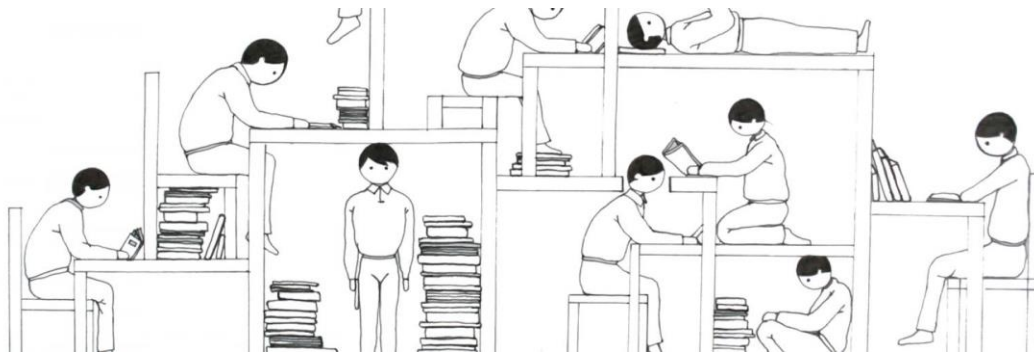


No, Germaine Greer, Art Does Belong in Schools – it's the Foundation of Healthy Public Cultural Life

The controversial intellectual suggests art would be better done at home – she should be careful what she wishes for

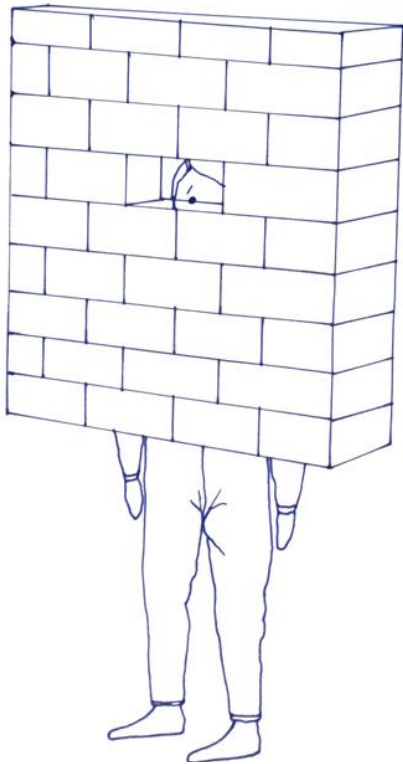
BY Dan Fox in Opinion
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Last week, shortly after having presented painter Rose Wylie with a prize at the South Bank Sky Arts awards in London, Germaine Greer proposed, ‘we should stop teaching art,’ because ‘people get an idea of what is the right and the wrong way to do it.’ ‘I don’t think you can do art at school,’ she says. ‘You do art at home.’ She mentions meeting a teacher who holds the opinion that Tracey Emin cannot draw, which Greer disagrees with, and takes that exchange as evidence no art teachers in the country know what they are talking about. ‘Let’s go. We’re not getting anywhere here.’ Her pronouncements are fresh scumble on the rotting canard that art’s too subjective to teach, as if subjectivity isn’t a fundamental part of the human experience.

Eva Kotátková, from the ‘House arrest’ series, 2009, ink and pencil on paper. Courtesy: Hunt Kastner gallery, Prague and Meyer Riegger gallery, Berlin

‘You do art at home,’ states Greer. She presumes a great deal about people’s domestic lives. Art materials cost money, and there are many families who are unable to give a creative young person what they need in order to develop artistic skills. Schools, if they have the funds, can provide art supplies, tools, skills and books from which aspiring young artists can draw inspiration; resources that may not be available in their home situation for a number of reasons, resources they may not even know exist in the first place. (Autodidacticism has been the secret education system that has sustained British popular culture for decades, but it does not work without prompts and guidance from schools or public sources of information such as libraries and television.)



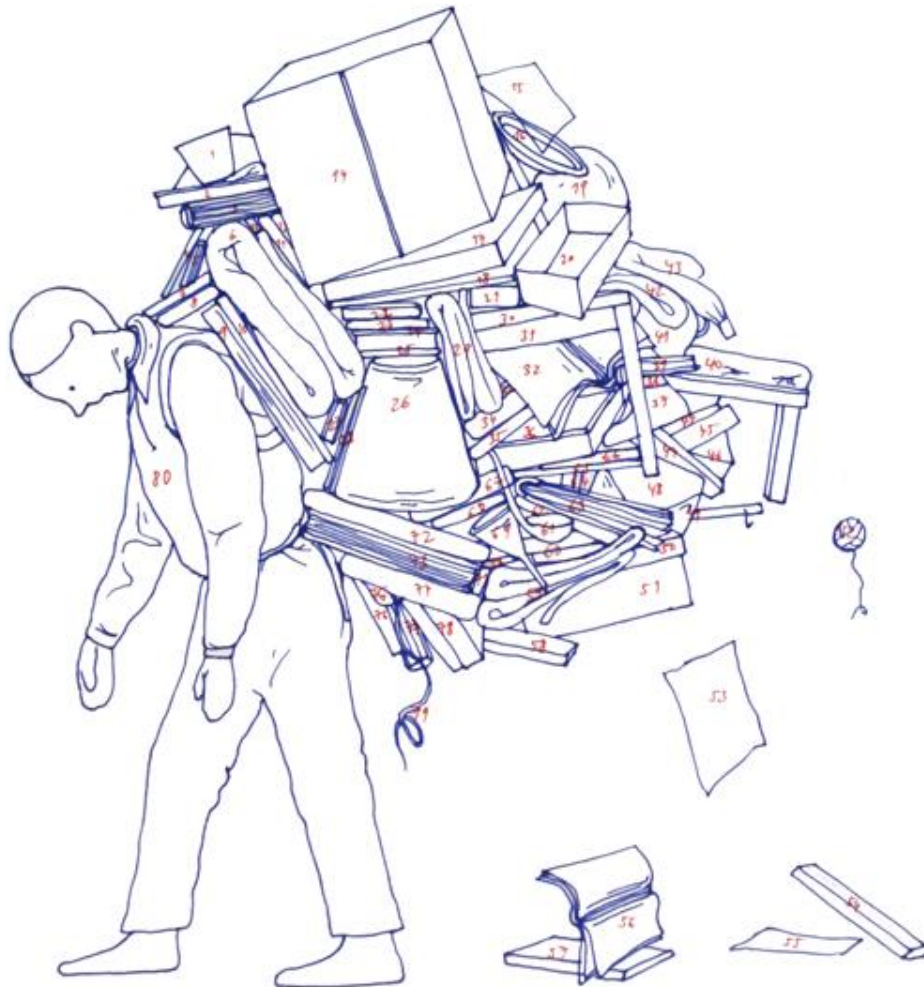
The same goes for other arts subjects – music and drama – and in these subjects what is even more crucial than material resources is a social apparatus. You can't perform in an orchestra at home, just as you can't stage a play on your own. To suggest art is an activity for the home is to suggest art should not exist in public, that it cannot involve sociability, or that we are somehow to be embarrassed by our interest in it. A generous reading of Greer's remarks might take them to mean that art is too complex to teach but a more likely interpretation is that art is too 'touchy-feely', and not a 'proper' subject like geography or chemistry, perhaps more of a hobby. Greer's comment smacks of the same attitude that has sidelined the teaching of home economics and cookery in schools. It's too domestic – read: feminine – as if learning how to look after your diet responsibly is of no consequence to personal and public health, or to well-being.



Eva Kotátková, from the 'House arrest' series, 2009, ink and pencil on paper. Courtesy: Hunt Kastner gallery, Prague and Meyer Riegger gallery, Berlin

Greer thinks that grading art is 'wrong' and that 'people get an idea of what is the right and the wrong way to do it.' Do they? I am not convinced it is as simple as that, and her argument denies the capacity of young people to make up their own minds about their creativity. (Disagreeing with what your teachers have told you art should be is part of the experience of learning to become an artist.) Whether or not art can be marked using standard pedagogical methods is to miss the point of primary and secondary-level art education completely. It does not matter in the slightest whether a child has the talent to take their art abilities further than school. What these subjects provide are life skills. In younger children, music, art, dance, writing and role-playing, all play key roles in physical and psychological development. For adolescents, the arts provide confidence, teach lessons about group communication and socializing, and open up perspectives on ideas and lives that are different to their own. Wylie, commenting on Greer's comments, observes that 'you can give the subject value by including it in the curriculum: giving it a level status with maths or science, rather than denigrating it by excluding it.' Value the arts in school and you demonstrate that you value the skills they provide.

What kind of stunted life, of mind and body, does Greer want for young people? Perhaps she thinks those who study the arts only have aspirations to be painters, actors or musicians. But where does she think the people who design signs for our roads, and other infrastructure come from? Who does she think draws the cartoons that entertain kids on wet Saturday afternoons? Who makes the costumes for TV shows? How do the architects who build houses, schools and hospitals come to understand space and form? Where do those who use art in therapy for the developmentally disabled or the elderly get their training from? Where do the photojournalists who document our world for the news learn to take pictures? Let's see what the world starts to look like after we remove from children the idea that a creative life is a viable one to pursue.



Eva Kotátková, from the 'House arrest' series, 2009, ink and pencil on paper. Courtesy: Hunt Kastner gallery, Prague and Meyer Riegger gallery, Berlin

What is most disconcerting is how Greer's statements appear to echo the Westminster policymakers who carp on about literacy and numeracy as they systematically devalue and gut arts education in state schools. These politicians are myopically fixated on measurable outcomes, slavishly devoted to mathematics and science subjects. These wonks cannot conceive of education producing well-rounded young people, equipped with curious, critical minds regardless of their class background or individual talents, because they cannot conceive of education being anything other than a quantification tool to produce examination results they can turn to their political advantage. They want to recreate a golden age that never existed in which the forlock-tugging lower classes learn their ABCs and multiplication tables by rote and don't need to trouble themselves with the idea that they can make a valuable contribution to the culture in which they live. These technocrats want to hand the production and administration of art in the UK over to those who have been educated in the private school system, where the arts remain well-funded,

and where artists whose experiences of life reflect comfort, privilege, and the monoculture of canonical art and literature, can be trained for cultural leadership roles. These politicians do not want the arts to be representative of British society, they want the arts to be a Jane Austen theme park that will reflect back to them their fantasies of middle-class gentility, a theme park in which everybody knows their place. By eradicating the arts from schools, these policy goons prove they know nothing about what it takes to educate a young mind.

They are not relegating the importance of arts subjects for reasons of economic austerity; they are doing it to consolidate power. It is not the arts that they are devaluing in state education, it's the spirits and minds of ordinary people. Greer should be careful what she wishes for.

Main image: Eva Kotátková, Construction for writing, drawing, studying, learning, sitting and walking, 2009, ink on paper. Courtesy: Hunt Kastner gallery, Prague, Meyer Riegger gallery, Berlin and the Conduits gallery, Milan

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