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Why the Arts Don't Do Anything: Toward a New Vision for Cultural Production in Education

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In this essay Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández uses a discursive approach to argue that mainstream arts in education scholarship and advocacy construes “the arts” as a definable naturalistic phenomenon that exists in the world and is available to be observed and measured. In the course of his analysis, he examines how this construction is employed through what he calls the rhetoric of effects as part of the mainstream discourses used in arts in education research today. He describes how this positivistic rhetoric masks the complexity of those practices and processes associated with the arts, limiting the possibilities for productively employing such practices in education. In addition, he explores how discourses of the arts both arise out of and continually reify hierarchical conceptions of artistic practices in education and broader society. He concludes by proposing an alternative rhetoric of cultural production, arguing that moving toward this new way of understanding practices and processes of symbolic creativity is critical for expanding our vision for the arts in education.

And Mr. Karp turns to me and he says,

“Okay, Morales. What did you feel?”

And I said . . . “Nothing

I’m feeling nothing.”

And he says, “Nothing

Could get a girl transferred.”

They all felt something,

but I felt nothing.

Except the feeling that this bullshit was absurd!

—*Diana Morales, from A Chorus Line*

We know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning.

—George Steiner

The scholarly literature on the arts in education is filled primarily with advocacy statements. At least since the establishment of public schooling in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, there have been arguments for the importance of the arts in education (Efland, 1990; Siegesmund, 1998). Arts education historian Arthur Efland (1990) argues that throughout this history there have been three “streams of influence” that have shaped how the arts are viewed in education: expressionism, reconstructionism, and scientific rationalism. According to Efland, expressionism focuses on the role of the arts as vehicles of expressive and imaginative work; reconstructionism focuses on the role of the arts in transforming both individuals and society; and scientific rationalism seeks a rational basis for understanding the role of the arts in relationship to knowledge, whether through aesthetic experience (philosophical) or cognitive functions (developmental). While these streams continue to influence contemporary arguments to some extent, more recent debates have focused on what can be described simply as intrinsic versus instrumentalist views of the arts. While instrumentalist arguments focus on the impact of the arts on things like academic achievement and other “non-arts” outcomes (e.g., Deasy, 2002), the intrinsic arguments focus on those aspects of learning that are supposedly inherent to the arts, such as “aesthetic experience” (e.g., Eisner, 2002) or artistic “habits of mind” (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007).

While there are important differences in the plethora of answers typically put forth to the fundamental question of why the arts matter for education, most arguments take but a singular form—that the arts *do*. The language should be familiar. From the intrinsic perspective of aesthetic experience, Elliot Eisner (2002) declares, “The arts have an important role to play in *refining* [emphasis added] our sensory system and *cultivating* [emphasis added] our imaginative abilities” (p. 4). From the instrumentalist perspective, while the verdict is still out on whether the arts improve academic achievement, there is no lack of research seeking to attribute even the faintest of effects, near and far, to the arts (e.g., Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Deasy, 2002; Israel, 2009; Miga, Burger, Hetland, & Winner, 2000; Smithrin & Uptis, 2005; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Regardless of the approach, mainstream advocacy arguments for the arts in education typically evoke the arts as a substance with the power to influence any number of educational outcomes and individual experiences, or even to transform the consciousness of individuals. Instrumentalist approaches assert that injecting the arts can improve academic achievement; intrinsic arguments assert that the presence of the arts enhances individual experiences and perceptions of the world. While the claims might seem dispa-

rate, the rhetorical turn is the same: whether the arts *refine, cultivate, transform, enhance, impact*, or even *teach*, it is what the arts *do* that matters.

That most advocacy statements for the arts in education should embrace the language of effects on educational outcomes should not be surprising. After all, the arts have always had a tenuous relationship to schooling (Chalmers, 1993; Efland, 1990; Eisner, 1972). Richard Siegesmund (1998) declares that the constant need for reasserting the value of the arts is the “peculiar problem” of arts educators, “who must fight to maintain their discipline’s presence in the curriculum” (p. 197). Since the project of schooling is itself always directed toward particular goals, advocates have typically had to demonstrate how the arts can enhance those goals, whether related to academic achievement, civic engagement, or social cohesion.

This ability to demonstrate what the arts do—whether it is to improve achievement or to make us better human beings—has become the holy grail of arts advocacy. Yet, as advocates continue to narrowly tailor arguments in terms of effects, we have woven a straitjacket that has impaired our ability to mobilize alternative ways of conceptualizing what we mean by “the arts” and what role the practices associated with the term might play in education. Indeed, as I argue below, what I call the *rhetoric of effects* is particularly constraining when the educational goal is to oppose the oppressive character of mainstream schooling. The rhetoric of effects is always caught in a positivist logic that enforces the prevailing normative and technocratic view of education, reinstating the same social hierarchies reproduced through traditional schooling. Moreover, a focus on effects has tended to obscure the actual experiences—whether positive, negative, or otherwise—that evolve within contexts defined by practices and processes of symbolic creativity typically associated with the concept of the arts (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, 2009; Harland, 2001).

I should underscore that the critique I present in this article stems from my deep commitment to the possibilities that engaging in practices and processes of symbolic creativity might open to students and teachers, particularly in educational projects committed to social justice, antiracism, and decolonization (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2007, 2010a, 2011). I came to the field of the arts in education because my own experiences with cultural production, particularly through music, seemed to open new vistas of the world, both as it was and as it could be. Inspired by the work of scholars like Maxine Greene (1995) and bell hooks (1995), I was convinced that the arts had the potential to transform the world. At the same time, my personal experiences as a professional musician and a music teacher included an amalgam of often enriching but sometimes undesirable experiences (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2002, 2010a). Lee Bartel and Linda Cameron (2002, 2004), for example, have documented the damaging psychological effects of professional training in the arts, particularly in dance and music (cf. Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, 2008; Galloway, 2009). My own current research on specialized arts programs in the United States and Canada reveals the cultural complexity within which artistic practices are situated

and how particular conceptions of the arts often produce and justify unequal access and differential outcomes (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010b; Gaztambide-Fernández & Nicholls, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, & Desai, in press; Gaztambide-Fernández, VanderDussen, & Cairns, 2012).

Searching for an argument that would ensconce the arts in education, some scholars have refused to simply discard these contradictions as anomalies or as irrelevant, seeking instead to develop an alternative language with which to engage in a more robust conceptualization of the arts in education as cultural practice (e.g., Bartel, 2004; Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Gablick, 1991; Gallagher & Neelands, 2011; Shapiro, 1998). Despite these efforts, most of which have emerged from debates within specific artistic disciplines, most of the mainstream literature that focuses broadly on the arts has focused on demonstrating positive effects, whether instrumentalist (e.g., academic achievement) or intrinsic (e.g., aesthetic perception). Indeed, in a literature that is primarily about advocacy, even claims about the power of the arts to inspire, to liberate, or to transform tend to obscure both the complexities and the possibilities that lurk within experiences with the arts in education. The rhetoric of effects requires that we curtail such complexity, demanding instead a flattened perspective that ignores the larger social and cultural context within which those practices and processes traditionally associated with the concept of the arts take place. Such cultural practices, however, are constituted through that very complexity: the ballet is beautiful not despite but because many young dancers starve themselves to look the part; the orchestra sounds magnificent not despite but because of the militaristic regimes that rule how many musicians are trained; the Broadway show inspires not despite but because the roles performed satisfy our most pernicious stereotypes about strangers; naked female bodies abound in the history of painting not despite but because of the patriarchal gaze (Nochlin, 1973).

My aim in this article is to demonstrate that we need to embrace such complexity and foment an understanding of the arts in education through a more robust language that does not require that all worthy experiences involving symbolic creativity be defined a priori as both good and predictable. To do otherwise is to persist with advocacy arguments that have done little to help us understand the actual experiences people have with processes of cultural production through their education. Such arguments have painted our commitments into an educational corner by using a rhetoric of effects that discursively construes the arts as *things in themselves*, as elixirs that can be injected to transform educational situations and guarantee particular outcomes. As I argue, moving out of such a corner requires that we make a distinction between, on the one hand, particular conceptions or discourses of the arts and, on the other hand, those practices, processes, and products involving symbolic creativity, some of which are sometimes associated—often in ways that are contested—with the concept of the arts.

With this distinction in mind, in the first section I argue that rather than a thing or substance, the concept of the arts operates as a *discursive construct* through which particular kinds of cultural practices are defined in ways that reflect and reproduce the larger social and cultural context. A discursive approach reveals the complex ways in which discourses of the arts are mobilized to particular ends. To think of the arts discursively means that we examine the ways in which claims are made, the assumptions that support such claims, and the social rules and relations that enable some people to make claims about particular kinds of practices to particular ends. In the case of the arts, particular notions of culture and cultural change define which practices and processes of symbolic creativity we come to qualify with the label “the arts” and, by extension, how we make claims about what the arts do (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008).

The process through which particular cultural practices come to be associated with the concept of the arts is complicated and often disputed. Certain forms like the ballet and the opera, the jazz band and the string quartet, the sonnet and the staged play, are typically accepted within the discursive realm of the arts as forms that have gained the stature to be associated with the term and defined as artistic. Others like parkour and krumping, knitting and quilting, graffiti and comic books, drag shows and raving, remain largely contested, and only achieve the status of artistic form under specific institutional circumstances—further illustrating the discursive character of the arts. Here I draw attention to this discursive process by deliberately using the term “the arts” to refer to those discourses that have prevailed in how arguments about cultural production and symbolic creativity are constructed within education. I refer to the broader landscape of cultural practices, processes, and products that may or may not be included under the discursive banner of the arts as practices of symbolic creativity or cultural production. My intention is to illuminate and interrupt how the concept of the arts shapes the way we think and talk about these practices in order to provoke a different way of thinking, one that perhaps requires that we abandon the concept altogether.

I should underscore that the ways in which we frame particular symbolic practices and processes as the arts in education are also deeply shaped by dominant discourses about schooling in particular. Advocacy arguments for the arts in education are trapped in the rhetoric of effects because the prevailing teleological view of education and schooling requires prediction and the ability to demonstrate the effects of what we do on some desired outcome. Current thinking in and debates about public education also embrace what Mica Pollock (2008) critiques as “shallow cultural analyses,” which “blame a reduced set of actors, behaviors, and processes for educational outcomes, and they include a reduced set of actors and actions in a reduced set of projects for educational improvement” (p. 369). Among such reduced projects are flattened conceptions of those practices associated with the label “the arts,” par-

ticularly when such practices are construed through a shallow conception of culture.¹

In the second section I introduce the *rhetoric of cultural production*, based on an understanding of the arts as forms of cultural practice involving symbolic creativity. As an alternative to the rhetoric of effects, the rhetoric of cultural production underscores the central importance of symbolic creativity in education. Rather than building an argument that focuses on the outcomes of schooling, the rhetoric of cultural production focuses on rethinking the very terms of engagement around which education happens; it focuses on the conditions that shape experience rather than the outcomes. Moreover, the rhetoric of cultural production raises questions about whether and how we mobilize the concept of the arts in relation to educational projects committed to social justice. Indeed, it should be clear from the outset that the particular reframing I offer here is explicitly committed to an educational project that opposes traditional schooling, particularly the technocratic view of schools that has yielded standardized testing, tracking, continued segregation, and extraordinary gaps in academic outcomes.

There have been many scholars and advocates for the arts in education who have taken a similar position in framing their own arguments, such as Maxine Greene (1995), whose work provides an important pillar for the argument I present here. Yet most of these arguments, shaped by what Efland (1990) labels the “reconstructionist” stream, are also structured through the rhetoric of effects, often mobilizing a romanticized conception of the arts as having the power to transform consciousness and turn students into political agents (e.g., Beyer, 2000; Holloway & Krensky, 2001). More recent scholarship makes a commitment to social justice while beginning to move beyond the rhetoric of effects, pushing the boundaries of mainstream arts education toward a more complex understanding of cultural production. My goal here, however, is not simply to push but to disrupt and disorder the boundaries of how we think about the arts in education and to provoke a rethinking of the very assumptions arts educators make, challenging the ways in which the very concept of the arts delimits how we envision our work. In the end, I hope to provide a framework for promoting an approach to cultural production in education that profoundly challenges current arrangements.

The Traps and Consequences of the Rhetoric of Effects

Every argument requires a rhetorical frame that allows the speaker to set the terms of persuasion. As Susan Galloway (2009) argues, the rhetorical frame that informs most arguments about the impact of the arts, including their effects on learning, is based on a “successionist” model of causation that seeks to “measure the effects on individuals of some type of encounter with the arts, testing individuals before and after exposure to an arts experience” (p. 129). Because it seeks to measure an effect, this model of causation assumes that the

“input”—in this case an encounter with the arts—can be defined concretely and implemented. In other words, it is based on a substantialist conception of the arts. The combination of a successionist model and a substantialist conception of the arts is what I refer to here as the *rhetoric of effects*.

This rhetoric is clearly evident within instrumentalist arguments for the arts. For example, the findings documented in *Critical Links*, a federally funded compendium of research purporting to demonstrate the effects of the arts on learning outcomes, suggest that there is limited evidence to support the claim that learning in the arts has an effect on academic learning (Deasy, 2002). Despite these limitations, in his overview of the report James Catterall (2002) insists that future research should continue to “investigate the possibility that sustained and deep learning in the arts *may cultivate* [emphasis added] habits of mind and dispositions impacting future problem-solving behavior” (p. 157). Moreover, while no one can yet prove that the arts improve test scores, advocates like Eric Jensen (2001) contend that at least “you may get fewer dropouts, higher attendance, better team players, an increased love of learning, greater student dignity, enhanced creativity, a more prepared citizen for the workplace of tomorrow, and greater cultural awareness as a bonus” (p. vi).

The same rhetorical logic is present in intrinsic arguments for the arts. In their most recent work, Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland (2007) from Harvard’s Project Zero “found that arts programs *teach* [emphasis added] a specific set of thinking skills rarely addressed elsewhere in the curriculum” (p. 29; see also Hetland et al., 2007). Even staunch critics of instrumentalism frame their counterarguments with the same rhetorical turn. For Bennett Reimer (2009) and other advocates of aesthetic education, for example, the problem is not that we frame the arts as autonomous entities that have effects on individuals but, rather, “that we exist in a culture more enamored with secondary benefits of the arts than with primary ones” (p. 161). Recognizing that both intra- and extra-aesthetic arguments are necessary, Reimer nonetheless frames his argument in terms of the “aesthetic/artistic *functions* [emphasis added] of the arts” (p. 155). In fact, when advocates holding apparently opposing views argue with each other, they do not disagree over whether the arts have effects but over what effects should be the focus of the argument.²

Several scholars have offered a strong critique of the successionist logic that informs the rhetoric of effects (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, 2009; Galloway, 2009; Harland, 2001). Galloway (2009), for example, notes that the successionist logic fails to account for the fact that encounters with the arts occur “within the open systems of the social world, and as a result are almost never repeated in exactly the same conditions” (p. 128). While Galloway’s aim is to develop a theory-based approach to evaluating the social impact of the arts, my argument here is that the rhetoric of effects becomes a discursive trap that reinscribes particular discourses of the arts and limits what kinds of claims can be made about the fundamental role of symbolic creativity in education. First, I will discuss how the burden of proof and the problem of definition under-

mine the claims about effects and what this reveals about the way in which the arts are discursively construed. Second, I will challenge the usual response to the burden of proof, which is that the arts do not need justification because they are their own justification. Third, I will show how claims about what the arts do have the discursive effect of reinstituting social hierarchies and undermining the possibilities of an education committed to social change, raising questions about whether and how educators committed to social justice should reject conceptions of the arts altogether.

The Emperor Has No Clothes: The Burden of Proof and the Problem of Definition

In the final volume of his documentary series *The Shock of the New*, art critic Robert Hughes (1982) states, “It’s one thing to wish that art had influence over events, and quite another to show that it actually does.” This problem is not unique to researching the impact of the arts in education; it has been examined more broadly in various studies on the impact of the arts in communities (e.g., Galloway, 2009; Guetzkow, 2002; Ramsey & Rentschler, 2005). Whether in education or in society at large, the belief is the same: “the artistic experience can have transformative effects on both the individual and society” (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, p. 226). The challenge at both levels is also the same: to explain

exactly how the arts operated their magic upon people; by what mechanisms the arts were capable of leaving a life-altering mark on the human psyche; and what aspects of the aesthetic experience were likely to play the major part in determining or shaping the impact of the aesthetic encounter. (p. 226)

In their infamous meta-study examining research claims that the arts had a causal effect on student learning, Winner and Hetland (2000) left arts advocates flabbergasted by their conclusion that such research was inconclusive and could hardly substantiate the claims that the arts in fact improved learning outcomes. Many in the arts education community were incensed that these two Harvard scholars would dare put such empirically based doubts on the holy grail of arts advocacy. In a context in which arts advocates were already struggling mightily to keep the arts in schools, Winner and Hetland’s research blew like a wolf on a straw house.

Yet, seen through a discursive critique of the rhetoric of effects, their findings were hardly surprising. The fundamental logic of the successionist arguments that mainstream educational advocacy requires is that there is a definable, observable, and measurable input that can be established to cause a definable, observable, and measurable output. Proving that the arts do something requires, on the one hand, a concrete output to be tested—such as performance in a test—and, on the other hand (and perhaps fundamentally problematic when referring to the arts), a concrete input that is comparable across different cases and that can be isolated from all other possible variables. Yet, if there is one thing that most arts educators can agree on, it

is that what counts as the arts is hard—perhaps even impossible—to define (Guetzkow, 2002). In fact, debates over whether the arts are the process or the product, whether some people are more qualified to make art or to determine what art is, whether children are born artists, or whether the arts include any practice involving a creative process undermine the idea that there is one concrete, identifiable substance called “the arts” that can be positively identified and injected into a classroom to achieve a desired outcome. The rhetoric of effects paints arts advocates into an educational corner by engaging a discursive space that requires them to make claims through a simplistic logic in which the arts *act* as if they are independent variables. However, the arts are not independent variables that can be determined to have this or that effect. Indeed, what we mean by the term “the arts” is open to wide debate; and if we can’t agree on what qualifies certain forms of symbolic creativity as the arts, how can we measure the degree to which such forms are present or make any claim that they have a particular effect on educational experience?

At first glance, this might appear like a rhetorical opening: since the term “the arts” can refer to almost anything, advocates can claim that the arts do almost anything; and if, in our advocacy attempts, we begin with the outcome in mind, then perhaps we can specify a particular definition of the arts related to the particular outcome at stake (Guetzkow, 2002). I argue, however, that the opposite is true; this definitional ambiguity is a rhetorical trap that illustrates the discursive nature of the concept of the arts in at least three important ways. First, claims about the capacity of the arts to do anything, whether transform consciousness, inspire beauty, or raise test scores, are simply impossible to substantiate without imposing someone’s definition of what constitutes the arts and what experiences they (should) produce. Second, the move to define the process on the basis of the desired outcome begs the question. If one defines the arts *a priori* as involving certain “mental habits” and “creative processes,” for example, then concluding that injecting the arts into the classroom makes students better thinkers or more creative is a tautological fallacy, because the conclusions are predefined by the assumptions. Third, because the aim of advocacy demands an idealized conception of what constitutes the arts, it discursively flattens any complexity of our understanding of those experiences and sidelines anyone whose experiences fail to match the expectation.

In the musical *A Chorus Line*, Diana Morales is a starry-eyed Puerto Rican dancer from the Bronx looking for a chance to break into the theater. She shares the story of Mr. Karp, her drama teacher at *the* High School for Performing Arts. During Mr. Karp’s lessons, which involve bobsleds and snow, Morales tries hard to “feel the motion . . . hear the wind rush . . . feel the chill.” She sings that she would dig “right down to the bottom of my soul, to see what I had inside . . . And I tried, I tried,” but she felt nothing. At a surface level, through a shallow conception of culture, we could draw the conclusion that Morales lacks the cultural background to be able to succeed in Mr. Karp’s classroom. There is something wrong with Morales if she cannot feel the pre-

sumably wonderful effect of improvising in a drama classroom. At a more profound discursive level, we could consider whether there is anything to be felt at all. Perhaps, like the emperor without clothes, there is simply nothing there to see, nothing there to feel—other than the shame that one is incapable of seeing the emperor’s new clothes, that all one sees is a naked man. Of course, Morales does *feel* something—the shame of being singled out by the teacher for *not feeling* what the others seem to feel—the snow, the cold, and the air.

Rather than opening doors for deep understanding, the requirements of the rhetoric of effects foreclose debate. If it’s art, it must be good. End of story. Enforcing the romantic avoidance of complexity in our understanding of those processes and practices typically associated with the concept of the arts demands that we ignore what is perhaps most important: all educational experiences—whether they involve something we might call “the arts” or not—are situated in social and cultural contexts that demand a deep understanding of culture. Such a “deep” analysis of culture would examine “the organization of people’s everyday interactions in concrete contexts” (Pollock, 2008, p. 369), including contexts where the concept of the arts is a relevant and significant discursive frame and regardless of whether the student fails to feel what the teacher expects.

Oh, for Art’s Sake! The Trap of Liberal Humanism

The rhetorical trap of having to define the arts always within an idealized frame ends up leaving us with little power to prove our advocacy claims. Yet, instead of embracing a complex view of cultural practices, many advocates—particularly those who embrace intrinsic arguments—inevitably turn to reinscribing notions of “the arts for the arts’ sake.” Indeed, when research fails to show that the arts have a particular effect, the typical answer is that, after all, the arts don’t have to do anything; they are their own good. This seems to have been the logic of Winner and Hetland (2000), who appear to have deliberately set out to prove that the arts don’t have causal effects in order to underscore that the arts are valuable for their own sake. According to Catterall (2001), the Project Zero researchers,

seem to believe that by belittling research that shows academic benefits of the arts, their own rationale for supporting the arts will rise in its fortune. People will buy into the art-for-arts’-sake message if academic outcomes research can be shown false. (p. 36)

Winner (2001) defended their approach by saying that to dismiss the idea of the arts for their own sake “is an admission of defeat”:

If we can finally understand (as many other cultures have) that the arts are as important as the sciences, and that the purpose of education is to teach our children to appreciate the greatest of human creations, then the arts will have a strong hold in our schools. (p. 29)

Literary critic and law professor Stanley Fish (2008), talking about the humanities in general, commented:

To the question “of what use are the humanities?”, the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said . . . diminishes the object of its supposed praise. (para. 13)

But try making a case for the arts in education, or for the humanities, on the basis of the argument that they are of no use whatsoever—not likely to fly, particularly in the current context of neoliberal accountability, where everything must not only be justified in relationship to future outcomes but be specifically linked to future profits (Gabbard, 2008). Winner (2001) resolves this through an ironic—if unsurprising—elision between the concept of the arts and the mind: “We favor arts for the mind’s sake, no less than science and math for the mind’s sake” (p. 29; see also Winner & Hetland, 2007). This turn to what Shakuntala Banaji and Andrew Burn (2007) call the “rhetoric of creativity and cognition” focuses on the relationship between the arts and mental capacities and “on the internal production of creativity by the mind, rather than on external contexts and cultures” (p. 63; see also Banaji, Burn, & Buckingham, 2010). Hiding beneath this elision, of course, is the thorny question of what precisely should account for what Winner (2001) describes in the earlier quote as “the greatest of human creations.” Linked to what Banaji and Burn (2007) call the “rhetoric of the creative genius,” the very idea of greatness is specific to the cultural discourse of European liberal humanism, which is the ideological basis for the very concept of the arts (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008).

The turn to the liberal humanist discourse of the arts for the arts’ sake hides far more than it reveals by concealing its function as an argument that reanimates a particular conception of what it means to be a “good” and “moral” human being. Indeed, it is precisely the aim of civilizing Others into the likeness of European conceptions of the human that is implied in the idea that the “greatest of human creations” includes something called the arts (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008, 2011). In fact, to claim that the humanities in general and the arts in particular have no use or justification is to ignore the many ways in which liberal humanist conceptions of the arts are central to dynamics of social exclusion or the ways in which the humanities have been implied in projects of conquest and colonization through cultural imperialism.³

Sociologists of the arts have demonstrated that arguments about pure aesthetics are fundamentally a form of social distinction and that they are an important part of a discourse that justifies social inequality (Bordieu, 1984, 1993; Zolberg, 1990). Thus, it is crucial to underscore that in taking the posi-

tion that the arts don't do anything, I am not arguing that those cultural forms typically associated with the concept of the arts are their own justification. To do so would be to retain a substantialist view of such forms as autonomous things-in-themselves that should be valued for some particular essence, as if they operated independently of social and cultural contexts. Such arguments are almost always bound to reproduce the status quo, as their adherents claim the higher ground of enlightened liberal morality. More perversely, adherents to these arguments mobilize the discourse of the arts for their own sake to secure aesthetic ideals that allow them to define "the greatest human creations" and, by extension, their own status as superior human beings. As Steiner (1998) reminds us, a soldier goes back to his day's work at Auschwitz not despite but because Goethe, Rilke, Bach, and Schubert are part of the heritage that confirms his presumed cultural and moral superiority.

On the one hand, this raises doubts about the possibility of predicting with any kind of certainty the outcomes—positive or otherwise—from experiences that involve something called "the arts," as the rhetoric of effects would demand. On the other hand, and more importantly for this argument, it points to how mainstream discourses of the arts—such as the notion of "the arts for the arts' sake"—are used by particular people and for particular purposes in ways that often sustain a particular social hierarchy. This involves what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) calls "the production of belief" and the misrecognition of the processes through which certain (affluent) groups inherit the capacity—economic as well as symbolic—to recognize and, by recognizing, to name what is worthy of the label "the arts." To say that the arts don't do anything is to say that there is nothing intrinsic about something called "the arts," at least nothing that can be known without someone, in some place, for some purpose, and under specific circumstances engaging in, with, or through something that someone—with the social stature and cultural authority to do so—calls "the arts." That is to say that although the arts don't do anything, a lot is done in and through the name of "the arts."

It Is Not What the Arts Do but What the Arts Do

One way to further understand how discourses of the arts operate is to examine how those involved in educational contexts defined by such discourses describe their experiences and commitments. Specialized arts high schools provide a relevant context. Such an examination is particularly revealing when these programs are established within public school systems, especially when general arts programs are under pressure. As Efland (1990) argues, "Whether the system narrows access to the arts or makes the arts broadly available tells us something about the character of the society" (p. 4). On the one hand, specialized arts programs are usually justified through the very same rhetoric of effects that arts advocates use to *broaden* access to educational practices associated with the arts across the schools. Ironically, on the other hand, the mission of specialized programs is also to identify a select group of students who typi-

cally audition for admission, thus having the effect of *narrowing* access to such practices (Gaztambide-Fernández & Nicholls, 2012). Understanding how participants make sense of such a vexing contradiction reveals how the concept of the arts is mobilized to justify exclusion through notions of talent and artistic ability that typically ignore or downplay the role of social context in determining who is included and, by extension, excluded (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., in press).

One of the arguments for specialized arts education is that such programs prepare students who are talented or who have a passion for those cultural forms associated with the concept of the arts to pursue future careers in what economists such as Richard Florida (2004) refer to as the “creative industries.” While these justifications are based on the argument that, when it comes to such futures, creativity and talent trump social inequality, the analysis that my colleagues and I have developed reveals the opposite; the social and economic context has a direct impact on how both students and teachers imagine certain kinds of artistic futures and the opportunities available to students for pursuing such work (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2012). More importantly, discourses of the arts are mobilized to both construct as well as justify different futures for different students. Thus, at one school serving affluent students, the arts are construed as playing a role in a holistic education that prepares students for university and for careers as lawyers, doctors, and architects. By contrast, at another school, one serving working-class and immigrant students, the arts are construed as opening vocational opportunities for work as drafters, technicians, and illustrators. In both instances, the concept of the arts, as opposed to the practices themselves, has the discursive effect of obscuring the social and cultural dynamics that produce particular futures.

What the work on specialized arts high schools illustrates is that particular people in particular contexts and in response to particular needs often mobilize the concept of the arts to particular ends. At the risk of sounding particularly redundant, the more important question is not whether practices and processes associated with the arts do anything but, rather, what particular notions of the arts—that is, specific discourses—do in relationship to particular claims and particular circumstances. What is open to question, in other words, are the discursive effects of the concept of the arts. Such apparent discursive liness, like the lack of definition, could be seen as an opportunity; used as needed, discourses of the arts might provide endless opportunities for multiple educational agendas. But this would be naïve. While it is true that anyone can make claims about what (or when or how or for whom) the arts are, not everyone is socially or institutionally positioned to make such claims, and certainly not everyone can mobilize institutional resources (e.g., money, legitimacy, authority) on behalf of some activity or set of practices someone may or may not call “the arts.” To be in such a position always implies power—not always economic but most certainly always cultural and in what Bourdieu (1993) calls a “homology,” or a corresponding position to the field of power.

Discourses of the arts do not emerge out of nowhere. They are constrained by particular histories of elitism and the current dynamics of social exclusion that permeate the circumstances where discourses of the arts become relevant. This is true even when discourses of the arts are mobilized in the context of programs with a commitment to equity and social justice (Willis, 1990). Indeed, one of the lessons to be drawn from the trajectories of radical approaches to cultural production is that the moment such approaches are recognized as belonging to the realm of practices associated with the concept of the arts, their radical potential is radically diminished. Once a particular cultural practice comes to be recognized through discourses of the arts, the social processes and institutional hierarchies that constitute what Howard Becker (1982) calls “the art world” tend to neutralize its potential for provoking social and cultural change (Diederichsen, 2011; West, 1990). The privileged position of artistic subjectivity in bourgeois society, explains Diederichsen (2011), undermines every attempt to describe artistic practice in radical terms.

What this suggests is that every instance, event, experience, project, or intervention that mobilizes discourses of the arts is always-already situated in institutional contexts and social relations that impose particular constraints on what practices and products can be construed as artistic (Becker, 1982). The concept of the arts always carries the history of how the practices associated with the term have come to be constituted, discursively, as things-in-themselves. Claims to the universality of this concept are always ahistorical, as they ignore the very specific (and rather short) history of Eurocentric conceptions of what counts as artistic, along with the notion of “the arts for the arts’ sake.” That history is also intimately attached to the constitution of a classed society and the role of symbolic boundaries in securing social hierarchies. In this sense, the act of mobilizing discourses of the arts in educational contexts always carries the risk of being trapped by the same institutional hierarchies that demand the rhetoric of effects. Put another way, the discursive *effect* of mobilizing the concept of the arts depends on the power of someone, somewhere, to name it; and the same is true for the arts in education. In the case of the rhetoric of effects, the concept of the arts has been mobilized always within the context of projects of betterment, in which what counts as the arts is always construed as inherently good and worthy, and as having the moral standing to civilize (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008). This also means that despite arguments to the contrary, claims about what the arts do always carry elitist—and Eurocentric—assumptions about what practices and processes can be associated with the concept of the arts and about what should be their intended educational effect, whether intrinsic or instrumental.

Such a trap may not present a problem for education projects interested in promoting a particular social order through assimilation and the civilizing role of the arts, such as the world-renowned music program *El Sistema* developed in Venezuela by José Antonio Abreu (2009). Indeed, the civilizing

project is behind ensuring access to arts venues and to traditional aspects of the arts that, rather than change society, keep it precisely as it is (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). Thus, arts educators committed to social justice must be willing to consider the possibility that the rhetoric of effects is irrelevant at best and oppressive at worst. Otherwise, such projects will always be constrained by the assumptions of liberal humanist discourses of the arts and the related moral claims that grant artists any kind of social authority.

The Arts as Cultural Practice and the Rhetoric of Cultural Production

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.

—*Frantz Fanon*

Contemporary debates about public education rely on the kind of “shallow cultural analysis” that blames people—and their culture—for their circumstances and for the outcomes of their education (Pollock, 2008). Such an approach seeks simplistic solutions to the problems of culture through an oversimplified application of concepts such as identity, cultural relevancy, multiculturalism, and, of course, the arts. Presented as a panacea, arguments about the arts in education require a rhetoric of effects that ignores context and the particularities of the lives of the very people arts advocates presumably want to influence. What is required instead is what Pollock (2008) calls a “deep” understanding of culture that focuses on “analyzing the actual interactions among actual people in shared opportunity contexts” (p. 376).

The critique I present in this article is not intended to minimize in any way whatsoever the incredibly positive experiences that many students engaged in practices and processes of symbolic creativity often have in many places and in many different ways. On the contrary, I have experienced many such illuminating and inspiring moments while engaged in activities that some people might call “artistic,” although whether the label applies is entirely beside the point. As a former musician, composer, and mixed media producer whose work was usually situated within the context of social and political struggle (specifically around movements for self-determination in Puerto Rico), I began the search for an argument for the arts in education convinced that such practices did have an important effect on society and were capable of at least initiating or inspiring social change. What I have come to realize is that it is not the arts in and of themselves that cause any such experiences or that can effect any such change, at least not in any substantialist and successionist logic. Engaging in cultural practices of various kinds can result in experiences that are usually not simply positive or negative, diminishing or exalting, but that are complex, open to interpretation, and always irremediably particular.

Understanding culture as a practice is to take account of the details of human interaction in specific contexts and of how meanings are negotiated

and constructed through the particularities of how people come together under specific circumstances. Rather than seeing culture as a set of values, norms, and customs that define the essence of a given group of people or as a collection of artifacts that represent their shared characteristics, such an approach seeks to account for the patterns of interaction that evolve in different contexts and under particular material and symbolic conditions. In this sense, culture is not what people are, what people have, or even what people value; culture is what people do. Artistic forms and practices are thus understood as processes of cultural production rather than as substances, and as evolving within both symbolic and material conditions that constrain but do not predefine how individuals engage each other through such practices. In other words, rather than thinking about the arts as *doing something to people*, we should think about artistic forms as *something people do*. This conceptual shift to cultural practice acknowledges that *it is actual people, under real social circumstances, in particular cultural contexts, and within specific material and symbolic relations that have experiences involving symbolic materials and forms of cultural production*. From this perspective, the practices and processes associated with the concept of the arts are nothing more than symbolic or cultural work, and therefore their importance to education should hinge on their character as cultural practice and not on their presumed or desired effects.

This view of the arts in education draws primarily on contemporary cultural theory and the notion of cultural work as the basis for a reclaiming of the contextually specific dimensions within which experiences with practices and processes of symbolic creativity, some of which are sometimes referred to as the arts, unfold (see Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; West, 1990; Willis, 1990; Wolff, 1995). The discourse of cultural practice is the premise of the rhetoric of cultural production.⁴ Unlike the rhetoric of effects (and its related rhetorics of the creative genius and of cognitive and economic effects), the rhetoric of cultural production takes as its starting point the idea that symbolic work is part of everyone's everyday life and that, as such, it should be front and center in education; while the arts may not do anything, symbolic creativity is fundamental to cultural life, and education is fundamentally cultural.

Key to this approach is the acknowledgment that every interaction is situated within a context of material as well as symbolic elements and that when individuals engage in cultural activities of various kinds (and, in some sense, all activity is cultural activity), they are constantly and creatively arranging and rearranging the materials available through symbolic work. This is what Paul Willis (1990, 1998) calls a grounded aesthetic:

the everyday application of symbolic creativity to symbolic materials and resources in context, whereby new meanings are attributed to or associated with, or seen in [symbolic materials], thereby re-organizing them and appropriating them to common concerns and issues" (1998, p. 173)

What such a view proposes is that rather than seeing symbolic work—including those practices associated with the arts—as a unique or special activity somehow removed from daily life, it is part and parcel of our daily “common culture” (Willis, 1990):

Most young people's lives are not involved with the arts and yet are actually full of expressions, sign and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meanings. Young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*. This is the realm of living common culture. (p. 1)

Here we have the basis for a different kind of argument for why symbolic or cultural work should be central to educational projects, particularly projects committed to equity and social justice. Rather than making a case that something called “the arts” should be applied like a magic salve onto the lives of youth, the argument should hinge on the understanding that the lives of *all* students are always-already imbued with creativity and symbolic work, whether it involves something called “the arts” or not (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). It would be erroneous to draw the conclusion that since symbolic creativity imbues the lives of youth, there is no need for cultural production in formal education. On the contrary, if we understand education as a cultural process, then schooling should be, first and foremost, a place for engaged and continued cultural practice. Symbolic creativity—including perhaps those practices and processes that are sometimes associated with the concept of the arts—should be central to how we conceptualize teaching and learning for all students, not because it *improves* learning but because it *is* learning.

More importantly for those of us committed to an antioppressive education, arguments for the centrality of cultural production to education are about constructing learning and teaching contexts within which different kinds of human relationships, premised on different forms of representation, are possible, although never guaranteed. Such a cultural production approach would hinge on the possibility that students might engage the symbolic material of their daily lives to recreate self-representations without necessarily recirculating dominant relations (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2007, 2011; Mirón, 2003).⁵ It is through symbolic work that youth negotiate the material and symbolic constraints that shape their self-understanding, their relationship with others, and their identification with social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of social differentiation (hooks, 1995; Willis, 1990).

The challenge for arts educators, of course, is that such an approach might require relinquishing what we seem to hold most dear—the very discourses of the arts through which we construct self-identifications as artists and arts educators. Indeed, whether the outcome of such interactions through symbolic creativity comes to be identified and classified within the discourses of the arts has less to do with the interactions themselves and more with the institutional contexts and the hierarchical assumptions made about the constituent

parts of the interactions. Whether we refer to such cultural practices as “the arts” or not depends on whether we want to negotiate the potentially deleterious effects of imposing the Eurocentric norms inherent in such a discursive move. Willis (1990) makes this danger clear: “the arts establishment connives to keep alive the myth of the special, creative individual artist holding out against passive mass consumerism, so helping to maintain a self-interested view of elite creativity” (p. 1). Willis points out that even “subversive or alternative movements towards an arts democracy,” while forfeiting institutional authority, rarely relinquish the conventions: “the forms must be kept more or less intact. If they must go, then so too does any notion of a specifically artistic practice” (p. 5).

This tension became evident during my recent research at an urban arts high school with a focus on equity and social justice, where participants often mobilized competing definitions of the role of the arts and what it means to be an artist, sometimes in the same breath. On the one hand, in order to justify broad inclusion and foment a vision of an urban arts program serving racially and economically diverse students, they espoused the notion that every student has the capacity to engage in creative work. Such a vision countered the assumption that arts high schools should serve students who have demonstrated talent in cultural practices traditionally associated with the concept of the arts.⁶ On the other hand, the notion that certain students have more “passion” or “seriousness of purpose” was used to exclude and limit certain opportunities, constructing an image of successful students that, ironically, was more consistent with the “rhetoric of the creative genius” (Banaji et al., 2010). The latter was particularly important for constructing an external image of the school that might attract potential donors and build an urbane audience among social elites who are invested in the concept of the arts and what an artist should look like and be able to do. Most educators at this school were well aware of this tension and were committed to engaging the contradictions at every turn, often challenging the relevance of the very concept of the arts. For example, the school’s strong commitment to community engagement challenges students to construe social activism as part and parcel of what it means to be a cultural worker, even though it contradicts students’ preconceptions of what it means to be an artist.

Engaging such contradictions is a necessary risk, particularly for an education committed to social change. The project of democratizing culture must be about opening up spaces of cultural production for democratic engagement as a process in which the very boundaries and limitations of every context are open to debate. Unlike the aims of cultural democracy, which tend to focus on issues of access to existing artistic practices and institutions, a cultural production approach is about the “democratization of culture” and about challenging existing institutional arrangements (Evrard, 1997; Gattinger, 2011). Such arrangements include schools, museums, orchestras, and other cultural institutions that delimit who can and cannot participate and

whose contributions count and whose do not, usually along social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Rather than securing access to these institutions, the goal of the democratization of culture is to reconfigure the institutions themselves. In this sense, the question of whether something is art—and whether the arts do anything—becomes trivial, or at least open for further debate. Indeed, if we seek the democratization of culture, presumably the hierarchies implied become irrelevant: no one is an artist if everyone is an artist, even if we like how calling ourselves artists makes us feel or if we think it will somehow empower others.

For arguments framed within the rhetoric of cultural production, what matters is not whether something can be called “the arts” but what kinds of relationships evolve within the context of symbolic exchanges involving creative work, including work that might be called “the arts.” In addition, discourses of the arts can be mobilized in order to create a context for such experiences and relationships to evolve. In the school described earlier, for example, when seniors engage in projects of community activism, they enact particular conceptions of the artist that grant them legitimacy to do their work. Yet, in the very act of engaging their communities, new relationships outside of the institutional constraints of the discourses of the arts become possible (Clark & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2004).

Research to support such processes requires a different approach to understanding how discourses of the arts—and not the practices and processes associated with the concept itself—shape particular contexts. In fact, it is imperative that any approach to supporting the rhetoric of cultural production does not take conventional notions of the arts as its starting point. As Willis (1990) puts it:

In trying to argue for and present the centrality of forms of symbolic creativity in everyday “ordinary” culture, we don’t want to start where “art” thinks is “here,” from within its perspectives, definitions and institutions. The search for new or expanded publics has started from the wrong end of the social process—from objects and artifacts, not people. (p. 5)

Such a search requires that we engage ethnographic analyses that can provide for understanding “the richness of situated learning in specific contexts” defined by the discourses of the arts (Mirón, 2003, p. 3; see also Pollock, 2008).

Some arts in education scholars and researchers have already begun to take seriously the rhetoric of cultural production and the view of the arts as cultural practice. This is especially apparent in the field of visual culture studies, where scholars have already made a strong case for a move away from the language of visual art (e.g., Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003). The importance of their work has been met with reluctance as well as downright contempt from the more traditional quarters of the visual arts education field, who see such a move as a threat to the hegemony of discipline-based approaches to the arts (e.g., Dorn, 2003; Eisner, 2001; Kamhi,

2004). Scholars have also offered successful interruptions to the rhetoric of effects and promoted a view of drama as a culturally situated practice (Gallagher, 2007; Gallagher & Neelands, 2011; Neelands, 2004). Other disciplines have been far more resistant, with fewer examples of this approach within dance and even fewer within music education, which remains ensconced within a traditional paradigm that accepts few alternatives (Bartel, 2004; Bowman, 2005; Gould, 2007; Koza, 2006; Shapiro, 1998). In contrast, Tia DeNora (2000, 2003) provides a clear articulation of what it means to approach music through the rhetoric of cultural production:

What is required is a focus on actual music *practice*, on how specific agents use and interact with music. Such an approach makes no assumptions about “what” music can do but examines music’s social “content” as it is constituted through musical practices in real time and in particular social and material spaces. (2003, p. 41)

While these scholars have worked primarily from their positions within specific fields of cultural production, my aim in this article is to extend the rhetoric of cultural production to discussions about cultural practices and processes writ large and beyond the constraints of particular disciplines. This move is important because contemporary cultural production pays little respect to traditional boundaries between visual culture, music, or movement, particularly in the context of electronic media production. In addition, extending beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines allows us to begin from the premise that whether particular practices or processes can or should be referred to as “the arts” might not actually matter. Instead, we can begin by considering how we want particular conceptions of the arts to matter as a discursive strategy. Such a move allows those of us with the institutional authority to call ourselves arts educators to make claims that redirect the rhetorical aims of various conceptions of the arts toward particular interests and to decide—without guarantees, of course—how we want such discourses to matter. To not do so is simply to perpetuate the dynamics of exclusion that are inherent, even definitional, to mainstream conceptions of the arts, arts making, and the arts in education. This is very tenuous ground, I realize, because it requires a rethinking of whether and how to engage discourses of the arts in a productive way, or in ways that capitalize on the legitimating power of such discourses while actually stripping them of the power to legitimate. Yet, as Walter Benjamin (1968) clarifies, all else is an attempt at ritual, the repetition of an outdated mode of the arts that reissues hierarchies of power. The only way to save artistic forms associated with the concept from their own demise, in fact, is to understand that the very notion of the arts might just be over, that all we have left is invention, as Frantz Fanon (1967) suggests. This requires advocating for what Willis (1990) calls a “profane” position, one that is irreverent toward the discourses of the arts and their lofty moral positioning in our society.

The insistence that the arts do anything is a dead-end trap; it cannot be demonstrated, at least not through the very logic that demands such an argument. But more importantly, the argument presumes the sort of educational guarantee that is not tenable and that contradicts most contemporary cultural theory. In the words of Stuart Hall (1992), there are no guarantees, and the forms of practice associated with the concept of the arts are no exception. Experiences with artistic forms cannot be guaranteed; even with the most carefully planned arts-based interventions, an experience cannot be predicted or planned or assumed to be good just because it involves something called “the arts.” The idea that the arts do anything presumes a guarantee, a guarantee that neither the practices nor the discourses of the arts can sustain. *A Chorus Line*'s Morales says as much when she admits that she feels nothing—“except the feeling that this bullshit was absurd.” Morales is the child in the crowd yelling that the emperor is naked and that all new evidence and all new finely woven arguments are just the newest clothes of our emperor of the arts. But if we cannot weave new clothes for our naked emperor, we ought to think about writing a new story.

Notes

1. For an excellent example of a widely used advocacy document that construes the arts through a shallow conception of culture, see UNESCO (2006).
2. See, for example, the debates between Eisner (1998) and Catterall (1998) and, later, between Catterall (2001) and researchers at Project Zero (Winner & Hetland, 2001).
3. On the role of the arts in social exclusion, see Bourdieu (1984, 1993). Cultural theorists like Hall (1992), Said (1978), and Spivak (1999) have demonstrated the role that the humanities have played in projects of colonization and imperial expansion; see also Hamm and Smandych (2005). Said (1994) carefully describes the role of cultural production, and the “fine arts” in particular, in processes of imperial conquest.
4. Banaji, Burn, and Buckingham (2010) call this the “rhetoric of democratic and political creativity,” which Banaji and Burn (2007) also refer to as the rhetoric of “democratic creativity and cultural re/production.” I use the *rhetoric of cultural production* for simplicity and because it is more consistent with the discourse of cultural practice.
5. Mantie (2008), for example, documents how youth in the One World Youth Arts Project in Toronto engaged in processes of inner exploration through musical production that allowed them to rewrite themselves and their identifications. Also, certain approaches to integrating cultural production processes into the classroom, such as the one articulated by Weiss and Lichtenstein (2008), provide a starting point for an iterative approach to integration that hinges on processes rather than effects, providing spaces for students and teachers to reimagine themselves and their relationships.
6. Here I am referring to the particular notion of talent that is specific to the cultural practices traditionally labeled as “the arts.” From this perspective, having talent is not the same as being interested in or as having a proclivity for a particular form of creative expression. Lots of people might have a proclivity for or an interest in dancing, but most would lack the embodied, material, and cultural resources to be able to demonstrate talent by the standards of classical ballet. The notion of talent is always specific to the particular practices under consideration. For a detailed discussion of how the concept of talent is mobilized as a justification for social and cultural exclusion within a specialized arts high school, see Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai (in press).

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