

CREATIVITY AND EDUCATION: A DISCOURSE INFORMED BY PERSPECTIVES OF THREE CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ARTISTS.

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When the theme for this issue of the International Journal of Arts Education: "Creativity and Arts Education" was announced, I reckoned the magnitude of the challenge that it will pose to the editor and to the possible authors. This challenge is rooted in the fact that, despite a large body of scholarly work devoted to the consideration of human creativity (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1990, 1999; Feldman, 1999; Gruber, 1988) and attempts to insert some rigor into the applications of the term – "creativity" is

a run away train in terms of how it is applied in daily contexts, at least in North America. A toddler fascinated with the feel of paint who accidentally leaves marks on paper that hold some aesthetic appeal to the spectator; a student wearing socks of a different color on each of her feet; or a school secretary who arranges photographs on a school display board at random angles instead of in rows – all can, and in my experience have been, described as “creative.” Specifically in the context of art education, in the many classes that I visited over the years, I cannot recall even one instance of a teacher questioning his or her students’ creativity. It seems that art educators have bought into the idea that “if you are in an art class you will be/act creative(ly).”

I question the latitude with which we refer to “creativity” not because I do not like pictures made by young children, have no appreciation for trends and fads in teenage fashion, or do not see the value of people doing things in ways that are, within their settings, less than customary. I am rather expressing concern over the “conceptual inflation” that I believe we face today, which confuses the meaning of creativity to the point where it becomes meaningless. This problem is perhaps especially acute in the context of art education contemplating, or more accurately being in the process of, a shift towards the “visual culture” agenda (Duncum, 2001, Freedman, 2003; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Tavin, 2000) – with its strong populist orientation.

To be clear, I am in strong support of the study of visual culture in education. I have long advocated the need for educators to be attuned to the interests of their students reflective of and enacted through the engagement with visual culture and considerate of the learners’ life contexts of which visual culture is a powerful element (e.g., Kindler, 1992, 1994, 1999; Kindler & Darras, 1997, 1998). I have further argued that the study of visual culture can make a powerful contribution to “visual education” (e.g., Kindler, 2003). In my view, young children’s fascination with cartoons or manga, for example, can be formative rather than destructive to their creative potential (and I am using here the term “creative” rigorously!) – if properly assisted through thoughtful, knowledgeable teaching. I also see the potential for the study of visual culture and its impact on a society to stimulate forms of creativity that can

guide new artistic – and societal – solutions. However, I also reckon that the expansion of the framework under the umbrella of art education creates a danger of blending of distinctions between activities and imagery that actually function in very different ways within a culture and its social organizations. Art, as a domain of human endeavor has, over time, developed its own field and institutions that define and guide it. For all the good and the bad that comes with it, even if “anything can be art” within the boundaries of the art world – the same claim, although commonly made within the society at large, does little more than make the self-proclaimed “artist” feel good – that is if he or she is able to derive satisfaction from an acclamation that is, in essence, groundless.

I am not suggesting here that all that has been acclaimed as art is good art – nor even that, in my view, it actually merits to be placed within the art category. I am also not implying that some of the work generated outside of the professional discourse in art would not merit such an acclaim by the virtue of its quality. These matters deserve a separate discussion.

I am rather suggesting that consideration of what is “creative” or “artistic” ought to be approached from a systems perspective – which does not make categories hermetic and rigid – but gives them some conceptual precision and clarity which allow these terms to retain the capacity to carry more than a superficial meaning by recognizes the value of the disciplines and the societal institutions within which these terms evolve and continue to be defined (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1998, 1999; Kindler, 2003a, 2004; in press). This way of conceptualizing creativity acknowledges “an interaction between producer and audience” and the fact that “creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individual’s products.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 314). I argued that a strong parallel can be developed to the concept of art and that it is possible to extend the systems perspective to the consideration of artistic development – understood as a process that guides development of artistic creativity (Kindler, 2003, 2004, in press). My critique of the traditional approaches to the study of artistic development has centered on their separation from the world of art and aimed at exposing the weakness of theoretical frameworks which do not take fully under account the power and significance of

interaction between the individuals and the symbolic, cultural and social aspects of the environments within which artistic expression takes place and/or is judged. This is, because, art, like creativity “is not a real objective quality, but refers only to the acceptance of a particular field of judges.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 316.).

Furthermore, I would like to caution against the tendency to claim arts education as the breeding ground for creativity in general. This argument has often been raised in arts advocacy efforts. Yet, there is no evidence that creativity is restricted to the arts, nor that creativity manifested in the context of visual arts, for example, is transferable to other domains of cognition. Although strong and convincing arguments have successfully been made about the valuable ways in which art contributes to the development of mind (e.g., Eisner, 2002), a straight-forward relationship between the engagement in art activities and the acquisition of qualities that would fund creativity “across the board” has not been established. From the systems perspective, this lack of a direct transfer can be explained by the close ties of an individual’s creativity with the domain in which such creativity is to be manifested. In Csikszentmihalyi’s words, “before a person can introduce a creative variation, he or she must have access to a domain, and must want to learn to perform according to its rules.” (1999, p. 327). Furthermore, with an individual most likely to be creative within a domain in which he or she has a particular inborn endowment, talent or predisposition (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences suggests that such special predispositions tend to be distributed among individuals rather than located within a single individual (Gardner, 1983, 1993). This limitation clearly does not diminish the value of arts in education – as catering to the development of qualities and attributes of the mind that the engagement with arts uniquely affords (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002) and the development of the potential for artistic creativity are, in themselves, most worthwhile goals.

In summary, for the discussion of “Creativity and art education” to be productive, it is important, in my view, to use the term creativity in its disciplined rather than colloquial meanings and to link this conversation to the world of art which should, if it already is not, be an important source of insight for art education. Although I realize that the readers will approach this

paper from the perspectives of their own experiences and definitions of creativity and art, I believe that focusing on the work of contemporary artists who have achieved “membership” in the world of art, as evidenced by their referred exhibitions records, reviews, and artistic awards may bring us closer to the consideration of creativity with some commonality of the meaning of this term – and in ways that could have relevance and application to art education.

Artists as sources for consideration of artistic creativity

Recently, I had an opportunity to spend three years in Hong Kong. During that time, I engaged in a study designed to explore – through the eyes and minds of visual artists - artistic development and artistic creativity. This study, conducted in collaboration with Victor Lai Ming Hoi and Ma Kwai Shun involved selected contemporary artists in Hong Kong and mainland China. Our informants included artists pursuing traditional Chinese painting, as well as painting that combines Western and traditional influences, experimental art/installation; digital media, sculpture/ceramics, as well as those recognized for their artistry in cartoon/caricature. A common characteristic was that all of these artists enjoyed international recognition and have been “accepted” by the world of art as evidenced by the refereed exhibitions records, awards, etc. We invited these artists to participate in semi-structured, open-ended interviews designed to access their understanding of how people develop in visual arts and what accounts for human growth in the ability to create in this domain. The interviews were conducted in English, Cantonese or Mandarin (or a combination of English and Chinese), depending on the preference of each artist. In most cases, we were invited to the artists’ studios which allowed the artists to refer to examples of their work - originals or reproductions in catalogues, and sometimes even to demonstrate how they engage in their practice.

I will not present here a full report from this study, but rather, drawing on the tradition of the cognitive case study (Gruber & Davis, 1988), I will share insights from conversations with three artists: Fang Xiang, Leung Mee Ping and Lili Lau Lee Lee. In doing so, I will attempt to insert voices to the

discourse on artistic development and creativity from sources which the systems perspective advocated earlier in this paper requires us to consider. Clearly, this is not the first attempt to solicit artists views on art or creativity (e.g., Goldwater, 1945; Herbert, 1964; Johnson, 1982; Kuh, 1962). However, I believe that it is important to explore how artistic activity and creativity are understood by the artists not only of the past but also of this day - especially those who operate in cultural contexts that have historically been neglected in the English language art education literature and, consequently, have not had a chance to impact on our thinking and practice.

Fang Xiang

I first became acquainted with Fang Xiang's works during an early afternoon walk along Hollywood Road in Central, Hong Kong. The street is lined with galleries that feature an impressive collection of antiques alongside inexpensive replicas for the less discriminating collectors, and where galleries of contemporary art offer a smorgasbord of art forms and styles from various parts of the world. I remember pausing in front of a large display window, facing a painting that instantly captured my imagination. It was one of the rare moments where I was confronted with an image which conveyed a sense of comfortable familiarity, yet was distinct from anything else I have encountered before. My bias towards abstraction vanished in an instant as my eyes entered an enchanted house where geese and cats and orchids and floor tiles and lanterns created a poetic environment, engaging my senses through the intensity of colors, intricacy of patterns, and a Matisse-like treatment of space – all with nostalgia of a traditional Chinese landscape painting. I felt conflicted by my reaction of falling in love with an artwork that exemplified many attributes which I generally find not appealing: it was overly decorative, incredibly complex, and clearly lacked discipline and economy in the use of pictorial devices. Yet, it held an irresistible attraction and generated a strong desire to find out more about its origins. I have to confess that my initial interest in including Fang Xiang in this study was to seek answers to the question of what is behind the works of art that have this exceptional sense of appeal and which instantly attract attention, regardless of the audience's awareness of their established artistic merit. I have since discovered that

Fang Xiang is, and understandably so, among the rising stars of the art world in China, with an impressive record of international exhibitions and awards for one of his age and with a growing community of devoted collectors around the world.

Fang Xiang was born in 1967 in Shantou City in Chinese province of Guangdong. In his childhood, in his own words, he “had nothing to play with except paper and pencil.”(Kindler, Lai, & Ma, 2004, p. 5) He described himself as a quiet and shy boy, who had found a sense of fulfillment in drawing for as long as he can remember. Fang Xiang attributes his interest in drawing to his uncle, a self-taught artist who eventually became a professor of art and who first introduced Fang Xiang to the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. As he acknowledges the role of “significant others” in his artistic development journey, he points to his early training at an art gallery in Guangzhou where he took lessons after he completed primary school. He described curriculum as “Russian style,” where he was exposed mostly to Western drawing and painting with only a limited emphasis on traditional Chinese artforms. He also credits his formal education at the Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts and specifically mentions influence of Lam Fung Chuk and Lam Yung. Fang Xiang comments that although these older generation painters’ technique is very different from his own current work, he suggests that in terms of “thinking and preference, there are still some similarities.” (p. 9) Questioned about his juvenile work and the origins of his artistic success, Fang Xiang shared with us what he considered as essential components in shaping of an artist.

First of all, he indicated that there are some innate prerequisites to artistic development related to perceptual abilities demonstrated in sensitivity to “see things that not every person can see.” (p. 6) He regards this sensitivity as central to the creative process and as a foundation for artistic growth. He also makes it clear that this sensitivity is something that grows and develops over time, and that it needs to be nurtured. This sensitivity is essential because, according to Fang Xiang “art originates in everyday life” (p. 11) and an artist has to be able to attend to this life in its fullest. He provides the following example:

“(…) most people think that trees in Southern China give them the

impression of not being so lively. The leaves are clustered, not so beautiful. But I can see the beautiful side instead. I would see these leaves like green clouds in the sky.” (p. 13)

Secondly, a related dimension of development that founds artistic creativity transforms this heightened awareness of visual world into the “inner world” where the essence of artistry eventually resides. It is in this inner world that the experiences become transformed. Fang Xiang contends that there are two ways in which the inner world can develop to either allow the artists to “paint through their rational thinking” or “to paint through their feelings.” (pp. 1-2) He considers himself belonging to the latter category of artists. This dichotomy suggested by Fang Xiang reminded me of Lowenfeld’s distinction between visual and haptic (Lowenfeld, 1943), where the emotion or feeling-driven artistic production is considered to be distinct from the one guided by priorities that are perhaps easier to define and grasp – in the case of Lowenfeld’s account – visual realism. Listening to Fang Xiang explain these dual trajectories of creative development, I also thought of the repertoire theories which, although articulated in very different ways, point to the plurality of developmental dimensions (e.g., Wolf & Perry, 1988; Wolf, 1994; Kindler & Darras, 1994, 1998)

Thirdly, Fang Xiang makes a clear connection between development of artistic abilities and “cultivation of good character.” (Kindler, Lai, & Ma, 2004, p. 4) He subscribes to the traditional Chinese notion that good character is a pre-requisite for good art. This connection between moral integrity and artistic integrity may seem shocking in the context of values and beliefs espoused by the contemporary world of Western art – but for Fang Xiang the ability to create in art is intrinsically linked to the development of moral character. Our conversation never engaged the notion of developmental progression from scribbles to more refined visual forms but rather focused on a steady progression towards moral and ethical refinement. It seemed that graphic development which has been the focus of the Western discourse about “artistic development” is of a secondary concern for Fang Xiang when considering development in artistic creativity.

Fourthly, Fang Xiang attributes great significance to practice and formal artistic education. Artistic development, in his terms, involves more than a

natural unfolding, it is a process where interactions with the external world need to be structured to encourage it. He does not deny that some artists can possibly be self-taught, but holds that development of artistry is greatly facilitated by a structured study. He mentions the value of social learning: “when you learn as a group and all of you are interested in painting, then you will set your classmates as your target to strive for”(p.13) He also makes indirect references to the need to learn and master a range of creative approaches and techniques – in both two and three dimensional media, by providing examples of such useful engagements. Persistence, practice and hard effort echo throughout the interview.

If I were to capture development of Fang Xiang’s artistic creativity while trying to stay true to his report of this journey, I would summarize it as a steady, continuous growth in cognitive abilities needed to attend in careful and sensitive ways to a lived experience, and to internalize it and to transform it through the prism of very personal, intense feelings; steady refinement and increasing commitment to moral and ethical principles that guide achievement of a strong moral character; growth in both repertoire and mastery of artistic media and techniques, as well as maturing resolve and persistence to strive for excellence and achievement of artistic goals. This collection of traits, attributes and values suggest a possible way to capture the essence of what founds creativity in visual arts – based on a life experience and through the prism of understandings that it has afforded in the case of one contemporary Chinese artist.

Leung Mee Ping

Leung Mee Ping’s studio provides a stunning contrast to the stereotype of an artist’s atelier. It is a spacious, uncluttered, well organized room with a sparkling clean floor where everything seems to have its precise place. It is within this “disciplined” environment that Leung Mee Ping works on the development of her ideas and creates early drafts of her impressive works. Born in Hong Kong in 1961, Leung Mee Ping was attracted to drawing from early on in her life and art has been her strength during school years. She studied calligraphy as a way to translate her artistic interest into a “productive” skill with a hope of earning money by producing calligraphy for

Chinese New Year greetings. When as a teenager she traveled to Canada to study, her independent spirit took over and after just a few months at York University, she withdrew and flew to Paris – with limited resources and no guaranteed admission to an art school. It took her three attempts to enter the L'Ecole National Supérieur des Beaux Arts and begin her formal study in visual arts which eventually lead her to completing, a decade later, a MFA at the California Institute of Arts. In 2003, Leung Mee Ping was honored by the ARTAsiaPacific as the “Leading Contemporary Asia Artist.” Leung Mee Ping’s work is complex and full of surprises – in the choice of media and in its conceptual depth. Her installations involving use of everyday objects, photographs, slide projections, films, sculptures, and sometimes even live creatures, are as carefully structured and disciplined in the use of visual devices and as neat as her studio. This economy of means combined with exceptional ability to trigger imagination, engage the viewer in a fascinating journey of discovery of possible meanings and layers of powerful aesthetic experience.

In ways similar to Fang Xiang, in our conversation about her own artistic development, Leung Mee Ping made only passing references to development in graphic representation. Instead, she focused her comments on the development of qualities that have relatively little to do – in direct, overt ways – with the act of creating a visual image. She placed a paramount importance on other qualities and habits of mind, although she also made references to the value of technical proficiency. She clearly emphasized the significance of conceptual development as it relates to art-making.

It is challenging to distill a three-hour long, rich interview to a few lines of conclusions, but as I checked throughout our conversation with Leung Mee Ping my understanding of her beliefs about the nature of artistic development and creativity, the following themes emerged: visual sensitivity and visual focus; attention to detail and ability to “enlarge” experience; never-satisfied curiosity; independence of mind; persistence and perseverance in one’s effort; technical proficiency; and awareness of the world of Art of the past and the present.

“I can’t believe that there is an artist who never looks into the world and can make the artwork” (Kindler, Lai & Ma, 2004a, p. 3), proclaims Leung Mee

Ping, asserting the primacy of looking and seeing. “I like to notice all things around me. I like to enlarge the things when I look at small things.” (p.3). She considers this thoughtful looking as an essential aspect of inspiration, but also as a means that enable an artist to transform experience into art. She sees this transformation as a key task for an artist. Although she contends that in the past she attributed artistic ability to inborn talent, she does no longer believes this is the case. She claims that visual sensitivity can be developed through an environmental intervention and that children from an early age can purposefully be encouraged to use their eyes in ways that support artistic potential. “To use your eyes, you don’t have to speak (...) I mean, sometimes, it (speaking) limits your possibility.” (p. 3) She goes as far as to suggest that it would benefit children not to talk at times – just to look, and to watch TV or movies with the sound turned off, to learn to focus on visual experience. She makes a parallel to the blind people whose sense of hearing is heightened by their visual limitations. She also suggests that “looking at the same thing (...) for a long, long time” (p. 5) allows people to grow in visual sensitivity and that it makes it possible for them to constantly discover new possibilities within the same image.

This notion of discovery and the developing ability to discover as a dimension of artistic development closely ties with Leung Mee Ping’s conception of art itself and the role of an artist. In her view, to “discover is more important than to invent. Scientists can invent a lot of things. But for an artist, we do not invent. Maybe we will invent a new meaning, another way of understanding, but (we) will not invent the object itself.” (p. 4)

Referring to her own experience, Leung Mee Ping points to the importance of curiosity and independent decision making in her artistic journey. She says that from her early years, she kept asking questions and remained never satisfied with the obtained answers and that this growing need to learn more about the world has been a powerful factor in the development of her artistry. Although there is a detectable sadness in her voice when she speaks about her childhood in a family with busy parents who paid little attention to her needs, she also credits this experience with the development of her independent thinking – a characteristic which she believes is of a great importance in the development in art. She believes that

it is important for children to “go away, to be more independent, to look around the world” so they can acquire a broad set of experiences that will facilitate and guide their future decision making: in life and in art.

Leung Mee Ping suggests that being sensitive, curious and persistent makes people become interested in “certain kinds of technique or expression.” (p. 13) She states that development in technical ability is fundamentally important “from the very beginning” and attributes significant value to the development in drawing and painting skills. She focuses in her comments not on innate cognitive processes or characteristics that may guide development in pictorial representation, but rather on the ways in which an outside intervention allows the artistry to grow. She points to the paramount importance of interaction between the environment and the individual and explains how learning to draw and paint extends beyond the acquisition of a technical skill. Specifically, she sees the process of learning to draw as a way to develop the capacity to see and perceive nuances that are essential to art. She recalls her year-long experience of learning how to make her own paints by grinding stones and mixing pigments as a vehicle for development of her sensitivity to color and making sound judgments about their use in a composition. The realization of the existence of “15 kinds of blue” (p.13) as well as the freedom to create them at will are seen as milestones in her artistic journey. Yet, Leung Mee Ping sees technique as not much more than “a hardware” that only supports but does not build the “language of the medium” – a language that an artist has to acquire to “transform your feeling into an artwork, (...) to communicate with your work” and to allow the artist to predict and possibly orchestrate how the spectators will engage with it (p. 15).

Leung Mee Ping acknowledges how important it is to connect with the world of art from early on: through an extensive exposure to artworks, opportunity to see artists at work, and having a chance to have one’s own work exposed, judged and validated by the experts. Asked if she shares Lowenfeld’s (1943) worries that an early exposure to adult art can have an adverse, stifling effect on young children’s creativity, Leung Mee Ping disagrees. She makes a reference not only to her own experience that points to the contrary but also invokes Picasso and other artists as examples of how

study of work by others has in fact unleashed innovative thinking in art. She points to the great value of exposure not only to the final product but also to the process:

“If I can look at other people, how other artists [work in their studios], how they set up their installation work, there are so many lessons. You can learn more that just what I can talk to you about.”
(p. 20)

Finally, Leung Mee Ping mentions the importance of presenting oneself to the world of art. She states that she is not an artist on her own desire and recognition – that the artistry comes as acclaimed by others and explains the impact on early rejections (when she unsuccessfully attempted to enter the prestigious L’Ecole Superieur des Beaux Arts on her initial approaches), as well as her first success and the opportunity to have her work exhibited in a professional context, on the growth of her artistic abilities and on her artistic future. These comments seem to offer support to the systems approach perspective on artistic development by recognizing the close relationship between the individual, the field and the domain in shaping Leung Mee Ping’s capacity to create in the visual arts.

Lily Lau Lee Lee

“Lily Lau may not be the first feminist artist in Hong Kong, but she is probably the most well-known one.”(Artist, n.d., p. 1) The way Lily Lau described herself in our interview extended beyond the “feminist artist” label. She used the descriptors: “Hong Kong woman feminist artist” (Kindler, Lai & Ma, 2004b, p. 14), later making an additional reference to herself as a lesbian artist – the term she would not explicitly use when exhibiting her work in Hong Kong, but comfortable using it when presenting herself in the West. Lily Lau’s career began as a graphic artist, when she graduated with a design degree from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Eventually, she completed Masters degree at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom and returned to Hong Kong to focus her work in artforms that became her trademark: cartoon drawing and installation. When asked about her childhood, she claims that she was not particularly motivated to draw or paint

and that she restricted her pictorial activity to school art assignments. She recalls that she was praised for the quality and originality of her school art projects but says that she was not a prolific, self-motivated “child artist.” In her view, her capacity to create in visual arts arose from her intellectual and personal growth and deepening of her conceptual engagement and concern with important social and cultural issues. Yet, in her explanation of how artistic abilities develop, she insists that “the first thing is to observe” (p.3) echoing claims of Fang Xiang and Leung Mee Ping regarding the importance of visual sensitivity and acuity. “Then, the second important thing is the way you articulate the things you observe with your own experience and your own thinking.” This in turn requires acquisition of “means to express the things you have, re-making in your own world, into a form of art” (...) “no matter by drawing, video.” (p. 3) For Lili Lau, technical proficiency is as important as to the other two artists and she suggests that artistic involvement requires “very sophisticated skill. I think in order to convey your thinking, your message clearly, you should have the mature skill to present it.” (p. 4)

However, the essence of artistic creativity is, for her, in a passion and ability to formulate and articulate in one’s mind an important message that can then be translated into a visual form. She believes that travel and exposure to the world and the opportunity to engage fully in life are the mechanisms to find and nurture one’s passion and to gain the insights that fund artistic practice. She believes that artistic development is dependent on such exposure and that social and cultural learning – from peers as well as accomplished artists - are fundamentally important. This notion seems consistent with the approach to artistic development proposed by Wilson and Wilson (1977, 1985), who went as far as to suggest that such development is exclusively a form of a cultural learning and acquisition of an existing graphic language. On the other hand, Lili Lau disagrees that copying the work of others is a part of the developmental journey. In fact, she claims that she never copied drawings of others and although she has seen and read some cartoons as a child – mostly Japanese manga – she never attempted to replicate the characters. She said that she had her own pictorial solutions in mind and that to this day the essence of artistic challenge for her is in formulating the story within the medium of her expression:

“I think the most important is that you’ve got a plot twist at the end or at the beginning. If you got that point, it will make your drawing interesting. I think the main characteristic of comic (strip) is that you can play around with image and words. You can make contrast with the words you have written and visually what you have drawn. They can convey opposite message. There are lots of interesting things happening between words and vision.” (pp. 9 – 10)

Just like Fang Xiang and Leung Lee Ping, Lili Lau volunteers a reference to the importance of the influence of the art world in the development of artistry. She emphasizes the significance of “being discovered” and claims that “it is very important to have this kind of union with different sectors or establishments” (specifically mentioning artists, art audiences, art critics and curators) (p. 5). “Only by reviews from the outside, from the people, from the critics, the cultural critics, art critics, I’ve got a sense that I am doing something seriously, and that I was doing something that makes them so interested (...) That was the point that (...) I can commit full time to become an artist.” (p. 5).

I chose to refer in this paper to the interviews with these three artists because they each represent a different art focus and art style – one may say they have found very different vehicles and avenues to manifest their artistic creativity. Fang Xiang is a painter who received all his formal education in art in China and whose repertoire of visual expression integrates elements of traditional Chinese ink painting. While very contemporary in its expressive qualities, Fang Xiang works are significantly more “traditional” than the experimental installations of Leung Mee Ping. These installations, although full of conceptual depth, put at the forefront the aesthetic experience of the audience and, as the artist herself explains, seldom contain a prescribed “deep meaning,” although she is not opposed to people finding it for themselves. The voice of Lili Lau, on the other hand, brings in a perspective of an activist, an artist who among the three is the most aligned with the contemporary interests in North American art education in visual culture and in art as a form of social advocacy and action. I thought that the perspectives contributed by these three exceptional, internationally recognized Asian artists who in their diversity represent the world of art as it is today rather than

as it was in the past, add valuable insights to the conversation about the development of ability to be creative in the visual arts – not in causal but in more rigorous terms.

Their reflections on development of their own artistry and identification of attributes and characteristics that define artistic capacity and potential for success do not, of course, lend themselves to a generalization – not in the sense of generalization to the entire population of artists – those who practice their art today, and certainly not those artists-to-be in the future. However, they are open to analytic generalization (Yin, 1994) and, from a systems perspective, contribute valuable knowledge that helps define the “shape” of the concept of artistic development reflective of at least some aspects of its understanding at the onset of the twenty-first century – and reflect on some attributes of artistic creativity that might be worthwhile nurturing through the art education process. As such these reflections inform us about the processes, values and priorities that have founded our interviewees’ artistic creativity and perhaps help us understand and distinguish how such creativity differs from the many manifestations that we have grown accustomed to label as “creative” in our daily lives – and in art education contexts. They serve as an invitation to inquire further into the lives and practices of other contemporary artists – not just to generate new knowledge to be added to the volumes of the contemporary art history - but for the insights that they may bring into what art education can (or perhaps even should?) be about as we ponder its future.

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