

Ellen Winner

An Uneasy Guest in the Schoolhouse: Art Education from Colonial Times to a Promising Future

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 216 pp.

Ellen Winner's straightforward but ambitious book details the "story of visual art education...in American schools [as] one of vast pendulum swings" (xii). At one end, "traditional" approaches in which the arts are merely a skill or are a means to succeed within more classically valued education; at the other end, "progressive" movements in which the arts present an intrinsically worthy pursuit in developing children's creativity, imagination, and self-expression (53). Opening with two concrete case studies from the 1980s in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and Beijing and Nanjing, China, the book then surveys broad changes in art and educational practice in the United States from the 1700s to the present, changes that were mired by the consistently ambivalent attitude towards the value of the arts in American public culture

Even from the preface, this book insists on arts at the center rather than the periphery of education; yet the argument is often implicit rather than manifest in the book's historical narrative. A psychologist, Winner analyzes changes in educational policy and classroom curricula through sociological observation, elucidating how influential thinkers such as John Dewey and Elliot Eisner, state-funded arts programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts, and professional teacher associations each imagined a different role for the arts in developmental thinking about education. It is here where the book excels, providing a concise and approachable chronology of the conflicts that arose about the position of the arts in the American classroom, charting its use in progressive education models from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, to its discipline-based implementation in the 1950s and '60s, and finally to its side-lining as a means to an end (e.g., success in standardized academic testing) in the 1980s and '90s, ending on a hopeful note about the arts' possible future in the twenty-first century as a special mode of problem solving. There is a strong focus on a Euro-American tradition of thought in Winner's historical account, and special emphasis is placed on drawing practices in the classroom, attesting to both the popularity of the graphic arts in utilitarian thinking about art (one that framed drawing as preparation for the technical trades), but also to the accessibility of mark-making on paper across the vastly uneven terrain of publicly funded education.

For education researchers, there is much to admire in Winner's book: the chapter recounting her work co-designing, implementing, and analyzing the PROPEL program of art education that developed out of her involvement in Harvard Project Zero (chapter 7) and related chapters on PROPEL's assessment methods (chapters 8 and 10) offer an inspiring account of innovative project design that puts educational research into practice. As she has done in dozens of previous studies, here Winner re-states (with the support of a deftly handled literature review) the lack of causal evidence that student involvement in the arts leads to traditional academic success (as measured by state-directed testing in literacy and mathematics. This assertion still

strikes the reader as a novel claim: such is the power of this cultural myth about the connection between arts exposure and academic success.

Much as the arts are the “uneasy guest” in the schoolhouse, I often found myself—as a historian of art and visual culture—an uneasy *reader* of the text, wanting more visual and material objects that would help us, in the present, understand how learners and teachers worked through these philosophical conflicts in their daily pedagogical and artistic practices. This desire for a granular, on-the-ground account of how students responded to the lessons delivered by teachers and artists is frustrated further by the poor reproductions that *are* provided, leading readers to squint at the child responses to the wonderfully inventive practices of the Reggio Emilia school the author visited in the 1980s, or to struggle to make legible a student’s re-working of a tree’s concentric rings into a story about their life cycle in an American classroom in 2016. Outside of the Reggio Emilia tradition, in which artworks are made collaboratively and documentation is therefore central to the pedagogical process, proof of these creative educational exchanges often slips the archival net, making the kinds of illustrations Winner provides all the more valuable to future historians of art education.

While Winner undergirds the capacity of artistic practice to engender “a deep form of awareness” (72) and special “forms of thinking” (131) that might activate the socially transformative potential of education, there is less attention to how practices of looking and seeing might also be spaces for radical, ethical pedagogical encounters. One wonders what might be opened up by connecting scholarship in visual culture and media studies on the pedagogical impact of images—such as Lisa Cartwright’s *Moral Spectatorship* (2008), Jill Bennett’s *Practical Aesthetics* (2011), or Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008)—or by contrasting pedagogical theory on the use of aesthetic objects in presenting difficult knowledge in the classroom (see, for instance, Deborah Britzman, Roger I. Simon, Sara Matthews, and others): how might these interdisciplinary conversations about aesthetics and pedagogy center art more meaningfully within public education, not just as a skill or mindset to be developed, but as a practice of visual literacy, civic responsibility, and ethical engagement? This question is not only philosophical but an urgent one within a human-made climate crisis (one thinks of the rich theory emerging around research creation methodologies in the work of Stephanie Springgay, Sarah E. Truman or Natalie Loveless, whose monograph is appropriately titled *How to Make Art at the End of the World*). Still, Winner offers glimmers of what might carry us into this unrealized future. “The arts,” as she concludes, “are a way of representing and thereby understanding our deepest experiences—love and loss, birth and death, childhood and old age, benevolence and injustice” (168). One hopes that teachers, students, and educational researchers will begin to be swayed from their ambivalence towards the arts by studies such as Winner’s.

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