

# The Problem of Imagination

## AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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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," variously interpreted, suffuses many of our problems: from our difficulties in reimagining 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 to describe a socially positive -even essential- human activity, often in conjunction with "innovation" and "creativity," most notably in the recent speeches by the president on education and the future economy. What underlies these form-

ulations is an interesting and problematic history of the idea of imagination, one filled with commonplaces and simplifications about human nature and capacity that too often evade productive scrutiny.

This course assumes that an exploration of the different ways in which imagination has been conceived is crucial to making sense of our current moment, one characterized by a need to "re-imagine" everything.

