

"ARTS IN OTHER PLACES":  
A CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

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In August, 1986, a conference took place at the University of California Los Angeles called "Art in Other Places." This article will critique that conference and make suggestions for further planning of art programs in non-public school settings based on 1) Wolf Wolfensberger's concept of normalization, 2) a recognition of the expressive forms that exist among various constituency groups, and 3) an analysis of long-range ramifications of decision making processes in art planning and programming.

Introduction

From August 21 to August 23, 1986, Susan Hill, the Director of the University of California Los Angeles Extension, Artsearch Program, coordinated a conference called "Arts in Other Places." A few hundred people attended and participated in the programs associated with the conference. Participants included arts administrators and artists from varying disciplines. The descriptor "other" in the title for this conference referred to arts programs which were implemented in settings other than schools and colleges. The participants in these programs were individuals who were described by conference speakers as inmates, the elderly, the handicapped, gang members and other differently labeled groups of people. We attended the conference to learn about the development and implementation of non-public school art programs and with the hope that those who coordinate these projects might learn to work with art educators and benefit from art education research and expertise. It became clear to us that art educators were not actively involved in this type of art programming. Because of this lack of participation, much of art education's valuable research and educational approaches are not being widely utilized. For this reason, our

attendance at this conference encouraged us to respond and critique presented programs and to make some recommendations. It is our hope that more art educators will choose to become active in non-public school art programming in an effort to share and learn from those people labeled arts administrators and artists.

The two and a half day event began with a keynote by Lenny Sloan, a charismatic man who had obviously been instrumental in realizing much of the arts programming in California. The conference continued with methods workshops on music, dance, poetry and creative writing, visual arts and theatre, films/videotapes, and panels which highlighted model programs. It ended at the site where Judy Baca and her assistants work on their Los Angeles wall murals--the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California.

We are appreciative of the opportunity this conference provided in our work toward the development of arts policy for non-public school constituencies. It was good to have a space and time for sharing common goals, frustrations, and successes in this programming area. As with most first efforts of this kind, "Arts in Other Places" should be seen as a beginning for further dialogue. This critique will point out theoretical and practical issues which we believe

should be researched and discussed in planning, administering, and evaluating non-public school art programs. There is a real need for more art educators to become interested and involved.

### The Constituents and Change

The organizers of this conference, the model practitioners they selected to present, and many of the conference participants demonstrated courage in working with their particular constituencies in the context of educational and residential institutions designed for persons who are experiencing disabilities, homelessness, harassment, abuse and incarceration, and which are notorious for their deculturating and dehumanizing approaches. Generally, the conference participants recognized these qualities and advocated changes in the offending human service systems. Art (the process and product) and artists were seen as vehicles through which change could take place. Specific alternatives to the status quo and strategies for making desperately needed changes were discussed.

Conference participants were very vocal in their belief that the constituencies with whom they work are abused and neglected in current human service practice. Consequently, we expected to see programming which would avoid abnormalizing etiological labels of disability or deviancy. Conversely we expected programming which would promote high expectations of people, the accessibility of arts environments, the integration of people experiencing disabilities with nondisabled people and goals for the general maximization of personal competence. Such approaches would be in keeping with Wolfenberger's (1972) "principle of normalization" as he formulated it for people perceived as being deviant and which has been widely used by special educators and is acceptable to groups advocating the rights of people with disabilities. The

normalization principle advocates the "utilization of means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible" (p.28). It assumes that persons providing services, as well as those institutions in which those services are provided, will act towards the realization of this goal. The "principle of normalization" demands that human service workers, including artists, arts administrators, and educators, provide services (educational and artistic experiences) in a way which disallows persons to act and appear in a way which is culturally inappropriate to them. This approach also suggests that program facilitators work within their educational settings, professional organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and other larger social arenas to activate and actualize normalizing circumstances for those persons perceived as deviant.

The conference organizers seemed to be largely unaware of the power and process of normalization. Print materials and formal introductions to presentations stressed etiological labels. For example, descriptions such as "emotionally disturbed," "homeless," and "incarcerated" were used as nouns rather than as adjectives which describe a person's present, but not necessarily permanent, experience. Concurrently, individual character and experience were de-emphasized in favor of broad stereotypic categories of deviance. We were pleased to see that the building which housed the conference was physically accessible; however, there was no evidence that an interpreter for people experiencing hearing impairments was available. In addition, to the best of our knowledge, conference materials were not available in large print format. However, it is to the organizer's credit that all conference sessions were made available on audio tapes.

The conference title "Arts in Other Places" was also troublesome. It implied segregation and separation rather than the integration of the constituencies represented by the conference represented. Few members of the constituencies represented by the conference title were in attendance. Rather, they appeared in films and videos and on slides which did not present them with the opportunity for dialogue or leadership. As long as those of us in leadership positions continue to speak for, segregate, and categorize people through the use of broad etiological labels of disability, we are not acting in a normalizing manner. The conference presentations showed program after program housed in separate settings without avenues of even minimal integration with the general public. Presenters appeared to urge program attendees to encourage others to give monetary support out of guilty feelings regarding those less fortunate. Such approaches do not promote normalization. They tend to sap the power of people to act on their own strengths, to remove themselves from a disabling label, or to overcome a handicapping condition.

In these ways this conference missed the opportunity to advocate the everyday involvement in the arts of those who experience disabilities, homelessness, advanced age, abuse, incarceration, and other difficult situations. Though the conference seemed to advocate social change for purposes of more expansive acceptance of art programming and funding, it underemphasized change in the quality of life for the people engaged in the art activities. That the conference leaders worked more to give their constituencies their ideas of art experiences, rather than pointing out how art can be a powerful tool to express individual and group ideas which the participants can identify and build on in order to change values and affect the quality of

their lives was a central disturbing theme. We think that the form and content of an art experience should begin, in large part, within the experiential realm of the participants. In this way they may recognize and build on the inherent expressive modes which identify them rather than the artist/facilitator.

The majority of the programs that this conference identified as exemplary did not empower people. The prevailing model was one in which artists, largely funded by arts councils, acted on behalf of the designated constituencies by primarily involving them as assistants. Together they worked in projects designed by the artist. These artists were primarily from a fine arts tradition and this seemed to prejudice them against the aesthetic viewpoints of those people with whom they worked. Consequently, their approach was not always community based. In at least one case there was a stated rejection of a waterfront community's nautical aesthetic favor of a fine arts approach which glorified abstract sculptures. Ultimately, constituents were not perceived as partners or collaborators, but as additional hands working for the artist's purpose. Judy Baca and her work with the oppressed people of Los Angeles on The Great Wall was an exception. Hers was a collaborative piece that included her constituents' personal view.

Artists working for social change in the spirit of normalization (in both the product and process of the art experience) would not view their constituencies as extra hands, but as major contributors, collaborators and partners. An improved approach would view participants as developers and creators. Their art products would then act as tools for self-advocacy. The art workers at this conference gave the uncomfortable impression of being responsible first to their own art, secondly to

their funding sources and lastly to their constituencies. In most cases it seems unlikely that the constituents had a voice in the selection of their artist-advocate. In our opinion neither social change nor democratic artistic participation results from this state of affairs. What we saw was an affirmation of the status-quo, of a top-down delivery of human service and artistic process in the guise of social change rhetoric.

### A Top-Down Approach to Arts Programming

The conference planners and presenters evidenced a top-down delivery of the Art World approach in their human service work and art educational approach. Art education programs in most public schools seem to promote the same artistic and political values. The sense that there are real artists and then there are individuals who are not capable of valuable artistic expression prevails in many settings. The notion that select members of the Art World can place almost exclusive value on art persists. The underlying message presented in the conference's so-called "other" art programs is that the artist cannot permit deviantly labeled individuals to participate to any large degree in the artist's values and creative process. The implied reason for such an elitist perspective is that the artist can make qualitatively better work in form and content than her or his constituent can produce. This approach is paralleled in the world of those grey-suited white middle and upper-class politicians and bureaucrats who make policies to "deal with" the dejected of society. It is unfortunate that those in power do not often facilitate the free choice and activism potential of those they most often identify with stereotypical labels of deviancy. As Bersson (1983) suggests, if we as artists, educators and policymakers utilize the elitist or top-down approach, we

must also look at the larger socio-cultural and political effects of our actions.

Advocating one person's artistic and ideological preferences (in this case the artist's) over those of a particular group of people, devalues and degrades what can artistically come from that population. It is likely that any individual or group of people told (in whatever overt or covert form) that they have no power, no valuable aesthetic direction, and no political or social statement of interest to make, will come to believe it.

The alternative is an empowered constituency able to comment sensitively and effectively on television, billboards, or welfare programs. They might choose to communicate their attitudes, values and beliefs by means of street theatre, murals or quilts. However, the choices should be largely theirs. Choices must not be made for them which reduce them to a position of passive compliance and facilitation of an artist's directive.

In order to effect an egalitarian approach, arts councils and other funding agencies must work to change the make-up of their funding panels and administrations. Art is political (Becker, 1982), and judgments made by funding agencies to support or reject certain artistic expressions are political decisions. Unfortunately, some aspects of the high Art World promote a "helping" or "giving" attitude suggestive of control over the differently privileged. Opposed to this philanthropic concept is a public recognition of the spirit, creative energy, and expression of all individuals including most notably those groups of people with whom these conference participants worked.

### Suggestions for Future Planning

Thoughts on the conference "Art in Other Places," elicit the following suggestions for those currently

involved in arts programming:

1) All arts programming should be considerate of people who are experiencing disabilities, homelessness, economic depression and like life situations often perceived as being deviant. This approach suggests recognition of, and engagement with, the strengths and expressive potentials of all children, youths, and adults. Arts environments should be as accessible as possible to all individuals and reinforcing of personal competence.

2) Art workers should clarify their values on the expressive forms that naturally come from varying constituency groups. This clarification requires a recognition of the modes of communication which already take place in a community. This will determine how expressive forms can be used and expanded to communicate a concern identified by the group or individuals involved. Artists, art administrators, and art educators should facilitate rather than artistically direct.

3) The political ramifications of every step taken in the development and implementation of arts programming must be recognized. Values which are expressed when action is taken should be clarified and long and short term consequences of a decision questioned. Arts programming must be perceived as a force in enhancing or changing cultural and individual stability. Consequently, artistic directions must be continually questioned.

### Conclusion

Dialogue on arts programming is critical. Our criticism of this conference has made us more aware of our own shortcomings in program planning. We hope that art educators and others involved with art planning activities will see this conference as a starting place for policy planning and discourse among educators, arts administrators, artists, and large numbers of community members.

### References

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