

The Problem of Imagination

AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Summer 2016

Terry Schenold

CHID 110

In the oft-referenced but rarely read *9/11 Commission Report* we find a startling conclusion in the findings of the committee tasked with the critical evaluation of the government in the lead-up to the catastrophe; namely, that the single most important failure of leadership was a "failure of imagination." The meaning of this statement in the context of the report might be understood cynically as something like insufficient paranoia, yet the idea that an individual, a collectivity, or an entire culture could suffer a "failure of imagination" suffuses many of our problems: from our difficulties in re-imagining all sorts of institutions and concepts, to our inability to "see" that which does not show up on balance sheets or body scans. The invocation of the term "imagination" is also calls to mind a socially positive - even essential - human activity, and it is often used in conjunction with "innovation" and "creativity."

What underlies these formulations is an interesting and problematic history of the *idea of imagination*, one filled with commonplaces and simplifications

about the function and value of imaginative works that too

often evade productive scrutiny. This course will

provide some historical context for these issues,

highlighting the significance of

imaginative works for addressing the problems

of our time - a time characterized by

imperatives to "re-imagine" just about everything.

