

# The Arts, Cognition, and Craft: Implications for Teaching and Research

David Pariser

**M**y thesis in this essay are that the connections between "child art" and adult art are their cognitive/rational bases, and that art education can be understood as an apprenticeship during which certain skills and bodies of knowledge are mastered so that they can be used in the service of personal expression. Good art teaching like successful artistry, is based on a craftsman-like approach to the task. I will argue that art education should concentrate on those things which are teachable such as technical skill, confidence, and cultural conventions.

Nabokov (1981), in his customarily imperious style, suggests a relationship between two ideas which concern us here. The first is the place of cognition in the work of appreciating art, and the second is the idea of the artist/author as a problem solver. You will note that for Nabokov the aesthetic enjoyment of a work grows out of meticulous analysis. Likewise, the author of fiction does not set out to aesthetically stimulate his readers but to solve a puzzle he has set for himself:

Literature, real literature, must not be gulped down like some potion which may be good for the heart, or good for the brain — the brain, that stomach of the soul. Literature must be taken and broken to bits, pulled apart, squashed — then its lovely neck will be smelt in the hollow of the palm. It will be munched and rolled upon the tongue with relish; then, and only then, its rare flavour will be appreciated at its true worth and the broken and crushed parts will again come together in your mind and disclose the beauty of a unity to which you have contributed something of your own blood.

When the artist starts out on a work of art, he has set himself some definite artistic problem that he is out to solve. He selects his

characters, his time and his place, and then finds the particular and special circumstances which can allow the developments he desires to occur naturally, developing logically and naturally from the combination and interaction of the forces the artist has set into play.

(Nabokov, p. 63)

Nabokov demands that the intelligent reader exercise his/her rational faculties first in lovingly dismembering the work. He also asserts that the creation of an art work is based on a rational, self-limited approach to a specified problem.

I suggest that two elements link the art work of children and adults; one is the common presence of limits—whether imposed by technical and psychological naivete, or self-imposed as a function of the particular game the mature artist has elected to play. The other common element is that no matter what the origin of these limits, it is always a problem-solving act to realize personal expression within the structure of the game. To the extent that the child is struggling to clarify his/her status in the world, and to clarify the organization of the environment, using limited means—to that extent the child is prototypical of the mature artist—who also struggles, using limited means, to make sense out of environment and self.

## I. Two definitions: art and its corollaries; craft.

Several things need to be pointed out at this juncture. First, I am going to be taking most of my examples of child art, adult art, and art teaching from the discipline of drawing. I do this because examples are available and I am sure that valid generalizations about art education can be gleaned from the field of drawing alone.

Second, the term "art" which has been freely used thus far, needs to be clarified. The definition of art I will use is a much abbreviated version of Arnheim's (1982) definition: Art refers to any work or object which, through its sensory appearance, serves to elucidate some aspect of human experience. Any object or work which functions like this will be referred to as "art." There are two corollaries to the definition I am advancing. Both have to do with the function art serves. One important function of art objects is that they provide distance between the maker and his/her problem. Arnheim (1964) compares the arts to Perseus' shield, whose mirrored surface shows the hero Medusa's reflection. The dragon slayer, unaffected by the monster's petrifying glance, decapitates her. The idea of artistic representation as an aid to understanding and action is focal to the concept of art which I am proposing. A second corollary is that art is always the outcome of a disciplined interaction between personal content and social conventions. For example, the mere fact that an artist has evoked a strong emotion while creating does not guarantee that an art work will result. Bettelheim (1964) chastizes art educators who confuse uninhibited self expression with significant creation:

It is especially hard to see how art teachers came to harbour the notion that giving the unconscious "free rein" can be of value, either as education, aesthetics or therapy... Art teaching should indeed show the student that the unconscious is not to be repressed... What is needed is a disciplined workingover of chaotic unconscious material, a casting of it into forms that are meaningful to others as well as oneself.

(Bettelheim, pp. 413-415, 1964)

# The Arts And Cognition

**DP Hallahan**



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