

Intimate, Immediate, Spontaneous, Obvious: Educating the Unknowing Mind

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*The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection. The water has no mind to receive their image.*¹

*The general tendency of the Western mind is to feel that we do not really understand what we cannot represent, what we cannot communicate by linear signs—by thinking. We are like the ‘wallflower’ who cannot learn to dance unless someone draws him a diagram of the steps.*²

-Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*

Before arriving at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I had spent many years at universities studying literature and philosophy. I learned how to acquire bodies of knowledge and then to cautiously replicate them before offering my own opinion. In all this time of university education—probably eleven years—I had not once been encouraged to discuss creativity or process in relation to my own work. Although we were students of literature and writing was our form of expression, we had never once been told that critical writing could also be a creative act. We had discussed the lives and artistic processes of poets, fiction writers, and even essayists, but the work we were doing was relegated to a category of its own: criticism. And, as criticism, it was not considered writing but rather analysis or *explication de texte*. My intellectual development was structured around such polarities even within one discipline, not to mention the boundaries constructed between literature, philosophy, history, and psychology.

In this environment, it was unthinkable to imagine our study as a Zen practice or to understand our writing as a meditative act. So when I began teaching literature to artists in an art school, I had no idea what to expect. Happily, I was immediately struck by what I regarded as the zaniness, permissiveness, spontaneity, and experimental nature of the environment. I soon realized that those engaged in their own creative process, and educated through a critique format, were often particularly astute in understanding the process of writing and the complexities of choice and structure shaping the work of others. Artists, unschooled in the history of literature, at times had more complex

responses to the writing, and greater insights, than did literature majors, who were often fixated on fulfilling requirements and gaining “information.” Art students knew how to give themselves over to work, imaginatively and intuitively, and to let it speak to them. Literature became important to them as another vehicle to facilitate their own creative journey.

I also realized very quickly that this atmosphere, which I had only just begun to absorb, felt more welcoming to the kinds of thoughts and goals I had about my own writing than the solely intellectual environment with which I was familiar. It wasn't that people were not intellectual in their approach to problems, but rather that there were multifarious approaches, not just conceptually but formally. One never knew where an idea would land or what form the response would take. What I had learned previously about pedagogy and writing was still remarkably useful in such an environment, but with certain adaptations. I soon understood, for example, that not all responses to the assigned readings would be written or verbal. Research papers, although at times brilliant, were often the most deficient and tedious for our students to complete. Their responses in other forms, however, were often captivating. If I read *Moby Dick* with my sophomore class, I might, in addition to the required writing, get at the end a performance, thirty-two woodcuts, or a sound installation. Rather than an analysis of the books in question, theirs was a response—an expression of how the work had affected them and their understanding of the world. I marveled at the immediacy of such responses, and the students' confidence in making them.

As I was developing my skills in working in such an environment, I was also reimagining my own creative practice. Or rather, I should say, imagining it as creative for the first time. Once I began to think about creativity in a conscious way, I began to think about writing in an unconscious way. And as I also began to study Buddhism more formally, I came upon the concept of the “unknowing mind.” This idea, central to Buddhist thought, helped me visualize the invisible process we were engaged in every day and made me understand the uniqueness of this environment that valued the “intimate, immediate, spontaneous, obvious” and original above all else.³ Many artists seem to understand intuitively that “the true mind,” also known as *wu shin* or *hsin*, “is no mind.” This state of unselfconsciousness, a most valued condition in the process of

creativity, is not easily translated. Allan Watts, for one, describes the Chinese ideograph for *hsin* as a visual representation of something like the heart, liver, or lungs.⁴ But the difficulty with the translation of *hsin* as heart is that in English its implications are too emotional, whereas the translation of *hsin* as “mind” is too intellectual. Watts goes on to say that “this apparent contradiction is resolved in the principle that the true mind is no mind...the *hsin*...is manifesting properly when it works as if it were not present.”⁵ Somewhere between the heart and the mind is a state of concentration out of which ideas, thoughts, and insights emerge.

Creative people tend to be comfortable living in this space of non-space. When artists are working, such a phenomenon often results in the feeling that, although something is moving them in a particular creative direction, they are also allowing themselves to be moved. We might say, with Watts, that the mind is “listening without straining to hear.”⁶ This is very different than forcing a resolution or solution while cultivating argumentation, proof, and refutation. To be receptive, philosophically, to the “unknowing mind” requires ‘fuzzying’ the brain, creating a soft focus, a willingness to allow things not to become completely clear all at once, but to remain diffuse at the edges. Once people live with and in this state of ambiguity, they can glimpse an idea as it approaches without being certain what exactly is coming towards them. They learn to let the idea reveal itself as it chooses and when it chooses. As painters say, they ‘let the painting talk to them.’ This process requires both trust and receptivity. Lao Tsu writes:

*Things are produced around us, but no one knows the whence. They issue forth, but no one sees the portal. Men one and all value that part of knowledge that is known. They do not know how to avail themselves of the unknown in order to reach knowledge. Is this not misguided?*⁷

Observing this space of consciousness in myself and in my students, I became aware that I was learning to negotiate this “unknowing mind”—mine and theirs. As I also began to think of myself more and more as a writer and to give myself over to my own process, I realized everything and nothing that I had learned had prepared me for these multiple challenges. Finally, freed of the verifiable and discursive as a prerequisite for all original thought, I was at home.

That was the beginning, when most everything in the art-making environment felt new, surprising, and liberating to me. I can still remember my surprise when I first noticed that no one looked up at me when I lectured because they were all doodling, and that models roamed around the school cafeteria in their slight silk bathrobes, completely relaxed. I even remember being shocked by the content of some faculty and student work and the difficulty of having to negotiate a response. But now, decades later, I have assimilated into this environment; I am of it and it is of me. I no longer view the School as 'Other.' And I no longer teach literature, but rather work with graduate students making art across disciplines. It is my pleasure to enter into and give myself over to their creative process, never knowing where it will take them or me.

Fly in the Web

*A monk asked, 'Where is the abiding place for the mind?' 'The mind,' answered the Master, 'abides where there is no abiding.'*⁸

-D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*

Artists, like all creative people, start with an idea that comes into their consciousness from no discernible place. When the idea seems good, it captures their interest and they pursue it, even if they cannot reconstruct its origin or as yet imagine its destination. This is the beginning of a very fragile process that can easily be deranged by many factors, including a lack of attentiveness and doubt. Such conditions sever the fine thread connecting consciousness to the imagination. As the creative person gives himself or herself over to an idea, the thought becomes more real and defines itself as an entity fit or unfit for exploration. In the case of artists, there is usually some product, object, or event soon generated. This process of giving shape to an idea can be arduous, the methodology often obsessive, and the results ephemeral.

The job of the educator working with young artists is to understand and then to move inside the space of the idea with them; to help evaluate and perfect it as it takes form. Perhaps as the work develops one might ask: In what way do you live here? What furniture do you need to inhabit this space? What appliances? How will its meaning be

communicated, made visible to others? And further along one might ask: Is this the work that you intended, or has it changed in the making? If it has changed its course, what is its new course? In other words, as an advisor, I have found it best to try to inhabit the dream space from which the idea originates and then to help monitor the successful manifestation of its intent.

Needless to say, everyone who has the privilege of working with young artists has a different approach to such an advisory role. Perhaps it is my own life as a student of literature that has taught me to move into the idea as if it were already an imaginary space—and to ask what is here, what is not. Can I move around in it? Am I restrained or locked out? What is the relationship between the narrator and the tale he or she is telling? Such an inquiry is useful for understanding both non-narrative and narrative work. Somewhere a fabrication is being constructed, a story is being told. How successful is the telling?

Because many artists value and live in the ephemeral, working closely with them has taught me that everything is about process—getting from here to there. Schools of art are also all about process, helping to bring new work into existence, always aware that once it is ‘done’ it might not succeed on the world’s terms. It might not get the response the artist desires. In fact, there are many students desperately trying to create non-object objects, for which there is no specified home. For them, the mind truly “abides where there is no abiding.” Ephemerality is all. The final result might not be valued or understood by the acquisitive agents of the art world. But even when this is the case, the work has usually moved the artist somewhere along the path, or moved him or her in a direction not anticipated. In this way the work becomes valuable. It leads to the next piece and, having been seen, affects what is to come. It enters our collective imagination.

The Real Fake

*To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it.*⁹

-Alan Watts

In addition to this emphasis on process is the central issue of all art making: the relationship between illusion and reality—that complex negotiation between signified, signifier, meaning, and artifice. I have recently worked with several students who are concerned with these issues of ephemerality in a continuously overt way. Jaye Rhee, a young Korean artist, makes work that plays with the constructs of the real and the fake. In her most recent piece, multiple video monitors display what initially appear to be falling cherry blossoms—an image often found in traditional Asian painting. This image is still a powerful advertisement for the elegance and beauty of the ‘Orient.’ Korean culture, like that of other Asian societies, anticipates the appearance of cherry blossoms each spring and is obsessed with their exact moment of perfection. But even as Jaye Rhee intends to create the illusion of light pink petals falling softly to the ground with the tinkling sound of Asian instruments in the background, she also wants the viewer to know that the petals seducing our eyes are not real cherry blossoms. They are in fact not petals at all, but rather chewed pink bubble-gum, spit from a height then photographed and manipulated to appear to be gently drifting down. The exotic, airy, pseudo-Asian soundtrack is actually the amplified noise of Jaye Rhee rummaging through a box of Styrofoam packing peanuts. She wants the fakeness and contrivance of the piece to be as apparent as possible. She delights in making the fake, fake. At the same time, she also wants the fake to appear just real enough to seduce us, if only fleetingly, into its illusion.

What I find so interesting and challenging in all Jaye Rhee’s work is that her chosen materials are banal, yet the images she creates reach for the sublime. There have been other such pieces. In one, the illusion is of the sea slowly rising to fill a row of video screens. It is created by Jaye running back and forth, winding and unwinding a length of variegated blue yarn before our eyes. In another, a large piece of fabric creates the illusion of undulating water that the artist walks through, splitting, tearing, and parting it

as she goes. Although each piece could construct illusion as reality, this is not her desire. Her intention is to create the “real fake,” as she calls it, the momentarily perfect simulacrum that seduces her viewers; gives them an actual sensual experience. In her case, this is always pleasurable, but also simultaneously deceptive and honest.

Another young artist, Dianna Frid, makes craters of the moon, asteroids, and fortresses, all obviously fake in scale and materials but each effectively creating metaphors, analogies, and narratives alluding to the past, present, and future. She has made deflated carousels and space stations cut out of aluminum foil and bridges stitched together from plaid fabrics—all large and inoperative, going from nowhere to nowhere. Portable when they should be permanent, flat when they should have depth, ethereal when they demand weight, Frid replicates objects of such scale and precision that no one could construct the ‘real version’ by themselves. Yet, she has made her own imaginative translations, that simultaneously allude to functionality, dysfunctionality, dream and reality. They are anti-technology, anti-progress, but also somehow of the future. Their physical virtuality is propelled into existence solely by desire.

Contemporary artists have often been quite adamant in wanting to expose such fake worldliness. What seems new here is the subsequent wish to have the seduction be complete in spite of its obviousness; to allow everyone to recognize the fakeness in the piece and still have a real experience of beauty, amusement, and joy. In a world of simulacra, these artists do not forget that the source of it all— “the real experience”— is no longer representable without some commentary. The artist might see the actual cherry blossoms and be amazed by their beauty, but not without the postmodern self-consciousness that brings to the foreground all the clichés associated with this image. In experiencing the “real fake” one can validate the inauthenticity of the materials and the overdetermined meaning of the event and still have a moment when it all seems sublime.

Without this seductive element, the piece would simply feel didactic, dissolving the illusion and replacing it only with an absence. In such instances there would be an uncomfortable, depressing lack. But here it seems these two young artists want this emptiness to send us back to the psychic space of the imagination—the aspect of mind William Blake believed was not only a state of consciousness, but “human existence itself.”¹⁰ To have the viewer give him or herself over completely to such artwork it has to

allow us to play, yet also to reflect. The best of such work encourages us to dream: not the dream seeped in illusion, but the dream about illusion.

Attempts at representation are metaphors for the world as it exists. Even when most successful, one cannot truly represent the world's sensorial nature. Standing in front of a painting or photograph can never exactly replicate the bodily sensations experienced out in the world. Many artists today do not try to represent the world per se, but how they see the world; not the event, but how they experience the event; not the sound, but how they hear the sound; not the movement, but how they interpret the movement. We, in turn, experience how they choose to organize these elements to create a new whole. The goal for many artists, like the goal of the Zen student, is to contemplate "true suchness" or "things as they really are".¹¹ For some artists this means emptying the work of all meaning and allowing it to reflect upon and then mirror permanence and impermanence—the nature of existence itself.

Paola Cabal worked for a year to recreate the shadows on the city pavements cast by construction scaffolding. She fabricated her own charcoal, worked outside on gigantic sheets of paper meticulously tracing the shadow patterns, and then tried to create these subtleties in her studio. But the elusiveness of the shadows seemed impossible to replicate. Then, for her final thesis project, she chose a space in the gallery next to a large window. She painted the wall gray to match the floor. Using white in varying degrees of density, she spray-painted right onto the wall, illuminating her intricate tracings of the daytime shadow patterns. This was achieved with such success that people got down on their hands and knees and tried to obscure the shadows they were observing with the density of their bodies, to see whether they were really coming from the windows or if they were *faux*. In this piece, *Here Tomorrow*, the shadows become permanent, while paint on the wall takes on aspects of the ephemeral. Because the work is visual and must be 'read' quickly, it does not reflect all of its internal contradictions or the complexity of its process. The desired effect is not to obfuscate, but to create the obvious. In *Zen and the Birds Appetite*, Thomas Merton writes:

*Zen implies a breakthrough, an explosive liberation from one-dimensional conformism, a recovery of unity which is not the suppressor of opposites but a simplicity beyond opposites.*¹²

What state of mind must we be in, not only to conceptualize such projects, but also to respond to them? “A monk asked, ‘where is the abiding place for the mind?’ The mind, answered the Master, ‘abides where there is no abiding....’ Where there is no abiding place, this is truly the abiding place for the mind.”¹³ How can those who teach help those who live so organically in the primal simplicity of the imaginary? How can we best enter their “make-believe,” live with them in the here and now of their process, and keep a critical distance?

As an educator, I have conceptualized my challenge as twofold—to be a guide for such artists and simultaneously to be guided by them. When I first encountered such work, I was amazed, not so much by the work itself, but by the ferocity of the artists’ intention. Because this work is not something I myself would ever attempt, I was initially simply in awe of the ingenuity, passion, will, tenacity, and discipline required to stay with these projects until completion. Why would someone struggle so hard to create such an effect? What is such a gesture really about? And because these students live in and respond to the “unknowing mind,” while waiting for the most compelling idea to come to them, they continue to work, obsessively making things, staying in a position of readiness, receptivity, and acceptance. It is useful to encourage such developing artists to cultivate a critical eye for their own work, an ability to make serious decisions and evaluations. But within this delicate process it is not useful for them to lose their depth of concentration and desire, or to step so completely outside themselves and their work that they fall into self-consciousness and doubt. This is as true for the teacher as it is for the student.

In Korea, a Buddhist monk named June-Kwang, also known as the “Mad Monk,” resides in a mountain monastery. He is famous for his wild lifestyle and his perfect Zen paintings. Although admired and respected by other monks and nuns alike, he also has been assailed with great criticism because of his unorthodox behavior. He drinks, carouses, and sleeps with women. A self-proclaimed man of “unlimited action,” he has reached a stage of spiritual evolution where he no longer needs to live within the normal rules established for monastic life. In the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, poet

William Blake offers a similar vision of a double-standard based on stature and consciousness when he writes: “One Law for the Lion and Ox is Oppression.”¹⁴

Even though June-Kwang is a monk, he lives like an artist devoted to his work. When he paints he does so in an ecstatic frenzy. He is an extreme Jackson Pollack, dancing a dance of action. When Asian scholar Lewis Lancaster told him, “You are the Picasso of Korea,” June-Kwang snapped back, “I’m better. His paintings are filled with thought, mine are not.”¹⁵

Play and Failure

*It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension.*¹⁶

-Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion, West and East*

Within the spectrum of human activity, art making is very much like hard work, but it is also like play. Play is essential to the creative process. In Western society it is rare to have the word play coupled with the word work, and yet, artists know that to work well, they must play well. Their art is the fruit of such work/play. When advising young artists, I am astounded at how many versions of something it takes to achieve success; how many iterations, incarnations, how many tries; how long the seed must germinate until one day the relationship of form and content finally succeeds. But were this enormous effort only experienced as work, would anyone pursue it? Somehow, it must also be experienced as play, precisely because no one is dictating what the artist must do. The invention of form and content is an expectation of the artist’s own creation. And, as one’s own creation, there is the sense that once you have gotten inside—begun the process of making a piece—the challenge is to find a successful way out. This is a game of one’s own devising.

Nonetheless, those who understand the potential treacheries of such play know that making art, at times, can be a sickening affair. One can get stuck inside the piece, immobile, or simply lose one’s way. One can suffer incredible doubt and, because the boundaries between oneself and the work are easily blurred, such an occurrence can

cause panic, depression, or a sense of failure. All of this may seem an excessive response to the work of the imaginary, unless one knows what it is to labor in this way—the demands it makes, the enormous sense of identity that is at stake, and the anxiety this can cause. But even with all these potential landmines along the way, the mind has no choice but to prepare for the work and then be prepared to go where it leads, where it wants to go.

In all of this, just as one needs to be ready to play at a difficult game, one also needs to prepare to fail. Failure is built into art making because in a sense one can never truly achieve the ideal, never really create what one sees in one's mind. The work has to be the thing that wants to be made, that lets itself be made. And even when it is perfected in one's own opinion, the work still may fail on the world's terms. It may be ahead of its time, behind its time, or peripheral to the prevailing art world fashion. One cannot account completely for the recognition some work gets while other work does not. The art world is capricious. Work that crosses many boundaries and still succeeds in its own terms may not fit into any of the acceptable categories designed by those viewing it. But if one can see all effort as play, play towards no end other than the successful completion of the process, then there is nothing to be lost. Success can be measured by completing the work and progression on to the next attempt. To dispel all expectations for their efforts, meditators repeat again and again the words of the *Heart Sutra*: "No knowledge. No attainment. No realization. For there is nothing to attain."¹⁷

Once again, I learned none of this in the university, where work was work and play was not working, even though in truth the greatest intellectuals and scientists are very much like artists, waiting for the inspired ideas to come to them, creating conditions in which these might make themselves known. But in self-declared creative environments, the conditions to become a practicing artist need to exist in order to allow the work to be made and to provide an example of how one must structure one's space, time, and energy in order to accomplish these goals. In such worlds, it is understood that the art-making process cannot be rushed. Artists learn to work within the parameters of ambiguity and to discover their own methods of realization within these contingencies. How does one confront one's own doubt and talk oneself out of abandoning the work altogether? How

does one address one's internal critic as well as all those outside? How does one keep the desire to make and to do alive?

"The idea of Zen," writes Suzuki, "is to catch life as it flows."¹⁸ In art making one sees oneself as a river but also as the boat on the river, periodically tossed onto the shore only to be caught up in the river's momentum once again. When this vision is achieved, creative individuals are able to move with excitement from one project to the next, from one idea to the next, completing one and beginning another, in an endless tide of creation, cessation, and creation again. If you are lucky, you can surround yourself with others tossed about by the same, tumultuous waters. And if you are very lucky, while on your own journey, they will invite you to enter into and comment on theirs.

¹ Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 181.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ When the Korean Master asks, "What are the qualities of Buddhist practice?" The expected answer is: "Intimate, Immediate, Spontaneous, Obvious."

⁴ Watts, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1964), 86.

⁹ Watts, 11.

¹⁰ As quoted in Kenzaburo Oe, *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* (John Nathan, trans.), (New York: Grove, 1986), 127.

¹¹ James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain* (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1999), 552.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 140.

¹³ Suzuki, 87.

¹⁴ William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in *The Viking Portable Blake* (New York: Viking, 1983), 264.

¹⁵ Lewis R. Lancaster, *The Mad Monk: Paintings of Unlimited Action* (Berkeley: Lancaster-Miller, 1979), bookjacket.

¹⁶ Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion, West and East* (New York: Pantheon, 1958), Volume II, Bollingen Series 20 (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 546.

¹⁷ For a good understanding of the "Heart Sutra" see Thich Nhat Hanh (Peter Levitt, ed.) *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prjanaparamita Heart Sutra*, (Berkeley: Parallax, 1988).

¹⁸ Suzuki, 75.