

School of VISUAL ARTS

Class of 2011 Commencement

Thursday, May 12, 2011

Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center

class of

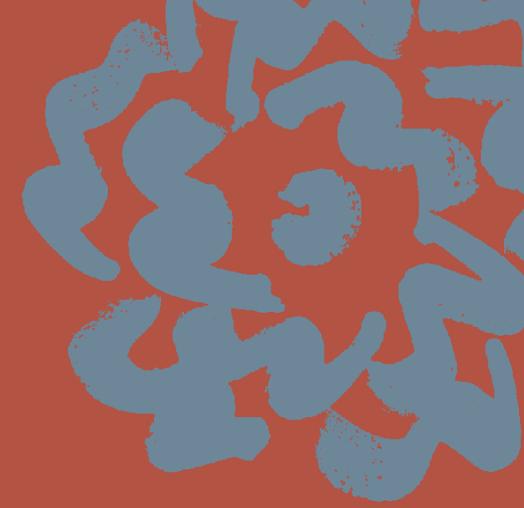
2011

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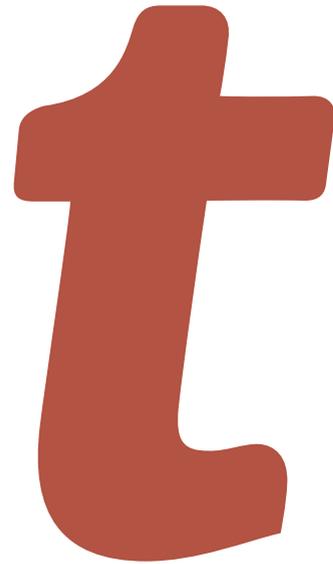
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David Rhodes, President



The expression “May you live in interesting times” has been described as a translation of an ancient Chinese proverb whose provenance has come into question. It seems the phrase was coined by an English diplomat who was assigned to China during the beginnings of the Chinese civil war, but prior to the Japanese invasion. It is thought that the purpose of the phrase is to wish ill upon its recipient—for a life in unsettled times is thought to be difficult, fraught with insecurity and danger.

And, it appears, that we do live in interesting times, at least so far in 2011. Along the 30th parallel—from Morocco through Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—with excursions north into Syria, and south into Yemen—the beginning of this year has seen a series of unprecedented non-violent mass protests unlike anything we have seen since the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 and 1990, which brought new governments to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania; independence for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia; and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The parallels between these two sets of events are quite striking. In both cases there were sclerotic regimes with little or no popular support bent on retaining power not by persuasion but by brute force. And, in every instance, when those who were charged with the task of suppressing protest refused to oppress their fellow citizens, the regime fell with haste and little blood shed.

When the forces of repression did not stay their hand, bloodshed and stalemate ensued,

as has been the case in Libya and Syria. From afar this panorama of protest is a remarkable tribute to the human desire for dignity—even at the risk of one’s health and safety.

The two most successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt also share another characteristic with the prior Velvet Revolutions. The governing elites were not only morally bankrupt, they were quite literally bankrupt—and unable to subvert the aims of the protests by purchasing the loyalty of their subjects or by suborning their collaboration by showering them with unearned privileges for themselves or their families.

Unfortunately, such is not the case as you move eastward along the 30th parallel. Money and the threat of the withdrawal of privilege have successfully subdued protest in other countries, and in some cases, have so thoroughly undercut the quest for dignity that protests—even of a clandestine nature—have disappeared.

Some regimes will survive and, in fact, may even thrive because many would prefer to live in uninteresting times. But this is, it seems to me, a fact about most of us. Compromise is generally preferable to confrontation—as confrontation is not the first resort, it is, rather, the last.

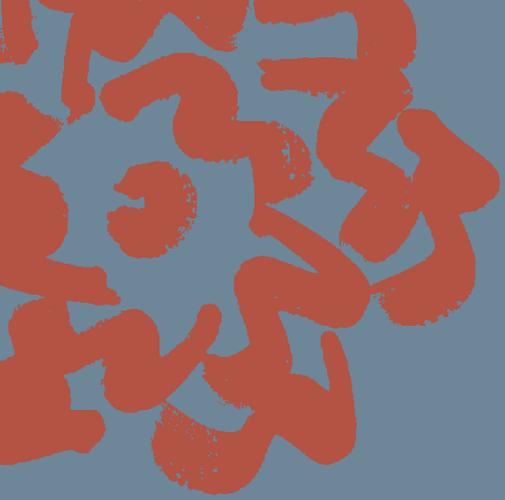
And so how do you fit into this world? I have spent much of the last month looking at your work and I must say you have done yourselves proud. The work is lively, engaging, sometimes provocative, often deeply thoughtful and invariably a delight to look at.

As you will all soon see, during the last decade SVA has welcomed an increasingly diverse, international—and as today’s two ceremonies demonstrate—ever-larger student body into its programs.

With increasing size and scope come increased responsibilities. Although we have immediate duties to family and friends, to the cities, states and countries of which we are citizens, we all have larger duties to support—by word and deed—those who have chosen the same path that we have, but who by circumstance of place of birth, or citizenship, do not have the opportunity to express themselves without fear of imminent retribution.

I should not tell you how to go about fulfilling this responsibility of solidarity, nor to whom you should lend your support, but I can tell that these gestures of support are part of what it means to be an artist in the 21st century. And, doing these deeds for others will make it less likely that others will be required to do these deeds for you.

Congratulations. Thank you.



MORNING SESSION:

Victoria Rivera, Bachelor's Degree Candidate, BFA Film and Video

I think we can agree on a couple things. Not all of them good but most of them true. We're graduating in the middle of one of the worst economic recessions this country has seen. Some people say it's not a great time to be graduating. But I can tell you what it is a great time for: creativity. Having the urge to observe, question and create. To approach a situation or a crisis in an original and unique way, from a place nobody but yourself can. Having the courage to be completely unapologetic, even if it means risking being wrong.

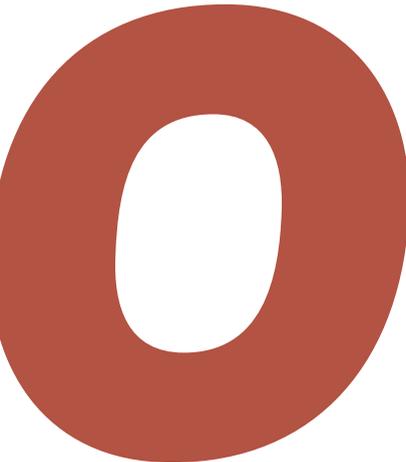
Today we find ourselves amongst intuitive, resourceful and imaginative artists, who are hungry to create and evolve; eager to flourish. We are surrounded by people who want it so badly that we will stop at nothing to accomplish it. On behalf of the Class of 2011, I want to congratulate everyone here. Not for graduating, but for trusting blindly in your craft, your process and your heart. I think it's safe to say that nobody here chose the straight way, but all of us chose the honest way.

This is a reverence for the parents who have unfailingly supported us, for the friends who have grown to be our family, and the faculty who have encouraged us to trust our individualistic convictions, No matter what they are. So for them, and for us:

Let's make some noise!

MORNING SESSION:

Ariane R. West, Master's Degree Candidate, MFA Social Documentary Film



On behalf of the class of 2011, I would like to thank the faculty, staff and administration of the School of Visual Arts, and extend a warm welcome to family, friends and guests who have gathered with us today to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of my fellow classmates and our work here at SVA, as well as stand with us as we turn our gaze towards our next endeavors.

The choice to be an artist is not an easy one in a world where empiricism holds sway and the quantifiable is trusted above all else. We have all learned that for the artist there is no clear path, there are no absolutes...the subjective rules, and yet our society orients us to believe in and seek out objective measures of our success. The clarity provided by objective standards, the reassurance that is offered by rational logic and the certainty promised by scientific methods are all very appealing to us as human beings.

We want to understand, and not only understand, but assign meaning—and not only that, but to connect with others and bond over that shared understanding and meaning—and that's where it gets tricky.

As much as my law professors, and my economics professors before them, tried to instill in me the premise that human beings are rational actors, the intervening years have shown me that we are, above all else, emotional beings—certainly capable of rational

thought and logical analysis, but rarely immune from the influence of our feelings.

And—this is where art comes in.

Rather than the observed reality of the natural or social scientist, the realm of the artist lies in the reality that is felt. Aristotle said: “the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” My endeavors prior to coming to SVA taught me that logic, reason and analysis are powerful tools, but they are just that. Without emotional connection and the ability to communicate in a way that resonates with others on a visceral level, even the most sincere efforts to understand, illuminate and communicate can fail.

We see evidence in the news on a daily basis of the enormous gulf between what we know about the world and each other—the things we are capable of observing and analyzing on an intellectual level—and our ability to harness that vast amount of knowledge and information towards greater understanding, empathy and cooperation. The work of the artist is to bridge this gulf, to create works that speak to people on an emotional level and to promote thinking that enables the intuitive leaps that are so often the basis for humankind's greatest advancements. As Albert Einstein said: “Logic will get you from A to B, but imagination will take you everywhere.”

Art is the ultimate catalyst for human connection and understanding. At its best, it is able to engage the audience's emotions as well as their intellect, and by doing so challenge them to grow. Our contributions, be it as a creator of artistic works, or work in support of the arts and their integration into society at large, have an incredibly vital role to play in the progress of our civilization, and the immense challenges that our generation will take on.

I have learned in my time at SVA that one's creative work is truly an expression of the soul: There is no right or wrong, there is no hiding behind logic, reason or scientific fact—it is you, offering your truest expression of yourself to the world. There is nothing more courageous, nor anything more meaningful—and I am honored to be representing the class today, as I count this as one of the most difficult challenges I've undertaken. The courage and conviction required, so wonderfully demonstrated by you, the Class of 2011, is what sets you apart. Your example is sure to be among your greatest contributions to the world.

The love and support offered by family and friends, the lessons provided by our

teachers and the guidance of our mentors and sense of community generated among our peers were all essential to our development as artists and creative professionals and our growth as individuals over the past two years.

It has been my privilege to be a member of this community, and your strength of purpose inspires me. May our work inspire others, help to break down barriers and build connections; encourage tolerance, understanding, and innovation; and may it promote empathy by accessing that place within ourselves that is both unique and universal.

AFTERNOON SESSION:

Jason E. Bakutis, Bachelor Candidate, BFA Computer Art, Computer Animation and Visual Effects

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ello class of 2011. I am incredibly honored to represent you, and you should all feel incredibly grateful that you are not standing in my shoes. After several sleepless nights, I offer you my experience, because as artists, we share similar experiences; we understand each other.

At one time, I thought a college degree was merely a tool for social mobility; it would allow me to make more money, gain prestige and provide opportunities. I realize now that while those certainly are true, they are not the true purpose of higher education. It feels to me that what it is really about, is living up to our full potential as artists and human beings. Humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow called this “Self-

Actualization,” and to be one’s best, is the final need—the final goal, of any human being. Not surprisingly, Maslow ranks creativity highest on the list, alongside morality and objectivity.

It has been our experience, time and again, that if we trust our creative spirits, and do what it compels us to do, things in life take shape, in ways we never imagined. We need to keep trudging, doing what we love, in order to feel that ineffable sense of true fulfillment. There is no mysterious formula: *Do what you love*.

The most important work of art we will ever create is the story of our lives. Treat your life like a work of art. Make it interesting, original, colorful and dynamic, so that it is

interpreted on many levels. Remember the words of Oscar Wilde: "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative."

Let's have faith in our Muse; she has guided us this far, to graduate from the greatest art school on the planet. This is no small accomplishment; we all know how much work this was. Let's go out and tend to nature and help grow the culture of this planet. It is a noble task.

Thank you School of Visual Arts, and my esteemed colleagues (I always wanted to say that). Thanks to my peers and faculty in the Computer Art Department, and thank you Chair John McIntosh.

Heartfelt thanks to my family and loved ones, who always, without fail, encouraged me to follow my dreams, and were instrumental in helping me realize them. I would also like to thank all the families and loved ones here today who have undoubtedly shown us love, encouragement and support.

My fellow students: no matter which way we look at today, it is a victory. Thank you and congratulations.

AFTERNOON SESSION:

Valeria Koutmina, Master's Candidate, MPS Art Therapy

It is a great honor to be speaking today on behalf of the class of 2011. I would like to thank all of our guides who are here to share in the celebration of the first day of the rest of our lives. I would also like to take a moment to thank and remember those who are not among us today, but whose hopes, inspiration and path have informed our own.

In his work *The Politics of Experience* psychologist R.D. Laing wrote: "What we think is less than what we know; what we know is less than what we love; what we love is so much less than what there is. And to that precise extent, we are so much less than what we are."

Fellow graduates, we have yet much to learn about the world and ourselves in it. More and more, we are discovering that there are no absolutes in navigating a nebulous, changing terrain. I would like to tell you: Do not fear the question, and do not shy away from questioning the world or your own position. This is the spirit of curiosity, of creativity. As we enter the world, continue to define for yourself, and define yourself against the ineffable. As artists, we have here been given the tools to bear witness to change, translate symbol to meaning, and give form to feeling.

Increasingly, historically, the role of the artist has become that of not simply the depicter, but the interpreter of the world. Continue to bear this in mind as you create. The creative impulse is a constructive, rather than a destructive, one.

Many have said that beauty will save the world. We should not take this for granted. As artists (“creators of beautiful objects” according to *Meriam-Webster’s Dictionary*), we owe it to ourselves to question the meaning and impact of the beauty we create. That which is “beautiful” traditionally implies virtue or truth. That which is “true” can be no other way. Thus, beauty has value, and meaning. Trust your own truth; take your own path toward meaning.

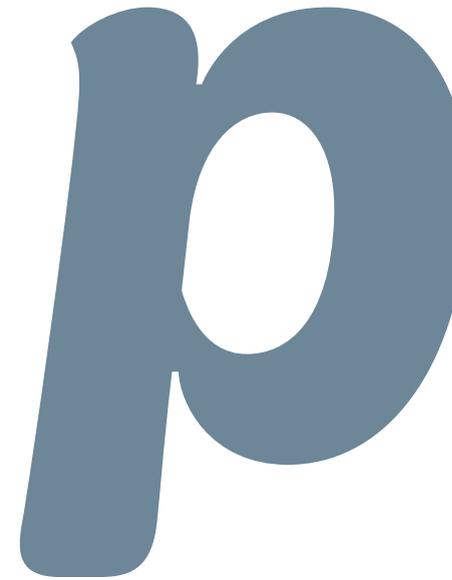
The definition of the word “art” has a shadow: artifice, trickery, illusion. Though beauty does not equal perfection, if you create that which is false, not only will you be betraying your calling as an artist (the seeker and seer), you will be making bad art. It will not be meaningful, nor will it be beautiful in the full sense of the word.

Art holds a mirror to the world, and in so doing raises questions, carrying forth the quest for something greater than the isolated idea or individual vision, as art demands a creator and a witness. Beauty, then, by walking hand in hand with truth, is a vivifying force, for from it meaning, form and communication are born. The laws of the universe dictate no action is without consequence. Our ideas matter more than we at this point may realize. We are all of us works in progress. I hope you become who you are, and are nothing less. I hope you find, as Dr. Laing puts it, “what there is”, and love it enough to share it with the world. We have often been told that knowledge is power. I believe that power without goodness is dangerous. The easy, convenient answer is no answer at all—that is myopia. May you choose consciousness, awareness, and truth. May you dwell in the ecstasy of the question aptly asked.

Congratulations!

Dr. Gerald Maurice Edelman, Nobel Laureate

Art, Science and Consciousness



resident Rhodes, members of the Board, members of the faculty, graduands, relatives and friends, ladies and gentleman. By convention, this salutation could be followed by a series of remarks involving exhortation, inspiration and congratulation. I hope that you will take these remarks as given.

It is a high privilege to address you on this celebratory occasion of the School of Visual Arts. I owe my presence here to the invitation by my friend Milton Glaser, a brilliant and creative mind and mentor at this school for over half a century. He would not accept my confession of ignorance in a domain that you have all mastered. To compensate for my ignorance, I consulted a variety of works by masters of art history and psychology. These included the work of Arnheim, Gombrich, Wollheim and Read. I then turned to some essays by neurophysiologists of vision. While pertinent, they did not

answer what I felt were the central motivational questions underlying the visual arts.

I realized that I had to attempt to understand two related issues: (1) How can we explain the almost universal prevalence of visual art in the human domain? and (2) What accounts for the urge to scratch, cut and paint? I have come to a tentative conclusion based on advances in brain science that I hope will provoke your interest. Following a

brief survey of the brain, I will attempt to provide a biological explanation of visual artistic creation. This will be couched in terms of biological evolution, particularly Darwin's theory of natural selection. After describing the notion that, during our lifetime, each of our brains follows Darwinian principles in giving rise to the mind, I propose to answer the two questions in terms of recent neuroscientific findings on the brain bases of consciousness.

For many centuries the mind was not considered to be a proper subject for scientific exploration. Indeed, the mind was removed from nature at the very beginning of Western science by Galileo for practical reasons and by Descartes for philosophical reasons. It was not put back into nature until the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Since then, extraordinary progress has been made in neuroscience. As shown in **Figure 1**, we now know that the cerebral cortex of the human brain consists of a series of separate regions committed to different modalities such as vision, hearing, touch and smell, as well as higher order regions dedicated to motor control and planning. The existence of such functionally segregated areas, however, does not mean that they function independently of each other. Indeed, they are interconnected by brain cells—so-called neurons—across wide areas in a vast network.

Each neuron is connected to others by so-called synapses, whose strength of connections can change with experience. The human cortex containing these neurons would, if unfolded, have the size and thickness of a large table napkin. It contains at least 30 billion neurons and one million billion synaptic connections. If you counted one synapse per second, you would just finish counting 32 million years later.

In the course of my efforts to consider how neuroscience can contribute to our subject, I will reject Descartes' idea of dualism or spooky forces on the one hand, and the so-called machine or computer model of the mind, on the other. Some scientists have proposed that a proper model of the brain is a digital computer. Time does not allow me to describe why we must reject such a machine model of the mind. Instead, as a more appropriate visual metaphor, we might use the painting by Le Douanier Rousseau: *Primeval Forest in Setting Sun* (**Figure 2**). The brain, like such an entity, has regularity, but also random variation, dynamic change, individuality and uniqueness.

We must account for how the activity of the brain can have these properties, and

Human cortical regions

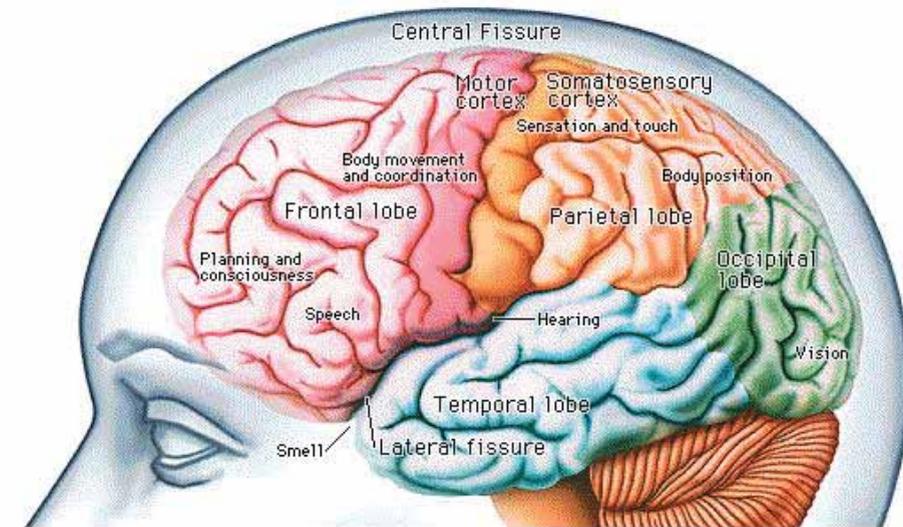


FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

can coordinate space, time and logic as well as the experience of feeling. To do so, we must call upon the ideas of the greatest biological theorist of all time, Charles Darwin. His theory of natural selection is based on population thinking. In a population of organisms there is variance: Each individual differs from others in genetic makeup and ensuing capabilities. Exposure to changes in the environment and to competition leads to selection of those individuals that are fitter. They will reproduce differentially, so that more of their progeny will survive, carrying their traits into subsequent generations. Those not sufficiently fit will die out.

In order to relate this line of thinking to visual art, I must describe a remarkable recent scientific discovery: Natural selection over millennia has actually led to selective systems that follow Darwinian principles within each individual's body during his or her lifetime. To help you understand this process of somatic selection, let me turn to our immune system, which can recognize and distinguish different molecular shapes on environmental chemicals, viruses, and bacteria, any one of which might threaten your survival. It turns out that this recognition follows Darwinian mechanisms. Antibody molecules, which can bind to and neutralize foreign molecules, are present in each of your bodies on cells called lymphocytes. As a result of mutation of the genes specifying antibodies in these cells, in general no two lymphocytes express the same antibody on their surface. Each lymphocyte expresses just one variant antibody. There can be as many as millions of different antibodies, each capable of recognizing a different foreign molecular shape. When antibodies on certain cells bind a particular foreign molecule, these selected cells divide to make large numbers of identical progeny cells manufacturing antibodies that can recognize the original foreign molecule. In this manner, your immune system works by Darwinian principles of variation and selection, right within your body and within your lifetime.

Advances in neuroscience now support the proposal that your brain also works as a selectional system, one that, of course, employs different mechanisms than those of immunology. According to the theory called Neural Darwinism, each individual human brain consists of huge numbers of different neuronal groups interconnected by synapses to make up a vast repertoire of variant circuits. During behavior, some of these groups and circuits are selected in response to environmental signals that yield patterns

of reward in the brain. This selection is accomplished by strengthening the synaptic connections among electrically active nerve cells in just those circuits that give rise to the rewarding behavior. Again, we see the Darwinian pattern of variation and selection.

We are now in a position to reconsider the mind and show how brain science suggests tentative answers to our original questions. How does brain activity give rise to human consciousness? Although this subject was, until recently, the sole property of philosophers, a series of theories and experiments now allow us to develop new views of the mind-body problem. We now know that to be conscious depends upon neural activity in a repertoire of circuits across many different brain modalities in cerebral cortical regions (**Figure 1**) that have been selected to yield a unified percept. Very recently we have been able to see some of what takes place when you become conscious of such a percept, in this case in the modality of vision. I will give you one example that uses the technique known as magnetoencephalography or MEG. This technique measures minute changes in the magnetism induced by brain electrical activity. A human subject is placed in a shielded room with a helmet on his or her head with a number of electrodes sampling this activity. This subject has a red lens over one eye and a blue lens over the other and is shown a pattern consisting of red vertical lines and blue horizontal lines. Even though his or her brain is receiving signals from both colored lines, it does not synthesize a single image from these two patterns. Instead, the individual is first conscious of alternating percepts: just red vertical lines or, seconds later, of just blue horizontal lines. All of this occurs while we measure magnetic signals from the brain mainly from the cerebral cortex. When, by pressing a button, the subject reports being conscious of either a red or a blue pattern, widespread circuits of neurons are selected to fire synchronously, reflecting the particular conscious state.

As shown in **Figure 3**, we can measure the intensity of electrical activity in different brain regions and also analyze whether there are groups of neurons that fire in synchrony during the conscious period. It turns out that neuronal groups over widespread areas of the cortex fire synchronously when the subject is conscious of a percept. The blue lines drawn in the figure link brain regions containing neurons that fire synchronously. It appears that consciousness involves integration of a wide variety of brain areas. This pattern of synchronicity is not seen when the subject experiences no awareness of the percept.

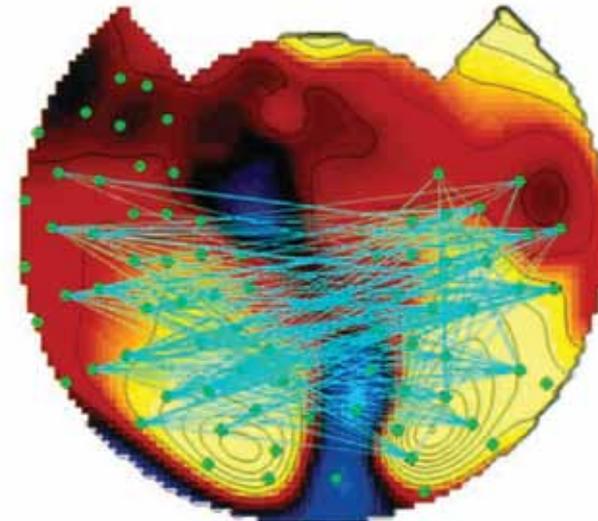


FIGURE 3

These and many other similar experiments now demonstrate that we can actually correlate states of consciousness with patterns of widespread brain activity. I believe that this allows us to develop a hypothesis to explain the artistic impulse biologically in a useful fashion. Before addressing our two questions about artistic activity in these terms, however, we must distinguish primary consciousness from higher order consciousness. Primary consciousness is a process that gives rise to a mental scene useful for perception and planning that is present in most mammalian species, for example, dogs. Animals with primary consciousness, however, do not exhibit individual awareness of being aware. This latter state is possessed uniquely by human beings who, as a result of the invention of language, have higher order consciousness. Unlike animals, we can be conscious of being conscious because we can shift from a perceived scene in the so-called "remembered present" of primary consciousness to the manipulation of symbols such as linguistic tokens. We are a symbolic species selected during evolution to be engaged in ongoing interactions of mutual cooperation and communication enhanced by true language. These interactions are enabled by neuronal group selection in higher brain areas involved in planning, such as the prefrontal cortex, a structure which is known to have expanded greatly during human evolution.

Given this background, we are now in a position to approach our two questions from the standpoint of brain science: (1) How can we account for the prevalence of visual art in the human domain? and (2) What gives rise to the individual urge to scratch, cut and paint?

I propose that visual art is a modality-specific form of higher order consciousness. Like language, it is driven by the symbolic communication that is unique to the human species. Being subject to patterns of neuronal group selection that are unique within each individual, visual art has, by these means, endless possibilities. While it is specific to the visual modality in its expression, it can be influenced by higher order consciousness provided by language as well as by the concomitant emotional responses that accompany mutual communication. This picture is consistent with the widespread cultural expression of visual art and with the urge of individuals in all cultures to shape expressive communication in the visual domain.

I find myself more satisfied by this account than I am by purely psychological accounts because it can explain why, as a result of brain evolution in our species, art is

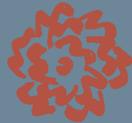
so universal in different cultures and why we are driven as a socially interactive species to communicate via our scratches, our cuttings and our paintings. In some sense, visual artists can take a cue from Neural Darwinism which, like natural selection itself, is an inherently creative process. A good artist creates new variants from his own brain repertoires that are reflections of many levels of selection and variation: those of human biology, those of art history, and those of his personal history; all of which are unique to being human.

I have not stressed the fact that the cortical activity of which I have spoken is accompanied by sub-cortical influences conferring value and emotional valence. As the philosopher Suzanne Langer put it, "Art is the objectification of feelings and the subjectification of nature." In the model I am proposing, the wordless metaphors of visual art are strongly interactive with linguistically based thoughts and with the imagination that results from the endlessly rich interactions of our brains, our bodies and our environment.

The domain of art so created is deeply ambiguous, but this is not a defect. I believe, in fact, that a certain degree of ambiguity is needed to make the endless rich associations required in the exercise of artistic imagination. Again we see variation and selection. And so I would say to you that being embedded in the selective system of Neural Darwinism opens up endless possibilities. Take pleasure in these possibilities as they are revealed in the exercise of your art. Take even greater pleasure in making selections based on the exchanges that have been so rewarding during your stay in this superb College.

With this admittedly sketchy picture, let me felicitate you upon your graduation and exhort you to rejoice in your achievement and the promise provided by your ongoing projects. Above all, I urge you to respond to the injunction of that great master, Milton Glaser, who said "***Do good work.***"

Godspeed.



School of VISUAL ARTS

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do good
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