Book Review

The Aesthetic Form of Life: Eisner on Arts Education

Elliot W. Eisner

The Arts and the Creation of Mind
Yale University and National Art Education Association, 2002
258 pp. (Available from the NAEA: members $30; nonmembers $35).

A dominant figure in art education, Elliot Eisner continues with his new book to make important contributions to the field. The book articulates a vision of art education that he has promulgated over a distinguished career. This vision is augmented with recent work in cognitive studies and somatic experience, not to mention an extended discussion of artistry in teaching. The result is a persuasive argument for cultivating the aesthetic form of life. The book, however, is less a comprehensive and systematic account of aesthetic education than a personal expression of beliefs and values, a credo as it were. This is not a criticism so much as it is a description of the kind of book that I think Eisner has written, and it perhaps explains why there is only light discussion of alternative views or references to a critical literature that bears on his argument. Shortcomings of the "credo" form aside, what is the substance of Eisner’s current thinking and why should readers take it seriously?

First, it will help to see Eisner's book as part of the so-called cognitive revolution that is increasingly displacing behavioral assumptions about the nature of mind and learning. In this respect it is similar to Charles Dorn’s textbook Mind in Art: Cognitive Foundations in Art Education, Arthur Efland’s Art and Cognition: Integrating the Arts into the Curriculum, and Bennett Reimer’s A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision (the latter two reviewed in AEPR [November/December 2002, March/April 2003]). All four writers can be understood as favoring cognitive approaches to arts education, although each with a difference. Dorn makes a case for art as intelligent behavior in the context of the Goals 2000 curriculum and evaluation reform effort and the National Art Standards; Efland expounds a postmodern view of visual art education that features social and political interpretations of art and art education; Reimer articulates a comprehensive, synergistic conception of music education that is experience based and understands musical intelligence in terms of the various roles involved in composing and appreciating music; finally, Eisner presents an aesthetic interpretation of arts education in qualitative terms that is rooted primarily in Deweyan aesthetics but which is topped off with contemporary studies of mind and feeling.

What, in general, does the cognitive revolution attempt to sweep away? Among the more salient items are misconceptions about the nature of knowing, intelligence, and evaluation. Eisner’s work receives its impetus not only from his devotion to the arts but also from his sustained commitment to offsetting the adverse effects of technical rationality in educational thought. The limitations of this latter style of thinking become evident in its failure to take into account the qualitative aspects of learning and school life, features that are difficult to capture with quantitative means. Along with colleagues with similar dispositions, Eisner has attempted to counteract reliance on the quantitative with such concepts as qualitative experience, qualitative intelligence, qualitative problem solving, qualitative material, qualitative inquiry, qualitative relationships, qualitative judgments, qualitative inquiry, and qualitative evaluation. Eisner’s emphasis on the qualitative owes much to Dewey’s later writings on quality and experience.

With the advent of Jerome Bruner’s theories, Eisner also began talking about multiple ways of knowing and their characteristic forms of representation. By assuming that human nature is unique in its capacity to create meanings, Eisner in effect puts himself in the
company of Ernst Cassirer (with his stress on symbolic forms of human culture), Solon Kimball and James McClellan (with their stress on basic disciplines of thought and action), Philip Phenix (emphasizing realms of meaning), E. D. Hirsch (focusing on forms of understanding), and Howard Gardner (with his concept of frames of mind), all of whom in one way or another accept art as a way of knowing.

**Transforming Consciousness**

Eisner's text begins with discussions of the role of art in altering mind and transforming consciousness and with brief summaries of contemporary interpretations of arts education, among them creative self-expression, discipline-based art education, visual culture, and integrated arts. In view of its influence and prodigious literature, one might think that aesthetic education constitutes a conspicuous omission, until one realizes that the Eisner's vision is itself essentially aesthetic, or at least artistic/aesthetic. In Eisner's thought, the aesthetic implies more than the creation and appreciation of works of art as he extends art to include the appreciation of various aspects of nature and, importantly, to education itself.

The central part of the book discusses not only what is involved in teaching the visual arts, with passing remarks about the other arts, but also what is involved in discerning evidence of aesthetic learning, designing curricula, and evaluating results. The text concludes with an agenda for research and suggestions for a number of ways in which education can be improved by taking cues from instruction in the arts. A summary portion consists of thirteen statements that recall the book's basic ideas. Readers might find it helpful to read these statements first since they can function as an abstract of the volume.

A key to Eisner's educational aesthetics appears early in his description of how certain kinds of experience constitute an aesthetic form of life. What constitutes such a form? Before this question can be answered, it should be pointed out that Eisner moves back and forth between discussions of artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation, which accounts for his occasional use of the phrase "artistic/aesthetic." The discussion of artistic expression, primarily in qualitative terms, stresses the making of an object that has the capacity to induce a satisfactory aesthetic experience. Although conventional usage tends to reserve the term "aesthetic experience" for responses to artworks and other things perceived from an aesthetic point of view, there are places in which Eisner uses "aesthetic" to cover both creative and appreciative activities. Aesthetic judgments, for example, or what Eisner calls judgments of qualitative relationships, encompass decisions made by both artists in acts of creation and respondents in acts of appreciation. What is more—while thinking obviously plays a role in creating and appreciating works of art—feeling, or what Eisner calls somatic experience, also forms an important strand of artistic and aesthetic judgments. This is particularly true when both artists and art critics make judgments about what seems right, coherent, and satisfying—judgments that cannot be reduced to rule or formula. In short, the aesthetic form of life is a compound of cognitive and affective strands. The fresh element in Eisner's argument is his discussion of somatic experience, and readers would do well to consider what he says about it.

What Eisner does not provide are detailed descriptions of the characteristic features of creative and aesthetic experiences. In addition to feelings of rightness and coherence, what other feelings does the aesthetic form of life produce? Although the question isn't easily answered, and probably cannot be resolved conclusively, there exists a considerable literature about the matter that, had it been brought into the discussion, would have amplified and bolstered Eisner's argument. Further questions and issues surface when Eisner expands the realm of the aesthetic to include the natural and human-made environments as well as the artistry of teaching, learning, and administration. Admittedly some similarities and parallels exist; still, what are the noteworthy differences between aesthetic experiences of works of art and natural landscapes, and between aesthetic experiences of works of art and teaching and learning, and so forth? Furthermore, the distinction between qualitative judgments and aesthetic judgments or between qualitative experiences and aesthetic experiences is not always made clear. Perhaps in Eisner's usage "the qualitative" and "the aesthetic" are equivalent terms; in some instances that does indeed seem to be the case.

Finally there is, I think, insufficient discussion of certain issues in contemporary aesthetic theories that have a particular bearing on Eisner's aesthetics. For example, serious questions have been raised about both the viability of the concept of aesthetic experience and Dewey's definition of the work of art as the effect of the created object on, and its role within, experience. Moreover, to strengthen his own discussion of the affective strands of cognition, Eisner refers to the writings of Nelson Goodman. Yet unlike Eisner—who follows Dewey's lead—Goodman does not believe that consummatory affective value is a principal criterion of the aesthetic. Finally, since there is probably no one who has made a greater effort to understand the nature of aesthetic experience and to describe its affective character—the way it feels—than Monroe C. Beardsley, a reference to his work would have been appropriate. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's idea of aesthetic experience as a species of flow experience casts a light on the character of aesthetic experience that in certain respects makes it compatible with Eisner's aesthetics, yet it isn't mentioned. In short, given the voluminous literature on the concept of the aesthetic, more extensive exposition would have been helpful.

**Impact on Arts Education**

The book's theoretical and practical relevance to K–12 arts education is established by Eisner's coverage of the major problem areas of aims, curriculum, teaching and learning, and evaluation. In Eisner's view the general purpose of arts education is to provide opportunities for substantive mind-
altering experiences. These are made available by the initiation of the young into the aesthetic form of life so that they may benefit from its inherent values, principal among which are the refinement of perception and imagination. Such capacities are attainable through acquaintance with activities that include the creation and appreciation of works of art, provided these activities are informed by a general knowledge about the history of art, art criticism, aesthetics, and the social sciences. In this respect Eisner's approach is compatible with the idea of discipline-based art education associated with the J. Paul Getty Trust's educational undertakings, for which Eisner served as a consultant. What is more, the effective initiation of youth into the aesthetic form of life depends on well-qualified teachers of art who have mastered the art of teaching, or what Eisner calls artistry.

To illumine the features of artistry in art teaching, and hence that artistry's relevance to K–12 arts education, Eisner describes the activities of three teachers of art—two high school teachers and one middle school teacher. The first teacher is followed as he teaches inner-city youth the distinction between practical and aesthetic points of view. The lesson involves pouring cream into two cups of coffee. One is a Styrofoam cup that conceals the interaction of the cream with the coffee and thus can serve only the practical purpose of preparing the beverage for drinking. The other cup is transparent, and thus, when the cream is poured into the coffee, a dramatic mixing of cream and coffee occurs that is intrinsically interesting to perception and therefore aesthetically satisfying. The distinction between practical and aesthetic experience having been clarified, students were then asked to think of personal experiences that seemed to them to be more aesthetic than practical. An assignment followed in which students were directed to infuse red ink into a liquid such that images were formed which the students were asked to describe in writing, using their best possible prose. The descriptions not only stimulated the students' perceptions and imaginations but also revealed their personal interests and backgrounds as well as their capacity to create meanings. Positive and negative examples of previous student work were shown to convey the fact that the writing task was a viable educational exercise. The results were then discussed by the class. Eisner mentions other traits of this teacher's artistry, but his point is to illustrate what can be done in aesthetic education; the task, he says, constituted "an imaginative transformation of a perceptual event that is imbued with meaning whose features and significance the students try to transform into language capable of carrying that meaning forward" (60).

Without going into detail, Eisner's other two exemplars of artistry in teaching concern, first, the attitude adopted by a teacher while guiding students during experimental, imaginative assignments that involved the making of paper-mâché figures of animals. The teacher's attitude—sensitive and supportive but sympathetically critical when necessary—created the kind of warm relationships between teachers and students that, according to Eisner, is not often found in other course work. Students also gained an understanding of the qualitative relationships typical of artistic expression and of the means of creating meaning. Another teacher attempted to teach the concepts of objective, nonobjective, representational, and abstract. She relied on her students' familiarity with cameras to make them understand the function of close-ups in visual art, using a work by Georgia O'Keeffe as a resource. The teacher's astute questioning about the character of O'Keeffe's painting (Red Poppy) also helped students to perceive the work's spatial and expressive color relationships. After this exercise the students were encouraged to produce either representational or abstract works in their own fashion.

Although I have some reservations about Eisner's educational aesthetics, they are certainly not serious enough to vitiate his vision of arts education. His voice is particularly important at a time marked by continual concern about not just an overemphasis on educational efficiency but also ideas that have potential for transforming the field of arts education into social studies and power politics. In such interpretations of art education, the demands and pleasures of artistic expression and aesthetic experience would play little or no part. I wish that Eisner had more energetically addressed the potential damage of these new directions, and in this respect I found the book somewhat disappointing. Never one reluctant to reply to criticisms of his work or to expose educational nonsense, Eisner usually writes with an edge that is largely missing from this book. With the exception of his criticism of technical rationality in educational thinking, Eisner's tone is, I think, too muted and accommodating in discussing postmodernism and visual culture studies. What cannot be questioned, however, is Eisner's commitment to the arts and their special capacity to provide youth with opportunities to realize the values of an aesthetic form of life.

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