Commencement Address, VCUarts Winter Graduation Ceremony

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Rudolf Arnheim, that great scholar and author of the book *Art and Visual Perception*, wrote a famous essay in 1983 about the importance of art in primary and secondary school. He said, "I have come to see that all productive problem solving takes place in perceptual imagery... To truly perceive the properties of things is an indispensable condition of original work in the arts and the sciences. But facts do not tell us much when they are observed in isolation. Productive thinking consists in the grasping of structure... Perceiving means understanding relations, what things do to one another. [In every] field of knowledge, problem solving that goes beyond mechanical computation is accomplished in the mental realm of imagery... by thought operations performed in the imagination." Arnheim asks: what are the fundamentals of education? Instead of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, they should be

Perceiving

Thinking

Forming

The hunger for training in what Arnheim calls "the syntax of relations" accounts for the number of students seeking out art as a field of study in higher education now. How are the creative disciplines taught, within the academic sphere? Here at VCU, the design arts, the fine arts, the performing arts, the history of art, and art education itself, are gathered into one of the largest schools of its kind in the country. Each discipline is unique in its nature and language, and bears its own legacy. What binds us together is our interest in perception, shape, and form; in the languages of the eye, the ear, and the body; in the relational nature of thought itself; and in the discovery of the ways things might go together. As another great educator, Elliot Eisner, said so simply: we give form to thoughts in order to have them.

Because we are a school of art set within a university, VCUarts offers the best of two worlds: a studio education where you discover the size of your imagination, and a liberal arts education where you discover the scale of the world. Our university core, with courses like "Earth System Science" or "Introduction to Political Economy" or "Critical Thinking About Moral Problems" provides immediate support to a young artist whose work might address a social cause, or whose inspiration comes from nature's quickchange forms. A sculptor should know something about analytic geometry. A designer should study global communications. A saxophonist should take physics. An art historian will study religion. Many students from the university *outside* the art school take courses with us and get their misconceptions about art forever changed. Those who do not, will yet have their lives changed by the kinds of thinking artists are trained to do.

The study of art provides a classroom experience unlike anything else in academia. The student of a creative discipline is called upon *from the beginning* to set her own rules, to define her game, to assert the what and why of her actions. Nothing is postponed till later. "But I need skills before I know what to say!" you protested in your freshman year. Then you saw that everyone, at every level, was sweating the prototype, wrestling the base question of what, in the world, to make. Like magicians, we are expected to produce a rabbit out of thin air. On schedule. Every week. Spinning straw into gold. How can this be taught?

In industry there is an old rule: you either tell your employees what to do, or you tell them to do a good job, but you never tell them both. In art school, we never tell you exactly what to do. You must invent, and invent well. My colleague Lester Van Winkle always said, "We teachers are trying to get kids to make things we've never seen before."

To do this, artists work a little blind. So one of the first things we train for here is the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. This entails some considerable faith in the game, and in oneself. The second thing we train for is how to work: the physical and mental practice of running ideas, inventing steps, and pressing through with actions. The best ideas seldom come to us at the beginning... they always show up late to the party, unwelcome and pushy. So we train for flexibility and judgment: "do I let go of my first idea and start over with this one?" This is where the work starts talking back. It's a two-way conversation, maybe even a fight. The artist wants to go one way, the work wants to go another. Sooner or later a student realizes his work is saying something very different than he thought. It's a spooky moment, with its own long reach into the future.

I remember a student years ago in the sculpture department named Martin Mayer. One day in the welding shop he took a length of 2 inch steel pipe and heated it up and crimped it with pliers a little like you crimp a pie crust. The pipe, once rigid, became floppy, noodly, but still strong enough to hold up its own weight. He bent it into a ring about three feet in diameter, and stood it up in the critique room. So it wouldn't fall over, he welded a little peg to one side and anchored it in a hole in the floor. Standing back, he thought, make the circumference larger, so he crimped more tubing, sawed open the loop, and welded in another arc. He cut and added another section, then another. At six feet in diameter, the ring began to sag a little. Only then, well down the road, did Martin decide to see how big he could make that ring. He added section after section, sure each time it would finally collapse. And the weight of the ring gradually sank into an outrageous trembling oval, 25 feet on the long axis. It almost touched the two opposite walls of the crit room. You walked in, and the door opening displaced enough air to make the oval wobble and torque. Cars going by outside made it shudder. It registered every current in the building, and every vibration within a city block. Its tension was as beautiful and fragile and three-dimensional as a live thing.

When one student produces a great work, everyone in earshot hears a rushing sound. It is the sound of a group of people going through a little acceleration warp, a speed-up. This is just what happens in the culture at large -- in historical time, in evolutionary time -- when a powerful step is made. Everyone gets a jolt forward, shares the momentum. Each classroom is its own micro-civilization, and the whole process is visible: the individual search, the public presentation, the critical consensus, and if there are a few victories, *everyone's* next project is stronger. That semester Martin's sculpture became the standard for teasing the devil, for pushing things to the edge. It showed how the best ideas come in the middle of work. It recorded the pleasure of doing something just to see what would happen. He made something that paid attention to the world. Smart as Martin was, his sculpture was smarter! That's why everyone could claim a piece of it.

The simple sum of these kinds of moments through time is what singles out a place, a school. It's why VCUarts is so good, and why a degree from this school has so much currency in the world now. You come here and inherit the best accomplishments of those who have gone before; and you then raise the stakes even higher with your own work, for those to come.

This semester in my advanced class I watched an especially ambitious group of students in action. Across their differences, they formed a community of individuals willing to think out loud, to risk opprobrium and embarrassment in front of one another, to argue hard for their views. In critiques, they spoke directly to one another, no bypass through the teacher. Now, students by definition are humans who talk a lot. The social life that explodes in college is a form of energy that could replace coal and oil if we could just harvest it. You wake up and start talking. To and from class, planning and scheming, in the studios late at night, under a deadline, the break in the rehearsal, openings, parties, cafes, backstage, locker rooms, texting from bed: there are students here who are talking to each other right *now*. Outside of class students talk without end. But when it happens *in* class, in a formal setting in front of a small public, debating values and truths -- *high* talk -- this is the moment when a generation takes an institution into its own hands. As a teacher, I pray I can just shut my mouth then, and hear what kind of future is coming. As poet William Worsdworth wrote, the Child is father to the Man.

In these years of your education, your idea of who you are and what you are worth has been tested under the fire of academic demand, peer pressure, professional competition, and your own expanding awareness of the force of history. Lester Van Winkle always said, "You pay for your education with your innocence" -- meaning that with dreams come responsibilities. In the global marketplace of things that can be bought and sold, an education is a most curious and unique purchase: it comes with few guarantees, but it is a set of opportunities like no other. It is the single greatest financial investment of a lifetime.

Perceiving means understanding relations, what things do to one another. You are the ones who see the patterns and hidden structures of our complicated and uncertain world. *Your* vision, the things you care most about, your very anxieties and fears, will make visible the driving issues of our time. *You* are our communicators and our creators. You are our seers.

[references: Rudolf Arnheim, "Perceiveing, Thinking, Forming," *Art Education*, vol 36 no 2, March 1983; Elliot Eisner, "What Do Children Learn When They Paint?" *Art Education*, vol 31, no 3, March 1978, p 10; William Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold," 1802]