

Holding “The Arts” at Bay

A Response

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ART HISTORIAN, PHILOSOPHER, and evolutionary biologist Ellen Dissanayake (2015) dedicated her scholarly career to the development of an evolutionary theory of “art,” one that departs from the question of “what is art” to the question of “what is art for.” Her argument is that, through the interactions between mother and child, human beings developed the propensity toward, and the need for, in her words, “making special.” “The arts,” said Dissanayake (2013), “began when our Pleistocene ancestors began deliberately to ‘artify’ ordinary artifacts and behavior—shaping and enhancing them so that they were no longer ordinary, but somehow extraordinary” (para. 34). Dissanayake is not wrong in observing that we human beings have a knack for embellishment and perhaps even for making ordinary things extraordinary; the exchange curated in this Special Issue of *JCT* is perhaps a case in point.

Starting with my attempt to propose a reframing of the arts in education through a conceptualization of the “orders of cultural production,” the editors invited four exceptional scholars and thinkers to write responses to my original article. This—in and of itself—is a gesture that “makes special,” that literally turns my ordinary theoretical argument into an extraordinary exchange, and I am both grateful and humbled by the engagement with these four scholars. Joni Acuff, Dipti Desai, Elizabeth Mackinlay, and Patrick Schmidt have offered critical engagement with my work, making the otherwise ordinary process of publishing an article into an extraordinary opportunity to engage in an exchange with colleagues. This issue is indeed special; but is it “art”? Or more to Dissanayake’s point, can it function as “art” by satisfying a need to make things special?

While it may be true that we humans express ourselves, our emotions, and our needs and desires by mobilizing ordinary materials in ways that are sometimes out of the ordinary (perhaps even in extra-ordinary ways), it is not true that every time we make something “special” we are doing something that is considered “artistic” or that earns the label “art.” This is because to label something as “art” or “artistic” (or someone as “artist”) is to place it (or them) in a “special” category; that is, the label itself is an act of “making special,” of awarding a certain kind of status of specialness. At face value, this may seem benign; what is the harm in making things we value “special” by the simple act of calling them “art”? The question is of course rhetorical and

somewhat ironic because it belies the idea that anyone can classify anything anywhere anytime as “art.” Indeed, what the history of the concept shows is that only some people are positioned (i.e., have the power) to mobilize and award the label and that this labeling has particular social implications and consequences that, despite the best intentions, sometimes have deleterious effects. As such, it is crucial that those of us committed to addressing inequality and injustice hold the label at bay—at a distance that gives us an opportunity to decide, deliberately and critically, whether in fact we want to make things special by the act of calling them “art.”

Dissanayake (2015) admitted that “art” is an abstract “construction of Western culture and in fact has a discernible historical origin” (p. 39). She attempts not only to distance her work from that history, but also to distinguish her use of the term from the Eurocentric roots from which it evolved as a concept. Yet, the very reference to “art” as denoting something out of the ordinary is the premise on which she relies to make her argument. And of course, not every instance of “making special” becomes classified or recognized as “art,” even if it involves some process Dissanayake might label “artification.” And here Dissanayake’s concept runs into the same tautological problem of most conceptualizations of what counts as “art,” because the identification, description, and analysis of those instances that constitute an expression of the human need to make special, or to “artify,” implicitly follow the same Eurocentric logic about what constitutes “art.” In other words, the very process of identifying instances of “making special” is akin to the process of identifying something as “art,” and such a process is imbued with power dynamics that are part and parcel of how the concept has evolved.

Moreover, since classifying things as artistic or calling them “art” has the effect of “making them special,” in the sense of categorizing them as worthy of a certain kind of attention, the act also has the effect of abstracting such things from their ordinariness and from the very ordinary conditions from which such things emerge and to which such things are a response. This abstracting effect of the concept of the arts is evident in the dynamic process that Peter Dyndhal (2013) calls “music gentrification,” as Patrick Schmidt so astutely pointed out in his response to my article. As Schmidt (2020) suggested, when certain kinds of musical practice come to be recognized as “special” (i.e., come to be classified as “the arts”) by the institutions with the power to grant that status, they are made to “jump onto a new track, functioning nearly identically in popular music studies as...in Western Classical music” (p. 46). The recent auctioning at Sotheby’s of a series of high school love letters by a teenaged Tupac Shakur (sold for \$75,600) and of a \$6 plastic crown worn and signed by Notorious Big at a photo session before he was murdered (sold for \$594,750) are a case in point (Beaumont-Thomas, 2020). While both the letters and the crown were perhaps materials used in an expression of the process of “making special,” it is precisely the fact that they are seen as special that ends up removing them entirely from their context in order to become rarified items to be bought and sold for the highest bid.

This same process of appropriation and decontextualization is evident when archeological artifacts are recruited in order to make an argument about the universality of the arts, which is central to Dissanayake’s body of work. In her response to my article, Dipti Desai (2020) articulated this argument by suggesting that the discovery of a 40,000 year-old painted figure on the wall of a cave in Borneo is evidence that “visual art” has played many functions throughout human history. I do not disagree with Desai that such artifacts are evidence that human beings have been expressing themselves symbolically by creating artifacts like paintings that likely played a multitude of social and cultural roles, perhaps even a role in transforming the world. What I question is the purpose of calling such symbolic work “art” and what it means to appropriate these artifacts in order to build a historical argument that confirms universality and conforms to a

concept that is anything but universal. We don’t know how the inhabitants of Borneo understood the act of painting these images, what purpose they served, or even whether they thought of these images as “special” in any particular way. However, we can say something about how contemporary viewers make sense of such discoveries and about the implications of classifying such artifacts as “art.”

When classified as “art,” artifacts such as the paintings in the Borneo cave are recruited into the invention of a linear historical trajectory that pleads for a starting point. Locating the starting point of art history with undeveloped others, in some place far away, sometime long ago, accomplishes two critical ideological purposes; first, it projects the concept of “the arts” on to other cultures, other humans, in other places and times, in order to sustain the premise that the category is a universal truth as opposed to an expression of particular ideas; second, it provides the beginning for a developmental story in which the ultimate and truly extraordinary developmental outcome is, of course, the contemporary Western “art world.” As I try to show in my article, this is clearly illustrated by the entanglement between the evolution of the concept of culture understood as a particular way of life (even the lives of those others, far away, a long time ago) and culture understood as cultivation (the unique developmental process that yields “desirable” human beings).

The intimate link between the concept of “the arts” and an understanding of culture as cultivation is also crucial for understanding how “the arts” are embroiled in domination. While acknowledging the role they have played in European colonization, Desai (2020) productively pushed back against the argument that “the arts” are implicated in the articulation of white supremacy and European domination. She offered the example of Indian Rasa aesthetics to show that similar ways of classifying and prescribing certain kinds of cultural artifacts and experiences have emerged independently of Western racist logics. While this may be true, however, the entanglement between Rasa aesthetics and the Indian caste system would suggest that a similar relationship exists between the prescription of aesthetic experience and the enforcement of social hierarchies. How is the Rasa logic of “making special” also linked to power? What hierarchies does it help to enforce while at the same time making them opaque? And following Bourdieu (1984), how does the prescription of aesthetic experiences work to classify not only certain kinds of affects, but also those with the power to prescribe and classify them?

These questions are crucial if we are committed to engaging creative expression and symbolic work as part of a political project of transformation, not just in the Western Global North, but everywhere. As Schmidt (2020) pointed out, the process by which cultural practices and artifacts become elevated into the category of “the arts” not only has the effect of decontextualizing them, but also of depoliticizing them and neutralizing their potential role in projects of social change. Benedict and Schmidt (2011) underscored how the discursive elevation of certain practices and artifacts to the category of “the arts” works ideologically to reinforce a kind of “magical thinking,” at once claiming that “the arts” have the power to transform while at the same time claiming an apolitical stance that “transcends the mundane” (p. 138). How can anything, at once, transcend while at the same time transform? This is precisely the trap of falling into the apparent benevolence of making universalistic claims about “the arts” as the work of “making special,” that we inevitably end up stripping the power of cultural practices to transform, and this has profound ethical consequences.

To hold “the arts” at bay, then, is to defer the question of whether and how we choose to “make special” by engaging the discourse of “the arts” or whether we muddle in the mundanity of the daily life that anchors any and all cultural practices and symbolic creative work in particular.

This is essential if we are to tackle seriously Elizabeth Mackinlay’s (2020) call “to live a more ethico-onto-epistemological and response-able life” (p. 30). Following Mackinlay, the call to hold “the arts” at bay is “a directive to turn our attention outwards otherwise; there is no mastery here, no white patriarchal colonial possessive logic, no ethico-onto-epistemological violence” (p. 30). In her response to my article, Mackinlay provocatively asked us, as educators, to ponder whether we are “colluders or rebels in the ways the discourses and regimes of arts education itself work to empower or disempower the marginalised, oppressed, and colonised to, for, and with whom we claim to work?” (p. 31). This is precisely the ethical question that we must ponder, and it is a question for which “the arts” comes up empty handed; there is no “making special” here, only the muck of life on the ground; only the messiness of cultural production.

Yet, there is beauty in this muck and in this messiness. This is a beauty that, in the words of South African scholar, cultural producer, and community educator Ra Hlassane, “emerges out of commitment,” when “a group of people have been able to persuade each other about the importance of something” (personal communication, February 26, 2020). This is the beauty in Joni Boyd Acuff’s (2020) “momma’s shrimp and grits recipe”—a beauty that needs no classification or elevation, that does not need to be made special, because it is always-already “special”—a beauty that holds “the arts” at bay. As Acuff point out, the concept of “the arts” works similarly to other institutionalized categories, like “scholar.” The gift of her response is precisely her refusal to respond accordingly and to hold “the academy” at bay, too. Her “raw engagement with the material” emerges out of a set of relational possibilities made available but not delimited by our shared investment in the academy, an investment that she—that we—both desire and reject. Her response articulates the spatio-temporal through an evocation of many sounds and voices: the soundtrack of Betty Wright and Bobby Blue Bland now overlapping with Mercedes Sosa; her mother and mine, cooking alongside each other; “making special” while “the arts” are nowhere to be found.

This productive exchange with these four thinkers and writers is a singularly special opportunity that, while not called to be classified as “art” in order to be special, is nonetheless authorized by our positions as academics. Indeed, the classificatory power works all the same and likewise should be held at bay. This is of course a paradox without resolution, a paradox that we must contend with if we are truly committed to justice. Our work is to make the paradox visible by holding classificatory regimes, whether hinged to the concept of “the arts” or to the notion of “scholarly work,” at bay—to create the distance from which change can emerge.

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