

## Raphael Vella

### Artistic art education

*What is your understanding of art?*

I came across this description of the artistic process in an interview with French art historian Paul Ardenne about the relationship between art and politics: “L’art me dit que je ne comprends pas: c’est alors qu’il est temps de créer”<sup>1</sup> (Art shows me that I do not understand; at that instant, it is time to create). There can be no prescriptive “understanding” of art, because its very existence depends on a misunderstanding. In Ardenne’s terms, if we are to search for art’s utility-value, we need to look at its ability to make us understand the limits of our understanding, *without* providing us with some kind of key that would help us to figure out its ultimate “meaning”. According to Ardenne, this is art’s political power, its resistance to contemporary society’s emphasis on expertise, efficiency and knowledge.

The singularity of each work of art as well as the singularity of each person’s relationship with a given work contributes to these “misunderstandings”. If this singularity is lost, we are left with a formula or codified understanding of art and the criteria we use to judge it. Yet, the singularity of each encounter with art (the artist’s as well as the audience’s) means that art is sometimes perceived as a threat to rationality and positivist thought in general. How can one “think” that which refuses to explain itself rationally to us? And how can it be judged?

These ideas about our lack of understanding in the face of art have at least three implications:

- 1) If art is a process of coming to terms with the unknown, it is by its very nature a form of inquiry. It helps us to adapt our lives and behaviour by becoming more aware of what we know and what we do not know. From actual artistic practices, we learn to problematise knowledge and preconceived ideas about ourselves in the world.
- 2) If, however, we are to think of art as a process of inquiry or research, the singularity of art is burdened with a problem: how does one generalise one’s conclusions about works of art and artistic processes when our experience of them is individualised? Indeed, how does one reach *conclusions* in the first place? I am assuming, of course, that generalisations usually form an integral part of any research process, particularly during the analysis of data gathered in that research. To think of art as a form of inquiry *and* also respect its inaccessibility is a challenge that we can face if we also accept that artistic knowledge exists in a state of flux (it is dynamic) and that it is a continuous dialogue (and occasionally a struggle) between an artist, a medium, a tradition and groups of people we erroneously call the “public” in the singular. This critique of the possibility of a “conclusion” is what art inquires into when an artist creates.
- 3) If, because of this lack of understanding, art cannot be universalised, then the learning of art in educational institutions also faces a predicament. Beyond the teaching of skills and professional techniques at higher levels of the educational ladder, what can be taught? Do we teach this “je ne comprends pas”? Perhaps, what can and even *should* be taught is each person’s ability to make different connections and interpretations within a dynamic model of art-making and the appreciation of art. Every person, not only artists, is faced by the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Fadat, *Conversations*, Nîmes: Appendices, 2010, p. 79.

situation of “je ne comprends pas”, but the artist also feels the need to express his or her frustration with this situation. This is what makes the artist’s role both socially and educationally relevant. Hence the importance of the artist’s vision in educational settings.

## **International Art Education**

### *Art Education in Malta*

Studies in Fine Arts form part of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the Department of Arts and Languages in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta. Studies in Art Education combine modules in art practice (painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking, photography, digital media, video) with knowledge-based modules in art history, theory and criticism, as well as art teaching methodology. After graduating, undergraduate students receive a teaching warrant, and some further their studies in Fine Art, usually in the UK. The Faculty of Education also offers a three-year M.Ed degree in Art Education that integrates theoretical issues in Art Education with studio-based credits. Studio-based areas are individualized and designed to accommodate students' requirements. This combination of educational, academic and artistic research is intended to permit successful students to progress to different doctoral programmes. Other degrees offered at the University of Malta include undergraduate and research degrees in History of Art and a MFA in Digital Art.

In the undergraduate and the postgraduate degrees in Art education at the University of Malta, professional art practices play a central role. Practising artists are involved as full-time and part-time lecturers, and international artists are often invited to give workshops at the university and even create new works in Malta, in collaboration with art students. Collaborations with other entities such as Heritage Malta (the national agency responsible for heritage sites, culture and conservation), the School of Art in Valletta and foreign universities also aim to offer students a flexible approach to art and art education, increasing opportunities for employability.

The philosophy of the Art Education programme is dominated by a strong emphasis on the student’s ability to think and work like an artist or combined artist/teacher, the desire to expose school children to works of art to help them appreciate how artists think, a political/cultural studies approach to making and teaching art, and a contextual understanding of how one’s work and ideas relate to other works in the history of art and to one’s environment. In this regard, site-specific work is often carried out to help students come into contact with applied challenges that bring them face to face with social issues and the relationship between art and society.