

On the matter of National Visual Arts Standards:

An Immodest Alternative within Reach

Dear Distinguished Fellows colleagues, I hope you will afford the time to read the critique of the NAEA's National Visual Arts Standards, to which in general and in particular, I take serious exception. Although lengthy, the significance of the NVAS for our professional organization and for the practice of art teaching is so broad and deep, and already enjoys such widespread approval, I believe it requires such a carefully and detailed rejoinder. I have shared the document with our Executive Director, Deborah Reeve, and she is aware of its content, my intention to make the critique available to the Distinguished Fellows and others, and is encouraging a supersession on the issue at next year's annual convention. As I write at the conclusion of the essay, there are certain to be many rebuttals of these same claims to be resolved. I welcome what conversation this critique may engender, especially from you.

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The following critique of the NAEA's National Visual Arts Standards is written in the hopes that this essay might contribute to a reexamination of the NAEA's policies on formulating and promulgating any document intended to serve as national standards in the teaching of the visual arts, and a rejection of this deeply flawed version in particular. There are indeed compelling political and financial reasons for the National Art Education Association to respond appropriately to the current political landscape that requires public schools and professional associations to develop guidelines as to mission and practice. However, the NAEA's responses in the creation of its National Visual Arts Standards opens itself to a fixed position on what to teach and when to teach it. In so doing, the NAEA compromises its most essential functions and services to its membership; encouraging open inquiry, inviting continuous innovation, and providing a neutral hub for the exchange of emergent ideas.

I believe the NAEA has been doing a splendid job this last decade in expanding the cannon, addressing the intellectual and expressive needs of many school children, of embracing emerging media and technology, and inviting a broader range of practitioners to participate in the organization. However, the very intent to formulate and promulgate National Visual Arts Standards that claim to provide Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, and Anchor Standards pre-K through high school for all students and all teachers for all schools is a profound reversal of the last decades of our association's increasing embrace of plurality of voices, appeal to diverse clientele, broadening range of learning and teaching styles, varied work sites, and providing supportive platforms for the continuous open exchange of ideas.

This essay is composed of three sections. The first presents the argument against the NAEA creating any document that offers itself as The National Standards for visual arts education. The second section describes the many flaws this particular version of National Visual Arts Standards, which this author contends are also symptomatic of similar misunderstandings throughout the profession in the areas of the requirements of scholarly research practice, the nature of the creative artistic enterprise, and saddest to say, the realities of teaching the arts

in the schools we have within the society in which we teach. The final section offers an alternative formatting and employment of the NVAS this author believes is more closely aligned with the direction and ethos of the NAEA while still aware of the need for our profession to offer a legitimate response to the call for national standards.

Although now well into the process of its dissemination, these observations are ventured at this time because it is still early on in the process of its adoption by the many divisions of our membership; general classroom teachers, art teachers k-12, administrators, teacher preparation programs, researchers, and other political and financially interested parties. It is also written, I must admit, with a heavy heart, knowing the sincere effort of many dedicated colleagues to the creation of the National Visual Arts Standards and its many astute elements.

The first issue with the National Visual Arts Standards that this critique addresses is with the entire enterprise of the NAEA's formulating National Visual Arts Standards (NVAS) at all, compelling, with all the force of a nationally sanctioned document, its adoption by all of its thousands of members, millions of their students, and inflecting the artistic culture of ensuing generations.

Fixing something that is not broken

There is abundant evidence that Americans are now and have been at least for the last one hundred years one of the greatest collection of innovators of all art forms- in the world. Music, dance, theater, literature, performance art, cinema, the visual arts too. To be sure, the same is also true of the sciences and the humanities. Has not America been experiencing an extended phase of artistic flowering these many years? In the midst of a national recession, in the midst of political incompetence, in a stubbornly sexist, racist, extremist, polarized society, is not our community of artists America's one of our brightest lights still undimmed in the view of the rest of the world? It certainly is not our politicians, or our bankers, our business communities that are lauded for their brilliant contributions to the common good. Is not the community or artists the most emulated planetary darlings for innovative, evocative and simply brilliant and to be sure, bizarre artistic endeavors? Can we build art museums fast enough for the oodles of artists and the many who throng to witness their work? Haven't Americans in general become more aesthetically informed and concerned with what they wear and eat and live in and drive and put on their walls? Not only the wealthy, but also most every person, regardless of economic resources has available to them and selects more finely considered circumstances than here to fore. Somehow our multifarious bunch of artists and their audiences has achieved all this without any National Visual Arts Standards, without DBAE, without Behavioral Objectives.

What evidence has been summoned demonstrating that the quality of arts education in America is faulty and in need of repair in the first place? Did classroom art teachers call for national standards to help them determine what to teach and when to teach it? Did the vast and varied individuals and groups of artists demand national arts standards?

Despite the NAEA's periodic fascination with formulating curricula intended to be the end of all curricula, I believe the NAEA has been doing a splendid job this last decade in expanding the cannon, addressing the intellectual and expressive needs of many school children, of embracing emerging media and technology, and inviting a broader range of practitioners to participate in the organization. However, the NAEA ought to have learned by now the steep price it has paid for embracing first one catchy idea that promises much, making it our current darling, glowingly espoused by the best of our brightest, only to drop it, albeit quietly, for another confection also introduced as the arrival of the curriculum to end all curricula.

I hope to make the case that we can avoid the professional embarrassments of first embracing one appealing idea then another, and instead, offer alternative responses to the clear need of our profession to appropriately respond to the political call for educational standards, preserve much of the content of the NVAS, and do so in form and employment more closely aligned with the basic tenets of our professional organization.

There may be no such actual things at all as “Standards” in the Arts.

Before we examine the particular flaws of this iteration of national visual arts standards, we challenge the very concept that there are to be found any such things as national visual arts standards. Maybe there are no such things at all as things that everyone must know and do in art.

Isn't the very fundamental feature of art, of the artistic temperament, of creativity, of our most valued myths, the stuff of our heroines and heroes, the core characteristic of the artist, the making of one's own way in the world, making coherent meaning of the personal experiences of one's own life? And isn't life's most essential task, and opportunity, to glean from the infinite ocean of discoveries of others and the infinite adventures of one's own self, to weave something more and better? Isn't art the same thing? Aren't other basic artistic values also the embrace of plurality, of emergence, of open systems? The very formulation of a matrix, wherein every thing that is anchor, standard, essential and enduring fits within a finite geometry itself is antithetical to the way the entire universe “sort of” fits with everything else but never so tightly that the necessary wiggle room for evolution to unexpectedly at every turn, comes up with endless novelties. No?

Maybe there is no such thing at all as a universal scope and sequence to the nurturing of creative, artistic sensibilities. Maybe formulating a twelve year curriculum of what every child ought to know and do and every teacher teach is itself incompatible within a universe and on a planet and in a society whose children (and everything else) constantly and suddenly evolve under unpredictable circumstances. Indeed, hasn't this same effort to predict and shape the future been tried by many utopian visionaries- and all too frequently, tyrants- only to crumble under the universal forces generating unpredictable changes? Maybe there is no serious value of “National” standards relative to the serious contributions of the arts and artists to democratic, secular, egalitarian nations. Maybe we are approaching a time in human history when the separation of political boundaries from swarming enthusiasms that spread almost instantaneously via global technological proximity, will be obsolete. After all, isn't it quite obvious that the arts seep up from everywhere, especially from those poised at the edges of politically imposed boundaries, where exposure to otherness invites curiosity and experimentation with the soundness of inherited boundaries?

Why the interest in Composing the Complete Book of Everything

Why this need to lay out the entire map of the world, to fit everything into such a neat matrix, why every grade having the same number of Essential questions and Anchor standards? Just because they fit? The Magic Matrix leaves no spaces empty? It looks complete? Where in this matrix of everything is there any space for one to add anything or subtract anything? Where is there space for an art teacher to add anything, to modify anything that would more exactly attend to their students, their neighborhood, their time in history, their own talents? How would I any teacher dare to add an *Essential* question, wouldn't that imply that the founding authors had actually missed an *Essential* question? Missed and Enduring Understanding? How could that be?

Composing the Complete Book of Everything, everything that is essential to know and anchored with standards that are to be employed nationally with enduring permanence, is to undertake the same folly that has doomed every such attempt at creating such a crystallized document, academy, and regime. It is bad science, it is bad politics. It's presumptions of

completeness invites revolution instead of inviting the natural flow of creative evolution. It has nothing to do with art or artists, what artists do, how we do it, and what we contribute to the world. Nothing. Frankly the entire idea of national standards smacks of our current global penchant for extreme, end of time solutions, these so costly responses to the endless, intertwining surprises that the irrepressible dynamics of evolution pour upon us relentlessly and that we resist at our peril, time and again.

The wrong headedness of imposing nationally sanctioned standards on un-standardized nation

Before imposing national standards for the teaching of art, (or anything) why not we begin with putting in place national health care standards, national standards of taxation? How about getting around to national standards of racial equality, national standards of honesty in government and business, banking, national standards for competent parenting, for safe neighborhoods in every town and city, for decent housing in every town and city, for the care of the homeless in every town and city, for no more childhood malnutrition, for equal educational opportunity not based on how much money your parents and grandparents happen to have, but on how intelligent and diligent you are? Then, when things are straightened out across this all too wrinkled nation, where being born to rich parents, living in swell neighborhoods, a place in your home to do your homework, with parents who talk intelligently to you, you have enough clothing and food to eat, makes kids so much brighter- or so it appears in standardized tests and everything else in life, *Then* let's have a standardized curriculum so that *all, now equally privileged children* will be starting at the same starting line with the same school bag full of empowering resources, Then. And not until then.

No Evidenced Based Research? No Verifying Data? No Acceptable Claims

If one were to attempt to create a document that had the compelling and ubiquitous force of anchor standards sanctioned by the sole legitimate and legitimatizing professional organization, one ought to present evidence based data to verify the claims of that document. Yet, the entire enterprise and its ensuing document has been formed entirely upon *opinion without a scintilla of evidence based research legitimizing any of its claims of providing Anchor Standards, Enduring Understandings, and Essential Questions*. Opinion per se, if it is the consensual product of informed parties, for the employment by those same parties, are of course, legitimate contributions to intellectual discourse. But *opinion* without documentation to substantiate its claims fails the basic academic criteria of legitimacy especially so when what is being claimed are professional standards, for *National Standards, for Anchor Standards*. Whatever one's opinions may be, even if shared by many currently so designated as experts, every opinion must remain intellectually and academically unsound until supported by demonstrated proof; a test every scholarly, peer reviewed institution requires. Yet, as far as I am able to determine about the origins and procedures of the NAEA's arriving at its National Visual Art Standards, there has been no field-testing at all. No comparative longitudinal studies, no examination of contributing variables to outcomes. No case studies of the effects of the program on all subject to it; students, teachers, parents, communities, civic and cultural life. Are these not preliminary efficacy tests necessary before any prescription for its widespread dissemination- no less the setting of national standards, be permitted? Are the arts and their teaching to be exempt from these universal scholarly criteria?

By the NAEA creating and adopting its National Visual Arts Standards without first providing proof beyond reasonable doubt of ones contentions, demonstrating that this is not only good and correct, but the most good and most correct of any prevailing alternative, the professional standing of our organization is put in question. If one further presumes to entitle anything as Core, Common, Anchor, Essential, Enduring, National, Standard, and then enlist the entire professional legitimacy and financial and personnel resources to its promulgation,

professional rigor requires – demands- incontrovertible *proof beyond reasonable doubt* of claims of sole legitimacy of those particular claims.

Basic procedures of scholarly research include determining if what one has proposed as possibly true, the hypothesis, is true by applying this hypothetical truth to the parties for whom it is intended and then determining if what one thought was going to consequentially occur, occurs, scrutiny for any unintended side affects, the duration of effects both intended and otherwise, determining critical contributing elements from subsidiary factors, observing the effects of the same procedures with different groups administered by different practitioners. Only then can one justifiably state; this is the way it is. No less, this is good, this is true, no less, and this should now become national policy of a national professional organization. No such scholarly procedures were employed in the creation of this document. Thus it ought to be taken, as it actually is, a conglomeration of opinions, for it simply, glaringly, does not meet the most basic test of any assertion of prime legitimacy; demonstrate that it works for the populations subject to it.

Have I missed evidence produced by a single test of the efficacy of any one of these Anchor Standards against an alternative practice, employing different standards? Has any one of these Enduring Understandings proven to be indeed *enduring* no less effective at all? Have these Essential Questions proven to be essential with different populations, different genders, different socio-economic groups, different cultural backgrounds, and different regions of the country? Have these standards been tested by any school district and compared with any existing curricula and quality of performance criteria?

Theory tests the bounds of existing practice and probes its possibilities. In its turn, the application of theory in the manifest world tests the bounds and legitimate claims of theory. Each invigorating each. John Dewey, a central philosopher of education and a key source for art educators, claimed this same dynamic of the interpenetration of theory and practice as the basis of his “Schools of Tomorrow” and has been adopted as a core effort of our own professional organization, bringing together the theorists from higher education with the pragmatists of classroom art teachers K-12. Hard tests to pass; theory field tested, and practice tested against the possibilities of evolving theory, but that must be so because ideas become consequential when they enter the manifest world in which everything matters. The consequences of field testing invariably results in more modest claims of efficacy and more nuanced application, offering the user more realistic expectations of outcomes. No such field testing here. Therefore the immodest claims of this elixir and the potential dangers of its unexamined/unintended side effects.

Of course no evidence based data are available because no evidence based research was conducted. And, truth be told, no such research could realistically be expected to be undertaken, in large measure because the sample groups, the millions of children and the hundreds of thousand of teachers across this nation are so diverse and motile. The sample group; the myriad children across this vast fluctuating nation are such a messy group. The sample is infinitely contaminated; so many different ages, so many different ethnic, socio-economic groups and varied religious persuasions, so many different parents, so many different degrees and kinds of intelligences, so many different teachers, so many different aptitudes and talents and languages. So many morphing categories and self identities. My goodness, what a mess! But isn't this swarming, multifaceted, multifarious, evolving mess the very glory of this country? Our endless, free wheeling, open ended conversations are the basis of our very genius, exactly what generates the hybrid vigor, that innovative verve that is the salient hallmark of our nation, in every field, the sciences, technology, business, and of course, especially so in the arts.

The research required to address this squirming sample would require years to conduct and resources that the NAEA simply does not have. So, if you cannot vouchsafe claims of the verity of your Enduring Understandings, your Essential Questions and your Anchor Standards, don't make those claims and don't compel their adoption by making those claims. Do something else. The final section of this paper suggests something else.

Could there not have been a more essential and timely assignment for our own Research Commission to vet the claims of the committee that formulated what would become the NAEA's National Visual Arts Standards? Or, alternatively, had a say in its claims?

But, are there not laudatory ideas imbedded in the NVAS? Yes, but.

Are there many laudatory things for children to do and to know that the NAEA's own NVAS describe? Probably. I happen to share many of the opinions on what to teach with its authors. But then, that is only the opinion of this veteran art teacher. Will children make good looking art-like objects and will they be able to write and speak informatively about the topics proffered by these curricula ideas? Probably. Many of my own students also made good looking art work and wrote and spoke informatively about art and its many meanings and purposes. Or so I thought. My colleagues thought that what they were teaching was also essential and that the art projects their students engaged in were also of utmost importance. Their pedagogy, curriculum and outcomes were different from my own. Indeed every art teacher in every art program in every institution I have taught art in, from the Museum of Modern Art in NYC, to high schools, universities, museums and art institutes across North America, also have had differing pedagogies, curricula and outcomes, many producing informed, articulate and good looking art work. Not one of these hundreds of professional highly vetted art teachers taught what and how they did in any way resembling the NAEA's National Visual Arts Standards. Each taught in a school and created in their own classrooms a culture particular to their time and place and students and their own genius. Every member of that culture flourished to varying degrees. What shall we make of this evidence of non-national, non-standardized art teaching in America for the last fifty years? What shall we make of the collapse of the French Academy and the ensuing invigoration of the arts and their teaching following that collapse?

Required opinions can be dangerous

A document that presents itself as being *the* national standard, as being sponsored by *the only* accrediting professional organization, as providing understandings that are Enduring, and Questions that are Essential, and assignments that are "Anchor, presents a formidable force for compliance. What else, where else, and to whom else can one turn to for alternatives to the National Visual Arts Standards? What teacher or teacher preparation program, what author, what seeker of jobs or promotion, can resist such credentialing? No one. These same forces for compliance also attracts- and for the same reasons, articles for our journals, proposals for our conventions, seekers of leadership positions and awardees within the organization. And so surrounded by such agreeable companions, comforted by companionable literature, presentations, job opportunities, awards and appointments, emerging new and alternative ideas and their proponents become scarce, or not at all. How to make a secure career of ones talents, values, vision, if there is only one place to stand and speak ones mind, when that mind happens to opine differently? Our organization and its members have suffered this same affliction most recently with the impossible to resist DBAE decade, now abandoned by its funders and sponsors and teachers. How long will this curriculum to end all curriculums, our NVAS, run its course rewarding its acolytes, stepping gingerly around those who are of different persuasions

If the NAEA's NVAS is not a national curriculum, then what is it?

The art lessons in the National Visual Arts Standards are thoughtful art lessons. However, their presumption of any thing more, or better, or to be complied with, is off putting to the thousands of art teachers and art directors and preparers of art teachers now and for the last one hundred years, who spend (t) their lives care fully designing what to teach and when to teach it based upon direct assessment of the genius loci of them selves each one of their students, and the enabling and restricting resources of their community, and their times. That the National Art Education Association adopted this or any other document as *The National Standards* is an affront to the professionalism of its members, at the very least, this member, and, in opposition to the very principles of diversity and inclusion with which the NAEA has developed policies and encouraged professional practices these many years.

I have read the disclaimers that the National Visual Arts Standards are not intended to serve neither as a national model, nor as standards per se, but instead to serve more as a curriculum *guide*, that the National Visual Arts Standards offers merely guidelines for the willing to consider. Really? What else can this document read as?

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VA:Pr5.1.6a Individually or collaboratively, develop a visual plan for displaying works of art, analyzing exhibit space, the needs of the viewer, and the layout of the exhibit.

Or, VA:Cr2.3.4a. Document, describe and represent regional constructed environments.

One hundred and ninety-five such “Anchor Standards.” Fifteen “Enduring Understandings.” Forty-five “Essential Questions.” All arranged, from PreK to HS Advanced, in a comprehensive matrix. Not a national standardized curriculum? What *else* would you call it? These 255 notions of what to teach and when to teach them are as carefully composed, detailed and sequenced a series of what to do in the art classroom throughout the year and over the twelve years of public schooling, that I have ever read in any curriculum guide. I write this as the editor of the NAEA’s own 1994 publication, “Exemplary Art Curriculums: a Guide to Guides.” Preliminary to composing this document, the editors, composed of state Directors of Art Education, supervisors and preparers of art teachers, conducted a year long national search of art curricula, and examined hundreds of city and regional guides from across the United States and Canada, selected dozens of guides that appeared to its editors as clearly describing the students, their teachers, resources, mission, its degree of support from all parties to the arts program, their particular opportunities, honest appraisal of their limitations and readability to all parties of interest. We then published our findings *as a guide to designing guides* for professionals that would be equally sensitive to the genius of their people, place, and time. The unit and lesson plans comprising all these many curricula presented themselves as lessons arranged into coherent units, offered over a period of years, each year subsuming the knowledge and skills previously acquired, and offering more advanced learnings in subsequent years. No one curriculum guide, nor its authors claimed to offer anything other than what *they* do and why *they* do it. No curriculum claimed to be a guide that would fit any other community, no less dared to suggest that what fit their students and their teachers and their community would also make a good fit for all the many other communities; villages, towns and cities of the United States. With this extensive background in art curricula, I am comfortable describing the National Visual Arts Standards as a curriculum, a national art curriculum.

Besides, I happen to like designing my own lesson and unit plans, and I can't imagine that I am alone in this. I love to listen and watch my students care fully for signs of where they are, when and where they might possibly go, where I might intercede, what materials and techniques seem most enabling, what I have to offer, what the system will bear. I love to draw up a diagnosis, hypothesis, a prognosis, and a treatment/educational plan. I love to see how it works out. I love to enlist the students in all these undertakings, always working for a better fit between what I know and am, what they know and are, and what we, together we might forge for our mutual advantages. The art and craft of teaching is all about this "close dancing." Someone else choosing the music, telling me what to dance, how to dance, when to dance, (how to teach, how to make art) reduces me to a robotic mechanic. That's not how art is created, that's not the art of teaching, that's not for me, and I do not believe it is a career of choice for anyone else of artistic or educative inclinations. Readers of this essay who prepare art teachers, is not this same art and craft of composing and then executing lesson and unit plans that take the full measure of the students, of the culture of the school and its neighborhood, time, resources- and the teachers own particular talents, the very central teaching of your teaching?

Section II Problems of Content

Having addressed the issue of the very need for national visual arts standards and the deeply flawed procedures for formulating the same, the critique turns its attention to the particular content of this document, finding it equally insubstantial and unsubstantiated.

Privileging Subject Centered perspectives over Student Present ones

Of the several features of the NVAS content that this author takes issue with is the one of privileging subject matter over student "presence." The formulation of most every Anchor Standard, Enduring Understanding, and Essential Question is posed in a subject matter forward orientation, placing in minor or completely absent position, the learner. By way of example, take the Essential Question; "How and why might criteria vary? [13 down, found in Enduring Understanding; 'People evaluate art based on various criteria] If this- or any- "Standard" were to position the learner as pivotal, that Essential Question might be transposed as follows, "What criteria might best be employed by others in order for them to better appreciate the intentions and quality of execution of your art work? Why would those criteria be most appropriate? What criteria would be of little consequence to you? Why?"

This perspective of student *present* (not student *centered*; student *present*) teaching engages the learner by the immediacy of its personal relevance, thus individualizing learning in its process and outcomes, and requiring each learner to make informed and personal account for their ideas, values and behaviors. In decided contrast the NVAS offers nothing of the kind. Instead, we are presented with the (unfortunate) classical divergence between the two major educational perspectives; subject centered teaching as opposed to student centered education. In this National Art Education Association sanctioned National Visual Arts Standards, every one of the 195, plus 15 plus 45 things to teach, every single one privileges Subject Centered teaching, entirely eliminating Student Present perspectives and their accompanying pedagogies. Does this bias in the NAEA's own National Visual Arts Standards, manifest the NAEA's own bias in this most significant matter of educational objectives and procedures? A bias I do not believe

the NAEA actually endorses, yet clearly through its wholehearted creation and endorsement, and vigorous promulgation is now conspicuously aligned.

Problem: privileging cognitive domain over other domains

The following are the mental operations the NVAS require to respond to the 195 assigned art projects.

develop criteria, formulate, investigate, identify, analyze, evaluate, classify, provide and cite evidence, distinguish between, establish relevant criteria, compare and contrast, assess, analyze, explain, provide evidence, brainstorm, elaborate, combine ideas, document, hypothesize, generate plans, set goals, apply knowledge to, demonstrate, document, classify.

And; imagine, visualize, investigate, invent, explore, experiment and create.

Note the specificity of the cognitive operations and the vagueness of the affective operations; imagine, explore, create. How instructive is that for a teacher? That is the whole difficult art and craft of teaching the arts! Children; Create! Invent! Explore!

Where in these NVAS assignments are such mental operations as becoming acquainted with and gaining mastery of the conventional materials and methods of forming meaning through the visual arts? Where is the sequence of assignments that would nurture the acquisitions of expressive line, form, color, shape, texture, tint, space, cadence, dominance, tone? Where do these units of making meaningful visual expression come in this twelve years education in the visual arts?

Perhaps all these other domains of mentation and processes employed in the creative/artistic endeavors are to be found in the sister document to the NVAS, the National Media Arts Standards. Indeed some of the materials and methods approach to art teaching are to be found in this sister document. This separation of the cognitive, affective and physical domains, is cause for further concern about this entire enterprise of setting national standards and in these two documents in particular. Has our profession learned nothing from the neurosciences about the holistic, integrated nature of the creative/artistic processes? Have we returned to the fallacious notions that these and other mental processes are distinct and can be cultivated in the absence of each other? Has it not become abundantly evident these many years that although there are specialized areas of the brain, that thought arises as a consequence of systemic "conversations" amongst many regions of the brain, each sensitive to the many inputs arriving seemingly simultaneously and adding its particular "voice" to the gathering hub-bub, in order to emerge, still mysteriously, with coherent, reality based responses? Everyone (else) knows this. Haven't we, art teachers, been at pains to explain to others outside of the arts, that creative/artistic procedures require, *thus cultivates*, all domains to form aesthetically meaningful and persuasive artwork? Upon what literature have the authors of these documents based their separation of the two of many domains in the formulation of these national arts standards? Ideas, materials, technique, interpenetrate, goad and restrain one another throughout the creative/artistic processes. Artists know this, sadly, the authors of these national visual arts standards seem to think otherwise.

And then there are other mental processes essential to the creative/artistic endeavors whose absence in both the NVAS and the NMAA is curious: the incremental formation of self worth that provides ballast for any artistic going forth in a world that constantly challenges ones own voice and convictions. The absence of an appetite for mystery, wonder, awe, fantasy, passion, inner quietude, joy. Just as you can create lessons that cultivate achievements such as the abilities to compare, contrast and categorize, you can also create a classroom environment in what you teach and how you teach cultivates a sense of wonder, of inner quietude, and of joy. These too are what the creative and the artistic enterprise are for and about and indeed, why we do it at all. Can I be the only art teacher who holds these truths?

Problem: privileging art as an aesthetic object to judge and discuss

The purposes of art are many; to entertain, decorate, meditate, sanctify, memorialize, gift, illustrate, heal, rejuvenate, pray, calm, commune. The general purposes that art is assigned in the NVAS are primarily to make objects that portray what one sees and feels in order to discuss their aesthetic merits. By way of example, we iterate the many cognitive processes students and their teachers are asked to apply to the consideration of art objects; develop criteria, formulate, investigate, identify, analyze, evaluate, classify, provide and cite evidence, distinguish between, establish relevant criteria, compare and contrast, assess, analyze, explain, provide evidence, brainstorm, elaborate, combine ideas, document, hypothesize, generate plans, set goals, apply knowledge to, demonstrate, document, classify.

There are of course many objects, intended as art and otherwise, amenable to these intellectual procedures. But there are other intentions of artists and their art that require quite other engagements. Art for spiritual intents, art for meditative purposes, for healing, for personal transformation, for communion, all require different points of engagement for the artist, and for the one who engages with the objects and procedures so made.

This truncated understanding of the many and profoundly different functions of the arts, and the many different conditions under which they might be cultivated, lead to the equally constricted standards of the NOVAS, and, sui generis, an aspect of the range of NAEA perspectives in its research, literature, and presentations.

Problem: too vague to be meaningful

VA:Cr10.1.2a “Create works of art about events in home, school, or community life”.

What kind of Anchor Standard could this possibly be? It refers to just about everything anybody of any age could possibly do! How is this Anchor Standard different from or an improvement upon any lesson plan any teacher might now be offering? Or has ever offered? Or could possibly offer? “Create works of art about event in home, school or community life” (!)

Or VA:Cr3.1.3a “Elaborate visual information by adding details in an artwork to enhance emerging meaning” But isn’t this procedure the constant procedure of every work of art at every age? Enhancing meaning is what the entire artistic enterprise is about. The difficulties of doing so are what make the making of art, the making of meaning, difficult and equally so revelatory. This assignment cannot be made distinct from other assignments, it is a constant in all artistic enterprises. As such, it puts into question the very structural integrity of all these assignments and their necessary placement in their designated boxes that are then assembled into a supposed ascending order. It looks reasonable, but it isn’t.

Or, VA:Cr1.2.IIIa HS ADVANCED “Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices, following or breaking established conventions to plan the making of multiple works of art and design based on a theme, idea of concept.” Here again, this sort of portmanteau National, Anchor, Standard, covers just everything, and therefore offers no useful council at all. Further, put into simple terms, this high school advanced assignment is essentially the same as VA:Cr1.2.1a. “Make art or design with various materials and tools to explore personal interests, questions and curiosity”. The essence of this wordy Anchor Standard might be just as well be written: *Make art with various materials.*

Problem: weak match of developmental age with assigned tasks

VA:Pr4.1PKa “Identify reasons for saving and displaying objects artifacts and artwork”

Or: **VA:Re8.1.PKa**. ‘Interpret art by identifying and describing subject matter’
(Admittedly, I do not understand what this Anchor Standard means)

Pr means Pre- Kindergarten, and that means the children are between the ages of two and four. Having children of my own and also grandchildren, taught and supervised many art teachers at the pre-kindergarten level through post doctoral candidates, functionally familiar with child development literature, I find these assignments not merely too advanced for the cognitive development of children, but equally of little or no interest to them. The same criticism of inappropriate cognitive development and child interest can be found in many VAS 's , by way of example; VA:Re8.1.4a, VA:Re9.1.1a, or VA:Re7.1.2a.

Problem: Cognitive Sequencing compared with Artistic Development

Every curriculum guide offers a version of sequencing of things to teach, sequencing most often arranged by degree of complexity and intellectual development, as do these National Visual Arts Standards. Across these 195 assignments what to teach seemingly becomes increasingly complex in terms of mental procedures required paralleling the ascending age of the student. But many of these assignments are actually quite the same ART assignment, only requiring more complex thinking procedures. While demanding greater complexity of rational thought processes in keeping with the increasing capacity to do so is good educational practice, however, the child’s engagement in the creative processes never goes deeper or finer. I do not find increasingly rich engagements for more ambitious, imaginative adventures, I fail to find assignments that increasingly bring students to deeper self reflection, or that gradually nurture more daring experimentation with media to reveal and unveil. I see little evidence of either the increase of either inner directness or global self-identification. Where is there to be found the nurturing of selective reserve, fuller dynamic range of expression, greater audacity of expressing deeper convictions, increasing explorations of profoundly different world views, all so essential for artistic sensibilities? Where is there evidence of the slow formation of a sense of self worth that provides ballast for any artistic going forth in a world that constantly challenges ones own voice and convictions.

Problem: Teaching Messy Children

However laudatory these 195 assignments may be, they all presuppose ready learners; children prepared to engage in these high minded and rather sophisticated assignments. That’s not simply a fundamentally naïve assumption underlying the entire enterprise, it is simply incorrect and as a consequence, mischievous. Actual teachers in actual classrooms with 25 to 30 and more children never have 25 to 30+ prepared children ready to learn whatever the curriculum of the day offers, no less such swell ideas as, **VA:Cr2.2.6a “Explain environmental implications of conservation, care, and clean-up of art materials, tools, and equipment”** Second grade!

But look, now with the NVA matrix of what to teach and when to teach it, every art teacher has been provided with 195 Anchor Standards, 45 Essential Questions, and 15 Enduring Understandings each one calibrated for grade level relevance. Sanctioned by the NAEA as “National Standards”, must mean that most everybody across this vast nation is capable of doing this. If so, some, perhaps many art teachers will say to themselves, “How come I, a

certified Art Teacher, can't even get to explain to a handful of children what we are supposed to be doing so that everyone, or most everyone in the class gets it. It must be either these kids or me. I'm trying as hard as I possibly can, and these children are basically good, so it must be their inadequate parenting, or maybe its these difficult times. How could it possibly be that the NAEA sanctioned National Visual Art Standards itself is somehow a flawed document? How could *that* be? No, it's these kids, it's their parents, it's these times; it's me.) This self incrimination for failure, when the flaws may very well lay elsewhere, is all too frequently the outcome of utopian demands upon mismatched subjects who for all their efforts, get to pay outsized costs.

Problem: Educational Jargon~ Jabberwocky

Art Teacher to School Board member:

"I am pleased to describe our new art program based on our National Visual Arts Standards. We begin with VA: Cr1.1PKa, and VA:Vr.1.2.1a, and then progress through; VA:Cr2.3PKa, VA: Cr3.1.Ka, VAa; Cr.2.2.La, VA: Pr4.1.1a, VA:Pr5.1.II a, on to; VA:nRe.9.1.8a, VA: Cn10.1.8a.VA: Re.9.1.8a, VA: Re9.IIa. VA: Re8.1.5a. For more advanced students we offer such assignments as VA: Re.8.1.IIIa and VA: Cr1.2.IIIa!"

School Board member to Art teacher: "What?"

How is an art teacher, parent, school board member, or *anyone*, helped to understand what ought to be taught and when to teach it by acronyms? How does this use of language encourage an art teacher's creativity, promote artistic sensibilities, invite teachers to meet the evolving needs of their particular students? How do these prefixes encourage teachers to rearrange as they might see fit, the imposed order of what to do and when to do it? How does this matrix encourage exploration, invention, divergent thinking, honor emergent circumstances? What kind of person would desire to enter a profession in which they would be invited to fit into a matrix that was 12 years long by 195 assignments wide, not a single one of their own devise? Not one of my students. Not me.

Instead, this matrixing smacks of our profession's penchant for seeking legitimacy by adopting intellectual forms created by other disciplines to describe their experimental findings; in this case, borrowed from the Periodic Table of the elements. Mendeleev, the creator of the Periodic Table, diagramed, in a matrix, how all the elements of the universe, by the incremental increase of their chemical and physical attributes, relate to one another. Thus each element's location in the matrix is based on the ascending order of their atomic mass, valence and oxide state. And because there is actual order at this level of the universe, the design of the matrix graphically reveals this universal order. Knowing the position of any element also describes the attributes of that element and therefore also has predictive value as to what element and its attributes come before and after, above and below it in the matrix. The Periodic Table has empty boxes and incomplete lines of "families" of the elements, because some families of elements –those sharing physical properties, share more properties and thus behaviors than they do with others families. Some spaces have nothing in them because they were either not discovered yet, but their properties were implied by what was already discovered, or, because that was the limit atomic structures permit. Regular order, and episodic fractal sequences blossoming now into discernable pattern then into other levels of order obscured for us by vast complexity and even indeterminacy. Sort of like kids, cute, but messy. Yet, the NVAS has cleaned things up for all of us. All anchor standards fit perfectly into all the boxes proscribed by all the Essential Questions and the Enduring Understandings. There is no meaning at all to all these letters and numbers; VA:Re8.1.4a, VA:Re9.1.1a, or VA:Re7.1.2a. except where they are in the Magic matrix itself. They explain nothing, they predict nothing. Yet this borrowed matrix presents itself as a diagram of everything you need to know and when to do it. Would it be so. But alas, it is not so, not so at all.

Section III In Sum

A personal opinion: Quo Vadis?

If anything in this critique of the National Visual Arts Standards is found to be deserving of merit, there is much to reconsider. Well underway, highly publicized and deeply embraced by the NAEA as the NVAS is, addressing any of the claims put forward by this critique would require serious deliberation of the NAEA leadership and other key members of our association. There are many intertwining factors in the creation and adoption of these standards that this critic is not aware. Modifying the policies and research procedures that brought about these NVAS, if taken up at all, are the proper responsibilities of those more knowledgeable of all factors and those vested with appropriate authorities than is this critic. Likewise, there are certain to be many rebuttals of these same claims to be resolved. I welcome what conversation this critique may engender.

With what expertise fifty years making art, teaching art, and preparing art teachers may provide, should such a conversation come about, I would put forward the following recommendations.

Put aside the matrix. Its map of everything to teach and when to teach it under the guise of providing anchor standards is wrong for the many reasons offered above. The NAEA would do well to abandon this periodic tendency. To retain much of the sincere efforts and worthy features of the document, the NAEA might reformulate and promote these perspectives for teaching art as something less lofty and less compelling of adherence. There are many wise questions and understandings, but they are not Enduring – nothing is- and although significant, they may not be Essential. Perhaps the enterprise might better be conceived and offered as “A Cornucopia of Good Ideas for Teaching Art.” That is what they are and that is all that they are. Interested parties to art teaching could then consult them as they might consult Google, or walk through Home Depot, look up how to make things in Popular Mechanics, thumb through the Whole Earth Catalogue. Put this Cornucopia on line with an active- and edited- interface to remain current. Each one of these globally successful information hubs knows that the whole world is bursting with ideas, many of them quite good, some being just right for certain folks, like teachers. Invite our teachers to select and create that which best fits their own genius, that of their students and sensitive to their times. Trust in the sagacity of the teacher in place to know best what is in their place, and best serves their clientele. These are the same services that the NAEA has increasingly provided its members these many years. Why not do so more and even better?

Post Script: an immodest alternative view

Teachers know that the jewel of great price in education is not the curriculum. That jewel belongs to the teacher, that teacher who places their own once in a life time life in the service of enhancing another persons life. What higher service can there be than this? No matter the curriculum or even the circumstances within which they teach, such a teacher will more than likely bring about many good things, amongst them good looking art work and informed, well articulated ideas. A weak teacher, in contrast, unloving, of her/his students, subject, self and future, will defeat every curriculum, every standard, and every child. The work will come hard, it will be dry, shallow. Who would dare to create, reveal anything else under the eye and hand of such a teacher? Everybody knows this.

There is an art to teaching, and particular arts to the teaching of the arts. We all know this. And, this being the case, I recommend with the release of energy and resources now devoted

to end of time documents such as national standards, national anything's, that the NAEA devote more of its substantial resources to the cultivation of *the personhood of the art teacher*.

There are of course many contributing elements to the effective teacher; mastery of subject matter, materials, techniques, the design of lesson plans, classroom management, and such. But the quality that makes the teacher the pivotal element of education, education's "Jewel," lays in their character of *being*. Without carefully nurtured character development, a teacher lacking the same, constricts if not collapses the potentials of the entire educational enterprise. There is much literature on this and its training found in humanistic psychology, holistic, and dare I use the term, spiritual studies. The field of art education might do well to expand its acquaintance with such literature, practitioners and methods. The NAEA could help provide its teacher preparation programs and its in-service members with programs that cultivate essential features of the personhood of the teacher. What might this mean?

The invigoration of our own particular creative talents, and in so doing, embolden those budding qualities embedded within each one of our students (colleagues too).

The cultivation of a deeply reflective Self, a Self that is deliberately nurtured in all three major dimensions of our being; mind, and body and spirit/core values.

The design and conduct of classrooms as arenas of well being, havens, far from judgment and punishment, where the tentative emergent Self can venture into the world, exploring its possibilities and propensities.

The education of the power of being gentle and patient with our own Selves and so model the same saving graces for our students, and while we are at it, for everything and everyone else.

Help us to the realization that everything in the world is different, and more, and better than we have known it to be, and will ever know it to be, including our own Selves. Help us to meet each of our students, create curricula, and employ a pedagogy to match.

* You might include other characterological qualities that you find significant in the Jewel of a teacher, and enhanced your own art- and life. No need to come upon such a teacher by chance, we can nurture such qualities first in our own Self, and then, and by consequence, our students.

In a classroom with a teacher possessing even a modicum of these personal qualities, my experience is that the student's art will flow naturally and abundantly, their words will come- eventually- grace full and clear, their work- sooner than later- will not be shallow. It will be the best that every one can do.

An impossible agenda. Impossible to achieve, yes, but not at all impossible to address. As Maxine Greene (my teacher) reminded us; Make of your own classroom the arena of your own becoming, for if you are not here and now in the continual process of your own becoming, it is certain, neither will it be for your students.

Thank you for your attention, I look forward to your own reflections on these matters.

Peter London

