



ELJA
Foundation



YOUNG AT ART
CONNECTING
BROADENING
IMAGINING

CHILDREN AND ART
PROF. DR. KOEN VAN EIJCK
ARTS AND CULTURE STUDIES
ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM

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ART FOR CHILDREN

Connecting, broadening, imagining

The mission of the ELJA Foundation is to strengthen the bonds that connect people in our society. Their primary focus is on children and adolescents who are offered opportunities to experience different ways of 'being in the world' through the arts, thus broadening their cultural horizon. In today's superdiverse society, with its persistent social inequality and political polarization, it is more necessary than ever to encourage people to be open to change, new ideas or unfamiliar points of view. The willingness to critically engage with one's own convictions is important here as well, especially if people tend to mingle with like-minded peers on social media where they will encounter confirmation rather than criticism of their ideas. Keeping the lines of communication open and applying the same definitions of what is true and what not, is perhaps less self-evident yet more needed today than ever before. The ELJA Foundation "wants to contribute to cohesive connections in society through music, dance, and visual art. Arts and culture work as the bridge for connecting. They enhance social cohesion, bridge differences and expand one's horizon"¹. That is certainly the case, but it does require serious effort to materialize. Sharing stories and experiences are the means par excellence for creating bonds and broadening horizons. That is exactly why the arts should play an important role here.

¹ Quote translated from Dutch as found on <https://eljafoundation.nl/over-ons>

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Power to the imagination!

The arts can connect people by stimulating empathy and imagination. Art teaches us to see the world in a new perspective and allows us to imagine how things could have been different. Art creates room to explore new worlds and thereby understand 'the Other' better. In order to realize change in the world, art may clash with the existing ideas and (pre-)conceptions with which we encounter the world². And it probably should! Art that only confirms what we already know or appreciate does not appeal to our imagination and therefore contributes less to the bridges that are to be built in a society in which joy, meaning and resilience play a larger role.

Imagination is a precondition for shaping one's cultural self-awareness³. Art, technology, dreams and political vistas are products of the imagination that can give new direction to our lives. In the end, the confrontation with arts and culture does not only teach us who we are, but also which ideals we can cherish. There are good reasons why *Power to the imagination!*⁴ was the slogan of the student protest movement of the 1960s. Art can thus offer criticism and dynamism. Art keeps society at its toes and can save people from blindly accepting the status quo by showing how things could be done differently – or: better. "Art changes people and people change the world."⁵

² Hans van Maanen: *How to study art worlds: On the social functioning of aesthetic values* (2009). Amsterdam University Press.

³ Van Heusden, B. (2015). Arts education 'After the End of Art'. Towards a new framework for arts education. *Arts Education beyond Art: Teaching Art in Times of Change*; van Heusden, B., Gielen, P., Eds, 153-164.

⁴ In Dutch: De verbeelding aan de macht!

Art as aesthetic experience

Art teaches kids to look at the world differently, it opens alternative views and creates bridges between different groups in society. However, it can also 'just' evoke an aesthetic experience through its beauty. That is more important than we often think, because there is something special about experiencing beauty, which is described by Dutch philosopher Frans van Peperstraten⁶ as "judging without rules". The thing is that there is no calibrated yardstick for evaluating works of art. It is a matter of taste and therefore subjective. Thus, forming an opinion about art will always compel children to ask themselves which criteria matter to them and why a certain work of art or piece of music is considered 'beautiful' or 'good' or not. In this manner, art teaches them to figure out what is important to themselves and, thereby, who they are.

This "judging without rules" appeals to both our intellect and our emotions and dealing with the arts teaches kids to develop these faculties in tandem. Combining the mind and the heart is not only opportune when dealing with the arts, but also in numerous other situations in which it is not entirely clear on the basis of which criteria an opinion can be formed. According to arts education expert Elliot Eisner⁷, these aesthetic skills are relevant in many domains as they matter to everyone who wishes to produce work that is inventive, competently executed and the constituting parts of which are well-proportioned. Such work could of course be a work of art, but also an essay, a teaching program, a surgical procedure, a car, or an apple pie. In this manner, children can develop a good feeling for nuance in a more autonomous way. They learn to manage with what they have, to continuously improve their work and to assess for themselves when something has come out right and is finished. In such processes, thinking and feeling go hand in hand. The sooner children are familiarized with such approaches, the more they will be able to benefit from them. Pedagogue Gert Biesta alludes to this with his concept of *subjectification*, or the ability to make your own choices and give direction to your own life. It is exactly that skill to which the arts appeal and that is further developed through engagement with the arts.

⁶ Frans van Peperstraten: *Oordelen zonder regels: Kant over schoonheid, kunst en natuur* (2020). Boom Publishers.

⁷ Elliot Eisner: Artistry in education. In: *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research*, 47: 373-384 (2003).

Art as instrument

Art works. Especially music is known for its ability to heal, both literally and figuratively speaking, to increase self-confidence, to connect people and to arouse strong emotions. Similar effects have been reported for dance and visual art. Therefore, every maker should be aware of the potential that lies in the aesthetic experience and / or the stimulation of the imagination and take these into account during the creative process. Doing so can lead to powerful experiences that leave a lasting impression if the unique possibilities offered by art are optimally utilized. For example, by reckoning with children's perspective from an early stage on, one can implement a stronger connection to children's subjective worlds while developing a project to make sure they will benefit as much as possible from participating. These can be seemingly simple decisions (which language usage fits best, how do we design the concert hall, do we offer an introduction to the play, do we give kids the role of artist or audience), but they can also pertain to features of the work of art itself (which play fits best with our learning goals, which music is challenging without being alienating, with which instructions do we send pupils to a dance performance, (where) should we take a break in between). The great potential of art, in a sense, forces us to keep thinking about how it can be best put to use for creating a better world.

Art as an integral part of life

Thinking about this instrumental potential of the arts does not mean that its so-called intrinsic value is considered less relevant. Rather, only through its intrinsic value, or the meaning of experiencing art in itself, can we hope to set in motion change in people's lives and that is why this intrinsic value should always remain center stage. If art is aimed at enhancing social cohesion by, say, making children dance together or answer questions about an exhibition, it may well achieve its goal but that does not mean the full and unique potential of the arts is realized. This surplus value is only truly achieved if art incites kids to look differently at the surrounding world, touches them emotionally, or teaches them to explore or communicate matters through artistic means whenever words fail to do so. Rather than manipulating measurable skills, the arts act upon feelings, beliefs, fantasies, et cetera. That is not always easily realized, but it is an important task for orchestras, theatre producers, museums, dance companies etc. to explicitly focus on this. It would certainly help to restore the role art deserves to play in society. By emphasizing the societal potential of art more, we reassign to it the important role it once played in everyday life. That is what American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey already argued in 1934 in his book *Art as Experience*. He deplored that fact that, in thinking about art, the focus was often on the artwork, the performance, or the novel itself. If we really want to know what art is all about, Dewey stated we should rather consider the way people experience art and what this experience does to them, as that is what matters most in art. The *raison d'être* of the arts lies in what they bring about in the individual and, by extension, society. Rather than putting art in museums, wrapped up in unnecessarily daunting jargon, art should reclaim its place in the center of young people's lives to function as an inherent, inspiring part of their everyday lives. Because active engagement with the arts enhances autonomy instead of conformism, creativity instead of predictability, empathy instead of aloofness, and a feeling for beauty in addition to functionality. A world that supports these qualities in its children, is a world I'd love to live in.

- Prof. dr. Koen van Eijck

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