MARGINAL IMAGES: ART AND IDEOLOGY IN THE SCHOOL

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Art has come to connote something that is eclectic and unpredictable. Art may be concerned with the aesthetic organization of visual elements, or it may defy conventional aesthetics; it may seek to interpret visual experience, or it may interpret psychological phenomenon that have no visual manifestation; it may have significant social content, or it may not. Art defies generalizations about its form, but welcomes more readily a characterization of its spirit. Art is inquiring, open-ended, illuminating, often startling. Art is very close to the central concerns and experiential reality of the artist. While it is increasingly difficult to say what art is, it is not difficult to have a clear intuitive awareness of what art feels like in relation to other basic human activities. In the context of social mechanization and pervasive pressure to ideological conformity, the importance of this intuition about the artistic spirit may surpass the importance of particular works of art.

When we think of art as it is taught in the elementary and secondary schools, however, our intuitions about the nature of art are assaulted by uninspiring certainties. Now art can be defined by clear and familiar criteria. Art in the schools is concerned with making art objects. These art objects resemble well-known prototypes -- nineteenth century landscape painting and sculpture, expressionist painting, commercial crafts, advertising design. Art in the schools rarely is concerned with significant social content. Art in the schools is heralded as the student's opportunity for "creative self-expression", yet is presented as an infrequent diversion, occurring on the distant periphery of the student's experience during the school years. The artistic process, rather than being inquiring and open-ended, is recipe-directed; and rather than resulting in shocks and illuminations, it produces only satisfaction or disappointment in the attainment of a conventional aesthetic norm. While there exist, happily, exceptions to this characterization of art in the schools, I believe that in most cases the characterization is accurate.

Why does this gap exist between the conception of art in life and art in school? While it may seem to an artist that school teachers simply do not know enough about art to teach art, I do not believe that this is the primary reason for the gap. Teachers are not the least informed sector of society with regard to the arts, and they have long had special access to artistic discourse through art education organizations. Nor is it the case that the arts have been singled out for unfair treatment in the schools. Rather, I believe that the arts in the schools are shaped (or mis-shaped) by the same social values that shape the teaching of all subjects in the schools. These values are 1) materialism, 2) scientific reductionism, and 3) conventionalism. While the arts are not alone in being subject to these pressures, it is certainly possible to argue that they are most severely affected by them.

Materialism, scientific reductionism, and conventionalism, are of course not unique to schools. They are larger social forces. And it is this that makes them so influential in the school. Sociologists of education have long noted that one of the underlying functions of the school is to reproduce the social order (Karabel and Halsey, 1977). Public schooling in North America has performed this function from its inception, from the time it taught the scriptures to a society for whom religion was law. In the 1830's, Horace Mann expanded the curriculum to include the subjects with which we are familiar in schools today, but the dominant intent remained moralistic, to ensure the moral habits of an expanding working and middle class (Karier, 1967). Further major developments in education have been guided by similar motivations, aimed at ensuring a preferred social order. The high school of the 1910's would provide vocational training; the new science curriculum of the 1960's would answer Sputnik with a North American technocratic elite. Rarely have major innovations in education been motivated solely by deep humanistic concern or by a commitment to intellectual integrity. The schools were founded to convey preferred social values, and it would be a great oversight to ignore this function in schools today. Hidden, perhaps, among the "objective" teachings of reading, math, science, social studies, and the arts, the larger social values are nevertheless instrumental in shaping how these subjects are taught.

Thus, if it can be said that art adheres more to a spirit than to a form, then the same can be said of schooling. Except that the spirit is different. When art occurs in schools, the conflict between these spirits is implicit and will remain highly problematic until it is explicated and thoughtfully resolved. I will examine here the nature of the implicit conflict between artistic and school ideologies along the three dimensions of materialism, scientific reductionism, and conventionalism. Materialism of course needs no explanation here as a dominant theme in North American culture. Children are taught to value the acquisition, maintenance, and protection of material goods over human needs in everything they see about them: extensive devotion to house and garden; peer pressure on clothing, records, television, sports equipment; the high professional status of real estate, insurance, and anything technological. In its effect on school art programs, materialism has acted as a steady erosive force, and the course of that erosion is not difficult to chart. Contemporary art education in North America was founded on anything but materialist values. Art was the most romantic element of the romantic child-centered movement in education of the 1920's and 30's. During this time, new emphasis was placed on the child's innate capacities. With the intellectual stimulus of Freud and Jung, psychologists and educators began to see an inner world in children that was deep in meaning, and conducive to emotional development if it were made manifest. One educator wrote in 1932:

> The newer education is learning the uses of the mysterious forces of the spirit through which one may liberally educate oneself for all the important needs of living. It is like the heart beat; no one has found the source of its power but no one doubts that the source is within us. The creative spirit is another heart; it will keep us alive if we give it a chance to beat for us (Hartman and Shumaker, 1932).

Art was seized upon as the way to make this inner world manifest. Painters like Klee, Kandinsky, and the German Expressionists validated this link between psychology and art. They, like the psychoanalysts, saw a profound inner world in child art (Haftmann, 1967), and then elaborated in their work the expression of this inner world, a world filled with fantasy, fears, sweeping emotions, and simple whimsy. European art teachers like Franz Cizek and Viktor Lowenfeld absorbed these charged artistic developments, and channeled them back to education (Efland, 1979). In the literature that soon emerged on creative self-expression in child art, the artistic process was seen as emerging from the child, being filled with deep fantasy, expressing emotions, depending entirely on motivation and not at all on visual deliberation. The social upheavals of the second world war brought many European art educators to the United States, where their ideals found company with a desire to develop the emotional aspect in children's education. The creative self-expression approach to art education established itself in the educator's and the public's mind, and has remained firmly embedded there.

It might seem from this brief historical review that art has been a romantic, inner-directed, anti-materialistic force in schools. And certainly it was this in its genesis, as well as the second wave of "process not product" rhetoric in the 1960's. But it was precisely because the founding rhetoric was anti-materialistic that it is so easy to see the shaping of school art by the materialist ethic. When the discourse of school art is dominated by terms like "creativity" and "self-expression", but the practice of the school arts is directed toward making conventional art objects for exhibition, then something is amiss. Either too little thought is being put into what "creativity" and "self-expression" mean, or these terms have passed into the realm of pure slogans that are not connected to practice at all. Most likely the latter is true. Through a remarkably effective process of cultural transmission, every parent, teacher, and child seems to know that creativity and self-expression (as well as the exercise of "talent" to produce "beauty") are the purposes of art. They also expect that the fulfillment of these ideals will consist of step-by-step instructions in silk-screen printing, tie-dying, batik, watercolor, macrame, enameling, metalwork, ceramics, weaving, acrylic painting, crayon resist, collage, mobiles, puppets, papier-mache, and numerous additional "media" which are commonly described in art education literature in spite of playing little role in contemporary culture.

What seems to have happened is that the originally subtle relationship between "inner worlds" and their physical manifestation in art has degenerated into a linking of slogans to recognizable art products -- any art products. While humanistic goals still have a plane in school arts rhetoric, they are valued much less in practice than are technology, recipes, and acceptable products. Teachers seek skills in as many media as possible, with skills defined as basic technique plus a demonstration of a conventionally acceptable product. I often remind my students that many artists spend their entire lives working in one medium -- for example, oils -- and spend little time concentrating on technique even within that medium. But then, of course, these painters do not work in schools where the social ethic calls for a new and different kind of product to be created every other Friday. Teachers and students function within a set of social pressures that can never be dismissed, and that only a clear analysis and strong will can counteract.

By submitting to the materialist ethic, art is both integrated into the school curriculum and guaranteed to fail within that curriculum. Fitted to a technological mold, art can not do what it does best. Its Friday afternoon miracles -- the pattern that emerges when the rubber bands are removed from the tie-dyed cloth, the straight line under the masking tape on the acrylic painting -- can not compete with the computer war game. The pot and painting, as products, are "enhancing" and "enriching" to the model home, and so they remain only enhancing and enriching, and thus peripheral, in the school curriculum. Without the spirit, there isn't much point to art; I think that any artist would affirm this simple point.

The pressure toward scientific reductionism in schools does not do much to preserve the artistic spirit either. By scientific reductionism I mean the tendency, widespread in twentieth century thought, to believe that all physical and psychological phenomena can be broken down to a set of discrete component parts. Thus human action is understood as a set of behaviors in response to stimuli and reinforcements. In art education, the reductionist tendency may be observed in the exaggerated dogmatic emphasis on visual elements and styles. Countless textbooks review the elements of line, shape, color, form and texture. In some, such as Johannes Itten's Bauhaus course Design and Form, the explanation is genuinely illuminating, giving depth and clarity to a formalist conception of art (Itten, 1963). But in others, contemporary derivatives of the Bauhaus approach, the reductionist tendency takes over. Now the visual elements are taken literally to be a language, and exercises with these elements become equated with art as a whole. Examples of good and bad approaches are given not only for shape and color, but also for less tangible concepts such as unity, balance, and rhythm. The desire to teach art as if it possessed a definite grammar surpasses by good measure the understanding of whether art in fact has a grammar at all (a questionable proposition, perhaps best treated by Christian Metz's statement that film is not a language; nevertheless film is like a language (Metz, 1974).

Styles too become stereotyped, as if they were preexisting categories that artists followed, rather than critical generalizations developed after the fact to describe what artists have done. Students are often asked to work in impressionist, cubist, and expressionist styles, with the chronologically later styles being understood to be the more advanced styles. The isms of the sixties and seventies are reserved for advanced work.

The social pressure of the reductionist ethic, like the materialist ethic, is unavoidable. The structure of twentieth century thought, and the structure of thinking experiences in school, demands a precise breakdown of a phenomenon even though that phenomenon may cease to exist once disassembled. I do not mean by this to revive the myth that art is such an intangible and mystical experience that it cannot be systematically analyzed. Rather, I mean to make the distinction that the useful and productive analysis is more likely to occur through critical and phenomenological methods than through reductionist ones. Scientific reductionism does not destroy interest in art as much as it makes it out to be a duller, less vital occupation that it can be. Scientific reductionism ultimately creates an art in its own mold, an art of patterns and forms that are equally at home in the engineering laboratory or the computer screen as

they are in the artist's studio. This art fulfills reductionist predictions by being built upon identifiable elements; but this art represents only a limited genre of formalist art, and does little to help us understand the dominant aesthetic and social forces of contemporary art. The "visual vocabulary" art serves only to support the ethic of scientific reductionism that is so central to North American economic and social systems, and does little to support the plurality of aesthetic systems that art has the potential to bring to society.

Reductionism encourages one type of conventional product in school art, but not the most conventional type. Schools constantly look back to those styles which have been labeled and celebrated. The single criterion for emulating these styles is that they are widely known as a style. The style may be as popular as naturalistic still-life painting, but it may also be as unpopular as Rauschenberg's assemblage or as poorly understood as Cubism. But it is crucial that it is historically identifiable. Through its identifiability, the style becomes liable to simpler and simpler labeling, until the history of art becomes a succession of pointed brushstrokes, geometric shapes, and dripping paint, in that order. "Styles" are conveniently matched with techniques, such as the dripping paint style with the straw technique to blow patterns in nursery school. Or the assemblage style and the junk technique. "Don't throw away your junk," is an admonition I have heard several times among the more progressive teachers, "Bring it to the art class."

The overarching conflict between the ideologies of art and schooling, a conflict which has been implicit in the discussion of materialism and reductionism, emerges clearly in this preference for conventions. The conflict is simply this: art asks for new ways of seeing, schooling (historically) has encouraged fixed ways of seeing. Conventional patriotic figures are identified as heroes in school, when they have little heroic effect on contemporary life. North American and European military battles are singled out for intensive study, while South American, African and Asian social history receives passing notice at most. These aspects of the curriculum are evidence of a conventional view of reality, a view that fixes social reality within a particular cultural perspective and reflects specific social interests. And with this conventional, fixed view, it is very difficult to deal with a subject that represents an antithetical position. This is the conflict that emerges when schooling and art meet. Art demands an open and critical attitude toward the exploratory and inventive; schooling, seeking to evaluate the student's grasp of identifiable subject matter along a right and wrong scale, can not cope with this openness and uncertainty.

One might argue at this point that I have sketched my case too broadly, that the ideology of schooling can not be so sharply delineated. And clearly (indeed happily) there are many art teachers whose teaching practices do complete justice to the spirit of art, whose students learn to see more fully and develop a critical attitude toward contemporary culture. Yet no matter how many of these teachers and students are enthusiastically acting as artists in schools, the question must be raised as to why their enthusiasm has not spread more rapidly to the wider community of teachers and students. And why, conversely, has the culture of school art described here developed very rapidly, and without the sanction of the larger intellectual and artistic community? The answer to these

questions can only be framed in the context of a larger pattern of social values that operate in schools and that work to shape the teaching of art whenever it is introduced in the school.

The alternative to this sketch of school ideology is not likely to be found in an opposing historical interpretation of schools. Rather, an alternative view is found in the realm of educational ideals, in the writings of educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Paolo Freire. For these writers, education and art have much in common. Education, like art, seeks to develop new ways of seeing and new intellectual resources for responding critically to problematic situations (Dewey, 1939; Freire, 1970). Education, like art, begins with the experience of the individual set in a social context, and seeks to develop that experience in a socially constructive manner. And education, like art, encourages the communication of different perspectives from individual to individual, and from community to community. In Dewey's and Freire's view, and in the view of many educators, this is the type of education that invites art to do what it does best, because it is art that builds upon individual and social experience to develop new ways of seeing social reality.

Thus it is ironic that this essay has had to note the opposition of schooling and art, when in theory the purposes and procedural principles of education and art are indistinguishable. In a school that fulfilled Dewey's and Freire's vision of education, the nature of school art could not be as I have described it here. School art would be changed, first, simply by being accepted. Educators would share in the intuition of what art feels like, and look for that intuition in school art activities. Materialsim would give way to mentalism, an interest in the mental experience represented by artistic form, rather than in the sheer physical form itself. The history of art would become not a chronology of technological styles but an array of interpretations of social reality. As Panofsky notes in Meaning in the Visual Arts, the world view made manifest by the work of art is nothing less than the content of the work itself (Panofsky, 1955). By examining perceptual evidence and restating it as clearly as possible, the artist does his basic work. He makes known to himself and to others the mental images that compose his experience of the world. Through the course of his work he reveals how those images combine into readings of social life and social issues -- as Vertov's films show a different Soviet Union than Eisenstein's, and as De Kooning represents a different sexual and emotional world than Bacon, or Hockney, or O'Keeffe. The artist's work makes contributions to intellectual and emotional life that far surpass the materialistic evaluation of the art object. The artist represents and structures his or her own knowledge of the world through the artwork, and invents symbolic means for communicating that knowledge to others.

The representational and communicative functions are basic to art, and are equally basic to education. In his literacy programs in Brazil, Freire called for educators to encourage learners to reconstruct their views of social situations that directly affected their lives (Freire, 1973). It is precisely this goal that the artistic process is designed, by its nature, to serve. Rather than dwell on the properties of the "art media," art becomes concerned with the mental structures that give artifacts their life. And once liberated from its material mold, the artistic image becomes the educationally relevant image as well.

With a changed ideology in schools, scientific reductionism would give way to its long overdue successor, phenomenological criticism. The reductionist movement, through its negligent attitude toward such basic phenomena as consciousness, perception, and the social organization of knowledge, has left behind it an immense vacuum in formal knowledge. What is needed now, not only in the arts but in the social sciences as well, is an introduction to critical methods that provide a multi-focal approach to social reality. And here again, recent experience in the contemporary arts provides the exemplar. Film critics regularly compare semiotic, structuralist, psychoanalystic, formalist, and phenomenological critiques of the same films. The film is illuminated, its meaning enlarged and clarified, through this process of interchange and comparison. In schools, children desperately need to gain at least the feeling of what the critical process is about. They need to know, for example, that there are many ways of seeing the experience of minority groups, not the one way represented by the wire services and the television networks. They need to know that news reports are interpretations rather than incontrovertible facts; and that not only can a pen leave behind relevant features of a social event, but a camera can as well. The phenomenological attitude seems to me the most inspiring of the contemporary critical methodologies, and not a difficult one to translate into the educational practice. In biology, social studies, or English, the phenomenological attitude as modeled by art critics would simply ask children to look more carefully for relevant features, to relate interpretations more closely to the evidence, and to value the interpretations of others.

Conventionalism would face a struggle in the new school as well. The constructive and critical attitude of the artistic activity would work against the inertia and stereotyping of convention. Conventions, of course, are no less a part of the art world than the school world. But the underlying spirit of art works systematically against convention. It works for a reexamination of established reality constructions, which means a continual replacing of stereotyped images with images that more adequately represent both the data and feel of contemporary experience. The artist seeks to be non-conventional, not in the cliched Bohemian sense, but in ways that matter in contemporary society. Artists now are increasingly questioning, for example, the convention of individual self-expression as a characterization of the artistic process; they are reestablishing a social role for the artist that has not been visible under the massive rhetoric of court art, patronage art, and celebrated art. If the artist's self-critique of his individualistic past were brought into the school, it would provide the ideal model of the self-critical, socially cooperative education that Dewey and Freire delineate. Artists could help students develop their roles as social investigators and community spokespersons, roles that have become stereotyped and thus neglected in their traditional "civics" context in the curriculum.

Could schools take this kind of open questioning both of social phenomena and of the learner's response to those phenomena? From the historical evidence, one does not know if they could sustain the will for this kind of enterprise; but from a philosophical analysis, one can not doubt that they are obliged to try.

Art would benefit from a valid association with schools as much as schools would benefit from art. While this essay has taken a critical attitude toward the history of schools and a favourable attitude towards the ideals of art, the distribution of problems and merits in each field is of course not entirely one-sided. The ideals of art also outstrip its contemporary performance, especially its most visible (museum-exhibited, book-published) contemporary manifestations. The artist's ideal of representing authentic perspectives toward social reality requires a broader base of committed artists if it is to be fully realized. Reality constructions in art must represent diverse cultural and class experience, if art is not to function only as an esoteric affirmation of dominant cultural values. The public school, obviously, is the meeting ground where the public and art could come in contact to redefine each other. From increased contact with the public school, art might lose its marginal status not only in the school, but in society as well.

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