

Art Practice and the Educational Engagement: Some Things in Common

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On the contentious front of the current, and probably eternal, struggle in education between the shape-shifting neo-conservatives and the humanists, I usually find myself solidly among the progressives, a fiery-eyed (if occasionally Quixotian) freedom-fighter on behalf of arts-based, experiential, and transformative pedagogies. Thus I was shocked to find how strongly I sympathised with the eminent and conservative English philosopher Michael Oakeshott's views, in his article "Education: The engagement and its frustration." This sympathy did not emerge immediately. Against a series of outrageous and reductionist caricatures of modern alternatives, Oakeshott argues for the preservation of what at first appears to be the traditional English public school education of a privileged upper class. The "Alma Mater who remembers with pride or indulgence" is itself "remembered with gratitude," we may suppose, from the perspective of a position in the City or fellowship at Oxbridge; one's schooldays were not "hurried through on the way to more profitable engagements" because such a future was a foregone conclusion, a world one could expect to inhabit because one's elders did.¹

Indeed, Oakeshott addresses not at all the mechanics of universal access to a form of education that always was exclusive and is now increasingly rarefied, although he has much to say about the negative effects of universalisation of access interpreted politically and implemented systematically. His various versions of alternatives to the Ideal are

couched in appalling stereotypical extremes guaranteed to offend social democrats. In an earlier England he could be talking about Fabians and nut cutlet advocates; his tone brings to mind the condescending sneer of William F. Buckley (and the grudging admiration from the Left on the couch watching *Firing Line*: “Clever bastard! Wish he were one of ours!”). There is an air of punting on the river about the whole thing, a mocking snobbery that assumes unquestionable content and fusses rather about form. In the disdain for the grubbiness of the “community centre,”² there is a sense of withdrawing from something rather than to somewhere, a repugnance both for the problems of survival faced by the majority of souls in modern industrial society and for the efforts, however misguided, made within the educational system to address them. His curmudgeonly defence of the impractical is infuriating – “school of dancing”³ indeed!

Yet this class-conscious resistance to Oakeshott, the immediate mounting of barricades in defence of the rational populist alternatives he criticises so vividly, gives way under admittedly reluctant scrutiny to the growing awareness that not only did I myself, through the enlightened if ambivalent intervention of my parents, undergo as a child the “educational engagement” he describes, but in adult life I continued to avoid as much as possible Oakeshott’s nightmarish “utilitarian” alternatives and the society that engendered them, pursuing instead such forms of the engagement as I could find. Furthermore, as a teacher, I had reproduced in my classrooms as best I could the conditions he prescribes as necessary for the engagement to take place.

I was certainly not aware of any theory in practice during any of this, either as a learner or a teacher: my understanding of it was intuitive. My students wanted to perfect their drawings of cartoon action heroes? Well then, if they were going to get it right, they must study Gray’s Anatomy, Leonardo da Vinci’s sketchbooks, Greek vases and coins, real skulls and bones, the nearest T-shirted athlete, and their own scrawny musculature; they could not just copy other cartoons. They should also know the significance of action

heroes, comparative mythology, and the history of cartooning (Hogarth, Grosz, Milt Caniff, Stan Lee...), while we were at it.

That they needed to “get it right” was beyond dispute. How would they know where they were, if they didn’t know what it took to get there? Surely that was the lesson to be learned from all this arduous re-tracing of origins. Knocked off the pedestal of class “Artist” (a common dead-end for young artists, that serves the dual purpose of consigning them to endless repetitions of what had once worked, usually some Disney reproduction or a technically perfect and completely sterile drawing technique, and, not coincidentally, sparing the rest of the class the terror of making even the most tentative first step), they grumbled, then buried themselves in the library, some for the first time ever.

It was a “torpedo-fish” experience of Socratic proportions⁴ when I recognised that I was a living example of Oakeshott’s argument: such an education had made it impossible for me, if I were to live at peace with my conscience, to do anything else in the field of educational endeavour but continue to discern the essential qualities of the tradition, the necessary and sufficient factors, from the tangle of what he calls the “partialities” of the “current” external world. My problem, the torpedo shock made clear, was one of recognition and naming, of situational framing and vocabulary: “Oakeshottian” education had combined with innate abilities to set me on a career path, or rather, compel me into a vocation as an artist, and it was the position of critical outsider with which I was familiar, and which is fundamentally similar, I believe, to Oakeshott’s.

I suspect he would be outraged by this suggestion, initially, and might say: “Contemporary art-making is the self-indulgent expression of hermetic navel-gazing, artifice contrived solely for shock value, unimaginative pandering to the lowest common denominator in mass culture, or just entertaining novelty, triviality and decoration; it’s

about ‘things not words’ ”⁵ (clashing of caricatures! carnage on the Cam!), “so what has it got to do with the disciplined and systematic preparation for inheriting the canon of Western knowledge?” But those stereotypes, and they certainly exist, are to authentic art practice as Oakeshott’s alternatives are to education: substitutes and travesties, as much of a threat to the “humane understanding of humanity,”⁶ (bringing Adorno into the fray) and for similar reasons.

A transformation from the state of unreflective passivity required by the commodity culture of contemporary mass society to the autonomous self-consciousness characteristic of the “civilized subscriber to human life”⁷ can be possible for more than just an elite few within the educational institution, if art-making is restored as a contemplative practice, because the conditions for doing so amount to those for the educational engagement Oakeshott prescribes. That is, the focus of attention in order to “distinguish and discriminate,” the “discipline of inclination” with its concomitant “habits of attention, concentration, patience, exactness, courage [especially courage]... intellectual honesty”⁸ and attitude towards obstacles (what can be more challenging than the yawning gap between the vision and the reality? Nothing but determination and practice will bridge it.), the detachment from the “social” world (but immersion in the concentric worlds of traditional practice and the haptic kinesphere), the particularly conscientious relationship between teacher and learner (this is not the domain of the computer graphics technician), the sense of being initiated into a long-standing and historical community, and finally, the absence of extrinsic purpose, are all hallmarks of a good art class, and what’s more, the engagement is possible for any student, however circumscribed their life opportunities may otherwise be. In this sense, art-making is a tool, not an indulgence. It is a powerful way to understand “the character of the world the newcomer is to inhabit,”⁹ which is not necessarily the world into which we ourselves were initiated, nor the way the world, or rather, the powerful of the world, would prefer

to be understood. It is definitely not a comfortable way to understand the character of the world, but it is vital.

Oakeshott's description of education as "a way of understanding [one]self in a new context or of undergoing a palingenesis in[to]... a more ample identity,"¹⁰ a re-birth, is illustrated by the American artist Claes Oldenburg's comment on drawing, the beautifully drafted preparatory work by which Oldenburg investigated the public space he later transformed with his huge, ironic installations of hamburgers and soft telephones, the goofy commentaries on mass culture:

The aims of drawing on arrival in a new environment:

Forms are carried along, the result of having found ones formed in other environments. Now one must find the meaningful, i.e. typical or thematic forms in the new environment and then bring them together with the brought forms.

First: a period of discovery, both as to technique (surface and tool), treatment etc. of the typical forms.

Second: their poetic merger, metamorphosis, and relationship through association. The poetic symbol, the "image."

Drawing is attained in a new place when the old has been expanded with the new, association is operating well - showing the family relationship of the forms, the unity of things in general, and when the proper technique has been developed to present the expanded and particularised as to place, poetic vision.

*This period is very unsatisfying... one is reborn, rather must reintegrate and develop the new relation in a natural way to one's new surroundings, so that they may speak clearly through one.*¹¹

In these parallel descriptions of metamorphosis in the autonomous, situated point of view, the function of the 'outsider' as translator or decoder is significant. Oldenburg was intent on confronting American culture with authentic images of itself, releasing the energy suppressed in representational art grown tired. His statement in 1961 on art and society, that "It is a time to move and painting in its present form has lost the power to move. It is the empire stage, money, fatness, ease, communication,"¹² recalls Adorno's comment on de Sade's *Juliette* that "in other demythologised epochs (Imperial Rome and

the Renaissance, as well as the Baroque) the schema of an activity was more important than its content.”¹³ Oldenburg concurred with the American composer John Cage that art was an activity, not a medium to be evaluated normatively; his use of perishable “found” materials fulfilled the need he felt for “a sort of martyric stance”¹⁴ in the undermining of preciousness and invested value of impotent gallery art,¹⁵ a moral stance which he identified as priestly or shamanic in function:

My position and that of others like me is one of the super-sensitive and super-intellectual in an insensitive and unintellectual society *who do not wish to escape* or who realise escape is impossible. We thus become clowns or wits or wise men. The danger is to forget art and merely construct parables, to become a wise man rather than an artist. No one can say that Cage with his mushroom picking is not a superwise man, but there is some argument about his being an artist.¹⁶

I feel my purpose is to say something about my times...this involves a recreation of my vision of my times...I am making symbols of my time through my experience. It is a question of getting things in proper order by a subtle (reverse) assault on standard responses. *A man who sees right has a duty to make others see rite.*¹⁷

It is this emphasis of Oldenburg’s on the illuminating and sacralizing function of the art process rather than, and in the face of, the investment of external value in the finished object that resonates with and parallels Oakeshott’s concern with what he sees as the primary frustration of the educational engagement, the imposition of extrinsic purpose upon the process of education: the student becomes the product of a service industry as the art object becomes a commodity. It is in resistance to the social pressure to reduce the processes of both education and art down to means to an end rather than ends in themselves that the similarity lies between Oakeshott’s position and the artist’s vision as articulated by Oldenburg. While these can be seen as “outsider” and alien in relation to the current status quo, from another perspective (and this is where I was surprised to find myself), where the status quo itself is seen as Other and alien (barbaric), the stance of resistance can be understood as radically conservative, in that both Oakeshott and

Oldenburg insist on the right of the individual to his or her own autonomous viewpoint, in the face of what both Oakeshott and Adorno refer to as “a new kind of barbarism.”¹⁸

This barbarism is characterised by a systematic “subliminal dehumanisation,” a moral callousness, or rather indifference, as well as aesthetic philistinism: “Without reflecting on what it does, bourgeois reason acts to distort men, making them less than they could be...without thought, the bourgeois attacks the sacred and conquers it for the profane.”¹⁹ Oldenburg struggled to come to terms with this while living in the slums of New York’s Lower East Side, making drawings of the Bowery bums and elaborate pastries in store windows, creating bricolage sculptures out of industrial garbage, collages from torn scraps of advertisements: “I detest it [American culture] - to begin with - those who pretend to ‘love’ it are fake or shallow. But I neither avoid it nor love it. I try to discover the human in it...to change [my outlook] from the denial of evil to the recognition of evil.”²⁰ In the face of the Machine, the human carries the quality of the sacred: Oakeshott identifies the one redeeming feature of the earliest of the educational “alternatives,” otherwise designed for the poor to see themselves as “units in...a ‘productive system’, ”²¹ as being the component of religious instruction: there at least could be found the dignity of an identity beyond that of worker-rabble, through the sense of possibility that comes through receiving “an inheritance of human understandings”²² in the Bible as literature.

Adorno, Oldenburg, and Oakeshott all share a passionate belief in the right of the individual to stand outside of, to perceive and critique, and to resist the limits on self-definition imposed by what Northrop Frye calls “adjustment myths.” These subversions of historically constructed foundation mythologies²³ are aimed, though not consciously, at producing obedience and docility in mass society, unquestioning acquiescence to the “natural” order of the hierarchy of power. Friedman says of this limitation that “...in its assumption that nothing is beyond the reach of bourgeois reason...[t]he bourgeois thus

attempt to administer the very souls of men, molding them to their standards.”²⁴ This subversion and resulting docility is achieved by confining of the individual imagination to the vocabulary and, one might say both literally and metaphorically, to the architecture of the prosaic. It is not just the realms of associative possibility that are suggested by poets and shut off from readers through pedestrian, utilitarian interpretation, the hazard Frye describes in *The Educated Imagination*, when,

on the rare occasions when ...many people [who] grow up without really understanding the difference between imaginative and discursive writing [do] encounter poems, or even pictures, they treat them exactly as though they were intended to be pieces of more or less disguised information. Their questions are all based on this assumption,²⁵

rather than recreating the poet’s experience in their own minds (“How does this poem make me feel? What in my experience was like that? What would I say, if something like that happened to me?”), which is bad enough. More destructive than, and consequent to, such a circumscribed response to the creative acts of others is loss of the ability to envision the creation of anything either by oneself or of oneself; that is, loss of the potential to imagine a world and thus a future, to move from the passive and receptive to the active and creative, from consumption to agency, from object to subject.

Without the sense of personal response and interpretation, without the conscious situating of oneself in the world and in human history, one might as well be a cog in the machine, a “potential unit of production,” an automaton. This “aphasia,” so to speak, forecloses on the ability to construct meaning. In that the non-verbal is part of the “disappeared” vocabulary of potential, the language of visual images, gestures, auditory and tactile sensations, the stuff of which speculative worlds are modeled, one could call this state “paralysis” or even “anorexia” of the spirit, although this last assumes a choice, an act of will in turning away: Adorno would argue that the “reconciliation with power,”²⁶ including the compromise of Marxism in the “elevation of the prosaic above the sacred”²⁷ is just such a choice. This is real impotence, absolute powerlessness, the

internal “vacuum” where adjustment myth rushes in. In commodity culture, this vacuum of meaning is highly desirable, and very good for business: personal identity can be “branded,” in current marketing jargon (are the unfortunate associations with cattle-ranching and slavery deliberate?), and bought, without the effort of even searching the mall, let alone the soul.

Essential for a position of resistance to such a bulimic²⁸ society is a sense of an independent standpoint. This is somewhere specific, not simply a makeshift retreat in reaction against and thus oriented towards and susceptible to the persuasions and inducements of commodity culture, but authentically and indisputably rooted in the hard-won understanding of one’s own experience. Although Oakeshott says nothing about the ground of the sacred or the dynamic of the aesthetic object, beyond a brief reference to “human artefacts” as “expressions” with “meanings,”²⁹ the conditions he sets in the terms defining the idea of School, where the educational engagement can be enacted, point to “a place apart” literally as well as figuratively, a theatre or arena where the event of transformation may transpire over time, distinct from “the immediate, local world of the learner,” where the “din of worldly laxities and partialities is silenced” and the “moral and intellectual inheritance...is encountered...entire, unqualified and unencumbered,” restored from the external, prosaic, profane world where much of it has been “vulgarized, obscured, abridged ...corrupted by the need for immediate results,” if not entirely forgotten.³⁰ The feeling of monastic space then is conjunct with a sense of sacred time, *kairos* rather than *kronos*, time that is not money, that can not be thought of as an investment. Thus the educational engagement and the aesthetic dynamic can both be seen as recapturing the sacred, in the face of experience profaned by its definition in commodity time.

It is worth investigating what is meant by the elusive term “sacred.” Frye assumes an appreciation of its historical existence as part of cultural literacy, pointing out

that “the containing framework of the mythology [studied as literature] takes the shape of a feeling of lost identity *which we had once and may have again*,”³¹ Friedman refers to the appropriation by the Frankfurt School of Judaism, “the most extreme instance of antimodernity in the Western tradition”³² as a staging ground for the “resurrection...and triumph of the sacred over the profanity of bourgeois existence;” Oakeshott describes at length and with distaste that which is not sacred, but unmistakably profane, in the alternatives to education; only Oldenburg lives and works in it,³³ particularly through his alter ego, the visionary and prophetic Ray Gun artist and “hero as loonie” persona, “an all-powerful and all-embracing creator and saviour” which he originally associated with Hart Crane’s “religious gunman,” a Christ figure.³⁴ In a secular society, it is much easier to identify the desecrated than it is to be aware of the sacred.³⁵ The avowedly non-religious (though Eliade would say that the completely rational individual is an abstract concept, and that the religious aspect of modern secular man resides in the individual’s unconscious³⁶) are objective and detached, anthropological or, at most, indulgent about those vestiges that remain: they are the nostalgic tourists at the annual pilgrimage to the midnight Christmas Eve service.

The historical institutions of religion, with their political machinations and bureaucracies, intellectual doctrines and denominational schisms, must be distinguished from the personal experience of reality as sacred. One may be conscious of the sacred without belonging to any organised religion; conversely, to participate in religious practice does not guarantee, presuppose, or even require awareness of the sacred—the religious observance may be motivated entirely by extrinsic and social considerations on the part of the participant, although this is considered to be a somewhat less evolved stage in the continuum of individual spiritual development. Ideally, and originally, formal religious practice supports the event of hierophany, manifestation of the transpersonal sacred in the temporal, earthly plane of human existence.

Creation mythology throughout human history, documented through studies in archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, and depth psychology, illustrate the recurring theme that sacred space is not homogeneous. At a fixed point, revealed by signs and revelation to those who would seek it,³⁷ the *axis mundi* is distinguished from the undifferentiated surround of profane space. Then the chaos of subjective relativity and confusion may cease, and the founding of the world is made possible: it is holy ground, territory is established, limits and order are set in place. This is a paradigmatic model, re-enacted in the creation of all worlds that are “ours” (sustained by the foundation rituals of cities and churches, “house-warming” celebrations etc.) and characterised by the understanding that here, in the vertical connection³⁸ between the divine (the transpersonal), the human (the conscious), and the underworld (the unconscious), the cosmic planes are in communication, symbolized by the axis, the *omphalos*, the Centre of the World. Vestiges remain in our assumption that *we* live at the centre of the world and all around us lies chaos, inhabited by those who would choose to live there: this informs the continuation of threshold and boundary rituals, including the decoration of doors with wreathes —and cartoons!

Sacred time similarly is not homogeneous: it is not finite and marked by death, but cyclic, eternally renewable. The significance of annual festivals and regular rituals is of paramount importance:

through annual repetition of the cosmogony, the original act of creation, time was regenerated, that is, it began again as sacred time, for it coincided with the *illud tempus* in which the world had first come into existence...by participating ritually in the end of the world and in its recreation, any man became contemporary with the *illud tempus*; hence he was born anew, he began life over again with his reserve of vital forces intact.³⁹

In sacralised life, all activity is seen as a re-enactment of the original creation. As the gods created humans, so humans create their world:

the cosmogony serves as the paradigmatic model for every creation, for

every kind of doing...in festivals the participants recover the sacred dimension of existence, by learning again how the gods or mythical ancestors created man and taught him the various kinds of social behaviour and of practical work.⁴⁰

Eliade differentiates this from Hegel's view that primitive man is "buried in nature."⁴¹ In homologizing daily physiological acts symbolically to cosmic re-enactments, the experience is one of an added dimension to prevailing consciousness. In the sense of oneself as a microcosm there is a connectedness with all of Creation, rather than a primordial absence of ego. A good illustration of this re-enactment process can be seen in the Zen Buddhist discipline of walking meditation. In this practice, as each footstep is co-ordinated with a slow deep breath, the attention is focused on the experience of the body as the weight shifts and the balance changes in the unfolding sequence of the step; that is, on the mechanics of the activity rather than the external purpose of getting anywhere. There is no view to look at, the intention is not to exercise or go for a walk. The activity, otherwise thoughtlessly performed as a vehicle for the daily pursuit of other ends, here becomes an end in itself. This removes the walker from *kronos* time; its pointlessness simultaneously encapsulates her and connects her with the cyclic eternal.⁴² Through walking nowhere, in circles, one step for each breath, the passage through life is symbolically re-enacted. The body's actions, ignored in daily life, are attended to and then transcended in a heightened awareness of their cosmic significance.

Similarly, in contemporary labyrinth practice, walking meditation takes the form of threading an apparently chaotic, though mathematically sophisticated, unicursal arrangement of concentric circular runs and turns towards a centre, though how this unfolds is impossible to discern from within the device, and only with difficulty, from the outside. The discipline is to identify and establish one's own rhythm and pace when released from the requirements of externally scheduled time. In the communal setting of walking the "Path to Jerusalem," this pace may be very different from other people's.

Living out the metaphor of negotiating and choreographing shared space on the path, or even knowing one's own pace in what can be seen as a spatial analogy to one's progress through life, is no small achievement of insight in a competitive, goal-oriented, individualistic secular society: the experience of doing so constitutes the meditation. It is important to recognise that this insight is not gained through an act of will or the application of reason, but emerges spontaneously in the practice. It is embodied by being experienced viscerally, understood intuitively, and consolidated conceptually: this is the purpose of ritual re-enactment of cosmogony. The act of will lies in initiating the practice.

Work, (or any other activity) in a "desacralised" society, on the other hand, is a profane act. With no paradigmatic model, it is exploitative of the material world, including the human making the effort, for an economic end solely, not a restorative and celebratory re-enactment of a divine outburst of exuberance. Profane activity transpires on a single, unreflective plane of human life, not three interacting dynamically; its dimension is flat, its quality is opaque, its purpose is illusory and dependent on external circumstance: its meaning is necessarily limited. Into the vacuum rushes the "adjustment myth."

To say, as Oakeshott does, that School is a place removed from the world is to establish a distinction between modalities that, for the sake of argument, I will call the sacred and the profane. Let us also assume that Oakeshott's lamentations are prophetic, and that schools today are themselves profane, or at least, in the process of desacralisation. This is not happening without a struggle for every inch of ground, as the strikes and protests against the recent provincial government actions, taken under the current Progressive Conservative majority here in Ontario, to rationalize the education system even further on the efficiency model attest. But whether or not the schools are demonstrably service-oriented, the students appear to think they ought to be: in the

Maclean's magazine's annual ranking of Canadian universities, among the 18 to 29 year olds surveyed, 79% thought the university's role was to train skilled employees, compared to 58% of those aged 45 and over; 71% of the younger group thought the university's role was to do ground-breaking research, compared to 49% of the older group, 73% of the younger group saw the university's role as keeping Canada globally competitive, while only 64% of the older group thought so.⁴³ Given that the average student debt load on graduation from university with an undergraduate degree is now \$25000, in a country that shares the distinction of being one of only four that charge user fees for post-secondary education (along with the United States, Britain, and Japan),⁴⁴ this attitude should come as no surprise.

Whether it is possible to undergo a four-year undergraduate program in a skill-focused area such as computer science, and simultaneously sustain the notion that one is involved in an "educational engagement" at School, is hard to say. It is not uncommon to hear thoughtful students in their final year announce that now they had completed their program requirements, they were going to take what they wanted in the time remaining to them. This would suggest that they were well aware of the compromise between intrinsic value and extrinsic purpose they had felt it necessary to make. On the other hand I suspect it is unlikely that any university program would publicly announce its commitment to maintaining the "sacrality" of its learning environment, even if there were any consensus on the meaning of the term, although the Naropa Institute and Matthew Fox's Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names College in Oakland come to mind as exceptions, albeit somewhat outside the educational mainstream. My own experience at the Catholic college of the university I attended during, ironically enough, a course on Eco-theology and Cosmogogenesis, was a vivid reminder that new wine in old wineskins is to be avoided for a reason.

Consequently I suggest that art education might be the last refuge of the sacred, as

distinct from the profane, in a practical, recognisable, and accessible form within the educational mainstream, if Oakeshott's conditions are met and his cautions taken seriously. Relevant here are sensitivities to multicultural populations as well as "the attempt to administer the very souls of [the children of] men." The first objection that comes to mind then is whether this project could be mistaken for or misinterpreted as religious indoctrination, and thus whether "accessible" is a code for "universal" and then "mandatory." Frye's argument for the Bible as the foundation for literature study in Western society, that "it's the myth of the Bible that should be the basis of literary training, its imaginative survey of the human condition which is so broad and comprehensive that everything else finds its place inside it" is balanced by the proviso that "for the purpose I have in mind, however, the Bible could only be taught in school by someone with a well-developed sense of literary structure."⁴⁵ In current practice, the content of most art history courses is religious in subject, with cheerful indifference to denominational or doctrinal specificities once it moves away from the Western European tradition. Thus it avoids the controversial element Frye addresses about literature, that comes up in parental concern about the appropriateness of certain books.

Appropriateness of method is a different issue. One public school board in Ontario recently had before its special committee on curriculum content the hotly disputed question of whether the use of anything called "guided imagery" as an instructional tool was an invitation to Satanism. The crux of the matter, however, was the difference in core values between those who believed that humans were inherently good and thus should use practices of inward focusing and reflection in order to identify and remove obstacles lying in the way of realising their potential (including, for that matter,

trusting their instincts enough to recognise abusive treatment), and those, on the other hand, who believed humans were inherently bad, and should not look inward to the self but outward to external rules and structures.

The committee found that a range of consciousness-altering methods have been used and taught even to very young children in educational settings (though not necessarily within that particular school board), unmonitored and without cultural support, albeit with the best of intentions. These included, for example, sweetgrass ceremonies and the appeal to spirit guides, for help in making important decisions, entirely without aboriginal cultural context, and some visualisation techniques for “putting the emotions in a basket” that could potentially promote schizoid affective disassociation, and are psychologically quite unsound. The committee recommended making a clear distinction between teaching methods requiring use of the imagination, “the mind’s eye,” speculation, and “pretend that” approaches, and those inappropriate to the classroom setting that involved the use of any induction techniques such as counting backward and the like which could result in hypnotic states of consciousness.

The danger in these examples lies in entering into the interior processes—the non-rational and the unconscious—without the reassurance and guidance of an external, objective contact to reflect on and orient towards, whether a person, a doctrine, or an actual object; this is a fundamental requirement for any initiate, to recognise a fixed point of origin and return as part of the transformational sequence. The essential materiality of art process provides this, first, in the dialogue between the artist and the emerging idea in tangible form, and secondly, in a three way discourse of artist, object, and observer as critic. This is conceptual at some level, intellectual interpretation and understanding couched in words, as well as a somatic event, experienced emotionally and perceived through the visual, auditory, and tactile senses. *Pace* with respect to Oakeshott, and to address a second objection, that the project is about “things, not words,” an investigation

of what goes on in the studio is required. This will clarify also how the conditions for the educational engagement are met.

First condition: the studio, like the School, is a separate place. It should not have carpets, it is not a place of leisure or decorum, though the tools and equipment must be orderly and easily reached, but not by babies, who should play somewhere else (and not with the artist). In fact, the studio should be “somewhere else,” sacrosanct. No one should barge in uninvited, and at school the intercom ought to be turned off. At lunch and break, the art students can hang out there: this serves to promote the camaraderie and neighbourhood aspects of the traditional community, as well as providing the experience of liminal safety.⁴⁶

Next condition, in the studio: rules of conduct are few and strictly adhered to. There can be no disrespectful treatment of person (self or other), object (work, place, or tool), or process (investigation, inspiration, visualisation, speculation, problem solving, technical learning curve, doubt, discouragement, commitment, sanity checking, resolve, closure) through words or gesture, attitude, or quality of attention. The studio must have an atmosphere of acceptance, if any creative event is to unfold. However, the studio is not a therapist’s office. Though healing may take place, that is not the primary purpose of it. Though the propelling energy may be emotional, the engagement is mediated and takes place within an aesthetic discourse whose vocabulary takes skill to use.

Here the relationship of teacher and learner is influenced by the model of generations of masters and apprentices in the transmission of accumulated knowledge, of the use and abuse of tools, technique and materials. Beyond that, the gradual acceptance of standards and the definition of “quality,”⁴⁷ while developing work habits (my students would start gabbing and the work would grind to a halt. “Talk and DO,” I’d admonish them, “it’s a skill, not an ability, doing two things at once. Practice! Or stop talking.”) culminates in the eventual coherence of all these skills, including spatial and sequential

task logic, discernment, proprioceptive and cognitive self-monitoring, physical manipulation of tools and material, and social co-operation, into a recognisable and conscious embodiment of the workmanly attitude underlying the aesthetic project of representing and expressing an idea as image.

To feel part of a tradition is important. I would begin my teaching projects by showing slides of historical metalwork, and everyone fell asleep pretty quickly. Once we started working, however, the students always wanted to look at them again, with new respect. Hearing about the medieval guild system, and the tradition of goldsmithing as the apprenticeship for all the other arts, filled them with awe. They found the idea that all these artists had once been fifteen years old trying to meet the standards of demanding teachers in relation to intransigent material particularly comforting; their camaraderie extended across centuries.

Working within such an established tradition provides an historical framework for comparison in the area, highly problematic these days, of the ethos of art-making, the reasons for doing it, the position of the artist in relation to society: a distillation of the dilemma for any discipline not immediately profit-oriented, as Oakeshott so eloquently makes clear. Was the work of the artist what constitutes “culture,” and everything else just subsistence and administration? Is what endures, then, all that matters? My students saw bronzes three thousand years old, made by people who were once their age. They were shocked to realise that what they were working on could be dug up in the unimaginably distant future, so they’d better think about what it was they intended that to be.

Finding their image, the symbol with power, was as hard as learning the techniques to translate it into objective, substantive reality. The students were their own clients, and I was firm about this: no Disney, no “happy faces,” no clichés. I was not going to let them go through all the trials of initiation for the sake of reproducing some

imported triviality. In the class making Classical Greek signet rings (an elegant, wearable form, achievable by even the most challenged Basic level student), once they had created the shank and demonstrated to me their grasp of tool use and symmetry, they could do what they liked, put an image on the top where the signet intaglio was incised, or blast right into the shape.

One girl wanted to make a timid little heart like the one in the Consumer's Distributing catalogue. She was stressed and unhappy and she was looking for a quick no-brainer. Back to the sketchbook she went, again and again. Finally she produced a massive *übermensch* of a heart ring, a totally heroic ring with muscular shoulders swooping up to support the lobes. It was a brilliant resolution of the requirements of function in a confluence of form with signifying image. Then, in the middle of a loud sustained rant about her stupid good-for-nothing boy friend, her horrible mother, and the general unfairness of everything in her whole sorry life, she picked up the carving knife and ripped a huge gash right across the top of it. Perfect! The whole class roared its approval.⁴⁸

Does this change the world? One girl wrote in the timed journal-writing I had another class do that she wished she could make art so powerful that people would put down their weapons and start to get along. Guernica. But it starts somewhere.

In that same class was a delicate fawn of a girl whose foolish parents had allowed her to go into a professional modeling career. At fifteen she was painfully aware of herself as a commodity, writing in her journal of her many concerns: her lousy grades, her limited future, her fear of the power tools and of loss of control, her lack of ideas. It was a short, intense project, involving the fire-and-brimstone initiation of bronze foundry casting: all the students were apprehensive and hard-pressed. As they literally faced the fire, their journal writing changed, and with it, their attitudes, carriage, and behaviour. In such a context, this girl's transformation was profound.

She began coming in at lunch by herself to work (unheard of among her friends), and in the space of five days became the resident expert in all steps of the process, trailing my apprentice-technician around the studio asking questions, reporting on the difference between silver and bronze as she came to know it, ignoring cuts and blisters and, finally, ignoring even the required appearance in other classes. In the group exhibition in the front hall display case, her work was outstanding in breadth and variety (versions of vertebrae, one of which I carry with me everywhere). The faculty couldn't believe her effort and output. Cognitive dissonance was expressed between the commonly held opinion, and therefore definition of her abilities and character, and this new expanded identity she had developed for herself. The last I heard, she was studying photography and applying to a highly ranked design college. She had moved from passivity to agency, and switched sides in the mirror.⁴⁹

This is “an exploit in self-enactment,”⁵⁰ what is meant by becoming conscious of oneself as human, contributing to history as well as inheriting and acknowledging it. In its discipline and symbolic re-enactment of the original Creation, the act of making art, not just the recognised masterpieces and flawless performances, but also the awkward attempts, the crumpled cast-offs, the pale derivatives, the long fallow periods and the hard, despairing dry spells, can be seen to parallel and constitute a spiritual practice. At the same time, it facilitates the cognitive development process, and functions as part of the emancipatory transformation referred to by Oakeshott, and in the broader social sphere, by Adorno, through resistance to the profane from a critical perspective developed out of an authenticity grounded in the creative process. A praxis of co-operation and collaboration is enacted when individual potentialities are realised in an arduous and “heroic” process taking place within the studio teaching tradition.

The act of will involved to follow the many laborious steps from vision to realisation in order to capture the image in time and space, however imperfectly,

constantly aware of one's human limitation, yet driven equally to make the attempt, is a template of empowerment.⁵¹ The art object commemorates this struggle, *faute de mieux*. As creator, not merely passive consumer, the artist-student glimpses liberation. In commodity culture, this is indeed an awe-inspiring event.

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¹Michael Oakeshott, Education: The engagement and its frustration, in *A Critique of Current Educational Aims*, Part I. Eds. R.F. Dearden and R.S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 24. For this and other essays on education see also Timothy Fuller, ed., *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), and Preston King and B.C. Parekh, ed., *Politics and Experience, Essays Presented to Michael Oakeshott* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

²Ibid, 29–30: “[T]his...vision of an amusement arcade and playground for all ages.”

³Ibid, 46: “It is now...two centuries since our educational engagement began to be corrupted by having imposed upon it the character of a school of dancing.”

⁴Dwight Boyd, The Place of Locating Oneself(ves)/Myself(ves) in Doing Philosophy of Education, in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 8. For commentary on his “torpification” see Ann Diller, Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One’s Own Education, in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. S. Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 2.

⁵Oakeshott, 29.

⁶G. Friedman, 19.

⁷Oakeshott, 24.

⁸Ibid, 22.

⁹Ibid, 17.

¹⁰Ibid, 39.

¹¹This quotation, emphasis added, I wrote in my notebook twenty years ago: the source may have been the catalogue for the 1961 exhibition *Environments, Situations, Spaces*. All but the last paragraph is reproduced from Oldenburg’s notebooks in Rose, 189. In the original copy I have written “...the result of having found *one’s forms*...” which implies a very different relationship between the artist and the form, connectivity rather than observation, expression rather than description, mantra rather than vocabulary.

¹²Rose, 52.

¹³M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 81.

¹⁴Rose, 40.

¹⁵The ironic stance of post-modern art towards the impossibility of effecting social change within the confines of high-art market culture is extensively documented by Suzi Gablik in *The Reenchantment of Art*; she contrasts its “endgame” nihilism, “hovering,” and self-conscious “guerrilla charlatanism” unfavourably with what she calls an “aesthetics of compassion,” what Oldenburg might be referring to as “rite” in note 7.

¹⁶Rose, 52. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷Ibid, 193. Emphasis added.

¹⁸Horkheimer and Adorno, p. xi, quoted in Friedman, p.16. Oakeshott refers to “the beginning of a dark age devoted to barbaric affluence,” 43.

¹⁹Friedman, 18.

²⁰Rose, p.64. Oldenburg’s parents were Christian Scientists; his writing and art refer often to a concern with spirituality as well as spiritualism. John Cage’s Zen Buddhism, expressed as an early form of eco-theology, was also influential. Ginsberg’s *Howl*, published in the same period, personifies the military-industrial complex as Moloch. Artists were acutely aware of the dehumanizing effects of modernity; in that the religious nature of their resistance is inventive, unconventional, emancipatory and non-dogmatic, its orthodoxy may not be immediately discernible.

²¹Oakeshott, 36.

²²Ibid, 36.

²³Northrop Frye, *On Education*, 123. I recall my father, a critic of “popular culture” and a contributing member of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, distinguishing Canadian from American culture by the comparatively benign treatment of the native population by the English and French and the mutual cooperation in the settlement of Canada, in contrast to the outright slaughter characterising the American enterprise: the mythical icons were the *coureurs du bois*, the embodiment of collaboration in the person of the Métis. This was long before the appalling revelations of coercion and abuse in the residential schools and conditions on the reserves. Adjustment mythology would account for these as biological susceptibility to alcohol in native populations, or aberrant behaviour by individual priests and officials, rather than systematic oppression.

²⁴Friedman, p. 18.

²⁵Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 49.

²⁶Horkheimer and Adorno, 86.

²⁷Friedman, 18.

²⁸Reminiscent of the “realm of the hungry ghosts” in Buddhist cosmology, inhabited by reincarnated unfortunates with gaping mouths and insatiable appetites, but no anus, no way to transform material and return it as energy to the cycle of creation, a psychic/spiritual constipation. This is not a desirable karmic outcome, in the Buddhist view. The Jungian Marion Woodman analyses the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia in parallel terms, the revulsion for food incarnating the inability to imbue matter with spirit.

²⁹Oakeshott, 19.

³⁰Ibid, 22–23.

³¹Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 45. Emphasis added to the origins of the term “religion:” *religare*, to bind, to moor; Cicero preferred *relegere*, to gather together, to collect again, to re-read.

³²Friedman, 19.

³³It may be argued that Northrop Frye also lived and worked in the sacred; he certainly occupies sacred ground in the pantheon of scholarly Olympians, as well as in the soul of Canada. For this insight and the greater part of my understanding of Frye and Adorno, I am deeply indebted to Edward James Cunningham.

³⁴Rose, 56, 61. The “hero into loonie” was a disguise, to prevent the assimilation of the artist into the culture he was critiquing: “The artist must practice disguises. When his intentions are best, he must appear the worst (which is often so, even when he doesn’t try). I admire good people who are not afraid to appear evil.” In Adorno’s chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, he refers to the resistant power of nonsense as practised by Charlie Chaplin. In *Creation and Recreation*, Frye describes the literary world as part of our own; the part inhabited by Lear and Quixote.

³⁵In *Words with Powe*, Frye writes that in this era of critical demythologizing, we really need to RE-mythologize, but to do that requires an education.

³⁶Eliade, 209.

³⁷Eliade, 26. Sometimes the signs are evoked or even provoked.

³⁸This concept is similar to Frye’s vertical inheritance present in every moment of horizontal time, outlined in *Words with Power* and elsewhere.

³⁹Eliade, 80.

⁴⁰Ibid, 81, 90. Adorno, and Frye would all refer to this as mimesis, not as reproduction or representation, but as recreation. Frye discusses the totality of literature as the story of the loss and regaining of original identity, in *On Teaching Literature*, see also note 31.

⁴¹“But we cannot say, as Hegel did, that ‘primitive man is buried in nature,’ that he has not yet found himself as distinct from nature...An existence open to the world is not an unconscious existence...” Eliade, 166–167.

⁴²This process resembles Adorno’s notion of abstraction in Art works, in *Aesthetic Theory*.

⁴³*Maclean’s*, 65.

⁴⁴University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union, *Survival Handbook 1998–1999*, 3, 15.

⁴⁵Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 46.

⁴⁶The benefit of this function was highlighted for me last Christmas by my kids playing an appalling new cardgame in the kill-or-be-killed “Monopoly” genre called “Lunch Money”! “Right-wing anarchy,” they explained cheerfully, “it encourages self-interest.”

⁴⁷Gary Trudeau had a running storyline in the *Doonesbury* cartoon about Paul Revere and his silversmith apprentice Wendy: she would be set to make a mug or plate, and come up with some horrible lumpy thing that she vociferously defended in jargon about expressing the turmoil of the times, to which Paul Revere replied “Melt it down, Wendy.”

⁴⁸Here Adorno would say that the class and I were assuming our responsibilities in our capacity as respondents to the art work, concomitant to the artist's responsibility to posterity, fulfilled in her magnificent act of "disassociation" within and characteristic of the art practice of the avant-garde.

⁴⁹Oakeshott refers to Leibniz' image of *un miroir vivant, doué d'action interne* to describe "the ability to throw back upon the world [her] own version of a human being in conduct which is both a self-disclosure and a self-enactment," 20.

⁵⁰Oakeshott, 18.

⁵¹This act of will and template of empowerment is, as Adorno says, part of that "Aesthetic Education [which] 'educes' the individual from the pre-aesthetic twilight where art and reality are intermingled, creating a sense of distance and laying bare the objective nature of the art work...[It is that education which recognizes that] Art is practiced in the sense that it defines the person as a *zoon politikon* by forcing him to step outside himself. In addition, art [so recognized] is objectively practical in that it educates consciousness." *Aesthetic Theory*, 344–345.