

Art Education in Social Context

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Abstract

Discourse about art, like other discourse, contains limits as well as possibilities for creating meaning about human experience. The following essay raises a series of questions about the difference between the discourse of most art education, and the discourse of contemporary art critics and artists. Why are these subcultures of the art world different, and what is the significance of their separation? Is art education systematically losing its capacity to make contact at the level of human experience? Has it alienated itself from larger social concerns? These issues are explored through general review of art education discourse and through the specific example of photography study in art education and art criticism.

The language used to talk about art is like a door both because it opens up some realms of meaning and because it shuts off others. Formalist criticism, for example, traces the contours of a world of expressive meaning, but keep the social context of meaning hidden from view. Wittgenstein (1963) encouraged us to see that language contained words, like the word "game," the meaning of which depends on the particular game being played.

It requires only a short leap of the imagination to see the significance of language games in a social context. Different social groups engage in different games, and are thereby possibly separated from the meaning-worlds of other groups. Nowhere is this more of an actual social condition than in art. From the rituals and crafts of village society to the popular expressionism of suburbia, and from the conventions of commercial illustration to the criticism of Modernism and Post-Modernism, discourse in art is characterized by the existence of numerous distinct art meanings reflecting the diversity of subcultures. The art meaning of each subculture is complete with its own values, criteria, and exemplars of "good art." Each subculture has its own rules for how to play its art game, either by unspoken admiration, by the use of appropriate catch-phrases ("lovely," "creative," "matches the couch"), through art fairs and gallery shows, or by inquiry into the criteria

of aesthetic value.

The concept of "game" as used here is of course a cynical one, as it suggests that our inquiries into art are "only a game," an aesthetically coherent preoccupation that lacks convincing connection to the real substance of life itself. In this cynical view it would be nonsense to say that one game is better than another -- that the investigations of the Post-Modernist sculptor are more important than those of the amateur portrait painter, for example. If each game is equally coherent and each systematically relates procedures and products to meanings, then each is an equally satisfactory occupation for the subculture that chooses to play that game.

But the cynical view is extreme. Games not only take us in circles, but also take us through the circle of the game into a level of meaning that is emotional or social. In sports, for example: football takes us to militarism, long distance running to a consciousness consuming trance, archery to its celebrated zen awareness. To appreciate LeRoy Nieman's computer generated football illustrations is simply to get in touch with the same kinds of meanings as are obtainable from televised football itself: homage to the brutal, raw, garishly colorful and totally conventionalized.

The referents of art games are to be found in the life-world itself. Through aesthetic games each subculture reaches into those core emotions and social attitudes that guide the wider arena of life decisions and life actions. The reason why the mutual exclusion of artistic subcultures matters is not an elitist fear that the wider public will miss out on a more cultivated aesthetic, but a pluralist's desire to make available those comprehensions of reality to which more adequate art meanings open the door. "World views," Panofsky (1955) told us, are the content of art. Different art games present the world views of voyeurs or activists, idolators or skeptics, wardens or liberators, killers or saints. World views provide critical choices that makes boundaries of discourse more than a sociological curiosity.

It is only within this century that public education has systematically sought to make the artistic discourse of the avant-garde available to the wider public. Today we have become used to the educator's efforts to disseminate high culture, and to create a homogenized respect for Picasso or

Pollock in the schools. In the nineteenth century, however, this was not the case. Art education was founded amidst the same contradictions that weighed down all aspects of the new egalitarianism in North America, a contradiction between democratic rhetoric and oppressive practice. While the Impressionists were opening the boundaries of sensory experience, art lessons in Boston consisted of copying mechanical design patterns. While Picasso and Braque were inventing Cubist space suited to twentieth century expression, school girls in New York were memorizing the moral lessons of selected genre paintings from the eighteenth century. Most of art education was not yet about either art or free inquiry, but about an acceptance of the industrial world and the right kind of moral character.

Earlier in this century a new cadre of art educators worked for a closer involvement of the public with contemporary movements in art. Two movements in the art world spurred these educators' hopes that a much closer rapport between art and public involvement with art was possible. Expressionism and the design movement, as exemplified by the Bauhaus, were each seen as movements away from the esoteric and towards a pre-existing consensus of popular aesthetics. Expressionism found itself compatible with an especially wide consensus of interests: the expressive forms of non-Western sculpture, the theories of unconscious exaggerations and deviations of form put forth by Freud and Jung, and the art of young children. Artists, psychologists, and educators each recognized this consensus and each group was electrified by it. For educators the consensus both confirmed the importance of "free self-expression" by children, and linked children's art closely to the highest concerns of the art world. Children in school and artists in society were seen to be linked not by special tutoring available to the few but by something universally innate.

Whereas expressionism emerged from a democracy of the psychological, the Bauhaus proposed a democracy of the technological. With the redefinition of an art academy as a design academy, notice was served that styles, genres, and academic traditions in Western art were now subservient to basic principles of design. Further, these design principles would be employed with any and all of the materials that had functional significance in contemporary technological

society. Thus the aesthetics of the artist/designer were at one with those of the builder, the architect, and the craftsperson. Communion with the Renaissance tradition was broken off, but communion with a much wider tradition of woodwork, stonework, and textiles was established, as well as a commitment to the continuing exploration of the new industrial technologies.

The design movement did not make contact with North American education until the forties and fifties, but when it did its influence was overwhelming. The Art Institute of Chicago and Carpenter Center at Harvard were direct descendants of the Bauhaus. Today, the design elements make up the most common course content in studio art programs and the studio component in art education. It is not difficult to ferret out the conditions that support this popularity. The design movement gives its first allegiance to technology, and fits its aesthetics within technological limits. In any culture that values technology for its own sake, this conception of the relatively subservient status of aesthetic interests is bound to be perceived as a favorable one.

While expressionism and design in art curricula have suggested a harmony between art and popular aesthetics, social conditions have continued to change; and art in the larger world has changed with them. The mandate of a universal expressionism has been modified by a less romantic view of non-Western art and child art, a view which is more aware of the diverse effects of cultural and social contexts on artistic form. Post-Modernism art has taken the divergent course of pattern, ritual and iconography, rather than solidifying the convergent aesthetics of expressionism. The utopian vision of the Bauhaus, too, has been challenged on all fronts: early on, by its uncomfortable proximity to the clean but inhuman fascist aesthetic, and later by the failure of modernism to meet human needs. Typical derivatives of technological modernism are buildings that no one wants to live in, forms that have internal coherence but no reference to either natural or spiritual orders. The "design elements" have been applied most energetically in the creation of advertising, more for the benefit of sponsors than for the improvement of basic life functions as theorized by Gropius, Itten, and Le Corbusier.

The avant garde in art has quite clearly changed its work and its discourse in response to changing social conditions. Public art education has done so more slowly, if at all. Today there are sharp discontinuities between aesthetic discourse in school programs and aesthetic discourse among artists. The nature of those discontinuities deserves careful investigation. If language games do make a difference in the life-world of those who participate in them, then the disjunction between school art games, art games, and society itself ought to be clearly identified.

One of the most pervasive themes in contemporary discourse in art, but not in art education, is the emergence and function of the image-world. Artists are aware that art images are not just a reflection of social reality, but are also entities in themselves which actively condition the social construction of reality. The two-pronged collaboration of art with industry, in product design and in advertising, has succeeded in a way that the founders of the Bauhaus could have foreseen only in their nightmares. Children think in advertised images; adolescents dream in them; adults construct their lives to measure up to them. Perception of the real is so effectively co-opted by the pre-structured, mass-broadcasted image that the perceiver is alienated even from personal experience. It is impossible for the artist to produce more images in this image-world without first considering the impact or, as Sontag (1978) suggests, the ecology of the pervasive corpus of images that already exists. Thus some artists choose not to create more images, but to provoke an investigation of experience through performance. Others use images in a confrontational manner, like Acconci with his video, to question the nature of the image experience itself. Those who choose to paint and sculpt do so with a new burden of responsibility, a responsibility to reveal and restore realms of experience that are no longer felt in the illusory image-world. Feminist and minority artists convey what has never been conveyed in Western culture and challenge the conditions that preserve the status quo view of reality. Criticism comes to the forefront of the art world as it becomes essential to identify the position of each art act in the battle between involvement and alienation, and to bring out the kind of experiential involvement that the effective art work provokes.

Criticism in photography exemplifies the kind of contextual awareness that seems to be growing within the arts. Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and John Berger represent different ideological orientations, yet have much in common in their views of photography. Each has an affection for the medium: Barthes a "love" of certain photographs, Sontag an "obsession" with all photographic images, and Berger a direct involvement as screenwriter and photo-essayist. Yet each is willing to break through the surface of their affection to uncover the reasons why the culture of the photograph is so disturbing. Each breaks through the language games of technical and formalist criticism to create new terms capable of tracing their experience of the photograph. Sontag uncovers its innate voyeurism. For Sontag (1978) the photograph appropriates the real to the extent that reality becomes something to be turned into an image rather than something to be lived. In this world of pure appearance there is no understanding, as understanding is always the questioning of appearances, not the acceptance of them. Berger (1980) highlights the function of this artifice in a capitalist society, where the stranger's view of our experience is not only taken to be a valid comprehension of that experience, but where those image-views are systematically marketed to us as articles worthy of consumption.

The disjunction between this kind of contextual inquiry into photography and the teaching of photography in the school and college is a broad one, perhaps as broad as any disjunctions that have preceded it in art education. The Center for Understanding Media (1978), a foundation supported agency in New York which develops media programs in education, expresses the standard view that photography captures the inaccessible, provides peak experiences, gives a feeling of success, and realizes an "intuitive philosophy in the flash of a photographic moment." While this group does have a humanistic concern with the impact of television and advertising on children, it assumes that this problem can be best averted by making children into television producers themselves, a symmetrical but probably self defeating solution. Photography is promoted by the Center not with reference to its ubiquitous presence and impact in society, but in the usual formalist way, with reference to the traditions of form and design in painting. At a time

when there is an urgent need for students to decode meaning in photographs, the school uses photography only for the simple technological reason that it is a quicker way than painting to create formally appealing and sentiment satisfying compositions.

Compare this attitude of evangelism for photography to the tone taken by Roland Barthes in his critical writing on photography. For Barthes (1981), the odd detail of clothing or gesture in the photograph can stir the emotions of the inquiring viewer because of photography's undeniable link with the real, its link with a sense of the "this has been." But for Barthes the value of the photograph stops there. In an era when critique of experience is needed, the photograph offers none. It is flat, certain, and cannot be penetrated. It is violent in that it fills the sight by force. The image-world of the photograph is thus the negation, not the realization, of the world of mental imagery we know. There are no transformations of thought instigated by it, only a definite, untransformable impression of reality fixed on the mind.

Barthes links photography to the mask of death in the theater. The photographer is the agent of death as she/he makes reality flat and certain, without a sense of duration and thus without connection to life and love. Barthes sees the paradigm of the photography world in the New York porn shop, where the image dehumanizes the world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it. In a world of images, as Barthes sees the contemporary scene, we come to consume images rather than beliefs.

It would be absurd, of course, to expect no disjunction in content between Roland Barthes and a public school program, or to ask that public awareness anticipate, parallel, or even closely follow Barthes' thinking. It is the particular contribution of a critic like Sontag or Barthes to synthesize and suggest patterns of meaning where the normal view of reality would miss those patterns. Yet, is it too much to expect that popular discourse at least be moved by the same forces that motivate these critics' inquiries? Is it absurd to ask, in other words, why the public and its system of education should not be in closer contact with its own social reality? What is clearly needed in education is a habit of criticism that would examine how visual forms are connected with life rather than inculcate a superficiality of

thoughtless decorativeness of the fashionable, the conventional, or the ideologically safe.

All levels of art education are uninformed about socially relevant critical systems. The photography example is not an isolated one. School art and art school programs alike participate in the one-upsmanship of the striking design, the layering of color and form that will stand out from the others and make its creator a star on the horizon of the arts. Just as it requires a bolder color and shinier piece of plastic to make one sign on a suburban strip stand out from another, school programs experiment with materials and designs that will create the impressive object. "Awesome" and "excellent" are the high schooler's current synonyms for the good that something beyond each of us, above us, capable of reducing us to our knees. Stereotypes of physical and material beauty are not questioned, but are systematically incorporated as comfortable end-points of the creative process. As the result, what is being transformed is not just the look of the world, not even the look of popular aesthetics, but the very capacity of the individual to invoke experience as a guide to purposeful action. It becomes increasingly difficult for a society that thinks in media images, that sees joy as a Coca-Cola commercial or friendship as a Michelob commercial, to be objective about its own culture of media imagery. Through its systematic intrusiveness the image-world replaces the possibility of criticism. In sum, the status quo of the image-world is reproduced and proliferated, not probed.

North American society needs the inquiry that discourse on art can provide. Many social and psychological crises are shared history (the effects of increasing concentrations of wealth, pressure on the family unit, fear of the future, and standarization of culture in general). Within the context of this greater social and historical reality, it would seem useful to encourage more diverse approaches to critically exploring all the forms which contribute to the understanding of this reality including visual art forms. Should the art schools, academies, college and university art departments as well as the school art programs be expected to examine the art games they promote? Are there ways to introduce contextual awareness, humanism, and healthy skepticism

into the study of art at all levels. Art games can be used to play high stakes. The greatest loss ultimately may be the continued mental attitude which accepts any unexamined aesthetic or social position.

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