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Book Reviews

Book Review

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Letting Art Teach: Art Education 'After' Joseph Beuys, Gert Biesta (2017)

Arnhem and Amsterdam: ArtEZ Press, 125 pp.,

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The purpose, value and most effective means to experience, teach, learn and live through art, education and their connections are ongoing and topical areas of debate. Gert Biesta's text *Letting Art Teach* strikes to the core of these connections, simplifying them and increasing accessibility to the contentions they present, through mobilization of affective and active messages in the art of Joseph Beuys. Biesta, an experienced international professor of education who has written and researched extensively across education, has cleverly crafted this book to voice and reveal through art practice an important message about the present and required future climate for art education – that the art education experience should be part of everyday dialogue.

Despite this book being published three years ago, Biesta's sentiments, like art education having an existential quality, where understanding and being addressed by the

world are purposeful to the subject are showing to hold the test of time. In the current climate of writing this review, amidst a global pandemic, the consideration and need to engage with existentialism – put simply the reciprocal relationships between one and the world – whether conscious or not appears to be in the minds and acts of many people. People, young and old, across the globe are turning towards the arts as a mechanism to understand, survive and make sense of the self, others, experiences and ‘happenings’ and the connections between these in light of changing events and circumstances. People are therefore perhaps encountering an ‘educational moment that appears inside the artistic endeavour’ where art can and may be being ‘allowed to teach’ (38) as personal means to negotiate the space between the self and the world. A space which, prior to this pandemic, was likely to be negotiated by a smaller spectrum of people engaging directly in art through education, career, hobby or industry exposure. With much of the art and educational world locked down in a state of uncertainty, there is now, evidenced by a rejuvenated interest in art and factors like needing to teach art online, a need to consider and do art and education, as combined and separate entities, in a different way. Biesta’s book as an entity in itself and also in current (and perhaps future) contexts teaches us that there are elements of the arts and art education that have been misunderstood and misplaced. For example, in the introductory chapter ‘Beyond expressivism’, art’s subject value as only being regarded if it contributes elsewhere like for academic outcomes or skill development is highlighted. To see art education as a space to explore the unknown and figure new things out, and as a subject with its own unique contributions, is even more important and relevant given changing circumstances across the world, in art, education and in ourselves.

Seminal issues in art education, such as ‘the disappearance of art and education from theory and practice’ (37) and the contribution art education makes to learning and personal development, are interwoven through this logically structured text. At the book’s outset, Joseph Beuys’ (1965) work *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* is shared giving credit to and modelling art’s own ability to teach, guide and be, dialogue and dialoguing. In the first few chapters of the book, this artwork is also connected to the key ideas raised that concern the following three areas: (1) how art education teaching can be used as means to ‘show’ learners’ areas of interest in the world (Chapter 1); (2) to consider effective approaches towards art education and the resistance such approaches face on micro and macro levels, like in relation to self and society (Chapters 2 and 3); (3) how connection between self and world occur in art education over time through unity between cognate thought, affect and the act of making art (Chapter 4). In the second half of the book, references to Beuys’ artwork are still made to explore art’s wider potential in a variety of ways, such as the following: a means to work through issues (Chapter 5); modes of teaching and their influence on sense making (Chapter 6); understanding risk and its affect (Chapter 7). The book concludes by carefully considering how approaching art education through different senses alters intentions, dialogues and experiences with the world, which aligns the text well to remain in dialogue with changes in art practice, education and global movements. A key contribution of Biesta’s book is that it philosophically addresses how the arts can ‘act upon us, touch us and speak to us’ (119) to provide means to understand and address important issues, such as sustainability, social justice and morality in the complex spaces of self, other and society.

What should be refreshing to the readers of Biesta's book is that each time you engage with it, you dialogue yourself with the world, you forge connections between your own identity, experiences and practices, those of others and the mental and physical spaces in which you exist. Biesta's work is effective in its ability to guide you to question and consider, taking away your own messages for change. The content, form and ideas communicated in Biesta's book share and model valuable lessons about teaching, learning, art and education as subjects. The interconnected dialogue, uniting art, text, real and reflexive experiences add rigour and impact to the discussions presented in this work. This book does not claim to give insight or instigate change, but it is offered as a form of teaching. It also appears to have the capacity to facilitate readers' questioning and consequently affects them in the way that successful art forms do. Biesta's book is in touch with reality; as author, he shows awareness that the roles of those working, practising and doing art and education are risky, complicated and changeable.

The honesty in Biesta's book increases its readability and so positions it as one appropriate for all educators to engage with and revisit. This is especially so if the reader has a willingness to learn about and adapt to the changing nature of art education as a discipline and desires to engage reflectively on levels that are personal, social, physical and material.