

# From the Editor

## Good Work

We teaching artists spend a lot of time these days talking about, being talked to about, and inevitably thinking about “assessment.” Certainly, if one is going to teach anything, one should be constantly evaluating whether and what the students and teacher are *learning*. There are many ways of doing this, and most good teachers and teaching artists make evaluation a central part of their practice in conscious and unconscious ways. We assess teaching and learning in every moment, based on how students respond to us: how they look; what they say; what they do and make.

When we argue for funding and political support of arts education we often lose sight of the obvious in our attempts to either quantify or overgeneralize about the qualities of good work. If we focus too narrowly on correlating arts experience to quantifiable *skills* in other areas, we risk obscuring the more generative, two-way overlaps between the ways scientists and painters actually think and work. If we generalize too broadly about abstract qualities of arts experience, such as “creativity” and “habits of mind,” we sometimes distract ourselves from what is deeply educative about the specific techniques and constraints of a discipline, medium, or material. We also risk implying that the arts have a special claim on “creativity,” that the painter or poet is, by definition, more “creative” or inventive in her or his work than the mechanic or statistician. Such an implication can only undermine what is powerful about the arts as *one mode* of creative expression. What makes art making so integrative and useful is that it can inspire, and also draw on, creative thinking in, and the products of, all areas of human work and thought.

Recently, I visited a photography summer program that takes place in a mostly working-class high school here in Chicago. Within moments of walking into the room where a group of students and a TA were working,

I had a strong hunch that I was looking at some very excellent teaching artistry and art making. I spent only about half an hour in the room, but everything I saw and heard further confirmed that this was “good” work. In the rest of this column, I would like to describe, as one TA to another, the things I observed that made me think these things:

- Students were making something that seemed important to them.
  - About 15 students sat at computer screens, some together, most alone. It was quiet, but not too quiet—people talked and joked a little. But it was clear most everyone’s focus was on the images displayed on their screen.
- The teaching artist seemed to relate to the students as artists.
  - I watched as this young TA moved around the room, mostly doing his own work (preparing to show and talk about some images) but attentive to how the students were progressing. Occasionally he’d stop to look at an image over a student’s shoulder. Sometimes he’d comment, sometimes not. If a student asked a question, technical or aesthetic, the TA moved quickly to respond and help, but with a very light touch; as soon as the student was able to move on, the TA moved away. The TA seemed to like and respect the students, but not in an overbearing way.
- The students seemed to relate to the TA as an artist.
  - Students seemed willing to ask the TA for advice and ideas, but as far as I could tell, they were more collegial than deferential in their affect. The students appeared to share the same liking and respect for the TA but the personal relationship did not seem to be the main thing—they were at work.
- The students seemed to relate to each other as artists.



- Some were clearly friends, some seemed perhaps from “different crowds” (though it’s hard to tell). Students seemed quite comfortable making suggestions and providing advice to each other in much the same way as the TA. I watched as a student only half-jokingly criticized, even disparaged, another student’s work. The second student shrugged, and then chuckled, as if the critique was completely natural, and also as if it was not particularly persuasive. It seemed as if, in this context, these students joked, discussed, even argued about *the work*.
- The students were working as intentional and conscious artists, and were enjoying it.
  - I probably annoyed any number of kids by interrupting them and asking what they were up to. Every one of them answered with an explanation related to technique. A student working in Adobe Photoshop with a beautiful image of a very large, strangely shaped piece of ductwork on the roof of the high school said, “I’m working with the contrast on this image to make this part stand out more clearly against the sky. I think that will make it look more weird, which is what I want.” Their focus, again, was on *making the work*, and it was immediately clear that they had some grasp of technique but were also sharpening their technical abilities as a means to control their medium. They seemed able to look at their work critically but were centrally engaged in making the work.
  - When I asked what a student intended with a particular image, or why they made images at all, I got short but interesting and unique answers: “I want people to look at my pictures and not understand them at all at first. I like it when I look at an image like that so I want people who look at my images to experience that.”
  - I asked several students if they enjoyed making images and at least two looked at me as if I was insane.
- The students were making good art.
  - OK, so that’s the loaded one, right? But to not raise that question is to miss the whole point. If we are not creating a context in which people develop their work, invent, originate, and gain more control over their medium, then we are wasting their time. I also happen to think that

any ancillary or “portable” learning that happens in the arts, happens *as the result* of a deep engagement with technique and application in a medium, not simply as the result of a superficial “arts experience.”

- I don’t think we have to adopt a whole system of aesthetics to talk about what “good work” means. In this room I saw:
  - *Variety*: Even though many students were working from related themes or prompts, there was tremendous variety in technique and aesthetic. This did not seem to be in any way an extension of the TA’s aesthetic. In fact, I had no sense from looking at student work of what the TA’s work might look like or what his focus as an artist might be.
  - *Invention*: I saw many images during my brief visit that were novel to me and did not fit aesthetic frames I was familiar with. I am not familiar enough with photography as a discipline to say whether significant technical or aesthetic experimentation was in play, but my inexpert take was that it was.
  - *Power*: Most of the images I saw were interesting to me; some visually, some narratively or associatively, many in multiple ways. Some were very moving. Others were engaging intellectually.
  - *Development*: A couple students showed me older images alongside the one they were working on. In one case I found the earlier images more compelling, if less crafted, but it was clear that student work was at least partly about evolution and change. The students did not seem stuck on just one idea or approach.
  - *Wholeness*: In my brief visit, I saw several images that I found so interesting that I’d want to look at them all the time. I knew I’d get something out of seeing them over and over. Of course, they were perhaps to my particular tastes. But it’s quite nice, and it seems a privilege to walk into a studio, student or otherwise, and have that experience.

As I thought later about what I’d seen, about *why* it seemed so good, it struck me that everything happening in that room seemed entirely natural and effortless. It made me wonder, as I often do when I see work like this, why things become so complicated in arts education; why simple, good work can become fraught with political, territorial, and methodological spats, and mired in jargon-laden administrative swamps. Aren’t we just trying to create contexts in which people can learn to make art better, and learn other things through that process?

And then I remembered (again) that we don’t operate in a political or social vacuum, and that this “simple, effortless” program I had the good luck to visit was the result of extremely difficult and dedicated work on the part of a highly skilled and enthusiastic TA and equally skilled and visionary program director who has to work tirelessly to fund, organize, and guide such a program. What is good and valuable about the work begins with them, and leads to some very good art, and some very powerful young artists. For me this is the most meaningful assessment of all.

*The Museum of Contemporary Photography’s Picture Me program provides intensive training in the medium of photography to 60 to 80 teens in three Chicago high schools per year. Participating students also take field trips to the MoCP and other cultural institutions, meet with professional artists, and publically exhibit their work.*

*The Senn/Rickover High School Picture Me program is presented in partnership with After School Matters with support from Sterling Goodrich, Tobias Emms, and Mary May. Teaching artist, Daniel Shea. Program Manager, Corinne Rose.*

*The image accompanying this article is the work of JP Raybon, a student in the class described in this column.*

Nick Jaffe  
Chief Editor

