

Making the Invisible, Visible: In Conversation with Ivy Ross



Ivy Ross, Fireside Chat: "Your Brain on Art" | Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

Elisabeth Cobb-Hughes

"From [Ivy Ross's] meditative practice of Qigong, to her jewelry-making, and throughout her professional work, there is an underlying curiosity about how the physical and sensorial plane intersect. [...] Ross experiments with ways to document and visualize changes within the human body in response to different stimuli. The result is nothing short of magical— data driven magic."



I wouldn't say I'm a great spiritualist. I know my star signs but am rarely aware of the lunar phases. I had never heard of Qigong before Ivy Ross's talk, and I tend to scoff at terms like "energy work." But in listening to Ross explain how influenced we are by various stimuli, I began to understand; or rather, feel.

As the Chief Design Officer for Consumer Devices at Google and an accomplished artist and designer outside of her day job, Ross is the kind of person whose advice you'd be wise to take.

Ross gave a talk at CCA on October 21st as part of the Design Division's annual lecture series, moderated by Helen Maria Nugent (Dean of Design). Titled after her recent book, "Your Brain on Art," Ross spoke proudly about her work and team at Google, recognizing that her team makes her work possible. Comparing herself to an orchestra conductor, she spoke about finding a balance in the workplace between individuals, ideas, and metrics. One could say she's quite the virtuoso.

Ross's work touches on understanding the experience of being in one's own body, which she studies in every facet of her life. From her meditative practice of Qigong, to her jewelry-making, and throughout her professional work, there is an underlying curiosity about how the physical



Helen Maria Nugent (Dean of Design Division) and Ivy Ross in conversation
Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno



Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us by Ivy Ross and Susan Magsamen
Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

and sensorial plane intersect. In her hardware design work at Google, she studies and applies how the relationship between sensation and aesthetics can influence one's mood. With her more explorational work at Google, Ross experiments with ways to document and visualize changes within the human body in response to different stimuli. The result is nothing short of magic—data driven magic.

Ross played an audio/visual presentation from her experiential work, *Shaped by Water*, that captured a visual depiction of sonic wavelengths, responding in real-time to sound produced by an orchestra. I don't really know how long she played the clip for—in a dark room surrounded by a few hundred other viewers, my attention was focused wholly on the symmetrical undulations. When Ross paused the video abruptly, the audience collectively shook back into themselves.

Forms of data Ross collects to communicate these ideas are displayed in such entrancing ways that observers become convinced that sound could influence the human body, and that the design of a room (*A Space For Being*) could invoke change in the body's vital signs. After all, these are measurable, observable phenomena. Sound is produced by vibrations. Color is a result of light photons bouncing off different surfaces, potentially to be observed by the human eye. Color, sound, and form exist whether or not we observe them, and as Ross claims, even and

especially at a subconscious level, our bodies respond.

In *Making Sense of Color*, the team at Google presents an idea of what color might sound, taste, and feel like. Blurring the senses is a consistent theme in Ross's work, and it's clear she is excited by the segmentations and slippages that happen in the neurological process of observation. "Our brains aren't used to being mixed up so you get out of your mind and into your body immediately. Art is the best form of meditation."

Some of these works feel more developed than others, but at the core of each piece is a deep understanding of



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how to influence emotion to observers through data visualization. Ross makes this an art, alchemizing craft and concept.

Our perception of observable stimuli is entirely the result of how our bodies perceive certain wavelengths. Ross believes that understanding the sensorial relationship between our bodies and the outside world can open us up to a world of creative possibilities. Under this approach, creativity can manifest not as the pursuit of a final product, but as exploratory engagement with the act of perception itself.

That's really what her recent book, *Your Brain On Art: How the Arts Transform Us* (2023) is about. Ross and her co-author, Susan Magsamen, claim that engaging in artmaking is beneficial for a person's physical and mental health. They assert that art can build strong communities,

and that whether we acknowledge it or not, aesthetics have a profound influence on our bodies.

Ross attributes much of her creativity to the physical environments she was exposed to. At one point, she spoke about her father—an industrial designer—who was so passionate about color that he had a carpet custom-dyed to a particular shade of lavender for her bedroom. She joked that she “grew up in a lavender box,” and that every surface of her childhood room was purple. Ross was quick to note that purple is the highest-frequency color discernible to the human eye, explaining in an offhand way that this must’ve had a profound influence on her aptitude for creativity. I’m sure that having a parent who worked in a creative field helped some too.

When sharing words of advice with us, the college students in the audience, Ivy reflected on her twenty-three year old self. At the time, she had an artwork accepted into an important gallery, but said that “the ego trip once I got work into a museum lasted two weeks. And then life was back to normal... The greatest gift at twenty-three was learning that life was about the journey, not the end game.”

She later said, “The future is multidiverse... those swim lanes [of occupations] are over. In my day, it was all ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Now, we have to cross train, cross train to pollinate and solve the problems of the future. We have to be complex beings with more than one skill to bring, more than one thing. [This] creates a program for yourself of looking at different things and inspiring yourself in unlikely places.”

If you, like me, are now a devotee of the Ivy Ross Approach to Creativity, get making. As Ross reminds us, “it’s not that it even has to be good art—it’s the act of making and knowing.” In the process, we can re-imagine what’s possible for ourselves and the world around us.

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