

ART, IDENTITY AND EDUCATION

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One of the most captivating catchwords in today's global interaction is 'identity'. It sounds ironical indeed that, just as the world knows no more boundary and is becoming seamless or transparent, identity, on the contrary, is sought even more. Yet it simply logical that the issue of identity comes to the fore these days, since in the situation characterized by the ubiquity of cultural intersection, self is, time and again, called into question in the face of 'the other'. However, since the context of the third millennium is completely new and unprecedented, the concept of 'identity' is to be understood differently so as not to become counter-productive, or even self-destructive. In this connection, one of the most powerful means of identity formation is 'art'. This might be at odds with what most people think about art, but at the deeper level, art is a process of shaping one's self, of creating their own world, of *autopoiesis*. This is why in this sense art is closely related to the whole process of 'education' as well; education in the German sense of '*Bildung*' (self formation) in particular. This paper will discuss further the interconnection between identity, art and education today.

Relational Identity

The new millennium has brought a psychological shift, a deep and unsettling one. Through the wave of Postmodernism, among other things, it changes the way you think about who you are. One of the solid things that melts into air today is the concept of 'self' as a fixed, stable and inner-directed individual. In the past an individual was conceived of as an agent with their coherent personality in the first place, who only on the second step, made an act and relation with others. The self creates relationships. Today, on the contrary, self is viewed as a temporary product of ongoing relations. It is relationships that

create the self, not the other way round. Albeit, in a way, self remains an agent or the producer of conduct, self is also the product, in the sense that the content of the personality keeps changing and growing along with the relationships. In the view of postmodern psychologists such as Robert Jay Lifton, Kenneth Gergen, or Connie Zweig, our selves are not merely programmed by the genes or projected out of the Freudian unconscious. Rather, they are continually created in collaboration with others. We are not, like animals, genetically instructed to perform specific behaviors; rather, we are genetically instructed to adapt to society or community. The thing is, today the communities we deal with are wide open, plural, and unstable, subject to fast change. This is why, even if self is deeply rooted in community, the contemporary self is a multi-community person; his or her life as a social being is based on adjustment to shifting contexts, and being true to divergent commitments. Further, Kenneth Gergen and Robert Jay Lifton, even propose the idea that every person carries the potential of many selves capable of being realized in different social settings. This is what Lifton calls 'The Protean Self', the flexible self, whose identity keeps changing depending on the relation in the social context. This, he says, is a general phenomenon of the new millennium.¹ Under certain circumstances we can define ourselves as warm or cold, dominant or submissive, plain or sexy: either one equally true. In every relationship we learn something new about ourselves and, as the relations change, so do the configuration of ourselves. The emerging configurations do not have to be consistent or coherent. In this light, we should not be anxious or depressed when we find a multitude of interests and different potentials within ourselves. Indeed we should be concerned more if ourselves become too fixed and one-dimensional, because it may mean that our environment has become redundant: we are relating to the same others, we encounter the same situations over and over. The latter may show that our identity is coherent, but it may also indicate that the identity has become rigid, stagnant, and even maladaptive.

This new way of understanding identity applies also to the so called 'national identity'. As the range of our interaction is getting wider and more

complex, we are compelled to get out of our comfort zone and the self-image of our community. We use the eyes of other's to see ourselves, and thereby we find new dimensions of ourselves, which otherwise would remain hidden. In the ongoing relations the content of who we really are grows richer and, for sure, more ambiguous as well, becomes uncertain. Yet through this fashion the complexity of our reality comes to the fore, for better or for worse. Identity is in fact not something substantive, stable and stereotypical. It is, rather, relational, dynamic, multi-dimensional, and can be inconsistent. Through the changing relations we are forced, time and again, to redefine ourselves as a nation or see ourselves differently. Just take for example the conventional image that Indonesia is the biggest muslim country in the world. This identity is surely true, at least in terms of the number of muslim population. Yet according to a research on the implementation of Islamic values, Indonesia is one of the worst, it is ranked number 140 (out of 208 countries), meaning, one of the most unIslamic countries.² This is equally true, albeit sounds inconsistent.

Identity, then, is something to be tailored, time and again, vis-à-vis the other. Identity is not so much a given substance as an ongoing process of enlargement or growth of self-perception; a continuous inner formulation of self and world. To use an analogy, we all are like poets who constantly struggle with words and images to articulate new meanings out of on- going dialectic between the past and new experiences. We can also be like an actor who plays different roles by wearing different masks in a play. In new relationships we wear new masks in accordance with new contexts and demands. The mask, however, is to be taken not as a symbol of superficiality as we commonly think, rather, the means of realizing our potentials. In this sense playing a role may lead to real changes in our self-concept and thereby, novel self-images emerge. Identity is dynamic and multiple. If this is the case, the best way to understand the process is through the paradigm of art.

Art as 'Aesthetic of Existence'

Today, when we come to the contemporary practices and experiences of the arts, our initial fascination often turns into bafflement, for the arts confront us with a disconcerting array of materials and perceptual activities. Traditional aesthetic theory seems at loss in front of the works of art with new materials, such as plastics, acrylics, gas, chemical ingredients, telepathic power, holographic images; electronically produced sounds; novels and plays without plots, and so on and so forth. And even basic distinctions within the arts fail to hold, since we are no longer able to draw the line between design, decoration, illustration, and fine art, or let us say, between musical sound and noise. Art seems no longer content with its special venues and discrete forms, but intrudes on building walls, subway stations and city streets. The perceptual modalities required for the appreciation of art have also changed and have broken out of conventional patterns. At times we have to enter into the space of the art work, as in environmental sculpture; contribute to its process, as in interactive theatre, installation or performance-art, etc. This involvement with the art objects and in the aesthetic processes, in turn, suggests a participatory attention or 'aesthetic engagement' in the place of the traditional account of 'disinterestedness'. The enlargement of aesthetic sensibility has produced the deliberate elimination of perceptual distance between the artist, the work and the viewer. Henceforth art becomes more a process of creative interplay rather than a stasis.

But the more significant change is the integration of art and life in general, especially in the usage of the materials of everyday life. The music of John Cage uses sounds of all sorts and considered any kind of noise as musical material. There are Happenings or Performance-art which deliberately draw their themes and materials from the ongoing course of ordinary life. 'One could view everyday life itself as theatre' says Cage. Pop art plays with the intimate relation between art and life. Robert Rauschenberg denies, for example, any division between what he calls 'Sacred Art' and 'Profane Life' and insists on working 'in the gap between the two'. Indeed, as he once remarked, 'There is no reason not to consider the world one gigantic painting'. Theatre, too, has joined the other arts

here. Everything is a fitting subject, and in the most candid, graphic terms, from race relations to homosexuality, deformity, and the sex act. The distancing logic of a plot has receded and in its place the focus is on the ordinary details of life that we never trouble to notice, such as the series of movements by which a man sits in a chair, or a woman handles a cup or moves her lips, etc. All this illustrates what has become a motif in the twentieth-century art : a deliberate dethroning of art and its reintegration into the course of normal human activity.

Thus, the world of contemporary art has been characterized by the extension of the art object, the intensification of appreciative experience, the enlargement of art to include the total environment.³ Corollary to this is the significant shift of focus from objects to process and awareness. What counts in art today is not the object in itself. The object may be absorbed into the totality of the aesthetic field or even ‘disappear’, in the case of ‘non-object’ art like conceptual art or social project. The art object is a means, an instrument, for the heightening of perceptual awareness and the intensification of experience. The object can even be anything. This may sound like a radical upheaval from the point of view of conventional aesthetics, but this new development is perhaps simply a return to its origin. For art in its earliest meanings, as we can still find particularly in traditional societies, was neither the cultivated fineness of high civilization nor a matter of disinterested contemplation on a particular works of a genius, but simply the shaping, the joining together, and the celebration, of things, for the sake of infusing human feeling, imagination and meaning into them. It is a sort of. It is a matter of sensitivity to the qualitative shape of human experience in their surrounding; to the multiplication and proliferation of human soul in various activities; to sundry modes of incarnation of the spirit into the world of things. Art is various efforts to re-create the self and the world in accordance with changing human experiences. This explains why in traditional life, as it is now, the arts include any practices of creative human activities, such as festivals, crafts, ceremonies and rituals, even the culinary arts, the art of gardening, the art of flower arranging, etc. It is not without reason if today we still retain this general meaning of ‘art’ in the terms such as the art of conversation, the art of

management, the art of politics, etc. Indeed art has no longer any frame or distinct boundaries, for now it encompasses the whole range of human activities. While it might look like a degradation of aesthetics, it may precisely indicate the opposite: the radicalization of aesthetics, the aestheticization of life and environment, that is, the 'Aesthetics of Existence'. In this kind of art, it seems that the traditional key-concepts such as beauty, the sublime, contemplation, technical ingenuity, or formal configuration are no more central, albeit still important. Perhaps what is essential in art today is precisely its 'poetic' character, poetic in the sense of '*poiesis*', that is, 'making' and 'creating' a better self and life. For sure here 'making' in the sense of 'craftsmanship' is retained, even extended and broadened, but what counts even more is creative making in its deeper sense: that the potentials are made actual, the formless experience is given a form, the ineffable is articulated, the imaginable is made conscious, the conscious is made perceivable and tangible. And equally true is the converse : the visible is set in the invisible, what is tangible and seen is connected to the untouchable and the ungraspable. This surely echoes the basic thoughts of Heidegger, but also in line with John Dewey's emphasis on the centrality of experience in the appreciation of art.⁴ Art as a process of making and creating self and life, in fact is other words for 'education'.

Education as Art and Education of Art

The philosopher Schlegel once said: "Everyone is an artist whose central purpose in life is to cultivate himself". He used the word 'artist' since self cultivation (*Bildung*, education) ultimately means self creation, by making use of imagination. If education is the whole process of continuous self-creation, then, education is itself 'art' in the strict sense of the term. Education is 'art' in that, through creative imagination and various relations, the potentials are materialized, the formless (amorphous) given shape, the identity articulated. And if art is 'autotelic' -an eternal process of creative emergence, having no purpose other than itself- so is education. As art, education becomes a process without goal. The goal of learning, so to say, is learning itself: learning to learn and learning to be

(as rightly emphasized by UNESCO), or better, learning to keep becoming, to see the ever increasing complexity of ourselves (its irony, ingenuity, contradictions, profundity, illusion, etc.).

However, there is a slight difference between education *as* art, and education *of* art. Both are surely creative processes, yet in the former, ‘art’ is used as a sort of *method*, while in the latter, a *skill* to sharpen or *artifact* to appreciate. To use Nietzschean concept, education *as* art refers to the Apollonian side of art, that is, ‘the *principium individuationis*’, the act of shaping oneself; while education *of* art refers to the Dionysian side of art, meaning, the act of transgressing any limitations, the opening up of new ways of looking at things.⁵ The former is the ‘prosaic’ (general) shape of art, the latter is the ‘poetic’(specific) form of art.⁶ The skill required in the education of art ultimately is one to create, mold, join together, and celebrate sundry elements, so as to infuse human feeling and soul into things, as well as to let us see new dimensions of life. It takes a keen sensitivity to the qualitative layers of human experiences, to various modes of incarnation of spirits in the world of things and events. Work of art, as object, is the most challenging means, a proper instrument, for the heightening of perceptual awareness and the intensification of experience. Education *of* art, in this specific and most poetic sense, is important in that it is capable of disclosing the real condition of identity (personal or collective), the plight of human existence, and new possibilities of understanding self and the world..

Notes

¹ Kenneth Gergen, “The healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks” ; also Robert Jay Lifton, “The Protean Syle”, in Walter Truett Anderson (ed), *The Truth about the Truth* (New York: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1995) hlm 131-150

² The research was conducted by Sheherazade S.Rehman and Hossein Askari from George Washington University, USA, published in *Global Economy Journal* (Berkeley Electronic Press, 2010)

³ Arnold Berleant sees this as stages of evolution of awareness, which I take simply as different characters with no distinct period or stage. Cfr. Ibid. p 111

⁴ Cfr. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York : Perigee Books, 1934) Ch. II & XIV

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Gollfing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 22, 56, 65

⁶ 'Prosaic' and 'poetic' are terms used by Katya Mandoki, in *Everyday Aesthetics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1988)

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