Curator Varnedoe: Art at its most powerful can induce disorientation, perplexity

I work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. This means that every morning I leave my home and the normal world of daylight and humdrum street life, and enter another kind of world, where traditional ideas of space are radically compressed or eliminated, where wild deformations of imaginative passion transform human faces into unnatural masks of anxiety and alienation; where time itself seems to be warped; where lost dreams of machine technology that date to the Russian revolution collide with assemblages of old cans, spattered paint and the displaced, chaotic detritus of our times — and then I get off the subway and go into the Museum.

This not-so-unreal description points up some serious questions that I should ask myself every day, as I walk past homeless people in boxes on 53rd Street in Manhattan to enter what one critic called "the Kremlin of modernism": questions, to put it in the blandest terms, about the relation between art and life. Put more topically, questions as to what a museum curator can tell you on an occasion such as this, when there are so many other pressing things to think about. What importance can the arts — and in this I would include all the visual, literary, and performing arts — hold in the face of the problems you're going to confront in our society?

I swear I'm not raising that question here just to defend my own turf. I'm more out to address an aspect of your life, to speak for parts of you that may not be getting much attention, that operate perhaps only in dreams, or in the silent, semi-intuitive guiding of your everyday choices. I mean your imagination and your curiosity, and I mean as well your openness to things that are bizarre or difficult (up to now that capacity may only have been tested by an occasional roommate, or people from Berkeley, but believe me, it will get sterner challenges in years to come). And I'm also after raising a larger and more public point, about the relation between those imaginative capacities in you and the similar parts of the people around you — a question about how you or any individual in this society is going to reconcile his or her beliefs, tastes, and tolerances with those of a lot of other people who've got very different and often very contrary beliefs, tastes, and tolerances. I want to talk to you about two principal things — why the question of the arts has come to be of pressing concern to this society now; and what your role might be, as a receiver and as a giver, in that new dialogue. And then that will lead me back to a broader question about growth and change — about the education you'll carry away from here, and about

This is the text of the Commencement address delivered Sunday, June 14, by Kirk Varnedoe, director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

At Stanford and other universities has been one very telling part of this shift. (You don't see a similar heat being generated about what they're learning in the business school or over in Engineering.) If you need further close-to-hand proof of this, look to recent American politics, where support for the arts is close behind sexuality and reproductive rights as a symbolic battleground on which issues of our national purpose, our collective morality and tolerance, are being contested. (I generally take it as a rule up thumb that anything that comes in a close third behind existence and obviously matters to attention.)

In this changed environment, the familiar tension between individual freedom and collective identity has come to vest itself in debates about the rights and powers of the creative imagination; and it has pulled apart some old companion terms. culture is now a positive — even better, a fundable — term of entitlement and solidarity (the more cultures the better); while art has become a four-letter word, suggestive of the dirty doings of some deviant elite. It has in fact become a very real and testy question what art as we know it has to do with us, and it's going to keep feeding into the national debate, even if I'm not raising that question here just to defend my own turf.

There are of course — even in the platitudes of commencement speeches! — no short one-line answers to those dilemmas. But we may be able to speak up on them sideways, if you let me suggest some of the things the arts can do for you as a person, and then worry about what that will mean for you as a citizen.

You may want, for example, to draw on plays, or novels, listening to music, being absorbed in poetry or pictures — to take you out of time, to establish worlds of the spirit that move apart from, and more slowly than, the incessible march of your bodies and biology, or the cyclical turn of the seasons, and that connect you to other minds in other ages and other places, to reassure yourselves of human continuity beyond mortality, to make you feel less alone and less isolated.

But this doesn't require that art be "timeless" and beyond, debate, pose, and just pay a different, unblinkered attention to the possibilities of the imagination, whole new world of feeling could be born — and they were. And embedded in this conception of art is the larger, wholly modern notion that as an individual you don't establish your culture only by the accepting embrace of your given nation, or race, or heritage of tradition — but that individual acts of imagination, proposing worlds that have not yet been, can create their own new, plural communities around them, and that these in turn can form a different kind of society.

For the artists and for their audiences, that gamble required large leaps of faith, and accepting a special kind of responsibility for unsecured judgment. Those efforts at maintaining an open situation were, and they still are for you, the price of admission to our age's most telling forms of expression.
And I'm also after raising a larger and more public point, about the relation between those imaginative capacities in you and the similar parts of the people around you — a question about how you or any individual could go on — in the centuries to come — and the immense strides and tolerances with those of a lot of other people who've got very different and often very contrary beliefs, tastes, and tolerances. I want to talk to you about two principal things — why the question of the arts has come to be of pressing concern to this society now; and what your role might be, as a receiver and as a giver, in that new dialogue. And then that will lead me back to a broader question about growth and change — about the education you'll carry away from here, and about the world you've entered.

There's a well-known story about the modern sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who is reported to have said that if there were a fire in his studio, his first priority would be to save the cat. Clearly in this common-sense way life is primary and art is secondary. It seems it should be easy to make that kind of distinction between things that are necessary and given, and those we merely invent; but it's not, at least, not any more.

We used to be much more confident about drawing distinctions between the things we could measure in the world “out there,” and the ideas we concocted about them, or the representations we made of them. For much of this century, people staked a lot on their ability to isolate a class of hard facts and firm truths from the confusions of mere opinions or interpretations. The movements of dancers might be nice things, but the movements of atoms were basic, essential things, and that's what really counted.

The pursuit of such rock-bottom certainties was the ideal of education — not just as a known sake, but because it was hoped that the more clearly we saw those truths, the closer we would all pull toward harmony and improvement; if the clarity and universality of science could be transferred into social affairs, so the argument went, we would resolve our mental muddles and get beyond our differing worldviews. Even if we all danced differently, the atoms danced only one way, and that should guide our steps.

Those were far from unworthy ideals; but recent years have been hard on them. On the level of theory, that reassuring distinction between what's true and what's false, between what's clear and what's murky, between what's certain and what's uncertain, between what's irreducible and what's reducible — turns out to be damned near impossible to establish with any finality. Even within science itself data and dogma, truth and conjecture, have been shown to be so tied together there's no final way to separate them. And the attempt to transfer science's ideals of mastery and predictability to other parts of human life seems more and more to be a misuse of our intellectual energy. We are going to dance to the tunes we make for ourselves, regardless of how the atoms move.

Similarly, in the world outside the classroom, many people hoped that a lot of humanity's problems would be solved by technology: telecommunication, for example, was supposed to override national barriers and join us in one big global village. As it turns out, though, modern inventions can adapt equally well to liberating or to oppressive uses. Few can be cheered by the speed with which the Ayatollah was able to fax his death sentence against the author Salman Rushdie around the world. In that way, instant communication can often just bring us together more firmly; it makes us all the more aware of our very often very different and sometimes-tribalisms of different and newly potent kinds.

And the seeming “hard evidence” that technology gives us with such vivid immediacy — from the Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination to the Rodney King video — has proved to engender irrefutable and disagreement, and to drive people apart rather than provide a universal touchstone. The more we see, the less we seem to know. Final facts turn out to be maddeningly elusive, hence impotent; but the ideas people concoct about them remain explosively powerful, and irresistibly viral.

You may well guess where I'm headed here. I'm trying to suggest that you're entering a changed world, where the relation between life and art is going to be more problematic and more important. As the "machine age," the century of hardware, draws to a close, it's

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growth.

It's also true that you can and will look to the arts to plunge you more deeply into time: to provide innovations and surprises that arise more swiftly and unpredictably than the cycles of your lives or the turn of the seasons, that quicken your pulse, and give you a keener sense of being alive, a heightened sense of the uniqueness, the particularity, of your own moment in time.

But this doesn’t mean that the arts are useful to you only in as much as they are — the buzz word of my Stanford days — “relevant” to the agendas of the day. As some wise soul once said, “Art doesn’t imitate reality; one of the damned things is enough.” A dance, a poem, a painting, a photograph is not a simple “reflection,” and neither the way such arts “interpret” experience, nor the way we interpret them are a matter of pinning down some one “right” answer.

People who want to find clear propaganda for one issue or another can find it in art, from polemical caricature to incogitantly to misrepresent the power of art. Politicians Right and Left are both busy these days warning you that imagined worlds — from Mapleton to Murphy Brown, and from rap music to Romantic poetry — will enslave your thoughts, determine your politics or morals, and guide your deeds in some specific way, for good or evil. This ranges from bills to protect you from pornography to arguments that core curriculums will fataly determine your universe of identity and political allegiance.

But art’s strong suit is not delivering specific messages and inciting concrete deeds. Art may instead be at its most powerful — and most uncomfortable for authoritarians of all stripes — when it orchestrates perplexity, fails to conform to what you already know, and instead sends you away temporarily disoriented but newly attuned to experience in ways that are perhaps even more powerful, because they are vague, vague, and indeterminate. And if this is true for the arts in general, it’s true for many an arts for the art of your era.

And now you certainly know where I’m headed: back to Manhattan and through those doors on 53rd Street, because there are useful things to be learned there. Lord knows, The Museum of Modern Art houses an ample fullness of all the errors of modernity in general — flights of deluded tendentiousness, exaggerated claims to truth, and obsessed fanaticism (and that’s just me and the rest of the curators). But overall, in the lineage that unrolls in those galleries, from Cezanne and Van Gogh to the present, there is a remarkable idea: the radical idea that living with uncertainty and open-endedness — in fact, embracing it, creating it when it wasn’t wanted — could produce something sustaining, a culture of its own that would satisfy the soul and serve social life as well.

The history of modern art, from Picasso’s scrambled faces to Andy Warhol’s soup cans and beyond, is a recurrent pattern of imperative individualism. It is the “Do your life, make it like you want it” approach. The problem is that traditional languages of expression — new languages of expression that had only the tiniest circle of initial understanding, but which produced the broadest conceivable changes in our way of looking at and thinking about the world, and in the way we represent life to ourselves.

The kind of art I am talking about is often difficult, hard of access, and thus by certain definitions elitist; but it is not “ex-clusive” in traditional senses. Modern art in fact began by negating the privileges of established education: it ignored traditional texts, snubbed respected skills and sidestepped familiar standards of quality. It required people to make judgments without the comfort of stable rules and categories; and to navigate in seas of uncertainty or even absurdity without a map — and with no guarantees.

The remarkable gamble offered here was that, if we would abandon the security of tradition, and stop looking for the utility of immediate pur-