

Preface

In: [Art – Ethics – Education](#)

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The starting-point for this new collection of essays was an idea born out of the ‘Theory Group’ of the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL), a network that aims to elaborate a set of competences in the field of visual literacy education within the European Union. Several members of this network subscribe to views about curriculum development and assessment that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) introduced with the aim of evaluating and providing comparable data about educational systems and policies around the world. It is a pragmatic approach, focusing on assessing and comparing students’ competences and their preparation for lifelong learning beyond compulsory schooling. ENViL similarly compared data gathered from 22 European countries in order to contribute pragmatic competences to the visual field, specifying requirements for the production and reception of images or objects as well as reflection about these processes. Defining visual literacy as the ability to “produce and respond to images/objects and reflect on production and response” ([Wagner & Schönau, 2016](#), p. 68), ENViL developed a competence model featuring social cohesion, civic engagement, personal unfolding and employability as its major aims. Its ultimate goal is the provision of a framework of reference for visual literacy derived from various European curricula leading to the improvement of educational policies, assessment systems and teacher education programmes across national borders.

During a number of ENViL meetings, one of the terms in the title of this collection – art – was discussed critically. Some opposed the idea of art as an exceptional group of images with unique features or a special way of thinking and acting. This notion of art was considered to be relatively marginal, esteemed only by a specific class of educated people or consumed by the rich in the art market. It was argued that pragmatic competences in the visual field should instead concentrate on a self-determined group of media images and on aesthetic abilities which may be useful in everyday situations, like creating visual presentations or organising company events. Such an approach runs the risk of replacing the education of individuals with coaching abilities that enable them to master given tasks successfully according to external requirements. This is essentially a neoliberal perspective, in which the aims of social cohesion, civic engagement and personal unfolding appear to be closely connected to the aim of employability. According to this view, people can successfully unfold when they are able to engage according to the expectations of certain groups and institutions, contributing to social cohesion, civic engagement and possibly conformism.

We question this pragmatism because of its tendency to reduce phenomena to measurable skills within the field of education and we also question its direct links to the needs of the workplace because such an approach tends to instrumentalise artistic processes. The conventional association of the word ‘literacy’ with linguistic skills also amplifies the idea that art and its processes must be ‘readable’. The real challenge would be to have art educators initiate processes that encourage learners to discover ways of being resistant to an artistic grammar, tracing new visual paths through territories that are still

unreadable. Competences and standards in the domain of art education emerge from a notion of administration and management driven by hylomorphic forces that invoke particular input-output models of teaching and assessment that lead to a reproduction of the known. This places a mandatory obligation upon both teachers and learners to repeat the known in terms of established practices, literacies and their respective grammars. Indeed art practice itself becomes conceived in terms of the competences or standards that are designated. This is not to disavow established skills, knowledge, techniques and practices; they constitute the substance and content of the cultures and traditions that we inherit. Art practice, as any other established domain of practice, evolves from its inheritance, although there are radical singularities when inheritance is difficult to detect (for example, Duchamp and Beuys). The important point however is that in our contemporary world, what we might term a current ethos of art practice conceives it as more than bodies of knowledge, skills or practices and takes into account its ungrammaticality. It often generates a puncturing and subsequent experimentation with and reconfiguration of practice leading to what [Rancière \(2010\)](#) termed a redistribution of the sensible. We might then say that an important aspect of art practice is its disobedience.

The process of art practice, as generally conceived today, but also in the past epochs, is often not an assured practice and in some ways is precisely contrary to the notion of pragmatic competences, for it is engaging with issues of emergence and the not-known. When engaged in art practice, when subject to the lure of art practice towards unforeseen possibilities, often we do not 'know' what we are doing. There is a sense of direction but no clear pathway. Thus, the future of art practice cannot be reduced to its present. Taking on board the notions of the not-known and disobedience when we consider art education in schools or elsewhere and the individual learning pathways of students, pedagogical work will be grounded in those acquired inheritances deemed valuable but it will also need to embrace how these are taken on board (or not) and iterated by students to develop their own modes of practice. And sometimes such modes may seem ungrammatical or disobedient to a teacher's pedagogical framework, or criteria of competence. In such moments pedagogical work is challenged to expand its parameters. In other words pedagogic work itself becomes an aesthetic enterprise in which it undergoes a redistribution of the sensible in accordance with or in response to experiencing the disobedience of a student's mode of practice or expression and its potentials.

The potential of the three terms we picked for the title and contents of this book – art, ethics and education – lies both in the words themselves and also in the spaces that separate them from and link them to each other. Ethics also revolves around the space between people, a space that is ignited by tensions of different sorts that cannot be simply swept out of sight in the name of political correctness or prescribed standards. Art, too, is prone to this delicate balance of connection and transgression, of openness to social injustice and the possibility of appropriating injustices committed against others for commercial ends. As they guide learners through the territories of art and human relations, art educators cannot avoid being located in this unpredictable 'in between' place. Engaging with this interdisciplinary zone is, perhaps, the most significant challenge that art educators face today. As [Pascal Gielen \(2015\)](#) has written in his work on the role of play in art education, pedagogies can be redefined according to the notion of 'dismeasure', which would mean that the standards and competences prescribed by specific cultures are analysed in order to find ways of confronting and

resisting them. In other words, teachers must become artists if they are to foster a sense of creative resistance amongst learners who are entrusted to them.

This openness and critical distance are missed in pragmatic models of art education. Bringing in ethics helps us to consider the effects that the aims and methods of education have on the learners as persons. This is not only a question of societal and economic usefulness but it is a question of how we esteem human beings – as a tool for institutional efficiency or as a being with his or her own value or ‘end-in-itself’, as Immanuel Kant defined the person ([Paton, 1948](#), p. 96). Apart from the questions of the place of art in a media-dominated world and the role of art education as a preparation for effective integration in societal and economic institutions, another critical issue generated by discussions within the ENViL group revolved around the chosen term ‘visual literacy’. This term was critiqued by some external evaluators because it leans too much towards a rationalistic understanding of visual issues, not really addressing ephemeral and intuitive experiences. Besides, like many educational institutions, it tends to privilege verbal or linguistic processes (literacies) over visual and spatial thinking ([Darras, 2016](#)). What this book suggests is that even an appreciation of the ‘visual’ isn’t sufficient in our artistic productions and reflections; pedagogies also need to attend to the limitations of ‘retinal’ art, to use a Duchampian term, because in educational contexts visibility easily becomes a substitute for measurability. Our interest in the ethical dimension of art also expects us to attend to art as an ‘experience’, as [Dewey \(2005\)](#) indicated. Such an experience is not restricted to the producers of images, objects or performances but is extended to others who encounter art. Bringing in a discussion of art’s publics does not emerge from a desire to articulate a one-size-fits-all aesthetic or normative language; rather, it shows that in the field of aesthetics there exists no universal means of communication and understanding that a set of visual signs can guarantee. While artists cannot be coerced to endorse a specific audience’s set of expectations or perceived levels of transparency, their work can never exist outside fields of experience and interpretation, however numerous these experiences and interpretations may be. Art demands political and ethical engagement even though opacity and conjecture always play a part in the reception of art.

These issues triggered the foundation of the ‘Theory Group’ within the ENViL network. Ethics developed into a link between art and education, allowing for an inquiry into crucial features of art and simultaneously continuing a discourse led by scholars and artists over the centuries. We hope that the collection of essays in this book will help to update this discourse with contemporary considerations that include the perspective of education through art and the invention of possibilities that expand capacities for learning. Pedagogic work must not only be concerned with ‘what is’ but also with innumerable and unknown potentials for becoming, of futures not yet arrived but whose potentials are immanent to each learner’s mode of practice.

References

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