WORKS OF ART AND WORKS OF INFORMATION

Reflections for the Twentieth Anniversary of the Women Art Series, Mabel Smith Douglass Library

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> Works work when by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, bringing out new connections and contrasts . . . they participate in the organization and reorganization of experience, and thus in the making and remaking of our worlds. . . . Sensation and perception and feeling and reason are all facets of cognition, and they affect and are affected by each other. Works work when they inform vision; inform not by supplying information but by forming or re-forming or transforming vision; vision not as confined to ocular perception but as understanding in general. . . . Works work by interacting with all our experience and all our cognitive processes in the continuing advancement of our understanding. –Nelson Goodman [1].

I.

Every thoughtful experience of information contributes to the construction of identity. We are formed by the structures and processes that inform us; gradually, we create ourselves as we resolve our unknowns. Among all possible information structures and processes, those of the library are special. In our culture, the library is a humanizing instrument. It contains expansive tools, requires reflective thinking, depends on communication, and conducts the learner toward inspired transformations of mind. The more informed and powerful we become, the more we require both passion and imagination to shape our future. When we encounter works of art amid works of information in the library, it is possible to see how they contribute mutually to the construction of a questioning, responsive life–how they contribute, in Nelson Goodman's words, to the making and remaking of our worlds.

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The first sentence of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is this: "The most notable distinction between living and inanimate things is that the former maintain themselves by renewal."[2] The library is an agency for creating this living difference: it is designed for the undertaking of mindful, intentional, knowing change in ourselves. We go to libraries in order to become different, to fulfill that part of ourselves existing in the mind's eye. The difference may mean new powers of intellect, or a skillfully resolved problem; it may mean a different way of thinking about experience, or a difference in the processes of leading one life; it may mean a change in our business or a decision for our future. Whatever our aims, we use the library in order to become–to change ourselves under the influence of information.

To this place we bring the complexity that is a necessity of change: a timely problem to be resolved, a bare framework ready to become detailed, or a promising unknown ready to be fathomed. The complexity we bring is the sum of our thinking and questioning. The construction of a new line of thought, the discovery of an alternative explanation, the documentation of an unusual insight: these are the kinds of differences made possible by information under our control. The library–perhaps all cultural institutions–exists to inspire these explorations of possibility, and to make imagined possibilities explorable. The library is an agency of transformation and design, a place where men and women grow nearer to their competencies through encounters with new information. It is a place where work is done on the unfinished parts of ourselves.

Artworks in a library identify the place as a cultural forum, a place where both images and texts influence the emerging experience of knowledge. The presence of works of art near works of information advances the library's idea of itself as a center for expression and reflection–a place for testing and honing vision. This presence of art in the library invites the inspiration and contemplation of its users, and expands the voices–and the idea of discourse–within its boundaries. Created and sustained by its community, the artful library engages and stimulates its community in turn. Artworks in a library remind us that, in a world of classifications, systems and apparently straight lines, knowing may be more than linear. Art reminds us as well that knowledge often requires divergence, crossing the lines. In libraries, our cognitive experiences are much like handmade artifacts: sometimes designed, sometimes accidental, but always our own constructions.

Together in the library, works of art and works of information are fitting companions: each kind of record has the power to incite critical differences in our lives as we strive to master the rough process of becoming ourselves.

Together, art and information enter and expand the responsive life, leading it forward. Each responds to us as we change, and each becomes different when we see it with renewed eyes. As with information, so with art: the more we see, the more we need to see. The more we understand the powers of information and art to change us into our future selves, the more we wish to be changed by these invisible powers.

II.

Ellen Dissanayake's attempt to answer the question "What does art do for people?" causes her to assemble a number of responses from diverse sources. She writes, for example, that:

> [Art] allows direct, 'thoughtless' (or unself-conscious) experience.
>
> Art exercises and trains our perception of reality, it prepares us for the unfamiliar or provides a reservoir from which to draw appropriate responses to experience that has not yet been met with.
>
> Art has been mentioned as assisting our capacity to tolerate ambiguity, a useful and adaptive ability.
>
> The tendency in art to make use of repetition, rule, and ritual can be seen as adaptively useful in that these features assist in giving order to the world.[3]

This selection of attributes–emphasizing the favorable effects of art on openness to new forms of experience, tolerance of ambiguous situations, and the uses of order and structure–suggests some tentative, arguably tenuous, connections between works of art and works of information in libraries, and to the development of critical and creative thought beyond the library. Both works of art and works of information document lived, observed, experienced worlds. The lexicographer and the artist present the learner with their versions of knowledge, transmitted through the particular intelligence and sensitivity of their work. The artist's knowing captures an interior view, literally a vision of the world; the lexicographer's art permits discourse about it. One version of experience "prepares" us for the experience of another. And further, these linkages are generative and connective, going beyond their original contexts; thinking of one world of experience amplifies the experience of other worlds.

Information and art are conducive to mindfulness. Our experiences of art and information demand cognition and context. We attempt to relate our new perceptions to other, similar images of knowledge, and to other, similar experiences. Wanting to understand, we use language as our primary tool for

integration and response. Our written language, in Vygotsky's words, is used for "deliberate structuring of the web of meaning."[4] The evolution of these structures through reflection and writing may lead us toward the value that Dewey calls "intensified prizing"[5]–a state of thoughtful, deepening appreciation.

Works of art and works of information suggest possibility, the quality Dewey refers to as "the suggestion of something not observed."[6] In libraries, the extraordinary is always counteractive to the mundane, leading the individual to think and rethink conventional approaches to intellectual work. These reconsiderations lead to transitions of understanding; these transitions lead to the new frames of thought. This is the revisioning and reconstructing of the world Goodman describes in the epigraph above.

Artworks expand the conceptual realm of the learner, moving it toward uncharted, exploratory modes of thinking. In alliance with works of information, works of art take the learner into a contemplative, reflective realm apart from routine contexts. In this way artworks assist in creating conditions for the fluent mediation of change and the assertion of new analytic powers, educative goals inherent in the library's reasons for being. "The power of art to undermine the familiar," John Gilmour writes, "together with its capacity to intensify our encounter with the world, opens up possibilities for change of self."[7]

Problems of information and problems of art challenge the intellect to respond. Conducting a thorough search for fitting information is a problem of interpretation, not unlike the search for meaning in a contemporary painting. Wrestling with each kind of problem requires a set of probing questions, an awareness of relevant data, advanced cognitive processing, and sustained attention over time to the issues at hand. Challenging works of art and intriguing works of information contribute to the faculty Howard Gardner sees as a prerequisite for human intellectual competence, "the potential for finding or creating problems."[8] Goodman says that attention to artworks can be a form of:

> learning [that] is as inquisitive, as cognitive a process as grasping a mathematical theorem or a scientific concept, but it cannot be reduced to or induced by words alone. It requires accessibility of works, pointed juxtapositions for comparison and contrast, everything that encourages hard looking and aids intelligent seeing. That includes words; for words may illuminate pictures as pictures may illuminate words.

Goodman calls this "active visual inquiry."[9]

Finally, library encounters with information and art, especially encounters of the deep kind that make differences in our lives, are essentially private experiences conducted in public. They foster the intimate emergence of critical values and the capacity to judge. Over time, a history of these encounters makes a structured intelligence, and the deep interpretation of our own interior experiences, possible. "The brain," Frank Smith writes, "is more like an artist than a machine. It constantly creates realities, actual and imaginary; it examines alternatives, spins stories, and thrives on experience."[10]

III.

In the life of any community, its library is the one public place designed for private change to be contemplated, encountered, and undertaken. It seems that the combination of works of art and works of information in the library meets several useful needs in the life of the mind as it changes: the need to pause and reflect, the need for wordless thoughts, the need for challenge and surprise, the need to interpret and understand, and the need to know the experiences and visions of others.

But more than meeting these needs, it is likely that artworks, when they appear freely and without interpretive constraints in libraries, also may induce several behaviors that are useful to the discovery and application of information in the production of new knowledge. For example, artworks require a learner's cognitive engagement over time, in the form of sustained attending and sensing with eye and mind. Such lingering is similar to the thought and observation critical to any information search. The meanings of artworks, like the meanings of discovered information, often depend on the strength and depth of the connections and associations the observer can develop–to memories, contexts, questions. These associations are at their richest and most productive when they range in great arcs, crossing lines of gender, geography, generation, and culture. Thinking in this way the observer seeks essential continuities between the new and past contexts. The most powerful aesthetic experiences may stimulate language acts and behaviors–notes, dialogues, readings–that begin the processes of personal change and growth. Last, if artworks in the library can lead the observer to critical reflections and insights, or to the perception of patterns and the development of values, they have truly informed the experiences of the individual.

We must think of art in the library as a provocative presence, intended to inspire and move its observers toward a thoughtful, critical, reflective mood,

one that awakens memories, suggests continuities, and stimulates questions. Works of art and works of information both have the capacity to tell the stories of human lives, often evoking admirable daring and self-definition. In a library strongly devoted to the education and enrichment of women, for example, the presence of women's art takes on new, critically important, and potentially transforming meanings for the community. Such a library creates an environment that responds visually to Carolyn Heilbrun's call to women: "We must begin to tell the truth . . . to one another."[11] In whatever form it takes, the articulation and presentation of one's own story is a way to undertake the creation of self and power, which Heilbrun defines as "the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter."[12]

Ultimately the presence of artworks in a library expands the possible discourse for its community, the possible images to be invoked, the possible truths to be told, the possible powers to be grasped. For a woman constrained by circumstances or situations, Maxine Greene writes, "The road to freedom for her can be opened only when she becomes aware of alternative possibilities for herself."[13] Citing Heidegger, Greene suggests that a first step is "unconcealment." She writes, "To 'unconceal' is to create clearings, spaces in the midst of things where decisions can be made. It is to break through the masked and the falsified, to reach toward what is also half-hidden or concealed."[14] For Maxine Greene, spaces of this kind are essential for the discovery of freedom, because they permit human beings to move beyond their constrained lives, and to express within their cultures new, visionary, senses of themselves. For all learners, the library where works of art and works of information can be explored without interference is a strong agency for these discoveries. If we are to find or create new ways to see ourselves, if we are to devise new anticipations for our lives, and if we are to see our works extend us beyond our limits, we will stand ever in need of such spaces and their possibilities.

Notes

[1] Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 179-80.

[2] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966 [1916]), p. 1.

[3] Ellen Dissanayake, *What is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), pp. 66-69 passim.

[4] Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1962), p. 100.

[5] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 237.

[6] John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1960 [1933]), p. 9.

[7] John C. Gilmour, *Picturing the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 181.

[8] Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (New York: Basic, 1983), p. 61.

[9] Goodman, p. 173.

[10] Frank Smith, *To Think* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), p. 12.

[11] Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), p.45.

[12] Heilbrun, p. 18.

[13] Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), p. 72.

[14] Greene, p. 58.

Mary Beth Edelson, "Great Goddess Installation," 1975