

TIMELY OPPORTUNITIES: THE LONG AND THE DEEP

by Dennie Palmer Wolf

SOME OPENING THOUGHTS

This essay asks whether we are creating a world in which young people have access to the many kinds of time they need in order to thrive. In particular, I am interested in two kinds of time, different from what might be called daily or existence time:

Long time: the experience of oneself as a member of an enduring community—as an apprentice, a descendant, or an inheritor, or, conversely, someone who has gifts, thoughts, techniques, or works to pass on. This is the time of generations, heritage, endurance, and persistence. An image might be a link in a chain. Or a turn in a conversation.

Deep time: the experience of pursuing an idea, or line of work over hours, days, and maybe even years. It is the trek toward becoming good, maybe even very good, at something chosen (as compared to assigned). This is the time that is often associated with intense making: a wooden boat, a wedding dress, a weaving, or a porcelain tea set. Like the moon, it has phases: gathering, testing materials, drafts, editing, and the suspense of completion and appraisal. An image might be sowing, planting, and harvesting.

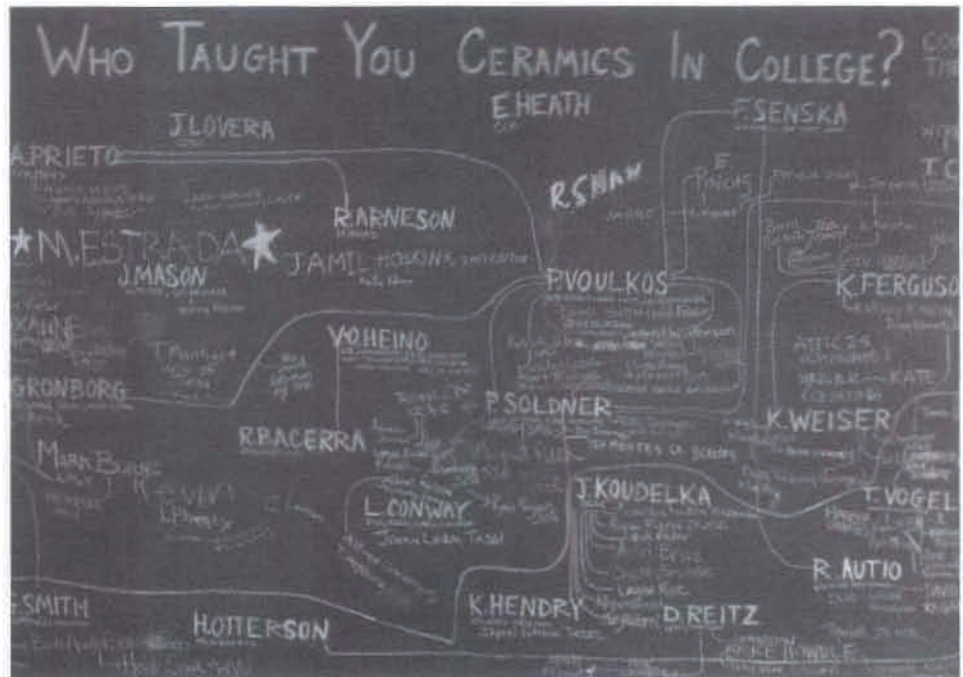
Both of these kinds of time are outside of quotidian time, allowing a person to leave the here and now, experiencing what some have called flow, the element, or transport.

I want to share three ideas about these other kinds of time. The first idea—and one that runs throughout these essays—is simply that the arts and crafts are ideal texts for teaching us about long and deep kinds of time and why they matter to us as human beings. A second idea is that many young people are eager for living and working in these ways—but their access is limited by factors beyond their control like the neighborhood and social class. A final idea is that artists and craftspeople, as individuals whose lives and work depend on these “out-of-ordinary” kinds of time, are uniquely positioned to model, share, and speak up for these kinds of experiences with the full range of young people.

LONG AND DEEP TIME IN THE ARTS AND CRAFTS

So what is long time? Earlier this winter, on the top floor of the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon, there was a ceramics exhibit. The cases were filled with the material evidence of long time. Each one of the pieces was a turn in a long-running conversation about what makes a plate a plate, or a pitcher a pitcher. Altogether the pieces were a kind of discussion about how to make a handle or a spout or a bowl that was at once functional and beautiful. And behind those particular pieces was a procession of Etruscan, Chinese, and Mayan clay works—a long line of figuring out what fired clay will and won't do. But just as revealing was a wall-length blackboard in the half darkness of the auditorium, inscribed with the title “Who taught you ceramics in college?” It was its own chalky x-ray of long time—a cross-generational network of teachers and students, and students who became teachers.

And deep time? William Kentridge is a South African visual artist who, over thirty years, has developed a rich body of work and also a very particular way of drawing human experience. Using only charcoal and hints of blue or red pastel, he creates animations, each based



on a series of some twenty to forty charcoal drawings in which he modifies his composition little by little between each frame shot by erasing certain parts, adding new elements, or redrawing them. In the resulting animation, ghostly traces of earlier figures often remain, creating a highly temporal, fleeting, restless narrative. As the films unfold, a viewer has a sense of fading or rewritten memories, the passing of time, what is not said but meant, and what is suppressed or forgotten but still felt. (Words are not the way to understand these works; it is important to look—even if only at the slightly smeared versions on YouTube.)

In one series of nine short films, he introduces two characters—Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum—men of a certain age whose daily routines, dreams, and travels depict the emotional and political struggle that has been, and continues to be, the life of many South Africans. In one of these films, *Weighing and Wanting*, the flux of erased and reappearing images portrays how the aging Felix weighs what he wants (a balance scale, a rig drawing up oil, a man with his head in a woman's lap, his brain being measured through an MRI, him straining to hear his internal "ocean" through a teacup held to his ear). This film speaks to deep time: its passing, the traces it leaves, the memory that events, beings, and objects leave when we shut our eyes and see the felt, not the material, world. At the same time, the body of work speaks to what deep time can yield: the gradual invention of a new way of seeing, characters whose lives speak to the arc of human experience, and an artist's unflinching record of political and social history.

TIME IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

In many ways, young people live in an "untimely" world.

Short time: Contemporary American children live in short time. Many young people between the ages of five and twenty have grown up during a period of unusual prosperity, in a culture where spending outdistances saving, few goods can be repaired, and formats change rapidly. Consider what their experience teaches them about the life span of:

- Information (VHS or cassette tapes)
- Tools (cell phone, computer)
- Stories (television series)
- Or even shoes (given that it is less expensive and easier to buy a new pair than to take them for repair)

Their personal and social worlds are subject to flicker. Their families move frequently, those dislocations accelerated by gentrification, suburbanization, and, now, crises in affordable housing, mortgages, and foreclosures. Nearly half of them see the partnerships between their biological parents dissolve. They are witnesses to adults changing, losing, and finding new work (particularly in regions losing traditional jobs like manufacturing, fishing, or farming, accentuated in harsh financial times). Few of them live in the same communities as their grandparents. Multigenerational tables are holiday events. Their access to the long time of traditions, heirlooms, and heritage is tenuous.

Shallow time: Similarly, young people's experience of deep time is often vulnerable. School is one of the major places where we teach children how to do things. But think about its typical temporal patterns: Children change teachers and classmates yearly. Within schools, the day is divided into forty-minute periods. And within periods, learning is often "miniaturized" into fragmentary activities. Consider this example of literature reading observed in one seventh grade classroom:

A Lesson in Learning to Read a Novel in Middle School

Getting settled = two minutes

Warm-up exercise = three minutes

Mini-lesson on the topic of the day = five minutes

Skills practice = six minutes

Peer sharing groups = four minutes

Silent reading = ten minutes

Reading journals = six minutes

Homework assignment and dismissal = four minutes.

In this structure, there are very few continuities or sustained moments for thinking or wondering. Nothing lasts more than ten minutes. If you multiply this example by six periods a day, five days a week, it adds up—but not to long-term projects, or sustained pathways where children learn how to do hard or worthwhile things well. Like reading a novel or making a prototype or sketching a painting into being.

Too often, the opportunities for these kinds of long and deep time are correlated with family stability, neighborhood amenities and safety, social class, and type of community (rural, suburban, or urban). There are sustained pathways—athletics, playing an instrument, dancing, and the road from Lego to robotics competitions. But frequently, these cost money, time, and social capital (knowing where to find a good teacher, whom to carpool with, how to get an instrument or equipment on loan). Like medical care or going to college, the opportunity to develop one's gifts or interests is unevenly shared. All children grow up, but only a few get the chance to develop the skills, understandings, and pleasures that are a part of long and deep time.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S APPETITE FOR LONGER AND DEEPER TIME

Contemporary accounts of young people often portray them as having flickering attention and little interest in anything long or deep. But in conversations with children and families in communities across the country, a very different picture emerges.¹

When asked about their “creative histories,” families at first shy away, saying, “No, we aren’t artistic or anything.” But when you probe, and make it clear you aren’t necessarily looking for formal training or a concert career, what often emerges is a very different story—one in which informal creative work is a point of pride and a source of pleasure. For example, when asked to find out where she gets her interest in, and commitment to, music, one seven-year-old interviewed her family to unearth her musical heritage. She drew placards listing how individual relatives (and her “like a sister” friend) are involved in creative activities. She placed stickers to signal others in her family who play or sing. Then, as if to sum up what she had discovered, she spontaneously drew a cascade of images of herself growing from infancy to young adulthood in this musical tradition.²

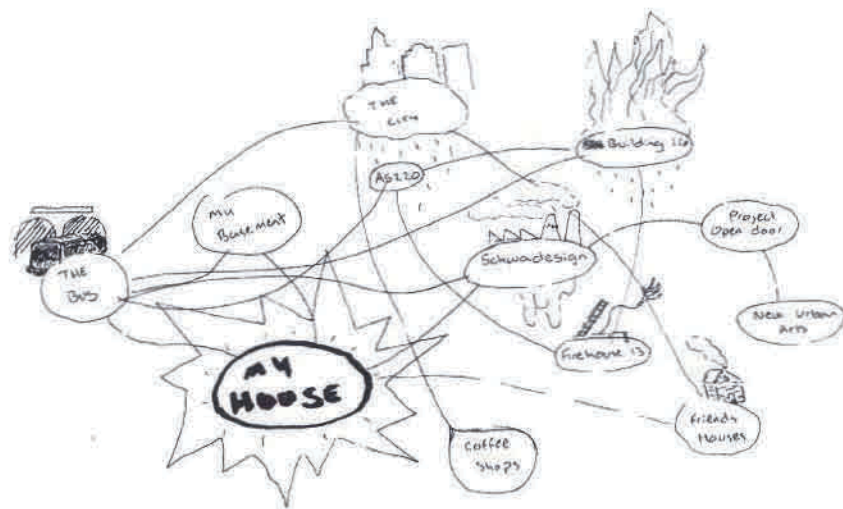
Again, if asked, many young people exhibit a similar appetite for deep time. A high school senior living in a suburban community in Arizona kept a running list of his day’s activity. That list shows how he translates almost every waking hour into his ceramics work:

up early to drive to school to unload kiln
hallway conversations with kids whose work didn’t survive firing
assist in Ceramics I class
compete with my best friend in Ceramics III class
read pottery magazines at lunch, looking for ideas
stay after school to load kiln
drive home to change
drive into town with friend and teacher
visit ceramics in galleries
ride home arguing about the best pot we saw that night



His determination is not unusual. When a committed high school artist maps how he sees his community, he draws a network of places where he develops his visual world: coffee shops where he looks at the work of other local artists, studios and performance venues where he goes to see the work his friends do (AS220, the Firehouse, Building 16), the design firm where he apprentices (Schwa Design), Project Open Door (a portfolio program for high school students at RISD), as well as his own and his friends' houses where he talks about art.³

These are only a few examples. But they are symptomatic of what we are uncovering, particularly when we provide young people (and families) with the occasion, the listeners, the formats, and the materials to portray the lived texture of their daily lives, informal activities, passions, and aspirations. What we see and hear is an enormous hunger for deeper and longer time.



AND SO...

Why share these illustrations? And, in particular, why share them with the Haystack community? As the earlier ceramics and the Kentridge examples make clear, craftspeople and artists are keepers of long and deep time. They work with materials like clay, wool, wood, pigment, and metal that go back to the dawn of time—there were pitchers and plates in Machu Pichu, Timbuktu, and King Arthur's realm. Their life work with materials and meanings places them in the long conversations that comprise heritage, traditions, and memory. They often work hours, even years, in pursuit of an idea or an experience. It is their business to know how to revise and remake, burnish and polish.

So, given how rare these forms of time are in the lives of many young people, what difference can artists and craftspeople make? How different would their practice look if they saw part of their work as passing on what they are lucky to have? As a way of beginning this conversation, think about three examples:

Slow teaching: Significant numbers of artists and craftspeople keep body and soul together by teaching in classrooms or in residencies as teaching artists. In both of those contexts, it is easy to get caught up in the "miniaturization" of learning mentioned earlier: pushing toward a start-to-finish product in short bursts of time. But why not teach to long time—a project that every class does every year, where they look at and build on what earlier classes have

done, creating a tradition, or a sustained conversation with those that have gone before? Why not teach a single assignment or project across an entire six weeks, or a semester, or a year with sketches, models, discussions, and critiques? In effect, it is up to craftspeople and artists to teach deep time, just as much as centering or glazing, perspective, or volume.

Apprenticeship: Large numbers of young people work as adolescents. But most of them work in low-wage, low-return jobs like fast food and chain stores. Anyone who runs a studio, a forge, or a workshop has space for one or more apprentices. Even if a young person only stores type, or dampens paper, or wedges clay as an apprentice, she has the chance to witness adults who work in long and deep ways. She has the opportunity to see work evolve.

Revelation: By and large when an artist's or craftsperson's work goes up for the world to see—in a gallery, museum, or store—the urgency is about showing the full body of work, in multiple instances, in all their glory. But that keeps the long and deep time that underlies the work a secret. Imagine using digital technology to make the equivalent of Kentridge's drawings: a stop action animation of a tapestry being woven or a bowl emerging from a burl. But not smoothly—with all the stops, pauses, twists, accidents, and episodes of play that are ingredients in moving from idea to object. Then a young textile artist or wood worker, along with her peers and teacher, would no longer see just the gleaming, finished object, with all its history swept up. Instead, she would see journal pages, sketches, or streams of e-mail, full of snags, checks, and changes of heart. The exhibit would be about the ornery history of how a work becomes.

The poet Gwendolyn Brooks, thinking about Paul Robeson's music, claimed that he used his astounding voice to remind listeners:

...that we are each other's harvest:
we are each other's business:
we are each other's magnitude and bond.⁴

So, too, for artists and craftspeople. Part of what they have to give—if they will—is a commitment to living and working long and deep.

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REFERENCES

¹ These examples are all drawn from a body of research about the development of creative capital in individuals, families, and communities. For more detail, see Wolf, Dennie and Holochwost, Steven (2009). *Building Creative Capital*. www.wolfbrown.com.

² This image is courtesy of Community Musicworks, Providence, Rhode Island. For a full account of the tools used to learn about family and individual creative histories, see "If you are walking down the right path and you are willing to keep walking: A participatory evaluation of Community Musicworks" at www.communitymusicworks.org/profiles.htm.

³ This image is courtesy of Project Open Door, Rhode Island School of Design.

⁴ Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Paul Robeson, the Great Forerunner*. New York: International Publishers. (1998)