



# WHY ART MATTERS



MARY CATE FRUEHAN

Art matters because of what making art teaches us. Sometimes, when I tell people that I am studying art, they tell me that they wish they were creative. And this makes me a little sad and a little frustrated. I have come to think of “creativity” a lot differently now than I used to. It used to seem like unreliable magic. Making art helps us realize that most of creativity is really just hard work. The ability to create something is not a stroke of genius that comes to you, and that visits artists more often than most. It’s the product of a lot of work and a lot of failure. Art teaches us how to use process to go places we couldn’t otherwise get to, how to think with our hands and our heads. No one asks why math matters; we just assume it does. Math is important, and there are things that cannot be known or understood without it. It teaches us ways of thinking as well as practical skills, which are universally accepted as important. And everyone practices math, for at least twelve years. If more people practiced art, maybe we wouldn’t have to justify why it matters.

Art matters because it demands failure. It teaches you how to accept it, and sometimes even use it to your advantage. We tend to see failure as something tragic to be avoided, but art can help us make failure a skill, one that could be useful for everyone in many areas of life. Failure is part of what makes process so important and helps lead us to something new.



Art matters because it is extra. It doesn't have to fix a problem, and it doesn't have to have a practical purpose. It can be made for any reason, or for no reason. It can be useful for many things, but it doesn't have to be. It allows us to explore.

Art matters because it makes us critical. It encourages questions, which disrupt our assumptions. When we experience the "extra," it opens our minds to possibilities. It helps to save us from going through the motions without ever asking why. And it can help us be critical of ourselves. We can evaluate our process, or our work, or our ideas.

Art matters because it helps us to be empathetic. It gives us a different way to listen, and a different way to speak. When we are confronted with the unusual, something intentionally out of the ordinary, it pulls us back from our normal ways of thinking and interpreting. It makes us ask questions that help us reconsider our own bias and perspective. We are trained to ask questions about the intention of the artist soon after seeing the art. This is a simple progression, but it is significant because it explicitly asks us to consider where someone else is coming from. I don't think that we have many other contexts in our lives where we think about the viewpoints of others so automatically and openly. Maybe art gives us a different way to listen. And because we get pleasure from viewing it, it makes listening a little more appealing; it might even make the viewpoint or idea itself a little more appealing. It probably won't change our minds then and there. But empathy is a practice in and of itself. It's like a muscle; the more you use it, the stronger it becomes. It sounds a little lofty to say that art makes us better people. It feels more true to say that art can help us practice being better people, and maybe give us something to strive for. The poet Mary Oliver has said, "we need beauty because it makes us ache to be worthy of it." Maybe art can make us ache to be better, and I think that matters.