

KAPITTEL 1

Art keeps us in and with the World: Gert Biesta in Conversation with Lisbet Skregelid

Gert J. J. Biesta

Maynooth University/ University of Edinburgh/ University of Agder

Lisbet Skregelid

University of Agder

Abstract: This chapter is a conversation between Lisbet Skregelid and Gert J. J. Biesta. The point of departures are texts by Biesta that touch upon issues related to art and art education. In the conversation, Biesta tells about his concerns and worries about art and also education disappearing from art education. He refers to how art in education tend to be justified because of its usefulness for something else, and also how art sometimes becomes both too child – and student-centered focusing on expression and emergence and also too curriculum centered. Biesta proposes a world centered education that is holding the child in what he calls the middle ground as a place where human existence in and with the world can take place. He argues that art can offer qualities of interruption, of suspension and sustenance, thereby demonstrating the educative power of the arts.

Keywords: world centered education, middle ground, interruption, suspension, sustenance

Lisbet Skregelid (LS): *The title of this book is Kunstens betydning? Utvidede perspektiver på kunst og barn & unge [The Relevance of Art? Extended Perspectives on Art and Young People]. The title refers to all the agendas that art is expected to address, especially when it comes to young people in educational contexts. In the text “What if? Art education beyond expression and creativity” (2018), you raise some concerns about what is*

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asked from art to bring about. Can you tell us a little bit about these concerns? What are your worries?

Gert Biesta (GB): In the chapter I mention that nowadays there is quite a lot of attention for the arts in educational circles. This is partly the result of all the work artists and art educators have done over the past decades to ensure that the arts have a place on the curriculum. And one could say that in a sense the attention for the arts shows that their efforts have been quite successful. It is also the result of concerns amongst educators and parts of society, including politicians, that the “diet” of contemporary schools has become too narrow – too much focused on the so-called “basics” (I will come back to the question of what should be considered as “basic” in education) and on measurable learning outcomes in a small number of areas (usually language, science and mathematics) – and that the arts are needed in order to broaden and rebalance the curriculum.

So, there is a definitely something positive happening, but any claim to a place on the school curriculum always raises the question of justification, and here I have some serious concerns. One discourse I have seen emerging – and in some countries it seems to have become the only discourse – is that the arts should be on the curriculum because they are *useful*. And the usefulness of the arts is then argued for with arguments such as “playing music will make you better at algebra, dance will make you better at geometry, the fine arts will make you better at science and technology, theatre will improve your self-regulation skills,” and so on.

What is also worrying is that many of these arguments are made “via” the brain, so to speak, claiming that in some way engagement with the arts does something with the child’s brain and that what the arts “do” with the brain is useful for what the brain then needs to do for the curricular “basics.” I put it in these terms, because I find this line of argument rather ridiculous, as if a classroom is just a set of brains that are processing information in order to produce learning outcomes that can be measured and put into league tables. The problem, as you will understand, is that in such a story there is literally *no one*.

One main problem with such justifications for the arts in education is that they do not really care about the arts themselves. After all, if the only reason for having the arts on the curriculum is because they are useful

for those areas that apparently really “count,” the arts can be taken off the curriculum as soon as there are other (which usually means: cheaper) ways found for producing the same outcomes. And just to clarify: I think that the language of “producing outcomes” is a very uneducational language, so I am using it here to highlight that it is actually a problem to think about education in terms of production and outcomes. So the problem with all these instrumental justifications for the arts in education is that they are actually not justifying the arts themselves, but only what the arts are alleged able to “produce,” and it is for this reason that I refer to this as a disappearance of the arts from arts education, by which I mean to highlight that the whole discussion is actually not about the arts but about something “else.” And this also shows, of course, the hierarchies at work, as the something “else” that the arts are supposedly to be useful for, are given a higher status than the arts themselves.

In more philosophical terms we might say that the whole discussion about the usefulness of the arts in education amounts to what is called a “category mistake,” that is, it uses a “logic,” a way of reasoning, that actually is inappropriate for the “category” we are talking about. The point here is that when we talk about the usefulness of the arts for generating particular educational “outcomes,” we are assuming that education is a kind of “production line” aimed at the production of certain *things* – and the fact that so much talk in education is about “outcomes,” as if they were things, shows what is going on here. But someone who has received education is not a thing that has been produced. The British educational philosopher Richard Peters has put the issue nicely by saying that to be educated is not to have arrived at a destination but to be travelling with a different outlook. So with regard to education we should not be asking what education *makes*, that is, what it produces, but about what it *makes possible*. And we could see it as our main task as educators to open up different “existential possibilities” for our students – different ways in which they can exist, meet the world, and meet themselves in relation to the world. Let’s come back to this point as well.

LS: *In addition to concerns about the disappearance of the arts from arts education, you also discuss the disappearance of education from arts education. Can you say a bit more about that?*

GB: Yes, this is an important point as well – a point I tried to express with the “what if?” – question in the title of the chapter. What I have in mind here, is another discourse about the arts and education, one in which it is indeed acknowledged that contemporary education has a far too narrow and restricted view about what schools should focus on – the obsession with producing measurable outcomes in language, science and mathematics – and where it is also acknowledged that this is to the detriment of the children and young people who populate our schools. The concern here is that in such a set up, children and young people can only exist as objects of all kinds of educational “interventions” – another problematic term in the contemporary educational vocabulary – and not as subjects in their own right: as human beings who are trying to figure out what this world is, what this life is, and what they are supposed to be doing here. (These questions may sound strange, but for me go to the heart of education – let’s come back to that too.)

Out of such concerns – concerns that there is no place for students to have a voice, let alone to have their own voice – the arts are brought in, so to speak, on the assumption that they have a unique capacity for allowing children and young people to express their own voice, to articulate their own identity, to make their own sense, to generate their own meaning, and, in all this, to be creative. Yet in doing so, an important question is forgotten as well, and I would argue that this is the key educational question. In response to all arguments for “expressivism” and for positioning the arts on the creative and expressivist end of the spectrum, we, as educators, should always ask the “what if?”-question. We should always ask: “What if the voice that speaks is racist?” or “What if the creativity that emerges is destructive?” or “What if the identity that articulates itself is only interested in itself?” and so on.

I am calling these questions educational questions, because the point of education is neither to suppress expression – that would be authoritarianism or education as a form of pure control – but also not to let expression just emerge, on the (mistaken) assumption – which we might call educational romanticism or political populism – that anything that emerges, *because* it comes from the child, simply has to be accepted. The educational work is rather to bring what emerges, what seeks to express itself, into dialogue with the world, in order to figure out, to put it simply,

what is emerging that is going to help or hinder the child or student in living their life well, with others, on a planet which has limited capacity for “carrying” everything that may emerge as an initiative or desire from the new generation. This is why education can neither be curriculum-centered – seeing the curriculum as the be-all and end-all of education and seeing education as getting the curriculum into the student – nor can it be child- or student-centered – that is, just focusing on expression and emergence. Education, by necessity, has to be world-centered, so I wish to argue, and this is the main reason why expressivist justifications for arts education and expressivist practices of arts education run the risk – or even amount to – the disappearance of education from arts education.

LS: *How do you see these concerns connected to the current socio-political situation?*

GB: That’s quite a “big” question, of course, but let me try. You may have noticed that in my concerns about expressivism I not only referred to educational romanticism but also to political populism. I think that one quite prominent aspect of the current socio-political situation is precisely what can be called populism, where I would see populism as the idea that any voice “counts,” so to speak, simply because it is someone’s voice. When you come to this claim from a history of suppression, exclusion, and discrimination, that is, a history in which some voices and identities were actively being silenced, it is rather obvious that the claim to a voice is a liberating claim or, if we put it in more educational terms, that such a claim is an emancipatory claim. But for a voice to be a voice it needs to be heard as well, so we might say. Pure voice – voice that just emerges – is not voice at all; voice needs to “arrive” in the world. Here, and I this see this as the profound insight I took from the work of Hannah Arendt, it will meet other voices who are not just there to listen, but who want to speak as well. And precisely this, so we might say, is the predicament of our human existence: that we are not alone in this world, and that the encounter with others, but also the encounter with the materiality of the planet, puts limits and limitations on us. The idea of pure voice, of 100% uninterrupted expression, so to speak, is therefore a rather dangerous myth. We could also call it a fantasy.

I think, however, that our socio-political situation is full of this fantasy, so we might say. At least I see many examples of the pursuit of pure voice, so to speak, and, at the very same time, I see many examples of a denial of limits and limitations. The latter is particularly clear in our ecological crisis, where for far too long the planet has just been approached as a resource, as a kind of shop we can walk into and just take what we want, without any concern for the longer-term consequences of such behaviour. We are now in the middle of those consequences – think of the climate crisis, think of food poverty, think of the pandemic – which reveals that they were not as long-term as some may have hoped for. The same is going on with populism and in my view quite a lot of problems we currently are facing with identity politics which, in my view, manifests itself in the claim that anyone should have the right to their own identity and should be able to pursue this right for 100%, are related to this. They all stem from the assumption that a voice, because it is someone's voice, or an identity because it is someone's identity, has to be accepted, without limits. But that is precisely *not* the “project” of democracy, which is never about the will of the people or the will of the majority, but has to be about the democratic will of the people or the democratic will of the majority.

The critical difference here is that a democratic will of the people is a will that is always “filtered,” so we might say, by the values of liberty and equality – and those values always exist in tension with each other. Whereas populism – and identity politics where it articulates itself as the desire for a pure identity – only tends to focus on liberty, the whole point of democracy is that it makes the case that any claim for one's own liberty has to come with a concern for the liberty of everyone else, which is precisely what the idea of “equality” brings to the mix. Democracy, as the attempt to exist together in plurality, thus puts limits and limitations on the liberty of everyone – and those limits particularly come into view when the claim to liberty of one individual or group would undermine the possibility for others to have their claim to liberty “on the table” as well.

So we might say that the main problem of our times is insufficient “attention,” if that's the right word, for limits and limitations – and this

problem shows itself both in our engagement with the living world and in our engagement with others. These are, of course, big social and political issues, but as an educator I also think that these are educational issues. I have already used the word “fantasy,” and one could say – and here I think Freud has provided some crucial insights – that one of the challenges of growing up is to come to terms with the fact that the world “outside” of us is what it is, so to speak. And while we may not always like that, and would prefer to stay within our ideas about how we would want the world to be, it is the coming to terms with the reality of the world that pulls us out of our phantasies. Growing up, trying to live one’s life in a grown-up way, is therefore precisely about coming to terms with the fact that the world outside of us is often not how we would want it to be. This acknowledgement does not mean that we should resign and simply accept the world as it is. But it is to always acknowledge that the world, the material world, the living world, the social world is real, and that there is some negotiation to be done, some give and take, so we might say.

I have already mentioned the ecological crisis as one manifestation of this problem. Populism is another manifestation. The “case” of Trump also fits in this picture, and one could say that the sadness of this case, but also of course the scandal of it all, is that Trump seems to be unable to engage with what is real and just keeps repeating his own fantasies about how the world should be, rather than coming to terms with how the world is. The phrase “baby in the White House” captures this really well. And I tend to think that where the struggle for identity becomes problematic – I am not saying that this struggle is problematic in itself – is when it aims for pure identity, because such a state of pure identity is only possible through the destruction of all other identities (which is the lesson we should have learned from the genocides of the 20th century, but may already have forgotten).

LS: *And how does this work out in the field of education?*

GB: Perhaps one manifestation of this tendency is the desire to make education “perfect.” This is what I see behind much education policy that seeks to make education not just more effective and efficient, but also does so with regard to this small set of measurable learning outcomes.

These all display tendencies of wanting to control education and I think what I have tried to say so far is that if in education we aim for total control over our students, we no longer are within the realm of education but have moved into the realm of indoctrination of even brainwashing. Now one problem is that many efforts that focus on the “performance” of education – making sure, for example, that all students achieve highly on a number of “indicators” – do so with reference to a social justice argument in which it is claimed that we should ensure that all children and young people have the same chance at “success.” This argument, in itself, is difficult to contest, but where it becomes problematic is when we look at what “success” actually means or, more precisely, how “success” becomes operationalised. This is one of the worries I have about this reference to the “basics,” because the basics that are often called basic – language, science, and mathematics – are perhaps not the basics that we should focus on. After all, should we really be content if we have made sure that all children and young people are excellent in language, science, and mathematics, but if none of them had ever heard of, let alone taken an interest in, peaceful, democratic, and sustainable co-existence?

LS: *The arts are neglected in school and society. How to claim the importance of art without undermining the arts’ own integrity?*

GB: It’s relevant that you use the word “importance” here, which is indeed a very different notion that what is focused on in the idea that art should be useful. Or to put it differently: If the only answer we could give to the question of the importance of the arts would be by talking about its usefulness, we would, as we’ve just explored, not really be talking about the arts. Having said this, it is of course quite difficult to say much about the importance of the arts themselves without referring to something “beyond” art, but nonetheless, that is indeed the challenge if we want to counter the ongoing instrumentalization of the arts, in education but also in relation to other domains, I think.

I am inclined to say that what I see many artists doing in all kinds of ways is figuring out what it means to exist “in and with the world,” to use that phrase. Artists are in some way engaging with the question of what

it means to be human or, in less theoretical and general terms: what it means to exist as human being. That is quite a fundamental question, and also quite an open question, and one could argue that it's an impossible question if, that is, we think that there is some kind of final answer to be given to it. But if we give up on the idea that there is a final answer to the question of being human, it is still possible to explore what we might call "the human condition," that is, the many dimensions, manifestations and facets of what it is to live one's life – and whereas in education I might be inclined to add "and to live one's life well," I would be entirely happy for the arts to look at all dimensions of this question, perhaps because in order to figure out what it might mean to live one's life well, we also need to go to the limits of that question – the limits of life, the limits of not living one's life well, and so on.

Now I am happy to concede that all human beings can be engaged with these questions – with is perhaps one way to understanding the suggestion from Joseph Beuys that everyone is an artist – but I do think that artists are in some way working on this question in a more intense way, and perhaps a more explicit way. What also distinguishes art is that art always has a medium, and, in light of what we have spoken about so far, I would say that art always has a *worldly* medium: sound, paint, stone, time, words, tone, rhythm, movement, and so on. This medium is never just a means for expressing particular ideas or views or imaginations. The medium is literally "in the middle," because just as the medium makes it possible to give form to some thoughts or ideas or desires, the medium also has an integrity of its own. So already in working with a "medium," artists are stepping into the dialogue with the world outside of them. In art – perhaps I should say good art, but I'm not sure – the medium also has a voice, also has something to say, which means that the artist can never claim to be in total control of the medium. The medium is, in other words, not a means, not an instrument, but matters.

So while it remains difficult to articulate the importance of the arts, I am inclined to say that many artists, and perhaps all artists – can we say "all good artists?" I'm not sure – are in all kinds of ways figuring out what it means to live, to exist, in the here and now, in and with the world. They keep the question alive, which is tremendously important, particularly

in times where there are so many distractions that we become forgetful about the very question of our existence – times where we become anaesthetised, so we might say. But they also keep the answers “alive,” they keep looking for new and different answers, never completely satisfied with settling on an answer – and this is tremendously important as well, as so often things go wrong when people claim to have found “the answer” to life’s question and tell other people just to believe and follow them. The arts, so we might say, keep us in and with the world, and keep us awake in being there.

If we look at the arts in this way, we can say that anyone who questions why we should have the arts – let alone invest in the arts – is probably questioning the idea that we should keep the question of our human existence open and alive, should be wary of any attempts at resolving the question or settling on one “final” answer, and is probably also questioning the importance for us human beings to stay awake. The enemies of the arts probably would like us all to be in a state of slumber!

LS: *In both the article and in the book Letting Art Teach (2017), you launch some ideas about the educative power of the arts and what art can do. Can you say something about this and what conditions are needed in order for this power to be realised?*

GB: Educative power is not bad as a phrase, although there is always a risk that when we talk about the arts and education we slip into instrumental thinking again. I tend to think that the arts are relevant for education – which is different from saying that they are useful for education – because the arts themselves have the existential question, the question of what it means to exist in and with the world, as their central concern. And for me, this is also the central concern for education. So rather than putting the arts “back” into an instrumental position vis-à-vis education, I think we can gain strength from each other by acknowledging our common concern, even if we “engage” with this concern in our own distinctive ways.

In my own work I have looked at our encounter with the world “outside” of us from the perspective of our actions and initiatives and the desires that are “expressed” in our initiatives. When we act, when we take initiative, we do so from a more or less clearly defined idea of something

we might want to do or achieve or obtain. This is always a step “into” the world, and while there are many situations where the world – the material world, the living world, the social world – may “go along” with our initiatives and desires, we may, at some point, encounter resistance. The experience of resistance is, of course, tremendously important – I have already hinted at this – because it means that we encounter something that is real, that exists on its own, that is not a construction or fantasy. While this encounter is important, it can also be frustrating, particularly from the perspective of our own initiatives and desires. Out of this frustration we may start pushing harder in order to subject what we encounter to our will. While it is sometimes really important to push so that we can achieve something, there is always the danger that we push too hard – and what “too hard” is, is something we will never entirely know in advance. When we really push too hard, we run the risk of destroying the very world, the very reality, we want to enter into dialogue with. We run the risk of what I have referred to as “world-destruction.”

But the frustration can also pull in another direction, that is, that we step back from the world because the reality we meet there is too difficult, too frustrating, not worth the effort, and so on. Sometimes this is of crucial importance – stepping back so that what and who is other gains space for its own existence. But if we step back entirely, if we withdraw completely, we end up in another problematic extreme, which I have referred to as “self-destruction.” This begins to suggest that our existence in and with the world, which we could characterise as our human condition, takes place somewhere in the difficult and precarious “middle ground” between world-destruction – pushing far too hard – and self-destruction, withdrawing from the encounter. This can be a difficult place to be; it is, at least, not necessarily an easy or pleasant place. But this is the very place where our human existence in and with the world *takes place*.

I would say that this gives us a vocabulary for education because it suggests that the educational work is about “holding” our students in this difficult middle ground – a middle ground where they can meet the world and can meet themselves in relation to the world. The educational work is about “holding” our students in the middle ground where they can encounter the difference between “fantasy” and “reality,” or, in more

practical terms, between their desires and what is literally desirable, that is, what can be pursued as a desire in light of the encounter with the world in which such desires, and their consequences, can become real.

This way of looking at education suggests that education is not about designing smooth, personalised learning trajectories that rush students swiftly towards the production of measurable learning outcomes. It rather suggests that education, if it takes the existential challenge seriously, has an interruptive quality as it seeks to “stage” an encounter between students and reality, to put it in very broad terms. Meeting reality – for example the material reality of clay or paint or sound, or the conceptual reality of ideas, formulas and laws, or the living reality of plants and animals, or the social reality of other human beings – can be a source of joy and energy but can also contain a degree of frustration. Rather than letting such frustration run its course – which would amount to setting our students on the path of world-destruction or self-destruction – the work of education is to give students time and provide them with forms that allow them to work “through” the frustration. And keeping them in that “space,” also requires that we provide them with sustenance rather than leaving them to their own devices.

Perhaps the quickest way to show the educative power of the arts, is to say that the qualities of interruption (the encounter with something that is real), of suspension (of slowing down so that there is time to really meet what is other and work through the complexities and possible frustration of such meeting), and sustenance (providing the nourishment and support for holding our students in that place) are to a large extent the qualities that the arts can offer. Art – and I am inclined to say: good art – interrupts; it is never entirely smooth. Good art slows down, it asks attention but also allows for attention, and provides concrete forms for encounter and transformation. And good order can also provide sustenance; it can provide pleasure and joy as well.

This is quite a long answer, but I think the detail matters if we want to figure out how the arts can enhance the existential work of education.

LS: *In our recent dialogues we have been discussing the notion of “insistence of practice.” How do you see this insistence taking place in art education?*

GB: That is, again, quite a big topic. Perhaps a “quick” response here would be to connect it to the importance of meeting what is real, precisely because when we encounter something that is real – that is not constructed by us, not controlled by us and thus interrupts any phantasies we may have about it – that we are not just faced with the question how to “handle” such a situation, but that actually an altogether different question “breaks through,” namely the question: “What is this asking from me?” If we really are able to encounter a reality “outside” of ourselves – which can be quite difficult, because so often we already project our ideas on what we encounter – we thus encounter something that insists, that asks something from us and that, in doing so, in a sense pulls us into the world as well.

It is along these lines that we can then also begin to ask – and here the path of artists and of educators should diverge – what the particular practices in and “through” which we work are actually asking from us. What, in other words, the insistence of the arts and the insistence of education is, bearing in mind, as I have tried to say, that there is definitely a strong degree of synergy between the two. Looking at our work, as educators and artists, in this way, can be helpful to free ourselves from our own fantasies and desires, that is, from all the things we would like to do and would like to see happen in our artistic and educational endeavours but that may actually keep us away from what art and education are asking from us. I don’t have final answers to the question what the particular insistence of the arts and the particular insistence of education are, though as an educator I am inclined to think that the insistence of education can never be to gain control over those we educate. The insistence we encounter, I think, is always one of emancipation – of ensuring that our students can exist as subjects in their own right, in and with the world, and not as objects of our agenda’s, desires or phantasies. And perhaps this is similar in the arts, where the works of art we try to bring into the world should never been seen as *our* works of art, as things we can possess and control. That is “Frankenstein art” which, as you will probably see, is as dangerous and problematic as “Frankenstein education.”

LS: *You have just published the book World-Centered Education: A View for the Present (2021). You call this approach an existential orientation to education. Can you tell a little bit about how you see this book relating to your texts on art?*

GB: Putting the world in the center of education is, as I have already alluded, first of all important in order to break away from the ongoing “back and forth” of child-centered or curriculum-centered education. While we need children and curricula, to put it crudely, neither the child nor the curriculum constitutes the “point” of education, as all education should ultimately be concerned about how we can encourage children to step into the world and take up the challenge of living their life with others and trying to do so well. This is, as I have tried to make clear, not a matter of just doing what you want to do, but is about encountering reality – reality that in all its forms makes our existence possible, but also puts limits and limitations on what we might want from life. Working through this difficulty so that we manage to stay in this mysterious, difficult but also wonderful “middle ground” – which is what it means to exist in the world, not above, outside, or beyond it – is the central task for all education worthy of its name and it is in this task that the roads of education and the arts cross. And it is at this crossing point that the arts and education can work together, can enhance each in their common interest in and concern for our “worldly” existence as human beings.

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