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# “Fulfillment,” “Disturbance”: Contrasting Purposes of the Arts in Education

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GUILLERMO MARINI

## Introduction

In memoriam of Elliot Eisner, I wish to commend his book *Educating Artistic Vision* for advancing a distinction between contextual and essential arguments that has become classical to justify the purposes of the arts in education.<sup>1</sup> Contextual arguments typically focus on transferring artistic qualities to nonartistic school areas and aim at achieving extrinsic outcomes such as higher academic results, a better school climate, improved cognitive development, and the like. Essential arguments are those that deal with intrinsic artistic qualities like the development of aesthetic awareness, the exploration of feeling and emotion as ways of interpreting reality, the capacity to make good judgments in the absence of fixed rules, the opportunity to rejoice in the making of a work that renders the inexhaustible variety of human experience.

Although it is difficult to deny the prevalence of contextual arguments in the public and political debate on the purposes of the arts in education, recently there has been a renewed development of essential-oriented proposals coming from the fields of art education and philosophy of education. To name four, we can consider John Baldacchino’s claim that artistic practice is a “doing” that constantly needs to unlearn itself, demanding a permanent revisitation of its purposes and expectations;<sup>2</sup> Tyson Lewis’s rediscovery of Giorgio Agamben’s work as a means to emphasize rhythm and playfulness in education;<sup>3</sup> Constantijn Koopman’s “art as fulfillment” as the crystallization of the most noble human traits that emerge through the arts;<sup>4</sup> and Claudia Ruitenberg’s “art-that-is-other” as a warning of the pedagogical power that remains hidden in artworks that seem difficult to work with.<sup>5</sup>

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Out of those positions, “art as fulfillment” and “art-that-is-other” show a conceptual complementarity that is worth developing further. The reason is twofold. First, although straightforward in their argumentation, I see the risk of simplifying both as contradictory arguments that would seek something like the benefits of “good art” and “bad art,” respectively. Second, I find a rich opportunity in tracing some of the differences and convergences among these kinds of positions as a way of stimulating new relationships between the different kinds of arguments that advocate for the arts in education.

Accordingly, this paper will begin by presenting Koopman’s “art as fulfillment” and Ruitenberg’s “art-that-is-other.” First, it shows the theoretical foundations that assist both authors in developing their arguments; then it proposes two artworks as means to portray the central aspects of each position. Second, it discusses a convergence and divergence between “art as fulfillment” and “art-that-is-other”: on the one hand, I argue that both aim at insight, although in an immediate and delayed manner, respectively. While Koopman promotes intersubjective resemblances between viewer and work, Ruitenberg pursues the conscious awareness of the epistemic structures that condition *how* we know *what* we know about art. On the other hand, I claim that they each assume a different perspective on art interpretation. While Koopman emphasizes the opportunity of meaning making through art, Ruitenberg criticizes the very possibility of identifying forms of knowledge in art.

### **“Art as Fulfillment”**

In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Hans-Georg Gadamer characterizes two fundamental experiences of time.<sup>6</sup> First, there is one kind of time that feels “empty.” This is the conception of time that supposes an original lack that needs to be filled in. It is a time whose value depends on how efficiently it is spent, a time that can be lost or earned, negotiated or regretted. Two good personifications of this sense of time are the bored who wastes time not knowing what to do and the workaholic who sees time fleeing while doing too many things.

Then, there is a “fulfilled” time that Gadamer symbolizes with the celebration of a party, an event that is both complete and actual. It is complete in the sense that the party congregates everything and everyone into a whole. This is why, during the celebration, nothing is missing or sought for. Rather than looking to be filled in by occasional characters, activities, or things, the party already supposes complete time.

Furthermore, Gadamer speaks of the party as being an actual, present-based activity that “explicitly suppresses all representations of a goal towards to walk to.”<sup>7</sup> This is why, during the celebration, people seem to share the perception of limitless length or, more precisely, of the actual overruling of

chained moments by an enlarged sense of immediacy that makes time stand still and invites the partygoers to linger together. The party expresses actualized time.

Constantijn Koopman builds on Gadamer and signals "fulfilled time" as a paradigm for what the arts in education should look for. According to Koopman, the arts should enable "the immediate vividness of aesthetic experience here and now," granting the conditions to "effectively manage the abundance of time we have at our disposal in order to engage in meaningful practices."<sup>8</sup> In what looks like the Aristotelic mimetic relationship between the artwork's aesthetic structure and the viewer's internal dispositions, Koopman's arguments rest on a collection of artworks that bring forth such a sense of completion that the spectator is moved to sustain her engagement with them without tiring.

As an example, Koopman refers to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In his view, what is particularly revealing here is that this drama is crafted in such a way that the person reading the text or attending the performance will eventually come to see the development of the plot—its characters' motivations, actions, and speeches—and understand its deeper meaning: that is, what constitutes friendship and betrayal. This revelation comes in the crucial moment of the work: "There is a flash of insight . . . intimated to us in the direct engagement with the work of art [where its] deeper meaning is suddenly revealed."<sup>9</sup>

However, Koopman acknowledges the existence of works of art that can be indeed very disturbing and that pose a threat to "art as fulfillment," for they lack the inherent qualities of completing order and meaningful immediacy. What to do before such art? Try to contextualize its historic, political, or educational origins, for these works typically emerge as reactions against decayed dogma. Although not ends-in-themselves, these works may eventually contribute to an enhanced experience of what fulfillment in the arts looks like by presenting their incompleteness as an example to avoid.<sup>10</sup> Building on Gadamer, one could argue that, while there are moments in life where people seem almost inevitably condemned to waste time either in boredom or running against deadlines, at the end of the day those situations could justify future fulfilled time events. In Koopman's words, "[N]o one seeks disorientation in the arts any more than one does in the rest of one's life. Eventually, we want something positive."<sup>11</sup>

The way in which Koopman further describes this positive quality helps us consider his argument better: positive encounters with art seem to refer pre-eminently to an "existential experience [of] unsurpassed beauty, exceptional profundity, rapture and ecstasy."<sup>12</sup> This type of experience ultimately constitutes the core of Koopman's perspective on the educational value of the arts: the best possible contribution that the arts can provide to education comes from those exemplary works that portray attributes like integrity, proportion, and cognitive clarity. In consequence, one could argue that the

arts are educational inasmuch they anticipate, model, and even challenge some of the most enriching qualities that human existence can long for.

I wish to go back to *Julius Caesar* to clarify my reading of Koopman. This tragedy constitutes an example of “fulfillment” not only because it is masterfully written but also because it delves into some of the core human traits and portrays them vividly. Far from simplifying the complex relationships between friendship and betrayal, Shakespeare zooms in on them, allowing the viewer to ponder nuances such as hateful deeds between people who love each other, the way in which parents may hurt their children without noticing it, the fact that ambition may overturn familiar and democratic values, and so forth.

More specifically, it seems to me that *Julius Caesar* has the virtue of transparently communicating its meaning to the audience. Straightforwardly, intensely, with obvious talent but respecting the viewer’s inner rhythm, the work carries the spectator into a realm where friendship and betrayal are revealed in their fullest, granting the opportunity to linger in their consideration. Building on Gadamer’s image, I would say that Shakespeare has the ability of taking the audience to a celebration of humanity that feels so intriguing that the occasional partygoers rejoice in slowing down and listening to what is being said here.

### “Art-That-Is-Other”

Claudia Ruitenberg provides an alternative viewpoint to Koopman’s. Her argument is that, regardless of their complete nature, those ways of dealing with the arts that aim at facilitating positive encounters preclude a whole set of educational qualities that are urgently needed in today’s education. For Ruitenberg, rather than focusing on traditionally fulfilling works, educators should concentrate instead on those works of art that are demanding, anomalous, and weird:

I speak specifically of those works of art that address us from, as it were, another shore. . . . [T]hey are works that are called “difficult,” “strange,” or “unfamiliar,” works that we can *ingest* but not *digest*, that we roll around uncomfortably in our perception, like a hot potato in our mouth.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to highlight that the notion of “art-that-is-other” comes from the input of an author that Ruitenberg has translated into art education: Douglas Aoki, specifically his critique against the value of “clarification” as the teacher’s key task in education.<sup>14</sup>

According to Aoki, those texts that elude easy comprehension or those that the teacher is not able to break down for her students are typically left outside the school curricula as too challenging. Ruitenberg expands on

Aoki's sense of a difficult text and includes artworks in her critique, pointing out that "in an order of teaching that prides itself on its pragmatism, works of art that do not disclose a meaning that fits well, or that do not disclose a meaning at all, are useless."<sup>15</sup>

Then, "art-that-is-other" would be purposefully complex and difficult to understand, refusing to "disguise its difficulty or the necessary incompleteness of its interpretation."<sup>16</sup> And this would not be a whim but a conscious decision to bring back into the educational scenario the willingness to deal with what is hard to understand. More precisely, "art-that-is-other" seems to emphasize the educational value of dealing with those artworks that disorient, by calling into question the very presumptions that originally moved to judge them as obscure.

An example may help clarify my reading of Ruitenberg's intention here. In 1952, American musician John Cage composed a three movement piece titled *4'33"*, renowned because its score commands the performer not to play his instrument for the entire duration of the work, that is, four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

Before the actual performance of the piece, the audience typically sees a musician coming onto the stage and sitting at a piano. During the entire duration of the piece, the performer only moves to open and close the keyboard lid three times to differentiate the piece's three sections. Then, the performance is officially over. This means that throughout the whole length of *4'33"* there is no music being played, at least not in the usual way one expects music to sound. At first glance, one could affirm that *4'33"* is indeed a "strange" artwork.

Now, given the existence of a work of art like *4'33"*, it seems an educator would have the option either to continue describing its formal aspects as if providing a framework to contextualize the work and help the students understand what is going on during its performance or perhaps attempt some manner of philosophical explanation that could explain this apparently absurd music.

Richard Taruskin has tackled both possibilities.<sup>17</sup> He explains that Cage's work does four things: most radically, it confronts the long-established notion of silence understood as the lack of noise and the amount of silence that a musical piece may include within its measures.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it challenges the very definition of music by proposing an inquiry on whether environmental and accidental noises can be accepted as music and, if so, under which conditions. Furthermore, it questions the traditional views on the authorship of music, for the noise produced by the members of the audience, together with the physical environment, actually *cocompose* and *coperform* *4'33"*. Finally, it produces a statement on whether the audience's reaction to a work is part of that work, questioning the social conventions of concert-hall etiquette.

However, regardless of the many pertinent musicological and philosophical implications that one may continue to distill from *4'33"*, I think Ruitenbergs point is precisely that, in trying to explain works like this one based on what tradition understands music to be, the work's "otherness" is ultimately suppressed or counterfeited. Someone could take an exhaustive music history course on Cage's *4'33"*, learn a vast amount of data about the work, and yet never actually experience the work, never learn a thing about or, more precisely, *with* the work itself.<sup>19</sup>

Works of art that are disconcerting may help move pass the mere label that tells what they stand for—or what the viewer expects them to mean—and open up a whole set of new perspectives from where to approach them. In other words, if instead of trying to name or solve the explicit meaning of *4'33"*, the viewer takes a step back into its reality as art, she may relearn to sense *how* art means rather than just *what* it means or stands for.<sup>20</sup>

In the way I read Ruitenbergs, the educational value of art is not in strangeness per se but in the very possibility strangeness gives to take a step back from usual ways of seeing. The key educational move would be not so much a matter of looking to produce *the* new way of seeing art but rather re-examining habitual interpretative structures that could reduce the viewer's encounter with the artwork through some kind of "good comfortable art/bad unusual art" judgment. I will get back to this point.

### **Relationships between "Art as Fulfillment" and "Art-That-Is-Other"**

In this section, I present two relationships between Koopman's and Ruitenbergs positions. First, I maintain that both arguments commend artworks that provide insight, although immediate insight in Koopman's case and delayed in Ruitenbergs. This convergence is pertinent because it allows visualizing the qualitative range of insight we might be willing and/or ready to perceive. Second, I show how both authors take a divergent approach regarding interpretative frames of reference: while Koopman seems to deepen the path of fulfillment and existential rapture within a peculiar tradition of art, Ruitenbergs allows reflecting on the very principles that condition the way we value art. This divergence is relevant because it deals with the relationship between valuing what we know how to appreciate and dealing with what we do not know how to.

A convergence between "art as fulfillment" and "art-that-is-other" is that they both look for insight, although in an immediate and delayed manner, respectively. For Koopman, the arts in education aim at a direct and vivid encounter with the artwork's essential meaning. According to him, this happening is so intense that it would help adjusting the viewer's personal time and dispositions with those of the work, facilitating an existential cohesion between them. For Ruitenbergs, there is a chance for a delayed insight that

would arrive only after surpassing the drive to make sense of *what* a strange artwork means and focus instead on *how* it means.

Put differently, I believe both authors would agree that their positions ultimately aim at a "celebratory event" in Gadamer's sense. In Koopman's commentary on *Julius Caesar*, this is straightforward. In my interpretation of Ruitenberg's through the 4'33" example, I believe there is a sound case for a delayed celebration. Members of the audience could have hardly anticipated what happened during John Cage's performance. Most probably, they were expecting a traditional music concert, music to listen to. They got, instead, sound, no literal message, no one talking to them, no themes, rhythms, or melodic ideas, just the omnipresent sound of the theater—environmental noise, increasing chattering, strong footsteps, door slams, shouts, boooohs. Although it is reasonable to expect reactions of outrage, it is also likely that a share of the audience did, in fact, have a unique time. Surprisingly, intensely, a work like 4'33" has the property of taking theatergoers through the experience of how music could sound if it were a different music than the one they usually listen to.

Consequently, I believe we could characterize Koopman's and Ruitenberg's positions as promoting intersubjective and epistemic insight correspondingly. On the one hand, *Julius Caesar*'s example highlights a personal experience with friendship, betrayal, hate, and mercifulness. Shakespeare not only invites the viewer to reflect on those human traits but also nurtures the possibility of tracing original relationships between what is occurring on stage and the people attending the tragedy. In other words, this artwork has the potential to echo directly some of the salient qualities of the viewer's interpersonal relationships, to offer resemblances of what they have done or would do in situations like the ones the drama present<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, 4'33" demands a shift into the cognitive structures of the viewer. In presenting this work as an example of Ruitenberg's position, I want to highlight that her proposal supposes, first of all, a displacement into the origins of knowing, a call of attention to each person's cognitive responsibilities in coming to deal with art. This is where Ruitenberg's insight may arise from: the conscious awareness of the epistemic structures that condition how we know what we know about art.

Finally, it is worth noticing that fulfillment and disturbance operate as a counterbalance of each other, revealing the mutual limits and possibilities in their quest for insight. Ruitenberg's argument helps us appreciate that, in looking for direct fulfillment, Koopman risks softening art, that is, excluding unfamiliar and challenging art forms, and privileging pleasing and seemingly transparent works. I find it difficult to disagree with Koopman's claim that, eventually, we want a positive, deep, and beautiful encounter with art. The danger lies in limiting the number and styles of art forms that we welcome into this "positive" territory. If we do not leave the door open for the serious consideration of new art—no matter how radical it seems—what



will prevent our experience from becoming a more or less predictable visit to the histories of art?

On the other hand, Koopman's argument helps us appreciate that, in looking for an emotional and intellectual rupture between work and viewer, Ruitenbergh risks removing aesthetic experience away from people's life, reducing art to an epistemic, sociocultural construct. I agree with Ruitenbergh when she demands a vigilant attitude about our ways of dealing with art: it is vital to examine critically the cognitive and existential traits that anticipate and condition judgment. However, I want to stress that those traits are not external elements to art—or to human experience in general—they are organic dimensions of it. Seeking to understand or simply wondering about a work that pleases our senses and may stimulate our mind already constitutes an indication of what I would call "a primordial sense of art."<sup>22</sup> I believe this is no obstacle but a basic human condition.

A divergence between Koopman and Ruitenbergh is that they assume different takes on the interpretation of art: while Koopman emphasizes the opportunity of meaning making through art, Ruitenbergh criticizes the very possibility of identifying forms of knowledge in art.

Let us set the argument's scheme: Koopman's fulfillment operates within the viewer's usual frames of reference. She has familiarity with the work's origins, contexts and/or purposes, and feels comfortable before it. There are key aspects of the work's identity that seem transparent and immediately meaningful, rapidly carrying the viewer through a path that may lead to existential expansion, so that it appears easy to engage with the work; fulfillment is welcoming and accessible. And, even if some unexpected qualities show up, according to Koopman's perspective, they could be eventually rearranged as a medium to reach an increased sense of completion.

Ruitenbergh's disturbance puts into question not the validity of such frames of reference but their pertinence in allowing for alternative perspectives to deal with art. This is why she encourages the use of "strange" art in education as a means to unpacking the epistemological and existential presumptions that determine what we usually call "immediate" experience. Those presumptions are the given, made and/or developing structures that actually mediate *how* we perceive *what* we perceive. That is why, when the viewer lacks interpretative coordinates to make sense of this work (she cannot figure out what the work is about; it is unclear what she feels and thinks of it, whether it is art or not, and so forth) it would be easier to take distance from the work and reflect on the very conditions that originally moved her to assess it as "strange."

An optical metaphor will help expand the point: while Koopman describes an exciting enterprise based on calibrating our sight's many lenses in order to reach a well-adjusted view, Ruitenbergh denounces the voracious pretension to conform reality to our sight's limitations. While Koopman's fulfillment can be interpreted as a road to seeing the very best art has to

offer—as shown in his *Julius Caesar* example—Ruitenbergs disturbance operates like a warning against nonconsidered attitudes and concepts that could prevent relating with art forms that look, at first, second, or third glance, "out of order."

In addition, Koopmans fulfillment depends on a backdrop of seen images—the histories of art that the viewer has come across in life, art lectures, museum visits, theater performances, and everyday aesthetic experiences in general; they are the context of costumes, meanings, and interpretative decisions that help in attuning the viewers sight. In other words, from Koopmans perspective, pre-existing information about the nature of art is decisive as a reference that helps make sense of the work. These data do not guarantee fulfillment nor are they sufficient to explain its revelation but are needed to enter its domain.

On the contrary, Ruitenbergs aims at a conceptually naked vision. This supposes dismantling the analytic categories that usually anticipate the understanding of the artwork, embodying instead the uncomfortableness of not being ready for what is yet to come. Even the remotest allusion to information is disgusting here, for it would suggest trying to impose some form of cognitive template on the viewers sight. A responsible, self-directed individual needs to be able to leave behind the circumstances that urge her to make something out of art and remain, as much as possible, with arts raw, primeval state.

## Conclusion

This paper presented "art as fulfillment" and "art-that-is-other" as arguments that help in visualizing a diverse array of contrasting purposes of the arts in education. It did so with the intention of preventing their oversimplification into basic contradictory positions and in the hope of providing new relationships between the different kinds of arguments that advocate for the arts in education.

First, it discussed and exemplified "art as fulfillment" and "art-that-is-other" by means of Shakespeares *Julius Caesar* and John Cages *4'33"*.

Second, it presented a convergence and divergence between "art as fulfillment" and "art-that-is-other." On the one hand, I argued that both aim at insight, although in an immediate and delayed manner, respectively. In consequence, while Koopman seems to promote intersubjective resemblances between viewer and work, Ruitenbergs pursues the conscious awareness of the epistemic structures that condition *how* we know *what* we know about art.

On the other hand, I claimed that "art as fulfillment" and "art-that-is-other" assume a different perspective on art interpretation. While Koopman emphasizes the opportunity of meaning making through art, Ruitenbergs criticizes the very possibility of identifying forms of knowledge in art.

## Notes

1. Elliot Eisner, *Educating Artistic Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 2–8.
2. John Baldacchino, "A Questioned Practice: Twenty Reflections on Art, Doubt, and Error," *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 14, no.1 (2013): 1–21.
3. Tyson Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).
4. Constantijn Koopman, "Art as Fulfillment: On the Justification of Education in the Arts," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* 39, no. 1 (2005): 85–97.
5. Claudia Ruitenberg, "Learning to Live with Art," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003): 452–60.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Robert Bernasconi (1986; rept. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
7. *Ibid.*, 50. Gadamer acknowledges his admiration for Kant's definition of art: "an end without end," that is to say, a purpose with no extrinsic or utilitarian purpose, a self-justifying experience without translation.
8. Koopman, "Art as Fulfillment," 96.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 92.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 95.
13. Ruitenberg, "Learning to Live with Art," 452.
14. Douglas Aoki, "The Thing Never Speaks for Itself: Lacan and the Pedagogical Politics of Clarity," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 3 (2000): 347–69.
15. Ruitenberg, "Learning to Live with Art," 456.
16. *Ibid.*, 452.
17. Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
18. It seems that, right after the first performance of the piece, Cage himself attempted a similar justification: "They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out." See Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with John Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.
19. Here, I am reminded of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's affirmation that, in viewing a landscape, the consciousness of depth makes impossible the accomplishment of a definitive perspective, a final adequate way to see. All we can aspire to see are the qualities that the different frames show as our lens expands or contracts, as if sight were a moving prism that alternatively emphasizes some aspects of reality while fading others. This is why it would be more precise to affirm "I see with" or "I see according to," rather than determining an ultimate vision in the form of "I see it."
20. In the past years, Margaret Mason has continued Ruitenberg's argument, highlighting "the transformational qualities of learning experiences that move through encounters with slippage, incoherence and evasion, and insist on engagement . . . provoke new relations of thought and understanding within the processes of questioning and reconceptualization that characterize encounters with what is yet to be known." See Margaret Manson, "Aesthetic Practice as a Displacement of Learning," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 305–13.
21. I have developed this point in Guillermo Marini, "Aristotelic Learning through the Arts," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no. 2 (2014): 171–84.
22. I have developed this point in Guillermo Marini, "A Primordial Sense of Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 1 (2016): 46–61.