

The People's Show:
Promoting Critical Response

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Abstract

An exhibition of artwork done by local artists was sponsored by a midwestern university gallery to promote greater community involvement. It was open to all artists and all media for a small entrance fee. A questionnaire of provocative categories was given out at the opening to elicit spectator reactions to the work and to help them vote. They were asked to decide which works best represented the particular categories. Responses to the show were mostly positive; however, certain artworks evoked much controversy and publicity. Two artworks, bordering on the pornographic, raised the question: Is art anything one can get away with? The press and public valued the work for its shock effect. Academia remained silent which raised another question: What is the role of art departments and art educators in considering the ethical dimension of art, to separate the schlock from the shock?

"Oh, my God, it's disgusting," said one person.

"But, hey it's art. It's different," quipped a second. "They usually just show women."

"I thought it was funny," commented a third.

"I don't think it's art at all," retorted a fourth.

These responses ranging from embarrassment, to rationalization, to delight, and even to nonacceptance represent a gamut of opinions about a polaroid montage called THE AMERICAN EGO. Each segment featured closeups of the artist's genitals. In one segment a little American flag protruded from the artist's rump. Obviously, this work was very controversial.

It was one of 335 creations made by 172 local artists displayed in a university art gallery during November of 1984. This open invitational, non-juried show was one of the most popular events ever featured by the gallery. The purpose of the show was to provide an opportunity for local artists of all ages and experience to exhibit their work. The show also tried to promote a process of evaluating artwork by supporting one's opinions with substantial aesthetic reasons.

In order to foster a critical thinking approach, two university art historians devised a questionnaire with categories to guide the people's votes on the artworks. These categories which included most popular, most classical, prettiest, best paint-by-number, most functional, most like real art, most obscene, most technical, and most shock of the new, were left vague to promote reflection about the nature of the categories as well.

The exhibit provoked much criticism, publicity, and controversy. In general, the public responded positively to the show and some comments included exciting, creative, invigorating, way-out, humorous, and eye-opening. Variety was hailed as the show's best quality. "People entered things they wouldn't have done otherwise, and they weren't afraid to break the rules," commented a lawyer.

An ambulance driver thought that the show was people-oriented because of the varied display of styles and competencies. A local art critic reviewed the show as having interesting surprises and noteworthy messages. It was also noted that the show reminded one that art exists in many categories--some folksie and some highbrow--and that all can be valid.

The voting results were predictable. An idealized portrait of a young woman was considered the most beautiful, and a clear blown glass vase was the prettiest. The most technical award went to a model ship constructed of metal pieces soldered together, and the most functional was awarded to a woven parka. A ceramic chess set featuring famous football heroes from the Browns was the most popular.

"I can relate to it; it's well done and clever. You can consider it trite, but I still like it," responded one person.

"I would say that it's the most useful because one can play all day with it," replied a second.

Several works overlapped categories in the judging so that the booby prize went to the pieces with the most votes. No artist could win more than once.

Representational works were favored both in categories and votes which annoyed some artists who felt that an abstract category for non-representational works was needed or a category which rewarded the formal

use of art elements. These artists also felt that the categories exploited the negative, such as the use of obscene as a choice. Others felt that the classical category was misleading since the winner of that award was a junk collage done by an art class. It was called HOMAGE TO OSU.

"I've seen garbage before, but this takes the cake. Look at it-- paper, cans, a comb," complained one viewer. Some felt that students from the class might have stuffed the ballot box.

Another viewer observed, "I would say it's most like real art."

The category, most like real art, invited some debate from spectators. Several people felt that everything in the show was real art, because of the artworks' concreteness and because they were made by artists. Others felt that real art referred to realistic art. Finally, one student remarked, "There are a few lewd ones that are lacking in good taste. Someone is having a good laugh. It's real art, even if it's pornographic."

The most sensational works had the most controversial content, such as an expressive painting of a castration scene. The making of a woman was recognized as the greatest shock of the new. The artist's provocative subject, impasto technique, and restrained detail were indeed dramatic. In contrast, the polaroid montage, THE AMERICAN EGO, was dubbed as the most outrageous. One art critic acclaimed these two pieces a battle of the sexes.

Male dominance was seen as a philosophical concern of the show. Members of the press panned THE AMERICAN EGO as so profound they couldn't understand it. The artist was questioned as to its meaning and he answered, "It suggests the impotence of American foreign policy." Although a local art critic took a position with the artist, it was obvious the press, the public, and a few art professors had different interpretations of the little American flag and its relevance to foreign policy.

The major controversy was not the shock or schlock value (See Note 1) but the status of this work. It raised a fundamental question in many people's minds. "Is art anything you can get away with?" The work was

viewed as outrageous, narcissistic and devoid of any reference to the declared content.

In the past, aesthetics was commonly regarded as the study of beauty and taste. Kant (1952) tried to establish aesthetics as a purist phenomenon, devoid of outside interests, such as ethics, politics and religion. Today, aesthetics has a broader meaning which involves the study of the nature, origin, meaning, and kinds of art. To assume that art and aesthetics is devoid of any hidden influences is to be blind, since it exists within a cultural milieu and is part of historical traditions (Margolis, 1980).

Dissent has always been an American ideal and, in turn, it invites criticism. Criticism that only accepts, or ignores, dissenting opinions is one-sided. An institution which prefers to be uncommitted to some form of ethical code in its aesthetic framework are nihilistic. The argument has been made (see note 2) that one cannot separate the aesthetic from the ethical because they both evolve from the same root of "praxis," meaning "the good" (Arendt, 1958). Today the trend in aesthetic criticism is shifting to a broader and more socially concerned position (Lippard, 1984); and institutions, artists and art educators must take a stand to protect the common good, as well as allow individual opinion.

What can art educators learn from staging such events? What kind of critical thought do art departments and art educators value? If we promote blockbuster shows and sponsor exhibits where the results are unquestioned, do we learn anything new? If questionnaires are worded so vaguely, does the public learn anything new? Do we censor works first or invite public reflection? Does the institution have a role beyond merely sponsoring a show? Should art professors voice their opinions?

It was learned that open invitational, non-juried shows instigate participation and publicity. Many local artists clamor for recognition of their styles, techniques, forms, and messages. In a show of this kind, a great variety of art forms, media, interests, and artistic levels are portrayed and this can be instructive. The exhibit can result in economic profit even if only a small entry fee is charged. A regional aesthetic or the taste in a particular community may be revealed. Such a show can be used to promote critical thought on the nature of art as well as its

qualities. By inviting different contending viewpoints and criticisms, a healthy exchange of ideas might take place where all learn from the experience. Art educators do have the choice to reflect on such matters as well, by presenting their own perspective and those of others. It is within their role to include the ethical dimension as one aspect of aesthetics. The unfamiliar and the unexpected are often interpreted negatively by the inexperienced; but if an audience examines a work with adequate understanding of the artistic codes used, the schlock will be separated from the shock.

Notes

1. In her article "Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock," Lippard (1984, p. 189) discusses the politics of porn, censorship and selection, as an issue that must have confronted the organizers of the controversial 1980 "Times Square Show," a sleazy panorama of artist-organized cheap artworks featuring violence and sex. Such work mainly aims to shock the public and doesn't give a damn about what people think. Lippard feels that artists of aesthetic integrity usually avoid misunderstandings by using codes more familiar to their audiences. In the long run, she hopes that such raw material might evolve into more expressive and acceptable forms. What good is it if artists alienate their audiences? She also points out that for every thesis there is an antithesis in a show of this nature to balance out the blood and the gore.
2. Arendt's interpretation of praxis as good is derived from Aristotle's distinction between techne and praxis. Art or techne is the rational ability or form of praxis that makes the product. When the maker adheres to the guidelines of his art, the products will be good and useful. The practical science of ethics emphasizes principles to insure actions that will lead to happiness and the general good as goals. These two aspects are united by prudence which relies on an open outlook as to what ought to be done. The production of art has become technically controlled or technique oriented, and human practices have become regulated by the dominant social or art school order, but not by social and moral consciousness.

References

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