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Risk, Response, and Responsibility: Artistic Interventions

James Haywood Rolling Jr.

Why does art matter? To make art is a liminal act—it creates an active threshold between risk and reward, between waste and resource, between personal trauma and social redemption. Human beings tend to do far more than is needed to maintain a natural equilibrium between our selves, our relations, and the environments we live in. We are catalysts. For better or worse, we make change, and that change requires something extra from us. Humans generate an excess of energy that must be expended and consumed one way or the other—either for personal or private gain, or toward the profitless exercise of helping one another become more human (Rolling, 2015). It is risky business to make something from nothing, without the overt goal of adding to personal wealth or prioritizing one's national interests. Each aesthetic response, either to one another or to the materials at hand, is fraught with such risk because so much is invested. Who is the artist working for? Is it solely for his or her career? Or, with each intervention undertaken toward the enhancement of our better selves, is much more at stake than the present-day culture acknowledges or values?

For about a decade I volunteered as an art director for a summer camp that served youngsters in the New York City foster care system. A child might go through an entire year without anyone even acknowledging his or her birthday. One year, I did collaborative self-portraits with every child in attendance, where they were given the opportunity to either paint or select a background world where they felt at home. What matters in this artistic intervention is not the identity of the child, nor the trauma of everyday family life outside of camp, but rather the joy of this particular moment of radiating and purposeful self-image. Photo by James Haywood Rolling Jr.



Artmaking exemplifies the ubiquity of humanity's inherent risk-taking, reward-making behavior—there is no culture that does not make art (Dissanayake, 1988, 2003). In fact, within every culture there is ample evidence to suggest that artmaking is primarily practiced not for the survival of the *fittest*, but for the survival of the *patterns* that sustain us. Truth be told, for most individuals artmaking is not a pathway to the accumulation of great wealth. In fact, making art objects or arts events alone will rarely allow one to make a comfortable living for oneself or one's family. So once again I ask, why does art matter? In this issue of *Art Education*, it will become evident that art matters because it is a liminal act—simultaneously unfolding and fashioning gateway thresholds that lead us from where we are positioned now to the next plateau of development we would do well to collectively ascend to. When I was an art student at the High School of Art & Design in New York City, I also started writing poetry for the sole reason of addressing it to friends of mine who were down or struggling. I knew what it felt like to suffer in silence as an introverted and isolated teen, and when I saw someone else at risk of being swallowed in the emotional abyss I had barely escaped, I doubled back to revisit this turmoil artistically with the hope that I could help. I was intentionally practicing art as an empathic strategy and an altruistic exercise (Rolling, 2013).

In this issue of *Art Education*, artistic interventions matter. In response to a culture of desensitizing violence, **Alice Arnold** presents a commentary that looks to the arts as an alternate way to engage the senses in order to influence learners to behave together productively rather than enticing them to behave destructively. Because artistic interventions matter, **Benjamin Tellie** and **Josh Dracup** explore how art educators can create learning environments wherein students are empowered to identify and address bullying situations in schools through repurposed art materials, developing practical techniques and strategies for transforming thoughts and personal feelings about bullying into an aesthetic experience. Because artistic interventions matter, **Joseph Amorino** identifies means by which art educators can address the topic of aggressive behavior at its causal stages rather than as a response to observed symptoms (events of bullying and violence).

When artistic interventions matter, connections take place. Also in this issue, **Cindy Hasio** describes how empathy and caring are relevant to art education toward building both a sense of self and connected knowing in multiple contexts, for the mutual benefit of all involved. **Jethro Gillespie** describes the improvisational connections that occur in the wake of the TASK parties he invites his high school students to participate in to jumpstart their creative activity. TASK is the brainchild of contemporary artist Oliver Herring (2011), who defines a TASK event as an “open-ended, participatory structure” creating “almost unlimited opportunities for a group of people to interact with one another and their environment” (p. 6). **Bonnie Halsey-Dutton** similarly (re)introduces the adventure of creative risk-taking to preservice elementary teachers through an issues-based instructional unit that encourages students to risk stepping outside of their creative comfort zones. Finally, through **Sarah Ackermann's** Instructional Resource featuring the work of Toronto-based artist Alex Garant, we are initially reacquainted with the disequilibrium we feel must surely come with creative risk-taking. Yet the purpose of risk is not to lead us to disaster, but rather to open up the possibility of new responses that lead us to generate new and useful sense, just as we do with Garant's work although at first we might be dizzied.

In the interplay between creative risk and response, our responsibility also becomes clear. We become steeped again in playful connections, rewired into the gainful pursuit of “learning by behaving together,” each one contributing his or her surplus energies in order to benefit and build up the world we share. We intervene. This is why art matters. ■

—James Haywood Rolling Jr., Editor

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