

**Artists on  
Arts Education  
A Written  
Discussion \***

Michel van der Aa  
Arnon Grunberg  
Aernout Mik  
Charlotte Mutsaers  
Ramsey Nasr  
Gijs Scholten van Aschat  
Barbara Visser

\* in: *Arts Education Beyond Art. Teaching Art in Times of Change*  
Barend van Heusden & Pascal Gielen (eds.)  
(Valiz 2015)



**Barend van Heusden** – Perhaps we could start by talking about your own experiences with art education.

**Michel van der Aa** – I attended two primary schools, the first one did practically nothing about drama or music, the second one did. A new world opened up for me. Every Friday afternoon we got to work with instruments, do playback singing, stage little acts. At the end of the afternoon we'd show each other our work, without inhibition or fear. Making things yourself, inventing, discovering, it all began for me during those lessons, and it sparked my curiosity about what else was out there. I remember that later on, when I was a little older, we listened to *Sacre du Printemps* and had discussions about it that went beyond 'wonderful' or 'terrible'. How was the work received originally? Why was that? Is there any music today that provokes the same reaction as *Sacre* did back then? Next, we discussed a George Michael song, *Careless Whisper*, miles away from Stravinsky but perfectly matched to our adolescent minds. I think it's important in art education at primary schools and high schools to approach the children's perception of their environment from the present, from the now. Use the contemporary musical DNA, and combine it with an (art-)historical perspective. Get them to sample other things, unfamiliar things, in small portions. Let them do it themselves first, then look or listen, then talk about it. In that order.

**Ramsey Nasr** – I spent my secondary school years at a grammar school in Rotterdam. There was no art education in those days: Latin and Greek were the main subjects, and I discovered art by accident. There was an annual school play that was organized outside the lessons. I joined in in my third year because I was keen to try it. I played in it again the following year, and the year after, and then I knew: I'm going to be an actor. So it was pure coincidence. I knew nothing whatsoever about the theatre. In all my years of secondary school I went to only two plays, and they were definitely not part of the school curriculum. One inspired teacher of Latin and Greek thought we should see a Greek

tragedy at least once. So that was personal enthusiasm on his part. The other occasion – God knows which teacher had come up with that silly idea – was when our class went to see a contemporary opera *Aquarius*, by the Belgian avant-garde composer Karel Goeyvaerts. I was bored to tears. It was indigestible for a pubescent boy – but then came the finale. Something happened in those final ten minutes that completely flattened me: the opera ended with a loud chorus, many-voiced, in hallucinatory harmonies, while the singers passed in front of us with stylized movements. I never forgot that random moment. It was overwhelming and shocking, it offered no answer, served no apparent purpose, and provided me with no practical skill whatsoever. It had the effect of an epiphany. For one brief moment I believed in something that I *knew* did not exist. Its value was only in the experience, it snatched everything away from me, it radically liberalized my imagination and crushed my Truth. I had believed in something that was alien to my nature.

All the experiences I just mentioned were coincidences. They were fantastic, but it makes no sense to have such life-changing events happen so randomly and coincidentally, to have them depend on the presence of a teacher, inspired or otherwise, who has some time to spare. If the interest in art and the love of art in our country depends on such arbitrariness and coincidence, I wonder what art and culture are worth to us.

**BvH** – What do these (and other, similar) experiences mean for the way art could be taught, according to you?

**Gijs Scholten van Aschat** – I think it's important that school children are offered a varied and diverse programme, one that allows them to discover and develop all their qualities. I'd like to share a few experiences with you from my professional field, the performing arts. To children, play is an innate skill. They develop a strong imagination even before they start going to school. A ball of paper can be a rock or a football, a stick, a sword or an airplane – anything goes. If the child is to grow, it's important that this development continues in school. You can develop your powers of imagination in drama classes or improvisation lessons, for example.

You need a certain discipline to be able to play together. You learn to listen and to wait your turn. You have to work together in order to play together, you have to adapt. You become part of a shared story. Also, the theatre is a wonderful outlet for many children: you're allowed to show your emotions, to let yourself go, because it's only play after all.

Once, at a time when I was playing Hamlet, I visited a school in Amsterdam where more than half of the students had an immigrant background. One of the teachers had read the play with them, they had been to a performance, and two Moroccan girls in headscarves had memorized some of the lines of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's two friends, for the occasion of my visit. I talked about the play with the class, and I played a bit of it with the two girls, who were very shy at first. In the course of the afternoon, the dynamics in that classroom changed completely. The rowdy boys who had been messing about initially slowly came round. Something happened. The teacher told me later that the class had changed after that day, for the good.

**MvdA** – What I like about working with song lyrics is that they are often about very topical issues in society. These days you can work with rap lyrics, or talk about Pussy Riot, and suddenly it's about more than music, it's about your attitude in society and your opinions. It gives me a chance to refer back to composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev under Stalin's regime. As far as I'm concerned, anything you do in art education should be anchored in the present, and from that position you can look back to the past and forward to the future. For today's generation of students, the genres merge much more easily. Spotify playlists switch effortlessly between Lady Gaga, Aphex Twin, Ligeti, Bach and Beyoncé. I notice it in my own children as well: they make no distinction at all between the genres. They are naturally open-minded when it comes to new things. And abstraction is not a problem for them, it still fits in easily with their imagination at that young age.

**RN** – I was surprised to learn what good art education can do when a horn player friend of mine recently told

me about her experiences as an art teacher. She teaches music to young children, from toddlers to adolescents, on a project basis. She prepares them for the concerts regularly given by big national orchestras. In her classes, the children get an introduction to the musical instruments in the orchestra, they meet some of the musicians, attend some of the rehearsals, and are sometimes given composition assignments about the music in question. As it turns out, young children have no problem at all with the kind of contemporary classical music that many adults dispose of as awful screeching. Children are absolutely lapping up the awful screeching, whereas they have much more trouble with Bach, Mozart and all those other composers that we rate among the venerable pantheon of classical music. They are adventurous by nature, they are open to an extremely modern, complex world. A recent educational project, focused on the German contemporary composer Widmann (whom I had never heard of), concluded with a sample survey. 30% of the children said they didn't care for the music, but 70% rated it as exciting, witty, wonderful and fascinating. This was the result of thorough, enthusiastic preparation. A telling detail is that after one of those contemporary music projects, the mother of one of the students went up to the teacher and told her in an angry voice: 'My God, if my own son hadn't been part of your project, I would have walked out after two minutes!' That's how much she had hated it. Her son had had the time of his life.

If we really take children and art seriously, a world will open up for us. So we need art education: at every level, at black as well as white schools, for Christians, Muslims, Hindus and atheists. It will offer a remedy against the Truth that kills off any imagination we may have.

**BvH** – Imagination – there's a recurring word...

**GSvA** – Developing a child's imagination is really important. Studies show that children who go off the straight and narrow often have a serious lack of imagination and empathy. Imagination is no more than picturing what will happen if you do something, and seeing what the consequences might be. Children at play learn to put themselves

in someone else's shoes, learn to feel what others feel in a fictitious situation. Kids who are good at that develop a stronger sense of empathy with others. After all, they played at being those others, they understand them. A well-developed imagination also allows you to picture a situation you haven't actually been in, and to learn what you should do in that situation. By playing roles or games, you also feel the emotions that go with the given situation. You learn to understand the roles you play better, you also develop a certain empathy for people with whom you have no bond at all at first, but who grow on you when you play them, or play with them. You feel what it's like to be belittled or threatened. Many children who intimidate others or show criminal behaviour have very poorly developed powers of imagination; they simply cannot imagine the consequences of their actions. That also goes for daredevils and show-offs. They feel no fear – and fear is no more than imagining what might happen in the future.

**RN** – Asking 'Why art education?' is the same thing as asking 'Why Greek and Latin?' Neither classical languages nor art serve a direct practical purpose in our lives; people function just fine without them, so why bother? Until a week ago, I also tended to think that none of these subjects had any use. I mean, dead languages... how useless can a school subject be? Latin and Greek offer windows on a world that no longer exists; art offers a window on a world that never was and always remains a possibility. It seemed to me more about giving meaning to the world than about usefulness. I changed my mind after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France.

Latin and Greek introduced me to a world that was wiped out, with gods that nobody believes in any longer and languages nobody speaks now – and it's a good thing. It creates the ultimate perspective, it shows us a world that can now only be evoked in our imagination. Novels and poems do precisely that, as do movies, plays, opera, ballet, music, the fine arts. They hand us a parallel world with people who don't exist, with a language that doesn't work like we expect it to, with new sounds and new images. It makes our world bigger and more confusing. School subjects

such as art, Greek and Latin seem to run counter to the purpose of education: they pose questions instead of offering answers. They tickle our curiosity about unknown territories, about what lies beyond the horizon, and that's how they liberate us from the tunnel vision of our hic et nunc without having to lapse into the temptations of a hereafter. They make us immune to The Simple Truth, which is eternal, suffocating and humourless. That is the true purpose of education and it's our only defence against stupidity and fundamentalism. It's precisely those subjects with a less direct application and of seemingly little use that are the perfect means for our protection.

Yes, that's certainly an idealistic notion. I realize full well that Latin and Greek are not for everyone. But art education should be available to all students, at every level of education. There is nothing elitist about experiencing art, you just have to be introduced to it at some point. Nobody does that of their own accord, no student will ever volunteer to go to the ballet, the opera, the museum – and that includes me, because I was way too busy dealing with my hormones at the time.

**BvH** – Could it be about representing your consciousness?

**Barbara Visser & Aernout Mik** – The fine arts are a fantastic instrument to look into your own consciousness and at your role in the world. You get a better idea of your perception of the world precisely by placing it outside yourself and abstracting it in images, words and sounds. While philosophy makes use of language in the literal sense, the fine arts do the same thing by exploring images, spaces or cinematographic materials. And yet the fine arts aren't always necessarily about producing actual images or objects. It's a pity that the world is more or less divided into producers and consumers, even the world of art – you are always either a maker or the recipient of art. It doesn't do much justice to the practice of the artist, who is first and foremost a critical observer of the world.

We have many certainties that are based on an amalgam of knowledge, assumptions, expectations and habits; our identities depend on those certainties to some extent.

The experiences and opinions you've accumulated are useful baggage, but not at every given moment. Ideally they are at your disposal when you need them, but they shouldn't turn into dogmas that hamper new or different perspectives. If you make an effort to be open-minded, if you ask questions about what you observe around you instead of forming an opinion right off the bat, you create room for new insights and for possible different perspectives. This quality is not much in evidence in our society. We're flooded by instant value judgements, and they tend to turn into a torrent of abuse rather than a considered opinion.

As a visual artist you teach yourself to suspend your opinion or judgement. You try to see what there *is* first, without immediately thinking anything, almost as if you see or experience everything for the first time. But since that is usually not the case in reality, it's an effort. You have to learn it and train it, as if it were some invisible muscle.

**GSvA** — I'd also like to talk about culture and the media in education. We live in a culture of images. We are surrounded by so much visual material and information it's making our heads spin. Sound and vision are the main media that supply us with information, but how does it work? Is it true what you're seeing? Who determines the content? Who decides what we see?

**BvH** — Do you think art education should teach children about this culture of images?

**BV & AM** — Learning about images and visual culture, and understanding them, should be an explicit part of the curriculum in primary and secondary school. Images, moving or static, have a much greater influence on our lives and the way we experience it than a few decades ago. Education can play a crucial role in developing that awareness. Even in our lifetime, visual culture has developed from two TV stations in shaky greys to an insane amount of moving and static images that we can see any time, anywhere, and that also come at us uninvited. If you had told people in 1966 what today's media would be like, they would have dismissed you as a crazy storyteller. Even our surprise about this fact sounds dated now;

these days we are so used to being confronted with images of decapitations, drowned refugees washed ashore, and hard porn. The young generation is growing up with it and they act like it's completely normal. Questions like where these images come from, who makes them and for whom, or what they could mean to some people all go unanswered. It's a fact that children see these images; we hardly know how it makes them feel, but it seems evident that schools could and should guide them in a world that swamps their minds with this kind of material.

In addition to the extreme examples we just mentioned, there is also the culture of images that we absorb in a much more ordinary way on a daily basis, a culture that peddles all sorts of things and tempts us: who or what is important according to the media, what should we buy, reject, and think? Games are also an important part of the culture of images. Some games invite you to design new worlds, others want you to nuke entire cities and murder their population. It's a relatively new aspect of visual culture, which is a reason in itself to study it, together with the students too. At the same time, the abundance of images neutralizes their power: with so many perspectives, the authority of an image is undermined, and if all goes well images will also contradict each other. Then again, young people may not see all the perspectives. A lot of them produce their own images, which will make them aware to a certain extent of the manipulative power of images and editing.

The culture of images and the media are a major part of the way we perceive the world and in turn influence it. That's why it's important to develop a greater awareness in that respect. A clearer understanding of what images are, what making, observing and *reading* images means, and which responsibilities you have if you confront others with them, is of vital importance in future education. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris demonstrates the extreme reactions a cartoon can provoke — apparently that is how powerful images can be.

**GSvA** — It seems inevitable to me that we should teach our children how to interpret all those images, and explain to them how they are made. An image or a film is always

the maker's choice. What do I show, what do I leave out? How do the media work? The news doesn't show all the news, it's a selection. How do social media work? To whom is your Facebook visit important, and why? And so on. The same things that apply to a culture of images also apply to the great epic stories of the world: the stories behind the religions, the stories from classical antiquity, and great literature, ranging from the *Odyssey* to Muhammad to Buddha, from *Candide* to *Star Wars*.

**BvH** — Can we formulate some conclusions to wind up the discussion?

**MvdA** — I think art education should in any event be regarded as a separate subject, without this economic value that people always talk about. It's about reflection, imagination, deeper values. It feeds the head and opens the heart. Art belongs in our schools, as far as I'm concerned. We can't expect all parents to introduce their children to art. We need to give them access so they can find out for themselves what it's like to work with music and theatre. How else are we going to get new audiences in the theatres and new makers on stage?

**BV & AM** — Schools can help develop a child's personal capacity for observing, thinking, analysing, and making connections between the many sources of information. This will require teachers to have the kind of knowledge that goes beyond the facts: how do you focus in a world awash with digital stimulation; how do you listen closely and look carefully; what is your frame of reference and how does it affect your perception of the world; how do the things around you relate to each other and to you; how do you influence that; what is imagination and why is it so important? It sometimes feels as if the over-the-top testing habit and the so-called social media were designed to turn our children into assertive, judgemental consumers, instead of attentive 21st century citizens who think and act independently.

If the latter is what we really want, education can play a major part. Knowledge of image production and visual culture are of great importance in that respect.

**GSvA** — And obviously the be-all and end-all of proper education is having inspired and skilful teachers. And a number of students they can cope with, so smaller groups. And I'd like to plead for raising the status of teachers. Better pay would be a start.

**Charlotte Mutsaers** — One frequently hears about prospective college students showing a sad lack of competence in the use of their mother tongue. So in my opinion, what they should have first and foremost is a perfect command and knowledge of their mother tongue in all its finesses. It will enable them to express themselves as adequately as possible. It will enable them to be taken seriously as a human being and as a member of society. It will enable them to judge and value literature. And it will enable them to understand, learn and command foreign languages much faster thanks to their fundamental knowledge of grammar.

As far as personal development is concerned: knowledge of valuable issues, and discussions about them, contribute immensely to personal development in an indirect way (and obviously this is a task for the parents as much as for the schools). I would also like to plead for raising students to become free people, and by that I mean people who don't let themselves be talked into things but are able to think independently. Confronting them with all forms of art, literature, theatre, music, and visual arts can obviously be invaluable in that respect. The current trend of doing everything TOGETHER is very much at the expense of the individual, whereas the most interesting notions and renovations are usually initiated by individuals. Thinking in terms of US should make way for thinking in terms of ME in education, without the thinker in question having to fear missing the boat on a social level. This will also substantially reduce bullying in schools.

The development of talent is an extremely vague notion. Firstly, by no means everyone possesses talent(s), and secondly, in young children it is usually by no means clear yet what those talents might be. If there is a talent, it must be developed by its owner first and foremost. And that won't be possible until that person has a perfect command of language, a certain urge for freedom, and the

necessary knowledge concerning arts and sciences. And that brings us full circle.

**RN** — Since the terrorist attacks in Paris I've become more convinced than ever that education should offer more than just theoretical knowledge and practical skills. It should try to teach children things like ambiguity, nuance, empathy, and imagination — not because they're so noble or chic or humane, but because otherwise our society will soon cease to exist. People who are introduced to art at a young age can discover that there is a wider palette than the three primary colours of their existence, that the world doesn't stop outside their front door. Such experiences are a vital necessity in a globalizing world that grows more complex with every generation. What's more, they can be easily realized.

**BvH** — Thank you all for this discussion.

The authors are all members of the Akademie van Kunsten (Society of Arts), part of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences).

At the editors' request (Gielen and Van Heusden), the written contributions to this discussion were collected by Barbara Visser and Gijs Scholten van Aschat. Barend van Heusden (University of Groningen) set them in order. The discussion is concluded with a column by Arnon Grunberg.

## Factory

Knowledge transfer is an intimate affair, which we like to forget because we have grown to think that intimacy is scary. Intimacy is similar to abuse, isn't it?

Knowledge transfer is a risky affair. Sometimes the transfer fails; student and teacher did not get along.

Since education is one of the areas where we no longer wish to run any risks, we have started supplying protocols for knowledge transfer as if it were a medical or military operation. Students are tested constantly, and when they fall behind it is expressed in months (in terms of spelling, two months behind; reading comprehension: four months). Everyone joins forces to help the students draw level. If they manage it, we regard their education as a success. They can move on to a higher level of education.

School has become a factory, and a child is a calf that goes in more or less alive and comes out as a generic sausage. (In that respect, education resembles the average talk show; guests are supposed to be generic. Some guests are so skilled at it that everything they say is baloney.)

What should we teach our children? Which books should they have read? What skills should they acquire?

Since most literature classes have actually turned into literature destruction machines, children should be taught to play.

Play offers the opportunity to develop social intelligence; play makes you flexible, play makes you curious.

In our culture, the life of a child is filled with more and more obligations, as if the child is a tiny factory worker. Let's not force even more obligations down that child's throat.

Art education should be free to offer children opportunities to learn to play, and to reflect on that play. Art education doesn't have to be more than teaching children that it's okay to fantasize without self-censorship, so it's okay for example to fantasize about killing your parents, torturing the cat or undressing your sister or brother. That's what art is: a sanctuary where fantasies

can be given free reign, in a harmless way, where laws and morals temporarily do not apply.

Playing is also an excellent preparation for the job market, which can be characterized as follows: playing in pseudo-serious circumstances. Not counting exceptions.

Arnon Grunberg