

GUEST EDITORIAL

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## **Art for Life: The Underpinnings**

**F**or thousands of years, even before Plato, art and aesthetic experience have been tied to the realm of the sensuous and affective. Romantic philosophers aren't alone in this. Empiricists, pragmatists, and even poststructuralists such as Lyotard, as well as Asian and African and indigenous cultures everywhere connect the aesthetic intrinsically to the life of the emotions, of intuition, of the spirit. Which begs the question: what is the role for the affective and intuitive in human life? Surely from an etiological point of view the realm of the affective intuition is useful and instrumentally valuable; otherwise evolution would have selected against it, so our current affective capacities would not exist. There must be something then about the affective realm, and the arts that serve and personify that realm, is an essential contributor to human wellbeing.

Looking at the history of art, it's pretty clear that art has evolved as a partner to ritual. Our rituals, whatever they are—a Greek chorus, a Gelede dance, a baptism, a funeral, a rap concert, or a gallery opening—focus us on ideas and values that we hold dear. In this enterprise, masks and rhythm sticks, baptismal fountains and stained glass windows, organ music and portraits of the deceased, light shows and

gold grills, and even abstract painting—cause us to pay attention to those things that matter for the group. Dissanayake (1988) argued very convincingly, in fact, that art's very reason for being is to draw our attention to those things that really count to us as social beings: that is, the values, mores, sensibilities and ways of doing and being. Langer's (1980) position was that art allows us to objectify our subjective realities, giving them aesthetic form, thus making them available for focused consideration and reflection. Taken together, these positions suggest that we make things of beauty to call attention to qualities, beliefs, and mores that count for us as a group, as a team, as a religion, as a society. The survival function of these creations is pretty obvious. It takes a team working together to create civilization—any civilization. Our ability to work as a group, dependent on collective understandings and beliefs is what makes us the dominant species on the planet (Dissanayake, 1988). And the arts are central to constructing these understandings and values. Art is central to constructing community.

As far as we know, art has been central to this community-making function from the beginning of human consciousness. It helped tribal cultures recognize their group's ways of being and believing

that cemented common purpose first for survival and then for conquest. Common purpose through symbolic identification gave tribal and national societies the solidarity necessary for the group to survive and prosper. That has been a good thing. But it also led to ethnocentrism, hierarchy, and ultimately social injustice.

Today, we can't afford a narrow tribal focus. The world is too small, too connected. Attitudes and actions are universal in their potential consequences. So our sense of community must take the next evolutionary step. In addition to being pipe fitters, Catholics, politicians, African Americans, feminists, Harley riders, non-smokers or whatever, we must become members of the bigger collective. We must strive to be our brothers' and our sisters' keepers. Or if we don't embrace our differences at least we need to tolerate them.

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We must become globally tribal as well as locally identified. Our tribe must include all people rather than just people who look like us or who live close to us. With advanced technologies such as automobiles, synthesized chemicals, and nuclear armaments that threaten our global environment, an immense human population that strains the world's resources, and increasing global technological and economic interdependence, we can no longer afford to be ethnocentric or culturally myopic. We must recognize unmitigated tribal loyalty as a hindrance to survival rather

than a survival strategy. We have reached a point of interdependence where everyone, everywhere, either will or will not survive and prosper, together. Our ability to cooperate in groups must undergo a transformation from the immediate group to the group known as humankind. And art can and should continue to be a central player in this attempt to construct a global community.

### **The *Journal of Art for Life*, as I See It**

In this context, I see the role of the *Journal of Art for Life* as being an instrument for presenting the simple idea that art should be about something that counts towards making our lives better, and that we can and should engage in art education and art therapy that is pivotal in making the world a better place. This assumes that art has both intrinsic quality as aesthetic form and extrinsic value as a form of communication that tells something about the nature of the human experience, both as it is and as it might be. My hope is that the *Journal of Art for Life* will frame art education, art therapy, and arts administration as instruments for social awareness and social reconstruction. In practical terms, I expect we will encourage the examination of multiple philosophical systems or narratives, and vigorously embrace the idea of cultural and individual plurality in making and receiving meaning in art and visual culture. There needs to be a place for educators, therapists, and administrators to explore both theoretical and practical ideas of moral and social import through art. I anticipate reading such discourse in future issues of this journal, in the hope that it may give readers a reference for making sound choices in a world of competing ideologies, claims, and interests. I expect that this and future issues will provide a forum that embraces

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content and concepts that address how community life can be structured for equality and justice through art and education as well as arts administration and art therapy.

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This assumes that the aesthetic, which lies at art's heart, can and should be used for therapeutic, administrative, and educational purposes to promote equity and social justice with the goal of developing a global community and that moves beyond traditionally narrow disciplinary confines. If the central concern is to integrate art with human concerns, inquiry may be best centered on significant human *themes* across disciplines and media, leading where ideas and spirit and intuition take one. So I think it would be rare that we would be interested in papers that explore narrow disciplinary confines of media, composition, or other technical qualities of art for their own sake. Instead I hope that through critically examining art works in their authentic cultural contexts, writers and readers may gain access to attitudes, mores, and cultural understandings of themselves as cultural beings. Toward the purpose of exploring social justice in art education, arts administration and art therapy contexts, I encourage submissions that explore real-world issues that address real problems with significance beyond the classroom. This orientation, we believe,

allows for explorations that become a passage for personal transformation and social reconstruction.

In the end I'm making the claim that the world can become a better place through art. In fact I could almost be persuaded to make one of those sweeping claims that professors try to dissuade in their students' writing. It goes like this: Just maybe, the world can be saved through art. Is that too grandiose claim to make? Probably so. But what if I reverse the question and ask if not through art, then through what? Certainly our ancestors understood that our most important values, traditions, and beliefs were to be carried on the elegant wings of aesthetic form. Are we not equal to that same wisdom today? It is the arts that provide the holistic, metaphorical quality of understanding necessary for social fullness and cultural health. Through the arts we develop the unifying sensibility and the direction, in short, the ability to use our many other gifts and tools with elegance and wisdom. Let us repeat then, if the world isn't to be saved through art then through what? My hope is that the *Journal of Art for Life* will contribute to the wellbeing of not just the art community, but of the entire community, and to the cause of social justice through art.

**Postscript**

Finally, on a personal note, when Melody Milbrandt and I began the journey of developing the art for life paradigm we had no idea that it would engage so much of our life energy and so much of our time. We also had no idea what impact, if any, it would have in the world of art education. In spite of that, Melody and I worked on our vision for eight years from conception to publication, wrestling with the meanings and significance of every chapter,

revising the framework when necessary to reflect our changing vision of the project, and testing every idea. It was an immense emotional and physical effort and sometimes we wondered if it was worth it, but we carried on. The generous feedback of others, in particular our reviewers at McGraw-Hill, was especially valuable in keeping us going at certain points as was the support and encouragement of our families.

I am also particularly grateful to my department chair, David Gussak, who had the vision to center *art for life* as the guiding paradigm for art education, arts administration and art therapy programs at Florida State University, and I am appreciative of senior editor, Marcia Rosal, for her dedication to this project and her willingness to let me have a word in this forum. Finally, I am particularly gratified that Melody Milbrandt, my partner in the art for life paradigm, has agreed to provide the lead article for this, the first issue of the *Journal of Art for Life*. There couldn't be a more fitting lead author and I personally am honored that we are able to feature her contribution. I look forward to your contributions and insights over what I expect will be a long life of this new venue for social justice in art education, art therapy, and arts administration:

***Journal of Art for Life.***

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## References

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