeals Hamlet, "suit the action to the word, the word to the action." We find a direct parallel here to the major thrust of Abbs' argument. Meaning in art "cannot be grasped outside of the form in which it finds expression" (1987, p.53).

Education in aesthetic form will therefore inform the degree of sensuous knowing revealed to classroom participants. If such an education is not provided then students, in Best's (1985) terms, are "deprived of certain possibilities of expression and individuality" (p.66). But there are certain dangers in promoting such a view. The major one being that instruction in the discipline will be prioritized over experience in it. Knowing the rules of the game will explain little about how to play it. Abbs (1987) recognizes that an over emphasis on theoretical underpinnings or induction in technique "can block and impede the immediate bodily response, the imaginative indwelling of mind in the pattern of sensation" (p.60). What is required is a sensitive balance between discipline and experience. There is an evident tension here between encouraging an "imaginative indwelling of mind" and providing the scaffolding which can support it. Stanislavski (1949) was well aware of the contradictory nature of structured spontaneity in the training of actors but he also knew that performers who had not studied their roles "well and thoroughly" were "like readers of a complicated, unfamiliar text" (p.171).

The challenge for arts educators as we move from the post-modernist period is to find ways of keeping alive the existential dynamic while broadening students' conceptions of enriching expressive forms. Encountering the work of Abbs and Best, and Dewey and Langer is one way for arts specialists to inform their contemplations on what distinguishes their work as aesthetic activity. The exciting aspect of sensuous knowing is that it recognizes the dynamic interplay between apprehending and creating, and affect and cognition. It implies a more active mode of engagement than has previously been advocated. It promotes a view of arts education which

enables participants to construct and respond to others'



conceptions of reality while preserving and transforming their own. The experience of engagement is then its own destination, enjoyed because of the satisfying encounters created by a liberating form.

#### Works Cited

Abbs, P. (1991) Preface in Hornbrook, D. Education in Drama London: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (1989a) A is for Aesthetic London: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (Ed.) (1989b) The Symbolic Order London: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (Ed.) (1987) Living Powers: The Arts in Education London: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (1979) Reclamations London: Heinemann

Beckerman, B. (1970) Dynamics of Drama N.Y.: Knopf

Best, D. (1989) Feeling and Reason in the Arts: The Rationality of Feeling in Abbs, P. The Symbolic Order London: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (1985) Feeling and Reason in the Arts London: George Allen and Unwin.

Bolton, G. (1992) New Perspectives on Classroom Drama U.K.: Simon and Schuster

Dewey, J. (1934) Art as Experience N.Y.: Minton Balch and Company

Eisner, E. (1991) The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enchantment of Educational Practice N.Y.: Macmillan

Greene, M. (1989) Art Worlds in Schools, in Abbs, P. The Symbolic Order London: Falmer

Haynes, A. (1987) The Dynamic Image: Changing Perspectives in Dance Education in Abbs, P. Living Powers London: Falmer

Hornbrook, D. (1992) Can we do ours, Miss? Towards a Dramatic Curriculum. The Drama/Theatre Teacher, 4:2.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991) Education in Drama England: Falmer

\_\_\_\_\_ (1989) Education and Dramatic Art Oxford: Blackwell

Landy, P. (1986) Drama Therapy Illinois: Charles C Thomas

Langer, S. (1953) Feeling and Form N.Y.: Charles Scribner's  
Sons

Metcalfe, M. (1987) Towards the Condition of Music in Abbs, P.  
Living Powers London: Falmer

O'Neill, C. (1991a) Structure and Spontaneity: Improvisation  
in Theatre and Education Unpublished doctoral dissertation,  
University of Exeter

\_\_\_\_\_. (1991b) Dramatic Worlds: Structuring for Significant  
Experience The Drama/Theatre Teacher, 4:1

\_\_\_\_\_. (1978) Drama and the Web of Form: An attempt to  
isolate the elements of aesthetic form and their operation  
within the process of educational drama Unpublished masters  
thesis, University of Durham

Stanislavsky, C (1949) Building a Character N.Y.: Methuen.

Slade, P. (1954) Child Drama London: University of London  
Press

Webb, E. (1987) English as Aesthetic Initiative in Abbs, P.  
Living Powers London: Falmer