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The Question of What and Where the Arts are Today

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The Question of What and Where the Arts are Today

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The Question of What and Where the Arts are Today

What is art, and analogously, what are the arts? The online Oxford Dictionary defines arts as “various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance as well as “[s]ubjects of study primarily concerned with the processes and products of human creativity and social life, such as languages, literature, and history (as contrasted with scientific or technical subjects)” (Art, n. d.). While the first part of the definition foregrounds the creative act itself and its outcome, art, the second part underscores the importance of arts research. Why did I select this definition from a number of alternatives? The answer is simple. Both aspects of the definition epitomize the goals proposed for works accepted to the *Research* strand for this, the inaugural issue of *Ubiquity*, in which our theme is “The Arts in Spaces and Places.” These goals exist to explore with our readers the “places and spaces,” traditional and non-traditional, where the arts exist and to share what we have discovered about the role of the arts in today’s literature, literacy, and arts education.

Why did we (the editors) decide on this particular theme? The reasons are several. First, we believe that the value of the arts is indisputable. As early as the fifth-century B.C.E., Confucius, a Chinese thinker, pointed to the beneficial influence of the arts on the people and on their character in these words in his book, *King Kieh*:

‘When you enter a state you can know what subjects (its people) have been taught. If they show themselves men who are mild and gentle, sincere and good, they have been taught from the Book of Poetry. . . . If they be big-hearted and generous, bland and honest, they have been taught from the Book of Music.’ (Bk. Xxiii, as cited in Müller, 1885, p. 255)

We also agree with Wolterstorff (1980), in his assertion that arts are the essence of humanity as they “are all embedded in the fabric of human intention” (p. 3). This is firstly

because works of art “are objects and instruments of action whereby we carry out our intentions with respect to the world, our fellows, ourselves, and our gods” (Wolterstorff, 1980, p.3). In other words, the arts are *ubiquitous*, since they are ever-present in our lives, and since they form and shape every aspect of human activity and social life. In view of that, we believe that by sharing the findings from researching the arts in *Ubiquity* we will help all our readers – students, teachers, teacher educators, researchers, artists and other members of the local and global community - become cognizant of the ways in which human beings have viewed the world in the past. As a result, we strive to help fellow researchers and educators to use their knowledge of the arts to inform the ways in which they look at the world today and tomorrow. It is through the explorations of this human universal – *art* – that we invite our readers to make a connection to and develop a deeper understanding of the real-life experiences in their own worlds as well as the worlds of individuals from different cultural, social, or economic backgrounds.

Second, like many scholars, artists, educators and philosophers before us (Dissanayake, 1995; Dutton, 2010; Pistoletto, 2010; Winner, 1985; Wolterstorff, 1980), we too think that the arts are everywhere, in different nations, cultures, and communities, in both traditional and non-traditional places and spaces. Michalengo Pistoletto (2010), a contemporary Italian artist, encapsulated this position in these terms, “Above all, artists must not be only in art galleries or museums — they must be present in all possible activities. The artist must be the sponsor of thought in whatever endeavor people take on, at every level” (para. 10). Accordingly, in our call for submissions to *Ubiquity* for Issue One, we invited the prospective authors to take us to “the spaces and places where the arts are or can be made evident, whether in schools, communities, universities, research sites and other non-traditional places” (*Ubiquity* Call 1, 2014, p. 2), and to share with us what arts today are and what role they play in the places and spaces which they

occupy. Brief overviews of these explorations follow. I extend heartfelt appreciation to all authors and reviewers on the behalf of the entire Editorial Board of Ubiquity for contributing their scholarly work and valuable time to make this inaugural issue a success.

In the article, “Not in the Script: The Unseen Benefits of Theatre on Struggling Readers,” *James Nageldinger* and *Timothy Rasinski* draw our attention to performance arts, especially theatre script reading programs, and their influence on the reading and reading processes of twenty-nine theatre majors. The researchers reported a positive impact in the areas of thinking, engagement, and inference with both theatre and non-theatre texts. *Jeremy Blair* invites us to thrift stores to participate with his pre-service teachers in “material culture discourse and self-narrative exploration” about the art found in these places. His study reports on the ways in which teacher educators analyzed, appropriated and transformed their self-selected objects of art “to make deeper connections to their found pieces.” *Sarah Falconer* and *Ann Kruger*’s quasi-experimental study, on the other hand, examines the influence of the Good Behavior Game, a technique and studio practice for behavior intervention, to obtain “desired artistic behaviors” in an elementary art classroom. The study discovered improvement in art-related behavior for students who participated in the Good Behavior Game in comparison to students who did not.

Collectively, our invited pieces by renowned researchers and teacher educators in the fields of literacy and art education ask us to explore the status of the arts education and arts research in the past, present, and future, pointing to positive trends, challenges and promising solutions. More specifically, in “A Place of their Own: The Arts and Literacy in the Age of Accountability,” *Susan Hynds* critiques the instrumentalist perspective on the role of arts in today’s high-stakes testing and accountability milieu of educational reform and proposes an alternative perspective for researchers and educators to adapt. Other calls for action are equally

important. Richard Beach's conceptual piece, "Engaging Students through Place-Based Education" offers a philosophical and theoretical base for exploring "the construction of places and spaces by larger institutional forces" and how these forces as well as places and spaces themselves "influence [students'] own ideas" on the local and global issues. Finally, in "Building Places and Spaces for Creativity in a STEAM Framework," Enid Zimmerman reminds us of the importance of research and practice that integrate creativity in all content areas in a purposeful and strategic way; "not just as an addition but as a necessary component."

John Dewey (1934) argues that viewing art gainfully is only possible because of our ability to draw meaningful conclusions from our mental impressions and experiences; "an experience of thinking has its own esthetic quality" (p. 45). He compares such an experience to a *bona fide* esthetic experience in arguing that "the material of the fine arts consist of qualities; that of experience...are signs or symbols having no intrinsic quality of their own but standing for things that may in another experience be qualitatively experienced..." (p. 46).

But what is an esthetic experience and what is merely an everyday one? Does an esthetic experience engage the heart or the mind? Dewey, again:

The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an [esthetic] experience. (p. 47)

This is another way of saying that balance, proportion and perspective – however they emerge – are essential ingredients of a "good" work of fine art. Those qualities, both of our

collected research and our curated fine art, are ones we employed in the collection of works called *Ubiquity*.

Evoking Dewey's (1934) ideals about experiencing works of art, we hope that the scholarship we present here in both the traditional article format (Dewey's "intellectual" side of art) and the multimodal format for select pieces (more of "pure experience"), will provide the reader with both an artistic and an esthetic experience.

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