

### THREE CERTAINTIES FOR AN INDETERMINATE PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY

**David Pariser**, professor  
Concordia University

It is good to see colleagues from UQÀM, and across La Belle Province once more. The Art Education Department and Concordia University are happy to host this colloque in collaboration with technical assistance from UQÀM. It's been a while since our last conference, and even though we are still meeting virtually, this is surely a step in the right direction: an opportunity to share ideas and to discuss our ongoing research as we have done on so many past occasions.

As the pandemic ebbs and flows and morphs from Pan- to En-demic we will be living in an ever more complex and uncertain natural and political world. For example, the mad Russian Tsar adds to the complexity and suffering of the human and natural world with his ongoing butchery in Ukraine. Let us hope that his plans will come to nothing in the face of Ukraine's fighting spirit and courage. As uncertainties both natural and social show no signs of abating, we must find certainties to help us cope. I suggest that rationality, civility, and the arts offer us some certainties as we navigate the inevitable turmoil ahead. I suggest three recent books that draw heavily on the three values I note above. Their authors will prove good companions for the way forward. The thread that unites these three books is a respect for and adherence to the exercise of reason, even when such an exercise has the odor of heresy about it.

Adam Gopnik (2019) offers a strong defense of the liberal mind-set. He staunchly defends traditional liberalism, descended from Locke and Mill, against its critics from both left and right. He presents us with many acute observations that offer a true and nuanced picture of the world. For example, here is his observation on the frustrated aims of both the American left and right, a situation quite similar to the Canadian:

...the... American situation (is one) in which the right wing wants cultural victories and gets nothing but political ones; while the left wing wants political victories and

gets only cultural ones. It is possible to see this as a massive distraction for progressive causes, in which the left manages to get sombreros banned from college parties while every federal court in the country is assigned a far-right-wing activist judge.” (p. 163)

John McWhorter (2021) is an African American author and Columbia Linguistics professor. He takes an even more heretical position than Gopnik by questioning what are accepted as progressive truths about racism. This writer offers a critique of what he refers to as “Woke Racism,” a phenomenon that McWhorter characterizes as an irrational embrace of what is essentially a religion and, as a such, not susceptible to any sort of rational counter-argument. One of his aims in the book is “...to argue that this new ideology is actually a religion in all but name, and that this explains why something so destructive and incoherent is so attractive to so many good people” (McWhorter, 2021, p. 9). Please note the descriptor “incoherent.” There is no logic to the position taken by the people he refers to as “the Elect,” who are the high priests of this religion. McWhorter also offers a list of ten “woke” positions on race and the incoherent actions that are prescribed (pp. 8-9). Thus, there is the fourth commandment addressed to white people, which states, “You can never understand what it is to be black, and if you think you do, you’re a racist” (p 8). So, damned if you do, damned if you don’t. In his discussion of removing statues of Southern Civil War soldiers from public spaces, McWhorter offers comments that are directly relevant to an ongoing debate in the art education literature and in wider cultural spheres as well. He notes that removing monuments to individuals who do not share our contemporary beliefs is tricky and often illogical. He states, “To be Elect is to insist that figures in the past might as well be living now, and that they thus merit the judgments we level upon present-day people, who inhabit a context unknown to those who lived before” (p. 136). Thus, McWhorter uses this argument as a way of defending Lincoln against erasure as a racist, because, in sum, he was a radically progressive president, in spite of his racist flaws.

You may ask what these two authors dealing with political and social issues have to offer art educators. The answer is that the very issues considered by Gopnik and

McWhorter are integral to many of the present debates in art education on both sides of the American border. Which brings us to Winner's (2022) brief and engaging history of American art education and her insistence on the intrinsic value of the visual arts. Winner encourages art teaching that addresses social justice issues, but her main emphasis is on rescuing the arts from their traditional role as handmaiden to a host of other more highly prized disciplines and economic goals. Winner covers the shift in art education goals from training craftspeople for industry to understanding the arts under Dewey's and Lowenfeld's influences as sources of cognitive and emotional engagement and self-expression. In more recent years, she notes the impact of critical and postmodern philosophical pedagogical inspirations resulting in the politicization of some art educational approaches. She notes the field's long-standing vacillation between laissez-faire or child-centered instruction versus more top-down approaches, as illustrated in China. For her, the ideal approach to teaching the arts and integrating it with other disciplines is best illustrated in the Reggio Emilia curriculum. This is the educational gold standard against which she measures most other art education curricula.

Winner's historical discussion culminates in her questioning the truth of a matter taken on faith during the late 20th century and well into the 21st, that is, the connection between studying the visual arts and good performance in other academic subjects. Over a long period, art education advocates have made this claim with no empirical evidence to support it. Winner offers two strong reasons for questioning the claim that those who study art will also do well in other academic subjects. First, she says, the practice of justifying the study of art because it leads to high academic performance is a short-sighted strategy that may well result in discarding the teaching of the arts entirely. The arts should be taught for their special qualities, virtues, history, and practice, all of which are unique and of great value. There are far more effective ways of training mathematicians, historians, or biologists than sending them to studio classes. And second, Winner makes a telling empirical point: she produces empirical evidence that there is no basis for the claim that art classes help people do better in academic subjects. She and a group of researchers performed a meta-analytic study that combined the results of some 20+ research studies that looked at the precise question: "Do students who take art do better in other academic

subjects than those who do not?” Winner reports that her study showed that there was simply no evidence for the positive effect of art study on the performance of art students in their other academic disciplines. When she made these results public, the response from some in the art education field was disturbing. Most respondents were annoyed that her results did not support their a priori notions of the good effects of art education on academic performance. And in one case, a senior academic told Winner and her researchers not to publish their results as they would be harmful to the field. Suppressing these results was a shocking suggestion. But given the current political climate, the suggestion was not altogether surprising.

As a result of the way in which her research was received, Winner decided that she would look more closely at the cognitive component of studio classes offered by talented studio teachers. In her book she reports on the results of her study. She notes that based on her observations, there is in fact evidence that real cognitive skills are involved in well-taught studio classes. The results of these observational studies are offered in two recent books by Hetland et al. (2007, 2013). These studio “habits of mind”—as they are called—may well be useful in other academic subjects. But, at this point the connection is an open question. Regardless of this possible connection, Winner insists that it is important to understand that the real value of studio classes is that they offer an introduction to the unique world of the visual arts, one that must be valued for its own sake. Winner ends her book with a heartfelt statement that sums up her commitment to visual art as something that is *sui generis*. She concludes:

...The arts in all their forms are a way of representing and thereby understanding our deepest experiences—love and loss, birth and death, childhood and old age, benevolence and injustice. ...It is my hope that the visual arts (and all of the arts) can give up their positions as uneasy guests in the house of education and become fully welcome, permanent residents. (Winner, 2022, p. 168)

So, there we have it. I recommend all three of these authors for your summer reading and hope that you will consider their reasonable and reasoned critiques of the cultural turmoil we inhabit at the moment.

## References

Gopnik, A. (2019). *A thousand small sanities. The moral adventure of liberalism*. Basic Books.

Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema S., & Sheridan, K. (2007). *Studio thinking: The real benefits of visual arts education*. Teachers College Press.

Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema S., & Sheridan, K. (2013). *Studio thinking 2: The real benefits of visual arts education (2nd ed.)*. Teachers College Press.

McWhorter, J. (2021). *Woke racism: How a new religion has betrayed Black America*. Penguin, Random House.

Winner, E. (2022). *An uneasy guest in the schoolhouse: Art education from colonial times to a promising future*. Oxford University Press.