

## 04 When Art becomes the Artist...



**Srivi Kalyan**

### Notes on the Sky Self

*If we move beyond the limited worlds of assessment, employment and success, we will be ready to create art programmes that revolutionise the identity of each child.*

Why do schools need art? But the other more serious, yet absurd, question is ‘What is really art?’ I like the absurdity of it. I went around asking friends and students what they thought art was. We had some really amazing conversations. All of us were confused and also rather excited trying to figure out this expanding universe of the arts.

‘My Art is my life’ said Mir Mukhtiyar Ali. ‘Physicists, mathematicians, sociologists, historians, craftsmen, and of course artists in the conventional sense - everyone seems to be an artist’ said I. ‘How does a blind child see art?’ asked Nancy Raj. ‘Colours soak into the paper’ said another friend, Jigeesha. Her words triggered an essential link in my mind about art as product and art as process. I asked myself a series of questions:

1. Is art the product or the process?
2. When does the process become the product?
3. And what really is the product of art - the work of art or the artist himself?

### Expanding our definitions of the Arts

“As I begin to paint, hold the sky in your hands; as the stretch of my canvas is unknown to me.”  
– M.F. Hussain

As teachers, parents, artists or viewers how do we define the arts? Our definitions characterise how we experience them, teach them or validate their neces-

sity in our everyday lives. We often come with preconceived notions about what we call as ‘proper art’, ‘good art’ and ‘bad art’. Further, we are also limited in our understanding of what art is? Is drawing mehendi design art or should we create a realistic painting? Is folk music sung by a fruit seller art or is art what is performed on a stage? Does the word include all forms of art, or is it just the classical arts like painting, sculpture, dance and theatre. Is craft also art? Simple yet profound questions plague our understanding of the arts we encounter every day.

Based on our preconceptions, we often create an environment where the arts cannot flourish, because they have been condemned before they were created. We have put ourselves into boxes like “artist”, “scientist”, “physicist”, “teacher”, “parent”. The moment we counter something that doesn’t quite fit into a box, we scramble, and try very hard to fit it in. From the elephant stuck in a cage to a child sitting quietly in a classroom, anything that doesn’t fit into a box seems like an aberration to us. But isn’t the box itself the aberration!

*Neither art nor science could flourish if it did not give satisfaction, or if satisfaction were the only aim. Constable urged that painting is a science, and I suggest that science is a humanity. Putting them in opposition misconceives and hurts both. - Nelson Goodman*



### Reflect and Experiment

*Take different kinds of paper - newspaper, used paper, paper with different grains and drop ink on it. If you have access to water-colours or coloured inks and a brush, try adding different amounts of water and paint on the paper. Do this exercise with children as well. Here are some questions that you can reflect on together.*

*What happens when colour soaks into paper? What can we really expect?*

*When do the colours really stop soaking into the paper; When the inks dry or when the paper ages; When the writer writes into it or when the silverfish make it their own? When it becomes a work of art or when the paper begins to crack into a million pieces? When it is framed or when it is viewed?*

By expecting children to create a realistic drawing, or repeat music without building a personal connection to the notes, we are taking away from them the ability to soak into the arts, or undergo the process of artistic evolution. Without allowing experimentation and discovery, we are also taking away the interdisciplinary nature of understanding, by expecting them to remain in one frame while understanding a subject. There may be mathematicians who are brilliant artists, who find no way to explore their innate understanding of either subject. In the process of teaching, we are probably stunting their growth, because we do not understand how their cognition of either subject works.

### Expanding our definitions of our Selves

*Practice, perception, and the several arts are equally ways of gaining insight and understanding. The*

*naive notion that science seeks truth, while art seeks beauty, is wrong on many counts. Science seeks relevant, significant, illuminating principles, often setting aside trivial or overcomplicated truths in favor of powerful unifying approximations. And art, like science, provides a grasp of new affinities and contrasts, cuts across worn categories to yield new organization, new visions of the worlds we live in.*  
- Nelson Goodman

Art is much more than the product that it becomes, be it performance art or visual art. Art and artist evolve seamlessly through the artistic processes they undergo. Their journey adds to the multiple dimensions of the subtle mystic self as well as the political and social self in relationship with the world. Both as voice and language, the arts permeate human society and are critical to the perceptions we build of ourselves. In this essay, using the lens of four selves, let's look at how we can build a new case for the arts in our schools.

### The Subtle Self

*"The search for the meaning of life and of the self in life is born with the child and is desired by the child".*  
- Carla Rinaldi

The arts provide us with road maps to our subtle self. When we experience art or create art, there are several internal journeys that we begin taking. Sometimes a swirl of colour evokes a meditative silence. At other times a raga, a note, an artist's voice, the dancer's construction of space and many other forms of art lead us into paths that resonate with a greater spirit that encompasses all of life. Sometimes looking through the microscope, looking through the macro lens of a camera opens up this world. We are suddenly removed from what we can comfortably explain as 'reality' to many subtle realities that exist beyond our consciousness.

*“I was all alone on the beach looking for pictures, when suddenly it happened. As dimensions of time and space vanished, I slowly dissolved in the fathomless blue. Something confined within the narrow shell of my mind and body was hurled into a whirlpool of ecstasy” - Ashvin Mehta*

### Challenge

*Using observation, interpretation and empathy to understand the subtle self*

*Simple activities like looking at a leaf and drawing it can open a subtle world. Nurture the child's innate curiosity while giving them this exercise.*

- *How closely can you look at a leaf?*
- *How many things can your naked eye see?*
- *What more can you see under the microscope?*
- *Can we look at a leaf through an ant's eye!*
- *Let's try drawing pictures of both.*
- *Talk about how you felt when you looked at the leaf. How do you think the leaf might have felt when you looked at it?*

*Open-ended questions that challenge both their emotional and cognitive understandings can challenge their viewpoints providing new ways to understand and experience their world.*

This subtle self is important for us to evolve as human beings, and discover compassion within ourselves. It also creates space in the mind, allowing us to create anew. So, how can we educate the subtle self? Can we create a space in our classrooms that allows for this quest for the self, through aesthetics as well as cognition?

### The Social Self

*The grass seeks her crowd in the earth. The tree seeks his solitude of the sky. - Rabindranath Tagore*

Each of us is simultaneously in a web of relationships. There is complexity and simplicity in each relationship we make during the course of our lives, be it with other human beings or with nature, objects or abstract ideas. Our relationships at once encompass feelings, reasoning, deep emotions, discoveries, practice, learning, conflicts and resolutions.

Expanding awareness about the intricate tapestry of this social self can help children rediscover themselves at every turn in their lives.

### Explore together

*Using abstraction, comparison and interaction to understand the social self*

*Ask children to create music with simple everyday objects around them. Ask them to listen carefully and hear how each note is interacting with the things around them.*

*Ask them to start using their bodies to make more sounds. Encourage them to reflect on how sounds interact with their minds and hearts.*

*Map the pathways in which the sounds travelled on the board. Talk to them about dimensions, atoms, metaphors.*

*Ask each child to draw this experience or write about this experience. Then gently suggest that they can create another drawing imagining all the people and creatures in their life are sounds. Watch for the interesting connections they start making about relationships and the fine art of living.*



## The Political Self

*“Little one, don’t be afraid of this dark night. Walk boldly as you see the truth and light. Love well, my child, laugh all day long, But do not take from any man his song.” - Ruskin Bond, Rain in the mountains*

**Create together:** Using reflection, compassion and research to understand the political self

*Ask children to write a play together that takes into account some of their differences and some of their similarities. Ask them to imagine that they are all different creatures. They have all come together to set up a school. What kind of a school will they create together? Ask each team to deliberate on a different problem. One team could work with architecture, another team could work with teaching methods, yet another team could work with policies and governance.*

*Even very young children in first and second grades can have simple yet profound thoughts on a topic like this.*

Every child is also constantly building an identity for herself that is political in nature. Gender, community, culture, religion, nationality, globalisation, media – each of these impose a political self on the child. Construction of the political self is a tough challenge for it takes into account history, interpretation of past, present and future. Even something as straightforward as drawing a tree can have so many influences of our unconscious political self. Engaging the child in thoughtful creation of art, writing or reflection by carefully considering the elements that constitute his thinking is important to construct a compassionate and meaningful political self.

## The Sky Self

*In the wild wet wind jasmines revel in their own perfume. The cloud-hidden stars thrill in secret.*

*Let me fill my heart to the full with nothing but my own depth of joy. - Rabindranath Tagore*

What if our self was not limited to our accepted notions! What if it was a sky self, what voice would it have? What colours would it be made of? The sky in the sky-self is just a metaphor for an unknown expanse. The sky-self can be an adventurous and powerful companion that allows a child to evolve and discover her potential without feeling limited.

Our definitions limit our ideas about ourselves. A group of 8, 9 and 10 year olds did a writing exercise on the topic –“If I am me, who am I?” From being human beings with two hands, face, nose, ears, girl or boy, we suddenly opened up and became as large as the universe, as tiny as ants. We started making noises of animals; we burst into ecstatic declarations of how many different things we could be. We discovered that when we feel different emotions we may have different heads. We suddenly found malleability, flexibility to our bodies and minds. It was an exercise in empathy for oneself. Children have

**Choreograph:** Using imagination, space, and exploration to understand the sky self

*Suggest to children that they could be sky-people for the day. Ask them to walk around the school, dance together, whisper or shout as sky people would.*

*Work in teams for each group to explore strange objects, planets and challenges they might encounter in space, by dancing around them, through them, above or below them.*

*Choreograph a dance piece titled “Sky-self” with your students. Ask them how big it is, how many things it can hold, what kind of music they associate with it and why? Each of these explorations will lead to opening up their minds and bodies to a new way of living.*



become so tuned to learning to please their parents or their teachers, getting good marks in their exams, being imaginative and creative inside a box that limits them, that just reaching into their own self becomes impossible.

*“Nature uses only the longest threads to weave her patterns, so each small piece of her fabric reveals the organisation of the entire tapestry.” - Richard P. Feynman*

Each child reveals a mystery of humanity. Nurturing each child to see how he or she reveals this magnificent tapestry of life is a challenge that teachers, parents and schools face. In the arts, children get many strategies, approaches, ideas and paths to discover this for themselves. However, for such discoveries to happen, our approach to the arts must embrace their interdisciplinary nature at one level. At another level,



we need to open our eyes and see that the artistic processes are also cognitive in nature. They challenge, teach and nurture our thinking and help us evolve in several dimensions. If we move beyond the limited worlds of assessment, employment and success, we will be ready to create art programmes that revolutionise the identity of each child.

**I leave you to ponder over the questions:**

1. What is art?
2. Is art the product or the process?
3. When does the process become the product?
4. And what really is the product of art- the work of art or the artist herself?



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